

7.1 Cosmetic Counter Connotations: Black Millennial Women and Beauty

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In 1962, Malcolm X, a human rights activist, addressed a crowd gathered for the funeral of Ronald Stokes. Stokes, a Nation of Islam officer, was surrendering during a mosque raid when Los Angeles police shot him in the back (Marable, 2011). In an attempt to call the Nation of Islam to action, Malcolm X delivered a speech focused on the brutalization of Black identity (Marable, 2011). He asked the question: "Who taught you to hate the color of your skin?" (Malcolm X, 1962). Out of context, it is an odd question, considering the occasion. Yet, the question and the speech are still relevant, 55 years later. In 2017, why has the U.S. failed to achieve authentic equality, which in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement seemed attainable?

Toward the end of his speech, Malcolm X stated "The most disrespected woman in America, is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America, is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the Black woman" (Malcolm X, 1962). Unfortunately, not much changed since he made the statement. Black women are still disrespected and neglected by America's white beauty industrial complex. Per industry standards, Black women are more beautiful when their skin is light and their hair is straight. In the cosmetics market, cosmetic availability and placement reflect this unsubstantiated belief.

Black women are one of the most disempowered segments of the US population (Bierria, 2014; Pratt-Clarke, 2013). While this fact has been discussed from many angles (Corra & Borch, 2014; Edwards, 2015; Lindsay, 2015; White, 2005), one aspect of their disenfranchisement is rarely investigated: their lack of power in the cosmetics marketplace. Studies on the relationship between Black women and beauty focus on contentious issues of Black women's hair, skin color, and what is deemed appropriate and professional appearance for them (Greene, 2011; Harvey, 2008; Opie & Phillips,

2015; Patton, 2006; Tate, 2007; Thompson, 2009). The fact that they are also enthusiastic participants in the cosmetics market has been overlooked.

The Business of Beauty

Women of all races and ethnicities seek cosmetics that would help satisfy their desires to be beautiful. However, the quest for beauty is an expensive one. In 2015, retail sales of beauty products reached \$46.2 billion in the US (Mintel, January 2016). Before, analysts predicted that the beauty industry would be worth \$42.5 billion by 2019 (Mintel, January 2015), yet it has already exceeded previous growth predictions. New predictions estimate that US sales of beauty products will reach \$51.8 billion by 2020 (Mintel, January 2016).

Mass merchandisers account for 38% of consumer traffic in beauty retailing, down from 41% in 2015 (Mintel, January 2015; January 2016). Yet at a mass merchandiser, Black women experience ongoing difficulties finding products that match their skin color. To be clear, the predicament awaiting Black women in cosmetic aisles is not the hassle of choosing the right foundation shade amongst multiple brand and shade offerings. In fact, having options would assume that cosmetic brands consider Black women as a target market. However, shopping for cosmetics at a mass merchandiser means selection from a tiny number of brands focused on highlighting Black women's beauty. Unfortunately, even amongst products geared toward Black women, variety remains limited.

This unfortunate state of affairs turns perplexing when one considers the fact that Black Americans have a buying power of \$1.2 trillion, which amounts to 8.6% of the nation's total discretionary income (The Nielsen Company, 2016). Black buying power reflects Black-Americans' population growth and increasing levels of education and entrepreneurship which in turn, increased their income. Within the personal care category, Black-American's

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divide their spending between mainstream beauty brands and brands targeting Black-Americans (The Nielsen Company, 2016). The Nielsen Company consumer report underscores two facts: 1) Black Americans are active participants in the beauty category and 2) Black Americans have the education and income levels necessary to act as well-informed consumers. Considering these points and the primary market for mass merchandisers – the self-described middle class – one would think Wal-Mart, a large retailer which aims to offer affordable products for every American, would offer cosmetic products which meet Black women's needs. But, this is not the case. Black women tend to find the most suitable beauty products at specialty retailers, such as Makeup Art Cosmetics (MAC), Bobbi Brown, or Sephora, where cosmetics retail at a significantly higher price point than their Maybelline and CoverGirl counterparts.

Case in point: Every cosmetics brand at a mass merchandiser will offer a makeup foundation in some variant of White skin, from “ivory” to several shades of beige. But, for women with darker complexions, the array of choice is limited to a couple of shades at the end of the spectrum as if *all* women of color, regardless of their ethnic background, fit into three shades. Having limited options creates a significant disadvantage for women of color, especially for those Black women whose skin color does not fall into the range of “caramel,” “cappuccino,” or “mocha” (Revlon, 2017). You do not believe me? Count the makeup products and compare the difference in shades in any drug store. Despite external attempts to incorporate more women of color in advertisements, the core offering of foundation shades remains the same. As millennial Black women have expressed, the commercials which highlight popular singers such as Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, are often misleading in relation to actual product choice (Reed, 2015). The lack of choices for Black women is more surprising when one realizes that, of the three colors, “cappuccino,” for example, barely matches even the lighter shades of Black skin. In addition, the existing “darker” shades are far from adequate to address the multiplicity of Black women's skin tones.

Several informants for a study on the cosmetics use of African American millennial women (Reed, 2015) reported that, no matter how hard they tried, they could not find a foundation that matched their skin color at a mass merchandiser. While drugstore brands may be ideal for products such as eyeliner, mascara, or eye shadow, these tend to be low-risk purchases because they are

relatively inexpensive. In contrast, foundation selection requires knowledge, skin color matching, and can range from \$10–\$50 for a 4 oz. bottle, depending on the brand. In comparison to eyeliner and mascara, foundation is a high-risk buy. Therefore, after repeated negative experiences with foundations at mass merchandisers, study participants disclosed they no longer even bothered looking for them at such retailers (Reed, 2015). Instead, they migrated to specialty beauty retailers such as MAC and Sephora where knowledge and expertise on black skin is readily available from employees.

A Beauty Standard

Beauty is an age-old topic of interest which has stood the testament of time. Obtaining beauty is more than a self-esteem issue. For better or worse, beauty practices are feminized. While, participating in the beauty industrial complex emasculates men instantly, it sings the praises of women who willingly participate. Yet, protofeminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, believed beauty was a weakness and a trivial occupation to appease men's desires and stifle women's ability to reason (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Later, Second Wave feminists also argued that women participate in the beauty industrial complex, not only because they want to, but also because society makes it quite clear that they *have to*. Through personal experience, women learn that a host of benefits and privileges, such as higher salaries and frequent promotions, are associated with beauty (Banks, 2000; Rhode, 2010; Tate, 2009).

It is a fact that many women have used beauty to their advantage and as a means of empowerment. However, beauty as a tool of power is problematic because it is the *only* power women are actively encouraged to seek (Sontag, 2010). Women's access to political or economic forms of power remains controversial, yet daily interactions with the White beauty industrial complex in American media reinforces the aspirational ideal for women. From Instagram models to TV commercials, women are told that obtaining and pursuing beauty is a worthy occupation of time, effort, and money. Even if a woman is an accomplished engineer, high profile lawyer, or even a CEO, to not be lacking, she must be beautiful. As Sontag (2010) states, women are only encouraged to seek beauty as a tool of power, implying that anything a woman achieves professionally is partly due to her looks. If beauty is the only means for a woman to achieve power, she is further isolated from real avenues of empowerment such as education and financial independence. Oppression

through beauty affects all women, but those women who are further segregated from mainstream society by race, class, and income are bound to have a different experience. Therefore, for Black women, who have the least power among all groups of women (Bierria, 2014; Pratt-Clarke, 2013), access to appropriate beauty products may be crucial for experiencing at least a slim measure of empowerment. But how, if they do not have the same options as White women?

The tension between Black consumers and White business owners predates today's micro forms of oppression. Exclusionary efforts within White retail spaces during the Jim Crow era allowed the cosmetics business to become an area where "Black consumers showed a preference for products manufactured and marketed by African Americans" (White & White, 1998, p. 185). Though the preference existed, popular media such as *The New York Times* (1909) implied that "Negroes... should by all means mask [their features] into some resemblance to the Caucasian race" (White & White, 1998, p. 187). The advertisement referred to by White and White (1998) goes on to imply that when Black people seek to cultivate their culture and looks, they "disesteem" themselves. The popular publications from the early 1900s, as the example shows, created a narrative in which White beauty was placed on a pedestal, and Black women were assumed to be followers. However, in actuality, most Black women who were using cosmetics were not swayed by the White beauty standard. Instead, what they wanted was the "freedom to construct their appearance" (White & White, 1998), the same freedom that White women had. So, the struggle was not about the implied desirability of "whiteness" (White & White, 1998), but that Black women wanted to control the avenues of their own self-actualization.

Beauty is not tied indiscriminately to race. Being born Black or White does not automatically make one beautiful. Yet, the narrative from the 1900s implies that Black women were lacking in beauty, and their usage of cosmetics was a way to increase their beauty potential. Inspired by this narrative, cultural norms supported the idea that physical features were hierarchical. In other words, in the measurement of American beauty – White physical features such as "blue eyes, blond hair, and fair skin" inspired positive connotations, while Black physical features like "thick lips, kinky hair, and dark skin" encouraged negative ones (Haney López, 2006). This byproduct of the social construction of race forced

Black women to cultivate their own beauty standard in opposition to the mainstream White beauty standard. Slogans such as "Black is Beautiful" emerged and helped create a conscious celebration of Black beauty against dominant constructions and understandings of race (Haney López, 2006).

Critics often recommended that Black women embrace their natural beauty (White & White, 1998) as a form of resistance to the beauty industrial complex. This veiled suggestion alluded to the understanding that Black women were better off not caring about their appearance at all. Implicit in this argument is the notion that the beauty industrial complex exists only for White women who are served through representative advertisements and convenient shopping locations. But, where does that leave everyone else? When advertisements repeatedly reinforce race and beauty as dependent, intertwined concepts, this forces women to look at themselves and ask, "Why am I excluded?"

Merchandising Beauty

The lack of appropriate cosmetics products affects Black women from all walks of life. During New York's Fall 2015 Fashion Week, Sudanese model Nykhor Paul, voiced her frustration at the absence of makeup artists' preparation for models with darker skin tones. Paul asked: "Why do I have to bring my own makeup to a professional show when all the other white girls don't have to do anything, but show up?" (Andrews, 2016, n.p.). Without a range of foundation options and diversity in models on the runways, makeup artists do not need to learn techniques or stock products for women of color. Through this omission, the market makes it clear that Black women do not belong in this space. Even though the media champions the diversity of the U.S. entertainment industry, a few tokens of visibility mask the fact that mainstream products for Black women are sorely lacking. Even in a professional setting, when a makeup artist is aware of the model's skin tone and hair type beforehand, no one bothers to learn the proper skills or carry the correct arsenal of foundation shades. Therefore, Black women's frustration with the lip service that the industry pays to diversity in the fashion industry is understandable; for every fifteen Black models walking the NYFW runways, there are 150–200 women with pale skin.

For this reason, some makeup artists, such as Fatima Thomas, Senior Makeup Artist, transitioned to using MAC. According to Thomas, when her career took off

in the early 90s, "it was rare for any one brand to have a universal offering of products for light and dark skin tones, especially foundations. But MAC did" (Andrews, 2016). MAC, in addition to other brands such as Bobbi Brown and Iman Cosmetics, has become known for its attention to women of color's needs in professional makeup artistry. MAC's serendipitous, but profitable, realization has helped the brand to continue to be at the forefront of Black Millennial women's minds and wallets.

There are two standards that Black women can measure themselves against – the mainstream (White) standard of beauty or their culturally-specific standard. In the case of young Black women, personal fulfillment within their cultural group appears to be more important than obtaining the mainstream society's approval. Part of this stems from the realization that Black women can never measure up to the White beauty standard, and thus, are not the target market for most beauty products. Measuring Black women against a White "norm" provides a narrative of disempowerment. Yet, finding products that work allows Black women to tilt the status quo in their favor.

Black women will increasingly influence and shape the marketplace. Today, if a Black woman has a bad experience at a makeup counter, she has options that did not exist even 25 years ago. It is a known fact to industry insiders that cosmetic choices for Black women continue to be limited. Still, very little is being done to improve the situation. Therefore, when Black women find cosmetics that fit their needs and help them actively shape their self-expression and help them reach their goals in self presentation, they are a step closer to where they want to or should be in terms of social recognition and inclusion.

Cultural and ethnic groups have their own standards of beauty that exist alongside mainstream beauty standards. Acknowledging this illuminates the reasons behind Black women's cosmetics purchase decisions and motivations. Black Millennial women's identification with MAC demonstrates that a brand can be successful in appealing to mainstream consumers as well as minorities. In a multicultural society, where the population is getting increasingly browner through migration, interracial marriages, or relationships, embracing several types of beauty standards is not only the ethical but also most likely the most profitable way to move forward.

Brands such as MAC are mainstream, but minor changes in their marketing philosophy have allowed them to operate as gatekeepers for young Black women

interested in using makeup. Because women remain loyal to beauty brands over the course of their lifetime (Mintel, December 2013), this relationship can be significant for attracting their buying power and retaining it. The relationship between Black Millennial women and MAC products exemplifies the importance young women place on self-presentation, the need for social inclusion, and communal acceptance.

The fact that Black Millennials cannot find culturally appropriate cosmetics in mainstream stores suggests that the beauty industry is still not inclusive. When Millennial Black women remedy this situation giving their patronage to stores that cater to their specific requirements, they empower themselves and gain importance as consumers. In addition, they achieve their beauty goals, which earn them admiration in their community. Black Millennial women's experiences in the cosmetic marketplace also demonstrate that a brand can thrive by simply embracing *all* races and *all* beauty standards. The problem is not that Black Millennial women are not interested in cosmetics, but rather that the roots of the problem lie in the historical repudiation of Black women's femininity, which continues to this day. Mainstream brands still appear to believe that Black women's beauty aspirations are not important enough to invest in. What they have failed to acknowledge is that Black Millennial women merely demand a level playing field: appropriate beauty products and value for their money.

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