

Media Effects and Black Hair Politics

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Abstract

Hair has historically reflected material consequences in the Black community; thus, research has begun to investigate how the power/privilege matrix that is propagated throughout the media permeates society and impacts African-American women's perceptions of hair. This research joins the discussion by exploring how Black hair magazine advertisements influence Black women's hair styles and their perceptions of what constitutes beautiful Black hair. Findings revealed that the images African-American women consume from Black hair magazine advertisements do impact what they consider to be beautiful and, subsequently, influence their day-to-day styling and hair care mechanisms, lending further support to the idea that the media serve as powerful sources of knowledge. This study culminates by theorizing about the constitutive meanings and importance of Black hair as conveyed through magazine advertisements and considers how Black women use social comparisons to make everyday hair decisions to achieve what they identify as *good* hair.

Media Effects and Black Hair Politics

Ethnic studies focusing on African Americans have addressed a myriad of research topics. One profound area of inquiry in African-American research that has recently sparked interest involves body politics. The term *body politics* describes the comprehensive ideals, guidelines, and decisions made by society about the human flesh and implies that the body is the site and surface of struggle. Representations, definitions, and treatments of the body are inherently political statements because of what they communicate about the constitutive meanings, importance, obsessions, practices, and urgencies related to the body. Body politics furthermore describes the social constructs of a particular culture or group of individuals regarding the parts and structure of the body. The politics that individuals adopt explain and govern the relationships between genetic traits, physical appearance, and other political ideologies that exist in a given culture (Spellers & Moffitt, 2010).

Body politics presumes that the body is a not only a political entity, but a rhetorical artifact. Thus, studying the body is similar to analyzing a text or artifact, and much like a piece of text or other rhetorical artifact, researchers have become increasingly interested in studying the human body to gain a better understanding of its relevance to art, science, religion, popular culture, cross-cultures, and even the mass media (Spellers & Moffitt, 2010). Because of the uniqueness and diversity of the demographics associated with African Americans, research has become especially fascinated with exploring Black bodies. In the book, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, author Ronald L. Jackson II (2006) describes Black body politics in popular media as “contemporaneous with slavery” (p. 12). Jackson (2006) writes, “Since the emergence of race as a social construct, Black bodies have become surfaces of racial meanings. So it is only

logical that any attempt to divorce the concept of race from body politics leaves the analysis incomplete” (p. 12).

Body politics is an all encompassing term, focusing on issues of hair, skin, size etc., and it is virtually impossible for any research endeavor to explore every area of body politics at one time. Toward this end, this study takes a more narrow approach in exploring Black body politics and assesses a single, yet powerful area related to Black bodies. Specifically, this study focuses on the hair politics that govern African-American women’s hair perceptions and decisions based on the mediated influence of magazine advertisements. The goal of this study is to examine how Black magazine advertisements impact the perceptions of what Black women identify as beautiful hair and how the women’s views, in turn, shape their hair decisions.

Review of Literature

The mass media represent powerful forces that have the unique ability to influence individuals in many different ways (Azibo, 2010; Chomsky, 1991; Gilchrist, 2011; Shaker, 2009; Spellers & Moffitt, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). The mass media are used to communicate information to vast audiences by way of television, radio, print, film, the Internet etc. People interact with some form of media on a daily basis, and therefore the varied channels affect people’s lives socially, culturally, or economically in some way (Biagi, 2010). The messages sent to the public through the media have a significant impact on how individuals view themselves and the world around them. Azibo (2010) argues, for example, that the mass media have endangered or depleted African-centered consciousness.

Various forms of media, including magazines, tend to mirror society by reflecting the culture and diverse trends present in society (Biagi, 2010). Because people within a culture or group are all unique, magazine advertisements—as well as the media in general—often face

difficulty trying to satisfy a wide range of consumer needs. Therefore, advertisers often tailor their messages to reach a broad mainstream audience; meanwhile, the consumers in minority groups frequently are ignored, underrepresented, or misrepresented in the advertisements they view in magazines (Taylor & Lee, 1995).

African-American women represent one unique minority group that is often ignored, underrepresented, or misrepresented in the media. As asserted by Collins (2000), these women have the multiple competing identities of race, class, and gender working against them in many areas of life, including how they are portrayed in the media. Current research on African-American women and the magazine industry has focused primarily on the effects that beauty advertisements have on the self-esteem and total body image of these women of color. Studies on body perception and esteem suggest that Black women tend to associate more readily with media images they can identify with in some way, and less with images that depict more mainstream standards of beauty (Frisby, 2004; Kennedy & Martin, 1994; Thompson, 2009). In other words, to evaluate their own unique characteristics, Black women tend to use images of similar others (i.e., other Black women rather than White women) to compare themselves against (Frisby, 2004). Hence, it is important for research to explore the types of mediated images about African-American women that this population uses when making social comparisons.

The theory of social comparison, as developed by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1954), explains why individuals judge themselves against the standards of other individuals in society. Social comparison theory assumes people desire to measure themselves against others they perceive to be like them, in some way, by evaluating their own characteristics with the comparative others (Festinger, 1954). Festinger's perspective on self-assessment purposes that social influence and competitive behaviors are connected and serve as the basis of human

motivation for self-improvement (1954). In order to promote upward movement of one's abilities and performance, the comparisons tend to involve persons who are perceived to possess similar opinions or abilities, according to the one engaging in self-evaluation, self-enhancement, or even self-advancement (Festinger 1954; Frisby, 2004).

As articulated by Frisby (2004), "From a mass communication perspective, social comparison theory would prove extremely useful in developing theory focused on information processing and the effects and uses of mass media messages" (p. 326). With this in mind, a mix of topics has been explored in examining how women socially compare themselves to others based on the mass media messages they consume. In particular, many topics related to body politics, such as skin color, hair type, and body size, have all been scientifically examined to determine if magazine images influence the perceptions, self-esteem, and mood of women of color (e.g., Chin & McConnell, 2003; Thompson, 2009; Frisby 2004; Mbure, 2009). Previous research on African-American women's self-perceptions and body esteem has often analyzed Black women in relation to women of other races—especially Caucasian women, who historically have served as an ideal image of beauty in mass media (Chin & McConnell, 2003; Thompson, 2009; Frisby, 2004; Mbure, 2009). Specifically, prevailing beauty paradigms in the U.S.A. have a tendency to privilege Eurocentric standards of beauty, which was inherited from slavery and passed down throughout the generations (Gilchrist & Jackson, in press). From this perspective, anything that is White or White-like has been perceived as good, desirable, or beautiful, while anything, including hair, that is Black or Black-like has been viewed as bad, negative, or detestable (Gilchrist & Jackson, in press).

In the book *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, Banks (2000) writes, "Hair has emerged as socially and culturally significant" (p. 5). For Black women,

hair is an identity marker and a symbol of status that can connote beauty, acceptance, and power. In other words, hair matters—a lot—in the African-American community (Gilchrist & Jackson, in press). Within popular culture, African-American hair is considered a very complex and controversial subject, and it has even grown into a very lucrative business. For instance, the 2009 film *Good Hair* highlights that African-American women have ballooned the Black hair care and styling industry into a nine-billion-dollar enterprise (Hunter, O'Donnell, & Stilson, 2009). From hair enhancements, such as weaves and wigs, to color treatments, and the *good* versus *bad* hair controversy, the *Good Hair* documentary addresses the long-standing issue of what beauty means in terms of Black hair texture, length, color, and styling practices (Hunter et al., 2009). Lester (2000) argues that, “competing mythologies around something as deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African Americans’ self-identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical, and political realities” (p. 203). The fascination and value that Black hair has always had in the African-American community makes it a worthy topic for examination not only through popular culture, but disciplined inquiry as well.

Historically, the *good* and *bad* labels placed on the various types and textures of hair carry a considerably different social meaning within the Black community than they do for other cultures. For example, African-American hair in its natural state is usually described as having a kinky or curly texture, and it has often been considered as less acceptable in society than chemically straightened hair, which resembles White standards of beauty (Banks, 2000). The negative connotations associated with Black hair texture reflect the deep stigma that the enslavement of African people in the West has left on American society, particularly within the Black community. As a result, the *good* and *bad* labels function as reminders of slavery,

analogous with other forms of discrimination such as the brown-paper-bag test used years ago to categorize, separate, and even degrade members of the Black community based their skin color (Banks, 2000).

For Black women, hair tends to serve as an identity marker that women become cognizant of as little girls, in part due to the images they consume from the media (Banks, 2000). Spellers and Moffitt (2010) assert that the Black body, which includes Black hair, has been associated with beauty, status, spirituality, health, erotic and exotic consciousness, and markings of social identity throughout the African Diaspora. Thus, there is a profound combination of stereotyping, desire, detest, and material consequence linked to Black hair. For instance, even Michelle Obama—the first African-American first lady of the United States—has faced scrutiny in the media over her hair decisions (Desmond-Harris, 2009). After photos of First Lady Obama’s various hairstyles were posted on the Internet, a writer from *Time* Magazine pointed out that 56 percent of an online poll’s respondents felt that the country was not ready for a “first lady with kinky hair” (Desmond-Harris, 2009, p. 56). Other situations in the media that reinforce a resistance of natural Black hair include an incident in 2007 when radio personality Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University women’s basketball team players as “nappy-headed hos” (“CBS Fires Don Imus Over Racial Slur”, 2009). These examples illustrate that the media are powerful forces that can bolster many stereotypes about Black hair.

Additionally, perceptions of Black hair are also evident in the workplace. Thompson (2009) argues, “A fact that needs to be underscored is that Black women continue to fear adorning the ‘natural’ especially in the workplace because of the spectacle an authentically Black aesthetic will create, and the potential negative impact on one’s economic mobility” (p. 852). According to Thompson (2009), even within the Black culture, a woman who wears her hair in

its natural state may suffer being ostracized in relationships or in the workplace because of her hair. The authors of *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* also conclude the following:

America's, including Black America's, beauty ideal has not altered drastically since the late 1800s. Large breast, small waists, and masses of flowing hair are still the look desired by men and sought after by many women . . . Black people looking to fit into the mainstream visually still overwhelmingly have to contend with the same standards as in the past. (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 181-182)

In considering how mass media platforms, such as the magazine industry, shape the way society makes everyday decisions, it is evident from the scholarly dialogue that African-American women engage in social comparison with beauty ideals that focus on both mainstream and minority groups. From the current research, there is a tendency for these women of color to engage in self-evaluation with women who mirror themselves. However, the dialogue on overall body politics also suggests that conventional ideas of beauty—particularly White standards—continue to permeate the media. With this information, the conversation warrants a more extensive examination of how the media affect specific aspects of body politics for African-American women. Because hair is such an important component to the identity of African-American women (Banks, 2000; Gilchrist & Jackson, in press), this study explores the effect that Black hair magazine advertisements have on these women's perceptions of beautiful hair and their overall styling and hair care decisions. Toward this end, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: Do Black hair magazine advertisements influence Black women's perceptions of what they consider to be beautiful Black hair?

RQ2: Have Black hair magazine advertisements changed Black women's perceptions of hair enhancements?

RQ3: Do Black hair magazine advertisements influence Black women's hair care and styling decisions?

RQ4: What do Black women perceive as *good* or *bad* in terms of Black hair?

Method

Participants

To study African-American women's perceptions of Black hair, the participants consisted of a purposive sample of African-American women residing in a large city from the U.S.A. South. The participants were recruited mainly based on acquaintance with the principal investigators. The participants were also asked to refer additional research participants. Hence, about 20% of the participants were obtained through snowball procedures. The volunteers ranged in age from 19 to 56 years of age, and the average age of the 50 women participating in the study was 26.

The women's current hair state included chemically-relaxed (n = 29; 58%), natural (i.e., hair not chemically relaxed) (n = 17; 34%); and transitioning from chemically-relaxed to natural hair (n = 4; 8%). Because this study examined how Black magazine advertisements impact Black women's perceptions of hair, it was necessary to assess the types of magazines the women view that contain the advertisements. All the women reported that they do view Black hair magazine advertisement. They then listed the names of all magazines they read that feature advertisements for Black hair products or styles, which included the following five magazines: *Sophisticate's Black Hair* (n = 28; 34.1%), *Ebony* (n = 16; 19.5%), *Essence* (n = 14; 17%), *Hype Hair* (n = 12; 14.6%), and *Jet* (n = 7; 8.5%). It is important to note that the magazines listed are targeted

toward African-American consumers, though the women had free range to choose any type of magazine, regardless of whether or not it primarily targeted African Americans or a more mainstream audience. However, it is not surprising that the women chose magazines geared primarily toward African-American consumers because, as stated in the Review of Literature, Black women tend to relate more readily with identifiable media images, and they are more likely to evaluate their own unique characteristics with similar others (Frisby, 2004; Kennedy & Martin, 1994; Thompson, 2009).

Procedure

After signing and returning an informed consent form, the participants were given approximately 15 minutes to complete an open-ended survey comprised of 10 items relative to perceptions of the women's own hair and the media's depiction about what constitutes beautiful Black hair. The survey also asked the participants whether or not the magazine advertisements they view impact their hair decisions. The questions were formatted as open-ended questions in order to objectively allow participants the opportunity to provide as much explanation as necessary about Black hair magazine advertisements and the influence that the images have on their hair decisions (See Appendix).

Data Analysis

The open-ended survey yielded data reflective of the African-American women's perceptions of hair. Thus, it was necessary to categorize occurrences of themes inherent in the women's written responses. Thus, quantitative content analysis was the appropriate data analysis procedure. According to Neuendorf (2002), *content analysis* is a "summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and

hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented” (p. 10). Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) add that content analysis involves textual analysis of a recorded or visual message, and it is used to identify and enumerate similarities and differences in the messages acquired in the data. Hence, content analysis was an ideal method for quantitatively summarizing the message content because the goal of this study was to describe and count the occurrences of messages embedded in the African-American women’s written response.

Frey et al. (2000) recommend using two coders to enhance a study’s validity when performing content analysis. Thus, two trained coders coded the data by following the process outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Based on their suggestions, the coders first examined the women’s written answers and looked for *repeating ideas*, which are defined as concepts “expressed in relevant texts by two or more research participants” (p. 54). The coders then worked independently and categorized the repeating ideas into *thematic constructs*, which are viewed as abstract concepts that organize a group of themes by placing them into a theoretical framework (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). There was high intercoder reliability (Cohen’s Kappa = .80). In the third step of the content analysis, the coders negotiated discrepant codings until consensus was reached. Analyzing the data comprised the final stage, whereby the coders counted the number of occurrences in each category to obtain an overall quantitative typology.

Results

Perceptions of Beautiful Hair

The initial research question asked: Do Black hair magazine advertisements influence Black women’s perceptions of what they consider to be beautiful Black hair? In response to this

question, content analysis results revealed that the participants gave various comments about what they perceive as beautiful based on what they learn from viewing Black magazine advertisements. Twelve categories emerged, and arranged from highest to lowest frequency, the categories included the following hair types: (1) straight, (2) long, (3) all types, (4) natural, and (5) weave-enhanced; a three-way tie occurred for (6) color-treated, (7) healthy, and (8) shiny; and a four-way tie occurred for (9) curly, (10) full/thick, (11) manageable, and (12) short hair.

Straight Hair. Of all of the women's responses, straight hair was reported as what Black hair magazine advertisements mostly depict as beautiful ($n = 32$; 32.6%). In the comments, the word *straight* usually referred to either chemically-relaxed or "naturally" straight hair. Many of the responses included similar terms such as "silky" and "flowing" in their description. According to one participant, "Beautiful hair is straight hair."

Long Hair. Additionally, the second-highest ranking category referred to the type of straight hair represented in the advertisements, which was long ($n = 18$; 18.3%). For example, some women commented that magazines show "predominately long, straight hair (chemically-relaxed), sometimes short hair, but nevertheless relaxed," and others said the magazines illustrate "mostly relaxed hair that is straightened and long, some short hair." As one respondent stated, "Children's advertisements show little girls with long, relaxed hair."

All Types of Hair. The third highest ranking category from the survey data was that magazines portray all hair types as beautiful ($n = 16$; 16.3%). Several comments in this group included: "Black hair magazines are very diverse. They portray all Black hair as beautiful"; "I think they [magazine advertisements] portray beautiful in many terms. They have long, short, wet and wavy, curly, natural hairstyles for Black hair"; and "I think they portray beautiful as natural, long, short, anything. I think they view Black as beautiful."

Natural Hair. In the fourth highest ranking category, women stated that Black hair magazine advertisements emphasize natural hair as beautiful (n = 10; 10.2%), but the women in this group often noted that this trend had reemerged in recent years. Sample statements included: “I used to see women with weaves and straightened hair only. Now, I see more natural women in magazines”; “A lot of hair magazines are focusing on natural beauty now”; and, “...natural hair is beautiful!”

Weave Enhancements. In the fifth highest ranking category, the women’s responses indicated that weave enhancements (n = 5; 5.1%), which are used to make hair appear longer or shorter, fuller, or even to change the color or texture of one’s natural hair, generally are represented as beautiful in Black hair magazine advertisements. For instance, one woman stated, “They [magazines] advertise the natural and relaxed look, but both using weave.” Another respondent said beautiful meant wearing weave that has “mixed-looking hair with perfect curls.”

Color-treated Hair. Another group of women in the sixth category revealed that Black hair magazine advertisements often use color-treated hair to depict beauty (n = 3; 3%). Comments falling in this category described beautiful hair as, “relaxed with color.” One response even added hair black in color was usually illustrated in magazine advertisements. According to one respondent, “Colored hair is hot!”

Healthy Hair. In addition, to color-treated hair, women in the sixth most frequently mentioned category said that healthy hair also is represented as beautiful in magazine advertisements (n = 3; 3%). “Good hair-care and maintenance” were listed among the comments. As stated by one participant, “Regardless of the magazine ads I see, they all have an undertone that healthy hair equals beautiful hair.”

Shiny Hair. Shiny hair tied with color-treated and healthy hair as the sixth highest ranking category portrayed as beautiful in Black hair magazine advertisements (n = 3; 3%). “They [magazines] advertise all types of hair as beautiful as long as it is shiny,” one woman replied. Another participant said, “Whether hair is long or short, magazine advertisements communicate that hair should have this shinny and glossy texture.”

Curly Hair. Per the participants’ responses, the seventh highest ranking content category included curly hair (n = 2; 2%). Aside from natural hair, which is characterized by its tendency to curl or coil when exposed to moisture, respondents stated: “They [advertisements] portray Black hair as relaxed and curly.” The same respondent also added, “Now natural is also portrayed, but it’s the curly, full hair.” Another participant said, “Curly and bouncing hair is beautiful according to magazine advertisements.”

Full/Thick Hair. Also included in the seventh category was full or thick hair as a representation of beauty in magazine advertisements (n = 2; 2%). One woman stated that “full hair” is a standard. Another one said, “I never see anyone portrayed in magazine advertisements whose hair is thin as a dime. Their hair is always full and thick.”

Manageable Hair. Manageability of hair was also mentioned in the seventh content category of beauty (n = 2; 2%). As stated by one participant, “Hair must be manageable to be beautiful.” Another term that the women closely associated with manageability was “texture.” The women indicated texture is seen as an indicator of manageability as well as beauty in Black hair magazine advertisements.

Short Hair. In addition to curly, full/thick, and manageable hair, the respondents stated that some magazine advertisements also portray short hair as beautiful in the seventh highest ranking category (n = 2; 2%). These women did not expound about the types of short hairstyles

they view, but they mentioned that many short hairstyles are appealing. As stated by one participant, “A cute bobbed haircut is hard to beat.” In sum, the participants specified that just as with longer hair, shorter hair is also considered beautiful.

Hair Enhancements

The second research question queried: Have magazine advertisements changed Black women’s perception of hair enhancements (e.g., weaves, hair pieces, wigs, and/or hair extensions)? Most of the women in the study responded that magazine advertisements of African-American hair have indeed changed the way they view hair enhancements (n = 43; 86%), and the women overall perceive hair enhancements very positively. One respondent said, “I think they [advertisements] are encouraging more people to use weaves, hair extensions, etc.” Another respondent said that she dislikes her natural hair, but hair enhancements have provided her with many more favorable options. She said, “I found myself putting extensions in my hair, and hating my hair.” Another woman wrote,

I feel that magazine advertisements have influenced the public to embrace the use of weaves, wigs, hair extensions, etc. Years ago, women wore wigs if they simply had thinning hair. Now advertisements show that women can enhance by changing the length and color of their hair at will.

In sum, the women overwhelmingly believed that Black hair magazine advertisements have enabled them to have a more positive perception of hair enhancements. For the small percentage of women who responded that the advertisements have not impacted how they view hair enhancements (n = 7; 14%), many of them argued that hair enhancements have always been a “big thing.” As stated by one participant, “Wigs have been popular for a long time—way before Black hair ads were popular.” Other responses stated that pictorial representations on

television about Black hair were more impactful than magazine advertisements because television tends to reach a larger audience.

Styling and Hair-Care Decisions

The third research question asked: Do Black hair magazine advertisements influence Black women's hair care and styling decisions? The data revealed that more than half of the participants answered *yes* in regard to advertisements impacting their own styling and hair care choices (n = 31; 62%). For example, one of the women influenced by the advertisements said, "Whenever I am ready for a change, I always turn to magazine ads to see what fits me and my personality." Thirty-one of the 50 women surveyed in this study reported that magazine advertisements influence their styling and hair care decisions; these two areas are further explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

Hair styling techniques. Several of the statements relative to the third research question revealed that most women consult magazines for new styling ideas (n = 21; 67.7%). Comments about styling tips included the following: "I look at magazines as more of a guide to see the latest trends, and I may do my hair or wear products because of it being in a particular magazine"; "They've [advertisements have] influenced me to continuously cut and color my hair"; and "From seeing different advertisements, I have decided to try to go natural [i.e., to transition to natural hair from chemically treated hair] instead of putting a relaxer on my hair." Overall, the statements about hair styling tended to focus on ideas for haircuts, color treatments, and other popular trends.

Hair Care. The respondents also used Black hair magazine advertisements to find knowledge about hair care management and new products to try (n = 10; 32.3%). These women replied: "Now that I am natural, I read these magazines to find products to help me better

manage my hair”; “They [advertisements] make me more aware of what I am putting in my hair”; and “Magazines make you want to try certain hair products.”

The women who stated magazine advertisements did not persuade their styling and hair-care practices (n = 19; 38%), followed up by listing the external factors that do influence hair decisions. Some of these women stated: “I base my decisions usually on the advice of my beautician”; “I mainly get tips and styles from online blogs and YouTube”; and another woman replied, “I have my own style.”

Good Hair versus Bad Hair

The last research question, RQ4, asked: What do Black women perceive as *good* or *bad* in terms of Black hair? While most women felt there were clear definitions for the terms *good hair* and *bad hair* (n = 35; 70%), other participants felt there was not a solid definition for what constitutes *good* or *bad* hair (n = 15; 30%).

Interestingly, data from RQ4 mirrored the findings from RQ1 in that what the participants defined as *good* hair paralleled what they reported magazine advertisements portray as beautiful Black hair. As with the findings from RQ1, many of the participants’ comments for RQ4 focused on the manageability of hair texture and its natural curl pattern. For instance, some women regarded *good* hair as manageable, while *bad* hair is unmanageable. Some responses even referred to *good* hair texture as “wavy”, “curly”, and even naturally or chemically straight, while other responses called “kinky”, “nappy”, and “course” hair *bad*. One respondent stated, “Hair that does not require chemicals is good, and adversely, bad hair needs chemicals.”

Also indicative of what was discovered in the results for RQ1, data analysis for RQ4 referred to health and appearance as markers of *good* and *bad* hair. According to the responses, key words used to denote *good* hair included “healthy”, “well-conditioned”, “growing,” and

“moisturized”, whereas *bad* hair was characterized as “damaged” or “dry.” As for appearance, common ways of identifying *good* hair included its “thickness”, “shine”, and “professional maintenance.” On the other hand, words used to describe *bad* hair included “thin”, “messy”, “dull”, and “uneven.”

Contrary to defining African-American hair as either *good* or *bad*, a few women felt there was no way to define hair using these terms. Some (i.e., n = 15; 30%) wrote that the terms did not accurately describe Black hair types. These comments included the following statements: “I feel all hair is good as long as you embrace it”; “I don’t define hair as good or bad hair. All hair is beautiful”; and “Hair is hair.” Another respondent expressed displeasure at the very idea that hair could be labeled as *good* or *bad*: “I don’t really feel any hair is good or bad. Those terms seem very stereotypical and were influenced by White society’s issues/beliefs about Blacks and Black hair.”

Discussion

Implications

This study examined how Black magazine advertisements impact the perceptions of what Black women identify as beautiful hair and how the women’s views subsequently shape their hair decisions. Toward this end, the first research question explored perceptions of beauty in Black hair magazine advertisements. Content analysis revealed magazine advertisements do influence Black women’s views of beautiful hair. Twelve categories of what Black hair advertisements portray as beautiful emerged via content analysis and included: straight, long, all hair types, natural, and weave-enhanced; a three-way tie occurred for color-treated, healthy, and shiny; and a four-way tie occurred for curly, full/thick, manageable, and short hair. Byrd and Tharps (2001) argued that the media’s ideal beauty standard has not drastically changed since the

late 1800s, but findings from this study counter this theoretical perspective and suggest that Black hair magazine advertisements are attempting to provide many different images of beauty.

The variety of categories indicates that magazine advertisements are now depicting and promoting multiple definitions of beautiful Black hair, as opposed to a single beauty standard. This suggests that the magazine industry is transitioning from a narrow, mainstream ideal of beauty to a more comprehensive representation of what beautiful hair can and should mean for African-American women. That said, the “masses of flowing hair” that the authors of *Hair Story* argue is still sought after by many Black women is not the only image being presented in the media now, nor is it the sole message being interpreted as beautiful by Black women (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 181). Instead, the impactful findings from this study concur with Gilchrist and Jackson (in press) and suggest that hair politics is finally merging in a direction that celebrates Black hair for what it should be—a personal choice and not a social construction of acceptance or rejection. Thus, it is the hope of this research that the magazine industry and other forms of mass media will follow this basic premise and continue creating more inclusive images featuring all hair types and textures as acceptable.

The second objective of this study was to explore whether magazine advertisements featuring Black hair have changed Black women’s perceptions of hair enhancements. The data suggest Black hair magazine advertisements have not only affected Black women’s perceptions of hair enhancements, but they have encouraged the women to have an overall positive view of hair enhancements. The women in this study reported that hair enhancements were becoming more popular or acceptable in today’s society, and weaves, wigs, and extensions are no longer seen as a stigma or taboo, but a personal choice.

As discussed in the Review of Literature, the documentary *Good Hair* highlights how the hair industry has ballooned into a nine-billion-dollar empire in recent years. With weave enhancements accounting for 65% of all hair care revenue, the documentary alleges African-American women are the primary consumers of these products (Hunter et al., 2009). Data from this study affirm the claims brought out in the *Good Hair* documentary and imply that African-American women have a positive affinity toward hair enhancements. The idea that African-American women readily embrace many diverse hair types and textures, whether natural or synthetic, is reflective of their acceptance of both Eurocentric and Afrocentric beauty markers. Hence, “today, hairstyles run the gamut from Afros to straightened hair to Jheri curls, irrespective of skin tone, socio-economic class, and political affiliation” (Thompson, 2009, p. 835).

The third objective of this research endeavor examined whether Black hair magazine advertisements influence the styling and hair care decisions of African-American women. Content analysis of the data from RQ3 shows that Black hair magazine advertisements do affect Black women’s styling and hair-care decisions. Specifically, the participants reported using magazines to find ideas for new techniques about haircuts, color treatments, and other popular trends. Additionally, some women used advertisements to find information on hair care products.

According to social comparison theory, people compare themselves with similar others in order to reach a goal (Festinger, 1954). This theory has much relevance to this study’s findings because the women consulted magazine advertisements in order to educate themselves on ways to style and care for their hair. Even women who did not use magazine advertisements to gather styling and hair-care tips admitted being persuaded by other forms of the media, such as television and online social media. These results concur with previous research asserting that the

media represent powerful forces capable of influencing individuals in many different ways (Azibo, 2010; Chomsky, 1991; Gilchrist, 2011; Shaker, 2009; Spellers & Moffitt, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999).

The final objective of this study was to investigate how African-American women define *good* and *bad* hair. In addition to exploring whether or not the women had conclusive definitions of *good* and *bad* hair, the researchers wanted to know whether the women's definitions were similar to or different from the perceptions of Black hair they view in magazine advertisements. First, the data imply that Black women collectively believe that there are indeed clear definitions of *good* and *bad* Black hair. The participants' explanations focused on the overarching themes of texture, health, and appearance. Particularly, the respondents' textural themes alluded to differences in the hair's curl pattern and manageability. For some women, hair textures with a loose or almost straight curl pattern were considered better and more manageable than hair types with a tight or kinky curl pattern. Also, health themes centered on the use of hair care products to nourish and grow hair. Regardless of hair type or appearance, the health themes indicated that well-conditioned and growing hair was *good* as opposed to damaged hair, which was seen as *bad*. Lastly, appearance themes concentrated on the length, thickness, and professional maintenance of Black hair. The data revealed that full, shiny, and well-maintained hair was visually better than thin, dull, and unkempt hair.

Per the second objective with RQ4, the results revealed that the women's standards of *good* hair resembled some of the content categories that emerged from the analysis of data for RQ1, which assessed the representations of beautiful Black hair in magazine advertisements. It is interesting to note that none of the participants used any of the content categories that emerged with RQ1 in their classifications of *bad* hair. These findings lend further support to the idea that

Black hair magazine advertisements shape what African-American women consider as beautiful, as well as how they distinguish *good* hair from *bad* hair. Specifically, this study found that the women's ideas of *good* hair matched the images they reported viewing in the magazine advertisements. The results are meaningful in that they lend further evidence to past research that has concluded the media serve as sources of knowledge for consumers (Azibo, 2010; Chomsky, 1991; Gilchrist, 2011; Shaker, 2009; Spellers & Moffitt, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999).

The results from this study also illustrate that Black women make social comparisons to achieve what the media deem as both beautiful and *good* hair, lending additional support to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. Although many African-American women have feared adorning their natural Black hair in professional settings such as the workplace (see Thompson, 2009), data from RQ4 show that African-American women are beginning to embrace a variety of hair types and styles as beautiful. It is arguable that African-American women are currently more accepting of various types of Black hair and are moving away from some of the race-related ideologies that once greatly defined and limited their beauty because magazine advertisements are becoming more diverse in terms of what they depict as acceptable beauty. Hence, it is important for magazines, as well as other mediated channels, to continue conveying diverse images that appeal to all hair types, textures, and lengths.

The researchers duly recognize the small percentage (i.e., $n = 15$; 30%) of the women in this study who responded that hair is neither *good* nor *bad*, but that it is simply hair. These women's responses counter some commonly held beliefs that assert hair is "socially and culturally significant" (Banks, 2000, p. 5). Instead, these women's comments, though in the minority of all comments made by the participants, provide hopeful evidence of a possible shift

in ideological perspectives. Perhaps there is a small percentage of women who are, as advised by Gilchrist and Jackson (in press), “breaking the chains of hair bondage inherited from slavery and passed down through the generations.”

Holistically speaking, the results of the four research questions in this study reinforce assertions by Biagi (2010) and imply that media do affect people *socially*, *culturally*, and *economically*. For African-American women, the findings suggest that magazine advertisements persuade them *socially* in that portrayals of beauty shape how they see their own hair in comparison to other images of Black hair in the media. Also, data acquired from this study imply that Black women are *culturally* affected by the images they view in magazines because those images tend to define what constitutes beautiful Black hair. Finally, magazine advertisements of Black hair impact these women of color *economically* by influencing the products they buy and the hair services they request in order to reach the ideal beauty goals portrayed by the media. Findings from this study have provided a model for future research to use in increasing the available data on how the media impact hair politics, with a specific interest on African-American women’s perceptions of hair and beauty.

Limitations and Recommendations

Although the study achieved its desired goal of enhancing the research in the area of Black hair politics, there were limits to the present investigation, especially in regard to the sample. For instance, the sample size only represents a small percentage of African-American women who view Black hair magazine advertisements. The nonrandom purposive sample of 50 participants from the U.S.A. South may or may not mirror the opinions of other African-American women in other regions of the country and certainly not Black women outside the country. Also, though the participants ranged in ages from 19-56, the average age was 26. Thus,

it was impossible to infer whether or not generational differences exist in what African-American women view as beautiful Black hair. Additionally, the current hair type of the participants may have been a factor in the outcome of the study. Because the majority of participants stated that they had chemically-relaxed hair (i.e., $n = 29$; 58%), their perceptions of beauty may have been influenced by their hair's current state. Future research could rectify some of the limitations associated with the sample by including the voices of a larger and more regionally diverse population of African-American women who are of varying ages and who represent a relatively equal distribution of each hair type.

This study only focused on one form of mass mediated communication—magazine advertisements. Yet, as indicated by the respondents, Black hair magazine advertisements are only one of many mediums that influence African-American women's definitions of beauty. According to the participants' responses, television and online social media, such as video blogs, are also influential to the study of body politics and are, thus, worthy of examination in future studies. Hence, the researchers recommend that future inquiries explore how other types of the media affect African-American women's perceptions of beautiful hair and their subsequent hair decisions in order to obtain a more holistic view of how various mass communication mediums impact hair politics.

This study's sample was only comprised of African-American women because research has consistently found that hair matters significantly in the African-American community, and there is a history of oppression and stereotypes associated with Black hair (Banks, 2000; Gilchrist & Jackson, in press; White, 2005). However, it might also be telling if future research examined whether or not White women and women from other racial minority groups have similar or different views of what constitutes beautiful hair in comparison to African-American

women. By exploring how magazine advertisements impact all women's hair decisions and perceptions of beautiful hair, the growing field of body politics can be enriched all the more.

This study's final limitation is of a methodological nature. Analyzing the open-ended questions via content analysis was sufficient for this study's purposes because, as stated in the Method section, all of the participants indicated that they viewed magazine advertisements about Black hair. To fully explore whether or not it is truly the magazine advertisements that are affecting the women's perceptions of what constitutes beautiful hair and their subsequent hair decisions, future research could compare the responses of those who view magazine advertisements with those who do not view any magazine advertisements. Perhaps data from these two groups could be compared with a *t*-test to see if a statistically significant difference exists in the survey responses. Data from the proposed quantitative method could greatly complement the findings that emerged from this study's content analysis.

Conclusion

This study explored how Black magazine advertisements impact African-American women's hair decisions and perceptions of beautiful hair. Findings revealed that the images African-American women view from Black hair magazine advertisements do impact what they consider to be beautiful, as well as influence the day-to-day styling and hair care decisions these women make about their hair. The wealth of images conveyed through the advertisements suggests that the magazine industry has helped to broaden Black women's definitions of beauty to encompass a variety of representations of Black hair, including hair enhancements. The magazine industry's portrayals of beautiful Black hair have also changed the way that the terms *good* and *bad* are used by Black women in defining beautiful hair.

This research is meaningful in that it has added to the growing body of research in the area of body politics, and more specifically hair politics, which connotes hair as a rhetorical construction (White, 2005). Data indicate that magazine advertisements have shifted to rhetorically construct beautiful Black hair in a variety of ways. No longer is there a single definition of what constitutes beauty in terms of Black hair; instead, beautiful Black hair is multidimensional and comprised of many textures and lengths. Data from this study further indicate that African-American women socially compare their definitions of beautiful Black hair with the images they consume from magazine advertisements, lending further support to the idea that the media serve as sources of knowledge (Azibo, 2010; Chomsky, 1991; Gilchrist, 2011; Shaker, 2009; Spellers & Moffitt, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Future research is now challenged to explore how other mass mediated channels, such as television and the Internet affect perceptions of Black hair. By further investigating how various mediums impact standards of beauty, scholarly research will continue to capture a more complete understanding of media effects and Black hair politics.

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Appendix

Perceptions of Black Hair

Instructions: This study explores perceptions of Black hair. Please answer the following questions in as much detail as needed. Do not write your name on this form.

1. What is your age? _____
2. Describe your current hair type. In other words, is your hair natural, chemically relaxed, straightened etc.?
3. Do you read or view Black hair magazine advertisements? Yes No (circle one)
4. If you answered yes for the previous question, what are some names of magazines you read regarding Black hair care and styling? (Note: The magazines can include any in which you may encounter an advertisement for Black hair products or styles).
5. In your opinion, what do Black hair magazine advertisements portray as beautiful in terms of Black hair?
6. In your opinion, do Black hair magazine advertisements have a single definition or multiple definitions of what constitutes "beautiful" in terms of Black hair? Please explain your answer.
7. Do you feel that, over the years, Black hair magazine advertisements have changed their portrayals of what is meant as beautiful in terms of Black hair? Please explain your answer.
8. Have magazine advertisements changed Black women's perceptions of hair enhancements (e.g., weaves, hair pieces, wigs, and/or hair extensions) in recent years? Please explain your answer.
9. How have magazine advertisements impacted your hair decisions (e.g., hair-care products, hair styles, hair enhancements etc.)?
10. What do the terms "good hair" and "bad hair" mean to you?