

The (Dis)Invention of Black Women: A Rhetorical Analysis of Intersectional Oppression within Cosmetics Practices

Chloe Benson

American beauty discourses often reproduce the dominant white worldview which privileges white femininity as the ideal; this standard of white beauty is reproduced in subtle and inferential ways within the cosmetics industry. For example, most popular brands fail to properly represent Black women within their products, if they even feature products for them at all. This phenomenon is visible within various brands' foundation product lines, which often fail to provide an extensive enough shade range to encapsulate darker complexions. Even in the most extensive ranges, there is often a clear lack of consideration for the needs and desires of women of darker complexions. This is visible in the lack of a variety of proper undertones for women of color, while lighter complexions are accommodated for, as well as the failure to consider women of the darkest complexions. Including shades for Black women is often considered an inconvenience, perpetuating "the idea that dark skin tones are abnormal, complicated and burdensome, thus difficult to understand and include" (1).

Many popular brands use naming systems for their shades that hypersexualize and exoticize Black women by associating their skin complexions with edible food items like espresso, hazelnut, cocoa, and mocha, while paler shades are often associated with objects related to white femininity and purity (i.e., ivory or porcelain). This association is tantalizing and seems to reproduce a larger dominant discourse that not only particularizes Black women to further structure the Manichaeian binary between Blackness and whiteness, but also contributes to discourses that deem Black women unchaste, and thus, consumable.

This project seeks to explore how rhetorical meaning structures within the cosmetics industry serve to reproduce racialized and gendered discourses that negatively impact Black women. More specifically, I analyze how Black women are disproportionately impacted by fetishizing rhetorical practices reproduced in cosmetics brands and how these rhetorical measures

contribute to the discourse of Black female unrapability. A basic premise of rhetorical studies is that naming practices are not simply a means of transmitting information. Instead, naming is rhetorical; it constitutes action in the world (3). Kenneth Burke asserted that "language is a species of action, symbolic action" (9). In other words, humans *act* with language, and action is possible because of humans' use of language. Therefore, the study of rhetoric involves analyzing language practices (or images and material objects) to understand how such practices constitute our social world by creating public meaning structures that have consequences.

In what follows, I will, first, contextualize the significance of my research within the rhetorics of cosmetics and the beauty industry at large. I will then define the theoretical and methodological frameworks for my analysis, establishing the importance of a Black Feminist perspective for exploring the rhetorical work and power imposed by gendered and racialized discourses in the cosmetics industry. Finally, I will analyze how the naming practices of cosmetics contribute to gendered and racialized discourses by engaging in rhetorical criticism with six different rhetorical artifacts, looking closely at their implied meaning structures and how they relate to macro-level oppressive discourses that impact Black women.

Contextualizing the Rhetorics of Cosmetics

Although the majority of academic scholarship on the exclusion of Black women from the beauty ideal, reviewed below, revolves around discussions of hair straightening and skin whitening (7; 11; 22; 35; 40), there are more subtle and inferential racist practices that reproduce the Black/white dichotomy within the cosmetics industry. For the purpose of this project, I will define racist practices through the lens of Ibram X. Kendi, who defines racism as "a marriage of racist policies and ideas that produce and normalize racial

inequities” (29). Racism encompasses both the “written and unwritten laws [and rules]...that govern people” (29). These unwritten laws that normalize racial inequities are notable within brands’ foundation shade ranges, which often fail to provide an extensive enough shade range to encapsulate darker complexions (4; 39; 45; 49). When there are twelve foundation shades in a makeup line and only three of them match the complexions of Black women, it is “clear that the range favors lighter skin tones overall” (45). This often excludes Black and darker-complexioned women from partaking in the cosmetics industry as it assumes that they are not worth targeting at all for foundation products.

Even in the most extensive ranges, there is often a clear lack of consideration for the needs and desires of women of darker complexions. In 2018, a popular mid-range makeup brand, Beautyblender, released a foundation line with over thirty shades. However, critics and consumers alike commented that “there only seemed to be five to seven shades maximum that are suitable for anyone with skin much darker than light olive” (49). One Reddit user commented: “If you can do 20 shades of ‘white’ you can do 20 shades of ‘dark’” (49). As Black-owned beauty brands (such as UOMA, Juvia’s Place, and Fenty Beauty) have become more prominent in the makeup industry, more public attention has been drawn to the way makeup brands reproduce racist ideologies that maintain whiteness as a standard and as the ideal complexion. Neglecting to add darker shades to their palettes illustrates how Black women are often seen as an afterthought for these companies. When a company launches products with majority white shades, they are affirming whiteness as the standard and norm.

Another way in which this dominant discourse works to reproduce a racist discourse around beauty standards is within foundation shade names. In 2018, affordable makeup brand Colourpop came under scrutiny after releasing a foundation range with the darkest shades named “Typo” and “Yikes,” while lighter shades featured names such as “Dove” and “Castle” (38; 43). Although Reid stated that “it begs the question who picks these names in the first place and who goes on to approve them,” what is more important is understanding how this rhetoric persists beyond just one individual or company (38). This negative association of Blackness with mistakes (e.g., typo, yikes) is both a product and reinstatement of more insidious and embedded rhetorics of racism in America. When we consider this example in light of other representations of Black women in the beauty industry (that is, Black women need to straighten their ‘fro and bleach the melanin out of their skin), it is clear that this example is not an exception to the rule, but in line with a rhetoric that has consistently denigrated the Black woman as a mistake of nature and

placed her in opposition to white femininity.

The power of this rhetoric does not stem from just one person or one company, but from an entire rhetoric of racism that subjugates Black communities. What causes a brand to deem a Black woman a “Typo”—a mistake—in comparison to the majestic white “Castle”? It is not simply a bad marketing mishap or a racist advertising executive. This kind of hateful rhetoric derives from a racist ideology that marks the Black body and places it in opposition to a white norm.

The American beauty industry has long reproduced the dominant worldview which consistently excludes Black women from the white ideal. Black women and their relationship to beauty have historically been devalued through white-centric discourses surrounding hair and skin tone. Both historically and contemporarily, Black hair and skin have been dichotomized in opposition to white hair and skin; one is “bad,” while the other remains the ideal “good” example of femininity and beauty (42). Black women have been consistently told to brighten their skin (i.e., whiten) and straighten their hair to be beautiful—to be white.

This dichotomous relationship finds its roots in the era of American slavery, in which the Black woman was masculinized for her “strength and ability to bear fatigue” as a slave laborer (12). Simultaneously, she was hypersexualized as impure, and thus unrapable, by white plantation owners (Crenshaw, 1989). These associations of masculinity and impurity placed Black women in opposition to ideals of femininity and purity—which manifested themselves in the representations of white women. This oppositional relationship between white femininity and Black womanhood continues to permeate our collective culture—in still insidious, but usually less explicit, practices.

While various aspects of the beauty industry are grounded in the racialization, particularization, and marking of Black women, practices within the cosmetics industry best illustrate the inferential and subtle nature that racialized and gendered discourses currently impose on the Black female body. To understand how intersectional discourses around beauty and Blackness have evolved into these more subtle and inferential practices, it is important to contextualize the rhetorical naming practices in the cosmetics industry and their place within the larger discourse of American beauty standards. The beauty industry has made it clear what the ideal is and who fails to meet that standard.

Vox’s Wischover argues that “beauty is a \$532 billion industry, and one in which black shoppers enthusiastically spend a lot of money” (49). And yet, Black beauty consumers are consistently excluded from contemporary conceptions of beauty within the industry. This is not to say Black women cannot or do

not shop for beauty or cosmetics products. This is to say that in the dominant cultural understandings of what constitutes beauty—Black women are often left out of the conception. Black women are still rhetorically set in opposition to white normality. Just as when Fanon said, “The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly” (19), these negative associations of Blackness with ugliness, primitivity, and savagery still exist. Black women are told they need to fix themselves— fix their Blackness, their ugliness, in order to be white and beautiful.

Still today, industry areas like skin whitening are booming, projected “to be worth over \$24 billion dollars” by 2027 and “the black hair care industry is worth more than \$2.5 billion” (34; 49). Despite the fact that these industries are “predatory and detrimental” to Black communities, particularly because of the “potentially hazardous substances like formaldehyde, mercury, and phthalates” found in chemical hair straightening and skin lightening treatments, the skin whitening and hair straightening industry areas are still thriving off of Black bodies (49). It was not until the Summer of 2021, after the death of George Floyd, that L’Oréal, “the world’s largest cosmetics and beauty company” finally announced they would stop using rhetoric like “whitening” and “fair” to describe their skin care products (20).

In the contemporary era, the largest and most mainstream beauty companies are still profiting off Black women and Black communities by reproducing rhetoric that tells Black women they need to be fixed (i.e., whitened) in order to be beautiful. Black women need to straighten and press their hair to fit the white ideal of silky, smooth, and relaxed hair. Further, they need to lighten their skin to fix their darkness—aiming for a fairer, whiter complexion. How does a skin lightening process which “can be traced all the way back to the 1500s” still thrive in contemporary society (34)? It does so by reinforcing rhetoric that ensures an entire subjugated and marginalized population *knows* they are ugly and abnormal. It marks their perceived ugliness through their hair and skin tone and tells them both must be changed to be beautiful.

Rhetorical Approach

This project utilizes a rhetorical analysis to discern how beauty industry rhetoric functions in the everyday. Van Dijk argues that “language use, discourse, verbal interaction, and communication belong to the micro-level of the social order” while macro-level sites of analysis focus on broader issues of “power, dominance, and inequality” (47). I am particularly interested in how micro-level instances of oppression (i.e., rhetorical

naming practices) contribute to a larger macro-narrative that hypersexualizes Black women. Through rhetorical criticism, this project seeks to understand how rhetorical meaning structures within the cosmetics industry serve to reproduce racialized and gendered discourses that negatively impact Black women. More specifically, my project analyzes how Black women are disproportionately impacted by fetishizing rhetorical practices reproduced through naming practices and how these practices contribute to larger discourses of intersectional oppression.

The goal of this project is to “theoretically bridge the well-known ‘gap’ between micro and macro approaches,” illustrated through the connection between smaller reproductions of oppression with broader systems of oppression (47). In agreement with Van Dijk (47), Brummett argues that often “power is seized and maintained in other, less obvious ways” (8). Utilizing rhetorical criticism as my primary method of research allows me to look more closely at the seemingly banal signs that exist within the beauty industry (8). Engaging in rhetorical criticism, I analyze foundation product line shade ranges and their naming practices as rhetorical artifacts, illustrating how these artifacts contribute to imbalanced power relations.

Often, the general public is unaware of how power and control is wielded through texts that are seemingly ordinary. Thus, my rhetorical analysis focuses primarily on the artifacts themselves rather than including public discussion about how others understand the meaning of these texts. My project specifically analyzes foundation shade ranges and their rhetorical practices because there is an “indexical” connection embedded within foundation shade ranges (8). The complexion shades and their respective names speak to larger gendered and racialized discourses that disproportionately impact Black and brown women.

Given the natural relationship between foundation products and skin, focusing on foundation shades as a site of epidermalization is a logical point of inquiry. My project analyzes six different foundation shade ranges as rhetorical artifacts. As Brummett notes, “an artifact is an action, event, or object perceived as a unified whole, having widely shared meanings, and manifesting in group identifications to us” (8). These artifacts work as “diffuse texts” because they consist of “a collection of signs working for the same rhetorical influence” (8). As a diffuse text, these artifacts primarily do work in the world unconsciously; “the unity of influence going on among several scattered signs” often goes unacknowledged (8). As a diffuse text, skin tone shades considered nude, neutral, natural, and flesh-toned, are reserved for white and light-skinned women, while darker complexions are routinely constituted as abnormal in relation to light

complexion shades, as they are not “natural” or “flesh toned”. Analyzing these artifacts allows me to discern the implications of the meanings these artifacts ascribe to Black women, understanding how the texts work “paradigmatically” to reproduce hypersexualized and essentialized Black women (8).

Three of my rhetorical artifacts are considered mainstream brands that cater primarily to white customers. These include: Wet N Wild, L’Oréal, and Estée Lauder. Each brand represents a different price range from budget-friendly, mid-range, to luxury, respectively. By looking at different brands at different price ranges, I hoped to better understand how this paradigm functions across socio-economic lines. The final three rhetorical artifacts considered are Black-centric and inclusive brands that specifically cater Black and brown women. These include: BLK/OPL, Juvia’s Place, and Uoma Beauty. Analyzing Black-centric brands allows me to understand how subversive brands and their rhetorical practices compare and/or contrast to mainstream brands.

To analyze the six artifacts, I developed a coding system corresponding to the shades and naming practices of each brand. Then, utilizing a rhetorical stance, I analyzed these artifacts to understand the intersection between the brands’ rhetorical practices at the micro- and macro-levels. More specifically, I sought to illuminate how these naming practices can work to reinforce larger ideologies of racialization and sexualization through the lens of Black Feminist Thought. Through my coding processes, I worked to interpret larger themes across all six artifacts. Coding the data allowed me to “[take] apart and [expose] their underlying meanings, biases, and preconceptions” (Foss, 1989, p. 241), and to go beyond the dominant reading to look more closely at “less widely shared meanings” that exist within the text, but that “many never have thought of finding” (8). After coding my data, three key themes were illuminated, that of the normativity of white femininity, women as nature, and Blackness as indulgence.

Engaging in rhetorical criticism allows me to analyze how these artifacts contribute to representation of Black women in popular culture. These artifacts “wield rhetorical influence because of the meanings they support” (8). They are significant because they have been imbued with meanings derived from a long historical trend of hypersexualizing Black women through sexual objectification and essentialization. As Brummett notes, “the empowerment and disempowerment of...people occurs bit by bit, in the moment-to-moment experiences of popular culture” (8). When Caldwell drew attention to the significance of something as simple as hair in reproducing racialized ideologies, she argued for the

acknowledgement of how “the small everyday realities of life” illustrate the most embedded meanings within a culture (11). Thus, while the cosmetics industry and its foundation shade lines may seem insignificant, they work as microsites of hegemony within our culture and have become taken-for-granted ideological sites of power (47). They serve as sites of disempowerment that directly impact Black women.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on the theoretical foundations of Critical Race Feminism (18) and Black Feminist Thought (21) enables me to privilege and focus on the experiences of Black women. Black Feminist scholars have established Black Feminism as a worldview and theoretical underpinning to foreground the intersectional oppressions experienced by Black women and to privilege the experiences and epistemes of Black women as worthy of academic scholarship and discussion (18; 21; 32). In fact, the term intersectionality, coined by Black Feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), holds that Black women “experience discrimination in ways that are similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men” (p.148). Thus, Black Feminist Thought serves to examine “the specific grievances of Black women who [are] discriminated against because of their gender and race” (30). Often, analyses of gender and race fail to account for the intersectional oppressions that subordinate Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, the experiences and struggles of Black women often go unacknowledged. Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminist Thought call for a recognition of the intersectional oppressions that Black women uniquely face (18; 26; 21; 32).

Utilizing Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Feminism also interrogates the controlling images that attempt to fix Black femininity through the white male gaze, “criticizing meanings and symbols...[and] how our identities, traditions, and experiences are masked and misrepresented inside the world” (32; see also 21). Black Feminist Thought grounds my rhetorical inquiry and allows me to establish the intersectional oppressions Black women endure as particular sites of sexism and racism. The communication discipline has long neglected the perspectives and contributions of Black women to rhetorical inquiry (13). By centering the perspectives and experiences of Black women, I work to disrupt the meaning making practices that have neglected our experiences, illustrating how the cosmetics industry has contributed to harmful discourses that construct Black femininity in dehumanizing and hypersexualizing manners.

Griffin establishes four key tenets of Black

Feminist Thought, (1) “emphasizing the value of Black women’s epistemological insight,” (2) “embracing intersectionality,” (3) “fostering self-definition and self-determination,” and (4) “resisting systemic oppression” (21). My project embraces these tenets, grounded in an understanding of the unique oppression endured by Black women, and seeks to illuminate how Black women can foster self-definition by subverting the oppressive hypersexualization fostered within the cosmetics industry. I couple this theoretical grounding with a rhetorical approach not only to embrace the importance of intersectionality, but also to disrupt the rhetorical power of the white male gaze.

Important to understanding the nuances of intersectional oppression is the distinction between the sexual objectification of white and Black women and their differing experiences. What makes the sexualization of Black women different from that of white women? White women are held on a pedestal within patriarchal society and are considered representative of “the ‘cult of true womanhood’...divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity,” while women of color, particularly Black women, stand in opposition to these values as primitive, hypersexualized and unchaste objects of the male gaze (12). This dichotomy between white and Black women has been formed rhetorically through “stereotypes and negative images of black women” that render them “invisible” (11). Higginbotham explores the invisibility of Black women through Sojourner Truth’s famous inquiry, “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” arguing that the statement “laid bare the racialized configuration of gender” that “denied [Black women] legal right to their own bodies and sexuality” (23). To be a Black woman, marked by race and fetishized as a hypersexual object, is to be judged by the impossible and equally unnecessary standards of white femininity. Both historically and contemporarily, Black women have been defined by their race and gender; the two cannot be separated. As sexual objects, Black women are seen as “less human, animalistic, or more ‘natural’” and thus are denied their own “subjectivity” as human agents (15). These associations fix the identity of Black women. As presumably primitive others, Black women are not only placed in opposition to whiteness in general, but also to womanhood and white femininity.

The disciplinary power of the white male gaze works to hypersexualize the Black body through fetishization. This ascription of promiscuity and hypersexuality derives from an intersectional oppressive power that assumes an ambivalent position (44). Black women are desired as exotic objects and simultaneously rejected and viewed as repulsive objects of ridicule. Black women are not only deemed passive objects through objectification but are further assigned as sexual objects. As Black

women are transformed into sexual objects, hegemonic white masculinity sustains its power and dominance.

This transformation from human agent to sexual object occurs through rhetorical means. Hines argues that through our linguistic use of conceptual metaphors, women are transformed from human agents to “sweet objects” (24). Aligned with hooks’ theory of eating the Other as a form of desire, Black women are consumed as “edible objects” to be “bought, sold, eaten...admired... [and] dismissed as *sinful*” (25). What starts out as a seemingly banal metaphor has the disciplinary power to normalize the Black woman as simultaneously desirable and repulsive, as an exotic thing to be consumed.

My project draws attention to the oppression of Black women within the cosmetics industry through this myriad of meaning making structures. My interest in this topic directly relates to my identity as a bi-racial Black woman. As a young woman developing my own identity, I was drawn to cosmetics as a site of personal empowerment. However, as I have matured, I have become more aware of the racial disparities that exist within the industry and the lack of representation that dark-complexioned women of color experience in the beauty industry. Black Feminist Thought has offered me a critical lens to engage in challenging oppressive practices in my own life. It has given me power to negotiate imbalanced power relations and to subvert the hegemony of oppressive discourses. I seek to illuminate the relationship between the rhetorical constitution of Black women as consumable, edible, and sinful and the narrative and historical trend of Black female unrapability through rhetorical criticism.

Analysis

The Normativity of White Femininity

One particular way in which foundation shade ranges reproduce intersectionally gendered and racialized discourses that negatively impact Black women is through their promotion of rhetoric that asserts white femininity as the norm. This rhetorical work is intersectional in nature, as white femininity—the interplay of whiteness and womanhood—is privileged as normative. American beauty discourses privilege white women as beautiful by closely aligning them with femininity. Femininity is assessed through “the ‘cult of true womanhood’” and those who fail to meet its requirements are considered less feminine and less of a woman (12). Some of the key requirements of femininity include piety, purity, submissiveness, and most importantly, perfection (12). Thus, the stereotypical version of femininity is one that is fixed by these qualities.

The stereotype of white womanhood conforms with this version of femininity and is made visible within the naming practices of cosmetics companies. Both mainstream cosmetics brands and Black-centric brands reproduce the standards of white feminine beauty by aligning fairness with femininity. For example, Uoma Beauty features a white shade range named “Fair Lady.” This language seems to say that a typical quality of a lady is one of “fair” complexion. There is a partisan nature to this language, meaning that to be a lady is to be fair and that which is not fair is not lady-like. To be of a darker complexion rules a woman out of fitting into the confines of womanhood. This line of thought finds its roots in the era of American slavery, as white womanhood was defined as distinct from and more refined than Black womanhood in order to justify the brutal denigration and enslavement of African and Black women, as mentioned earlier (12). In this era, the “lady” of the plantation was the slaveholder’s spouse and Black women were masculinized through enslavement—viewed as unrefined, unintelligent, and unladylike. Contemporarily, this discourse has persisted. “Ladies” represent those of the upper echelon—more civilized and refined women—while marginalized women are seen as unrefined, more animalistic, and backwards in nature.

If the metaphoric rhetoric of shade names did not make this relationship clear enough, brands go even further to assert the normativity of white femininity through more overt language. All three mainstream brands utilize rhetoric that assert whiteness as a norm. For example, Wet N Wild and L’Oréal both associate light and medium shades with the word “Natural.” Across all six brands reviewed, not one dark shade features the word “Natural” to describe it. Thus, to be white is natural, and to be natural, is to be the norm against which all else is compared. To associate white and light shades with the word “Natural” is to align them with that which is innate or inherent. The fact that not once are Black women considered “Natural” marginalizes Black women. It means that Black women are somehow unnatural, and to see Black women as unnatural is to associate them with abnormality.

It is important to note that the relationship between white femininity and Black (de)feminization is not entirely binary. The phenomenon of colorism complicates this relationship by constructing a spectrum of what is considered acceptable or normal through the white male gaze. As noted earlier, individuals within oppressed groups who have ethnic and physical features more closely related to whiteness (straight hair, lighter complexions) are valued more highly within the dominant discourse. Within the cosmetics industry, then, brands utilize language such as “Classic Beige” and

“Natural Buff” to describe medium-complexioned skin tones. Women of color with lighter complexions often fall within this shade range. By utilizing words like “Classic” and “Natural” to describe these light-skinned women of color, the cosmetics industry reinforces “hegemonically defined” ideologies of “who and what is valued [and] beautiful” (35; 11). This rhetoric is particularly of note because to be “classic” is to be higher quality, more quintessentially beautiful. This rhetoric reinforces that normality of white femininity; this ideology is reinforced through other rhetorical strategies within cosmetics naming practices. As I will discuss below, the dichotomy between white and Black women is further structured by the ways in which the white male gaze perceives white femininity as the standard and Black womanhood as abnormal and abject.

Woman as an Element of Nature

A major rhetorical strategy noted across brands that reinforces this dichotomy is the association of women with elements of nature. Collins argues that “the identification of women with nature [is] central to women’s subsequent objectification and conquest by men” (15). Men are far more likely to be constructed in ways that align with reason, civility, and logic than women are (14). Women, more often than not, are associated with that which is primitive, wild, and illogical. Women, and in particular, women of color, are consistently defined as “less human, animalistic, or more ‘natural’” (i.e., not a part of civil society) in an attempt to deny groups of their “subjectivity” and agency (15). Being aligned with what is primitive, wild, and illogical relegates women to the natural world as distinct from civil society. Thus, they are viewed as unfit to participate in the public sphere and in public decision making.

One commonality across all six rhetorical artifacts was the association of women with elements of nature, including land, natural objects, and animals. In this case, “natural” is associated not with white normativity, as with the examples in the previous section, but with primitivity and that which is crude and uncivilized. While women of all complexions, light, medium, and dark, are subject to this messaging, the severity and impact varies depending on racialized skin tones. There is a continuum of primitivity when we consider how women of color and white women are represented as different types of elements in nature. This continuum aligns with the theoretical underpinning of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

My findings show that white women are far more likely to be associated with soft, feminine, and fragile aspects of nature than women of color. For example,

both Estée Lauder and Wet N Wild Beauty utilize words such as “Porcelain,” “Shell,” and “Rose” to describe lighter (i.e., white) skin complexions. These words illustrate forms of femininity that align with the traditional stereotype of fragility. To be “Porcelain” or a “Shell” is to be fragile and breakable. It does not take much to shatter either. On the other hand, a “Rose” conjures up images of love and romance; it is petal-soft, gentle. There is a quality of fragility that denigrates white women as weak in some respects, but also reinforces the idea of traditional, white femininity. Similarly, Uoma Beauty’s lightest shade range “White Pearl” conjures up imagery of the classic, feminine woman. Brands’ tendencies to associate white women with traditional femininity uphold the cultural norm of femininity as a white woman’s trait. By reproducing rhetorical strategies that privilege white femininity as the only kind of femininity, brands work to negate and invalidate the womanhood of Black and brown women. This only furthers the dichotomy between whiteness and Blackness that has historically been maintained. This dichotomization of white femininity and Black (de) feminization constructs a clear definition of beauty that leaves Black and brown women at the margins.

While white women represent softness and femininity, women of color are more likely to be associated with natural elements that are considered tough and harsh. For example, brands often used “Mahogany,” “Ebony,” “Copper” and “Bronze” to describe Black and brown women’s skin complexions (48; 31; 17). These terms invoke the hardness of particular natural elements like metals, minerals, or wood, that would not readily be associated with white femininity and fragility. Instead, harsh or tough aspects of nature like “Mahogany” and “Bronze” frame women of color in opposition to white women—as more sturdy and tough. This aligns with the rhetorical defeminization of Black women by masculinizing them and associating them with the historical image of the uncivilized, brutish slave or the tough female slave laborer. Consequently, Black women are not seen as vulnerable or soft but instead as tough enough to handle hard work, or even pain and violence. Because Black women are not perceived in the same classically feminine, and fragile, ways that white women so often are, they are subject to a disproportionate degradation of their bodies in a variety of ways.

For example, Black maternal mortality rates and the dismal mental and medical healthcare provided to Black women and women of color can be seen as a consequence of this rhetoric. A 2016 research study found that Black women were more likely to receive lower quality health care than white women, primarily due to discrimination within the medical field (5). In

a 2019 study, it was found that Black women were three to four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women (41). These findings do not argue that Black women are more susceptible to illnesses or pregnancy complications than white women. Rather, medical professionals dismiss their pain and take their expressed concerns less seriously, exposing these women of color to neglectful and disparate mortality outcomes. Once babies are born, they become the focus of care and mothers are monitored less. For women of color, the rhetoric of the tough Black woman plays into these mortality outcomes. After birth, the mother’s concerns become less relevant to medical professionals, and the assumption that Black women can handle more pain leads to a neglect of their serious medical issues.

In addition, Black women bear the burden of “the superwoman schema”—the idea that Black women are obligated to manifest strength, for themselves, their families, and their ancestors (33). For many Black women, the image of the strong Black mother becomes internalized and makes them reluctant to seek out the help they need. Because of this, along with medical mistrust within the Black community, Black women are less likely to seek out mental health resources than white women (33). Thus, the rhetoric of the strong Black woman, reinforced through associations with hard natural elements like Mahogany, intersectionally oppresses Black women disproportionately. The oppression of Black women does not stem just from their social location as women, or as Black, but as Black women. This rhetoric has a direct impact on the livelihoods of Black women—it does *consequential* work in the world.

Subverting White Normativity and Redefining Black Femininity

Despite the serious material consequences of harmful rhetoric within the cosmetics industry, some Black-centric brands have worked to create more rhetorically productive spaces for women of color to see themselves represented within the beauty industry. Although reinforcing white normativity is common across brands, mainstream or not, Black-centric brands attempt to resist white normativity in a variety of ways. The most common attempt is the choice to flip the shade spectrum to privilege Blackness as the norm. More often than not, when we encounter the skin tone spectrum, it is organized as lighter shades to darker ones. This is extremely common within the cosmetics industry—to organize shades from lightest to darkest. However, in an attempt to subvert this norm—to privilege Blackness—two of the Black-centric brands, Juvia’s Place and Uoma Beauty, flip the shade spectrum. When you search for

your shade with either of these brands, they will always start with the darkest shade on the top-left, then descend toward the lightest, on the bottom-right. Although these brands are still at the margins of the industry, they are creating a space for women of color, and dark-skinned Black women more specifically, to highlight their skin tones as the norm. They celebrate Black womanhood by privileging Black complexions within shade ranges.

Flipping the shade spectrum is not the only way Black-centric brands make attempts to subvert white normativity. For example, Uoma Beauty features a medium to dark shade range named “Bronze Venus.” This name could potentially be a play on Venus de Milo, the famous ancient Greek statue which is said to depict Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. The Venus de Milo is a stark white statue, aligning with the normative perspective of beauty and love as white-centric. Uoma Beauty pushes against this by celebrating the “Bronze” nature of Venus—their description of a darker complexion—as just as beautiful as the traditional white Venus. This description of Black beauty is not without its limitations, though. Black beauty is easily distorted by the dominant white male gaze. For example, “Bronze Venus” conjures up the historical existence of the Hottentot Venus, as described above. The Hottentot Venus’s excessive and grotesque backside made her an object of both intrigue and disgust. Images of her worked to represent that which is so grotesque that one cannot look away, leading to the temptation to indulge in viewing pleasure.

Juvia’s Place stands out amongst all the artifacts due to its unique rhetoric, which associates women with nations, cities, and places. From its darkest shade, “Sudan” to its lightest, “Marisol”—each shade connects women with geopolitical location. The rhetorical strategy of Juvia’s Place redefines femininity as engaged in mobility or action, rather than as passive and inanimate. Historically, women have been aligned with that which is passive and acted upon. Further, women have been routinely relegated to a state of passivity by their exclusive alignment with the private sphere. By reimagining femininity as mobility and action, Juvia’s Place works to foster “self-definition and self-determination” and resists systemic oppression (21). Many of the destinations considered within the shade range are exotic or jet-setting locations that are likely to be visited on holiday trips and summer vacations. They are significant sites of culture and history as well.

By associating women with geopolitical locations, Juvia’s Place works not only to privilege the historical origins of Black and brown people through their products, but also works to redefine women as more than that which is tied to natural elements; they assert that women, and in particular, women of color, should

be understood as mobile, as jet-setting, and as active agents of culture and history. This work, which may seem superficially insignificant, has real power in interrogating the controlling images that have fixed Black femininity through the white male gaze. By redefining Black femininity through a lens of agency and mobility, Juvia’s Place makes an active choice to disrupt the historical meaning structures that have masked the experiences of women of color and have misrepresented us within the dominant discourse.

This is not to say that the brand is without limitations. Its rhetoric could be considered reductionist in nature—making the assumption that all women from “Sudan” or “Aruba” or “Bali” have the exact same complexion. In this way, it has the potential to essentialize women around the world by defining them only as their nationality or place of origin. Thus, the brand could be said to propagate a monolithic understanding of race and ethnicity by associating skin tones with cities and nation-states. Despite this limitation, Juvia’s Place’s rhetoric powerfully imagines new possibilities that celebrate the agency of Black and brown womanhood. This is an important contribution to re-defining what Black womanhood and femininity constitutes within contemporary discourses.

Acknowledging the limitations of these brands’ rhetoric is not to discount the work they have done to resist oppressive beauty standards. These acts of resistance are powerful. However, in order to deconstruct the normalization of white femininity, this resistance cannot only be done at the margins of the industry. A more powerful rhetorical shift in racialized beauty discourses requires a stronger, more prolonged disruption of dominant cultural attitudes about Blackness and beauty. This stronger disruption is necessary, I argue, because of the intersectionally oppressive nature of this rhetoric as discussed more fully in the next section.

The Consumption of Black Women

The relationship between Black women and food serves as one of the most revealing aspects of this research. Food is often closely associated with Blackness; consider the ways in which our culture has associated Blackness with images of watermelon, fried chicken, and soul food, or Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben. Historically, the relationship between Black women and food has been a tenuous one. When we look at the caricatures like the Hottentot Venus, it is clear to see how Blackness is often associated with excessiveness. The perception of Blackness and food has not been different. Stereotypical Black foods, like “Soul Food” are often considered overly indulgent and excessively comforting. These

foods are often classified as “gross” by the dominant public due to their use of unconventional food sources, like chitlins—a dish made from pig or cow intestines—or pigs’ feet, and they are almost never characterized as healthy or good for one’s body.

Similarly, Miller-Young (2014) analyzes the ways in which Black women have been discursively aligned with the image of brown sugar. She reveals the associations between Black primitivity and savagery with the rawness of unrefined brown sugar, concluding that as “super-sexual beings,” Black women have driven a global appetite for [their] sweetness” (Miller-Young, 2014, p. 5). The white male gaze has an appetite for Black womanhood and seeks to consume it, own it, and control it. The way in which cosmetics companies associate Black skin tones with food carries a similar rhetorical weight.

Almost all of the rhetorical artifacts analyzed feature shades associated with the richness and indulgence of Black complexions. Within the shade ranges analyzed, the majority of complexions associated with food are those for Black and brown women’s complexions. For example, one common association was that of Black women with sweets and desserts. For mainstream brands, this results in associating Black women with foods such as “Caramel,” “Toffee” and “Rich Java” (48; 31; 17) What does it mean to associate Black women with the richness of these desserts and sweet drinks? It means that Black women becomes associated with that which is sinful to the body, and perhaps even the soul. As Hines argues, the linguistic use of metaphors such as these transforms Black women from human agents to “sweet objects” (24). To indulge in a Black woman, is to consume something that surpasses the everyday; it is a treat that is excessive or “sinful.” In the same way that the Hottentot Venus was made hypervisible and grotesque based on the depiction of her backside as excessive, Black women are relegated to the hypervisible and grotesque through their association with excessive, sinful indulgences. To associate Black womanhood with that which we cannot resist, but that we should avoid to remain pure, reinforces historically ambivalent images of Black women—that which is simultaneously desired and rejected. In this way, by associating Black women with excessive objects of consumption, cosmetics companies have reinforced the ideology of Black women as hypervisible objects. They are both desired and sinful; they are objects that men cannot resist and are there to tempt men.

Mainstream brands are not the only ones to engage in this rhetoric of Black indulgence. Uoma Beauty, Black-centric in nature, also features shades that associate dark complexions with “Honey” and “Brown Sugar.” The association of Black women with these ultra-sweet

sugars emphasizes the unique oppression that Black women experience due to their intersectionality. Honey and brown sugar are much sweeter than the traditional white sugar—they are typically seen as indulgences, rather than a common, everyday ingredient.

It is important to note that brown sugar has double meanings. Miller-Young’s (2014) analysis of the way Black women have been rhetorically aligned to the image of brown sugar reveals that this association is one that aligns Blackness with primitivity and savagery through the rawness of unrefined cane sugar which has yet to be bleached. However, brown sugar can also refer to the rich, thick molasses-infused brown sugar used to bake sweets. When we consider cosmetics brands’ rhetoric in this light, it is made clear that the even Black-centric brands have internalized a rhetoric that has served to denigrate, not uplift, Black women. Whiteness confronts Blackness, and in particular, Black women through sexual consumption. Identifying Black women as rich brown sugar plays into hooks’ (25) theory of eating the Other. By hypersexualizing Black women through rhetorical means, Black women become sexually consumable for the white male gaze.

It is important to note that colorism is at work in this rhetoric. While Black and brown women across the shade spectrum are subject to the hypersexualizing and denigrating rhetoric illustrated within cosmetics shade ranges, they are impacted differently due to colorist interpretations of skin complexion. Within the concept of colorism, what is light (or closest to white) is valued more highly; thus, women of color with lighter complexions are viewed differently than dark skinned women through the dominant lens. More specifically, the darkest complexions within shade ranges were almost exclusively associated with harsh and tough aspects of nature like “Ebony” and “Mahogany” or bitter and toughened foods like “Black Walnut” or “Espresso” (7; 17; 31; 48). In a similar vein, Black women were likely to be associated with nuts—unprocessed, tough, and raw food items. For example, “Hazelnut,” “Pecan,” “Chestnut,” and “Almond” are all common associations of Black skin tone. As dark complexions lightened, they were more likely to be associated with sweets and indulgences. I found that Medium and Dark shades were more likely to be associated with spices, desserts, and the overly sweet. Although all Black and brown women are impacted by harmful rhetorical practices, they are harmed differently, with those of the darkest complexions routinely (de)feminized as harsh and tough while those with lighter complexions are hypersexualized through fetishization and exoticization.

The association of Black women and spices also presents a connection to the exoticization and fetishization of Black femininity. Estée Lauder, among

other brands, associates Blackness with “Cinnamon,” and “Nutmeg,” (48; 31). While these naming practices can imply an association of unrefined primitivity and ultra-sweetness, they can also be associated with “the exotic”. Claiming that Black women are “Deep Spice” highlights not only the richness of Black femininity but also the “spicy” qualities of Black culture, such as their “exotic” origins and presumably “backwards” cultural traditions (17). What starts out as a banal metaphor has the disciplinary power to constitute the Black woman as simultaneously desirable and repulsive, as an exotic thing to be at times consumed, and at other times rejected.

Although the (de)feminization of Black womanhood may seem to mean Black women are undesirable, this is not the case. The hypersexualization of Black women illustrates how ambivalent the practice of racialization is in relation to the Black body. As an othered and marginalized being, the exotic Black female body becomes a site of intrigue for the white male gaze. The simultaneous (de)feminization and hypersexualization of Black women results in the erasure of any moral quandary within the act of rape and sexual violence (26). To hypersexualize Black women is to argue that they are asking for the unwanted sexual attention they receive; they are handing over their bodies on a platter.

The rhetorical construction of Black women as delectable desserts or spicy treats harms Black women and women of color. Rhetoric does consequential work in the world because naming practices are material—they have consequences because of their subtlety and banality. To symbolically associate Black women with spices, desserts, and sweets is to categorically dehumanize them while also reinforcing their perceived hypersexualization. By associating Black women with indulgent foods, this rhetoric constructs them as “ripe for the picking.” This assumption, that Black women are inherently sexual in nature, implies that Black women are perpetually available to sexual partners—that they always want to be consumed. Making this assumption causes sexual violence against Black women to be taken less seriously. If Black women are perceived as always wanting of sexual relations, then they are also perceived as always offering up their consent.

When we represent Black womanhood as hypersexual, sinful, and exotic, we “[reinforce] violence, rhetorical and real, against black women” (23). This rhetoric harms Black women by appropriating a historical trend of viewing Black women as unrapable. By dehumanizing Black women through this rhetorical strategy, cosmetics brands are engaging in a discourse that negates the humanity of Black women and ultimately excuses violence against them. Through intersectionally gendered and raced ways of seeing, certain bodies

are made to be objects for display, while other bodies remain undetected. In this way, Black bodies become hypervisible in the most harmful of ways.

This coveting of Black bodies has been maintained in dominant U.S. culture. Historically, this argument was utilized by plantation owners and white men to victimize and rape enslaved Black women (Sharpe, 2010). However, as this discourse has evolved, the hypersexualization of Black women has re-constituted Black women as exotic, immoral “hos, skeezers, and bitches” (37). When we consider how the #MeToo movement has been co-opted by white women (10) and how sexual violence against Black women receives little media attention (30), it is clear that the same discourse that excused rape and other forms of violence in the antebellum era is still at work contemporarily.

Conclusion

The goal of this project has been to illuminate how the cosmetics industry engages in micro-level reproductions of larger discourses that are deemed harmful to Black women. I have sought to illustrate how deeply embedded these discourses are within our social fabric—so engrained that they can be found in the names of the makeup we put on our faces every day. While this remains the primary goal of this project, the most revealing contribution this research offers is that of the relationship between the cosmetics industry and the rhetorical trend of Black Female Unrapability. Black women are more than just dichotomized from white femininity; they are made hypervisible through discourses that (de)feminize and hypersexualize them. By drawing on the theoretical foundations of Critical Race Feminism (18) and Black Feminist Thought (21), I have privileged the unique intersectional oppression endured by Black women and women of color more generally. Through a Black Feminist lens, I have observed the ways in which denigration differs for Black women within the cosmetics industry due to the unique interplay of race and gender.

One of the core principles of a Black feminist spectator gaze (32) and of Black Feminist Thought is that of “self-definition” and resisting intersectionally oppressive systems (21). This project demonstrates that there is much work to be done to continue to strive for self-definition, as there is only so far that marginalized groups can go in negotiating power within oppressive systems. For example, Uoma Beauty and Juvia’s Place both do important work in redefining Black femininity. Uoma Beauty’s play on the cultural understanding of Venus of Milo in their “Bronze Venus” shade allowed the brand to resist against the idea that only white women can be associated with love, beauty, and romance.

Juvia's Place works to redefine Black womanhood as active and mobile, rather than passive or fixed. These examples of self-definition are powerful and needed. Thus, more research is needed on the integration of Black centrality within the beauty industry and how Black women can subvert the hegemonic power and control of white normativity within beauty standards.

The beauty industry has been structured to privilege white beauty above all at the expense of denigrating Black and brown women. When Black women foster self-definition through Black and Afrocentric beauty brands, these norms are interrogated as values that can be changed and negotiated. Brands like Uoma Beauty and Juvia's Place have illustrated that subversion is possible.

If we continue to operate off the current lens, the appropriation of the white male gaze will only continue to dehumanize Black and brown women through hypersexualization, (de)feminization and other means. The idea promoted by cosmetics brands that Black women are overly indulgent sweets is not much different than the historical image of The Jezebel, which emphasizes the overly sexual and unchaste qualities of Black womanhood (27). Now, the Jezebel has been replaced with the Black woman prostitute and the idea that Black women are inherently pornographic, "sexual deviants who will fulfill any and all fantasies" (37). When we look at popularized Black women celebrities such as Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, and Rihanna, we can see how this image has been maintained. Black women are "certified freaks" known for their "waist... ass...[and] titties" and are willing to engage in BDSM because "chains and whips" excite them (2; 36; 16;). There is an inherent complication in this imagery. While from one point of view, these women are seen as sex-positive and empowering, a critical reading of these images exemplifies how these sex-positive Black celebrities participate in their own sexual objectification of Black women, a direct consequence of the appropriation of the white male gaze. Whiteness is always seeking to understand what is Black, but it does so through a narrow lens that ignores the dimensionality of Blackness. We are more than the flat character of the Jezebel or prostitute. Unfortunately, the predominant representation of Black womanhood ignores the complexities of Black women's identities. This is not to say that Black women should not be sex-positive or to disparage the agency Black women have over their own bodies. It is to acknowledge that the way that we, as Black women, are viewed is through a dominant lens that promotes the rhetoric of Black female unrapability. This rhetoric exists deep within our social fabric; so deeply, that it often goes unnoticed. When cosmetics brands appropriate this language, they affirm this gaze

as the dominant lens through which to understand the world. More research is needed to understand the complications and tensions between sex positivity and hypersexualization—to better understand how Black and brown women can embrace sexuality through re-definition and reclamation of their bodies.

To protect Black women's health and well-being from various forms of violence, sexual and otherwise, we need to re-define what it means to be a Black woman. We need to ask ourselves what it would mean for women, particularly women of color, to challenge a system of misogynoir and commodification of Black beauty. What would it mean to unfix the current definitions of Black femininity and womanhood and re-invent what constitutes Black beauty and Black femininity? To de-commodify our beauty and find confidence, power, and acceptance in our perfectly flawed bodies? Through a disruption, redefinition of Black women as human agents, rather than consumable objects, can occur.

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Author

Chloe Benson

Chloe Benson is an emerging diversity, inclusion, and equity practitioner at Bloomberg LP where she works on the Diversity Recruiting Team and leads the strategic direction of early engagement recruiting. Prior to working at Bloomberg LP, she attended Villanova University, where she was a recipient of the Villanova Presidential Scholarship Award. At Villanova, she was involved in a variety of organizations and initiatives that promote dialogue around issues of equity and inclusion. These experiences working within higher education diversity and inclusion influenced her professional career path toward creating more diverse corporate spaces for underrepresented groups.



Mentor

Dr. Billie Murray

Dr. Billie Murray is Associate Professor of Communication and was the Inaugural Faculty-in-Residence with the Center for Peace and Justice Education (2017-2020) at Villanova University. Her scholarly work seeks to advance understandings about public space, activism, hate speech, and the rhetoric of social protest and has appeared in *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *First Amendment Studies*, *Western Journal of Communication*, and *Communication Theory*. She is the author of a forthcoming book with the Pennsylvania State University Press entitled *Combating Hate: A Framework for Direct Action*, that details her research on public responses to hate speech.