

Racism in the Beauty Industry

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Introduction

The beauty industry in the United States was estimated to be worth \$32 billion in 2020. In 2021, sales are projected to reach \$35.6 billion (US Industry and Market Reports, 2019). It's a booming industry. Both men and women love to feel good about themselves, and they have turned to products to make their visions of themselves come true. These visions, though, are based on societal beauty standards that have always been in place, and these standards have always reflected attributes of white men and women (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986). This is fine for those who can easily walk into a store and find 200 possible foundation shades to match their complexion (Fleming, 2019). However, this is not the case for many people, mainly people of color, who find that only certain shades come somewhat close to their skin tone (Fleming, 2019). Some brands have made shades that are dark enough for darker skinned Black women, but there are still not enough, and they are either poorer quality or not marketed well (Marshall, 2020).

Black women spent up to nine times more on beauty and hair care than white women, and in 2017, they made up 85% of hair and beauty sales (Fleming, 2019, Marshall, 2020, Christiansen, 2020). Maybe this is the case because they are trying to conform as much as possible to American beauty standards (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Marshall, 2020). These standards include light skin, bond and straight hair, and blue eyes (and a thin body) (Poran, 2002, Slatton, 2012). These racially charged attributes are likely a result of the history of racism in the

United States; they are likely a result of the idea that “white is better” (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986). Because of these standards and ideas, beauty brands have a history of excluding women of color, particularly those with especially dark skin (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986, Marshall, 2020). This paper explores how racism in the beauty industry is still prevalent and how beauty brands can fix this issue.

Lack of Product Diversity

Product diversity in the beauty industry is severely lacking; the lack of shade diversity in complexion products throughout the industry is easily seen in any store (Fleming, 2019). There are barely any shades available for darker skinned Black women compared to the abundance of shades offered for white women (Fleming, 2019, Marshall, 2020). One brand that has made lots of shades for Black women is Fenty Beauty. Started by Rihanna in 2017, her launch began with 40 shades of a matte foundation, and they made \$100 million in a little over a month (Fleming, 2019, Christiansen, 2020). This shows that there is a desperate need for darker shades on the market, and that brands are actually losing money because of their exclusion of darker skinned women of color (Fleming, 2019, Christiansen, 2020). As of 2020, Fenty has 50 shades of both matte and hydrating foundations—that’s 50 shades each—along with a line of 50 concealers to match (Fenty Beauty, 2020, Marshall, 2020).

Florence Adepoju, who launched her own makeup company called MDM Flow in 2015, said that she had “spoke to buyers who said, ‘Our customers have

not complained that this is even a problem,” but that she had encountered plenty of customers complaining about a lack of shade inclusivity (Fleming, 2019).

Fenty Beauty may have set and raised the bar for amount of foundation shades, but some brands still fall short (Christiansen, 2020, Marshall, 2020). The brand called Beauty Blender, who invented the egg-shaped beauty sponge meant for facial makeup application, came out with a foundation with 32 shades, only 9 of which were for meant for people with darker skin (Marshall, 2020). Only four of these shades are meant for those with very deep skin tones (Marshall, 2020). A well-known beauty influencer on social media, Manny MUA, actually said in a tweet that he turned down a sponsorship with the brand because of their lack of inclusivity in their shade range (Marshall, 2020). Like Fenty Beauty, they later added more shades, and now have a total of 40, but still, only ten of these shades are meant for women with dark skin (Beauty Blender, 2020).

Even though Beauty Blender seemed to only increase their shade range because the public attacked them on social media, there are brands like Fenty Beauty who actually try to be inclusive because they care about their customers rather than their image (Marshall, 2020). One of these brands is Morphe. They started out as a brush company and now have many eyeshadow palettes, lipsticks, and other products, including a line of 60 foundation shades (Morphe, 2020). The brand is all about being artistic and experimenting with makeup, so it makes sense that they'd want as many people as possible to be a part of that (Morphe, 2020). Huda Beauty also is an inclusive brand that actually cares that their products reach everyone possible (Huda Beauty, 2020). Though their most

recent launch, a stick foundation, only has 39 shades, 18 of them—a little less than half—are for darker skin tones, and ten of these are suitable for very deep skin tones (Huda Beauty, 2020). Ten out of 39 isn't the best, but there is always more to be done (Fleming, 2019).

Other brands could improve their shade ranges. Tarte Cosmetics has three different lines of foundation, one with 30 shades, one with 40 shades, and one with 50 (Tarte Cosmetics, 2020). The one with 50 shades has 17 shades for darker skin—a third of the whole range—but the foundations with only 30 and 40 shades don't have this ratio (Tarte Cosmetics, 2020).

Within the Products Themselves

Some brands, such as Fenty Beauty, Tarte Cosmetics, and Morphe, name their complexion products by number (Fenty Beauty, 2020, Tarte Cosmetics, 2020, Morphe, 2020). But other brands name foundation and concealer shades after objects, and more specifically, food (Fleming, 2019). Niellah Arboine, a journalist, finds it strange that complexion products for women with darker skin tones are often named “chocolate” or “coffee,” and that in the same line of products the lighter shades would be called “ivory” or “porcelain” (Fleming, 2019). She says it's very dehumanizing and that “even within the language we are using for makeup there is that inequality,” and asks, “Why are we food” (Fleming, 2019)?

A brand called Too Faced Cosmetics names most of their complexion products after food (Too Faced Cosmetics, 2020). Food is part of their gimmick:

they have eyeshadow palettes that smell like chocolate and peaches, and entire makeup collections named after peaches (Too Faced Cosmetics, 2020). But that has nothing to do with skin color, and the inequality comes from the fact that not all of their shade names are after food (Too Faced Cosmetics, 2020). Included in some of Too Faced Cosmetics' shade names are "tiramisu," "honey," and "pearl" (Too Faced Cosmetics, 2020). Most of the darker shades are named after food, with the exception of "mahogany," and most of the lighter shades are not, with the exception of "vanilla" and "almond" (Too Faced Cosmetics, 2020).

Huda Beauty names each of their concealers and foundations after food (Huda Beauty, 2020). Even the lightest shades are named "marshmallow" or "milkshake" (Huda Beauty, 2020). In this case, shade naming is equal, but that is not a reason to continue this trend.

Harmful Trends in Beauty

According to American beauty standards, lighter skin is better, along with straight, blond hair and blue eyes (Poran, 2002, Slatton, 2012). This is part of the reason that Black women spend so much money on beauty and hair care products: they are trying as hard as they can to conform to these standards (Harmon, 2018, Poran, 2002, Slatton, 2012, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). They are trying to be what society will consider beautiful, but the thing is that they will never be able to fully conform to the standards of light skin and straight hair, so they do what they can, but sometimes products they use can be dangerous (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Harper & Choma, 2019).

Skin Bleaching Creams

Skin bleaching is a trend among Black women that is growing in popularity (Hall, 2018, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Harper & Choma, 2019). It's a result of colorism, the idea that even within a race, the lighter your skin the better (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). But these skin-bleaching creams are dangerous (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Harper & Choma, 2019). They have carcinogens and levels of mercury that are over the legal amount set by the US Food and Drug Administration (Hall, 2018, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). Mercury is a poisonous element and in skin lightening creams, it can cause neurotoxicity and kidney damage (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019).

Skin bleaching also has a psychological element (Hall, 2018). The Black women who use these creams do so because they want to lighten their skin as much as possible in order to feel beautiful (Hall, 2018, Harper & Choma, 2019). But this is because of internalized colorism and racism, which results from societal pressures to conform to white beauty standards (Harper & Choma, 2019, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). This is damaging to one's self esteem (Hall, 2018, Harper & Choma, 2019, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019).

Hair Straighteners and Relaxers

Conforming to Eurocentric beauty standards also includes straightening hair (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Marshall, 2020). There is constant societal pressure to straighten hair, or to get rid of its coily texture (Harper & Choma,

2019, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Marshall, 2020). Black people often face hair discrimination at work, which also affects self esteem (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). But the products they put in their hair, like skin bleaching creams, have harmful chemicals (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Marshall, 2020). These chemicals, which include parabens and estrogen from placenta, cause cancer and are harmful to the endocrine system, the system in the body that regulates hormones (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). Phthalates and nonylphenol have also been found in these products, and they can also cause cancer, along with asthma and obesity (Marshall, 2020).

Disparity between White and Black Women

Because white women don't need to use these products, they are a lot less likely to encounter dangerous chemicals in their beauty products (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Marshall, 2020). 50% of hair care products that women of color use contain these harmful chemicals, while only 7% of these products that white women use contain these chemicals (Marshall, 2020). White women's skin is light enough and hair is straight enough to conform to American beauty standards without them having to try, so the products they use are different than those of women of color, creating the disparity of exposure between white women and women of color (Zota & Shamasunder, 2019, Marshall, 2020).

Increasing Representation

Within a Brand

Maybe the reason that brands still do not have sufficient shade ranges is that there is not enough diversity within the brands to represent what all populations want from their products (Fleming, 2019). In order to fix the problem of exclusion in the beauty industry, brands must hire more women of color, both on the employee and executive level (Fleming, 2019). This will give more of a say to those with darker skin tones, as the employees will be able to help brands make products for them that are both better quality and are marketed more strategically (Fleming, 2019, Christiansen, 2020).

Pull Up or Shut Up

Social media has been very important in trying to keep brands accountable for their diversity or lack thereof (Fleming, 2019). In the summer of 2020, after the death of George Floyd, Sharon Chuter, the founder of UOMA Beauty, began a campaign to ask brands about their employee statistics (Shacknai, 2020). Like many others, she was angry that the only response that she saw from big brands was a black screen, figuring that if they really cared about Black lives, they'd pledge to do better by their Black employees and customers (Shacknai, 2020). So she asked brands to "pull up or shut up" and reveal their percentages of employees by race and level of employment (Shacknai, 2020). She believed that transparency was what would hold companies accountable (Shacknai, 2020). As stated earlier, Black women spend nine times more on hair care and beauty than white women (Fleming, 2019, Marshall, 2020, Christiansen, 2020). But the Black population—both men and

women—amounts to 13%, and only 10% of college-educated adults are Black (Shacknai, 2020). Chuter believed that brands should reflect this statistic, so by exposing their employee breakdown on social media, they'd have no choice but to pledge to do better (Shacknai, 2020). Brands that did not respond to the call to “pull up” were attacked in their comments and direct messages, and sometimes they were even boycotted until they posted their statistics (Shacknai, 2020).

Within Advertisements and on Social Media

Brands must increase representation not only in their employees and executives, but with their models and on social media too (Fleming, 2019). In the United States and United Kingdom in 2016, 78% of the people shown in advertisements were white (Fleming, 2019). That means that only 22% were people of color (Fleming, 2019).

On social media, brands that have the shade ranges don't always show them, as their models almost always have lighter skin (Fleming, 2020, Christiansen, 2020). Even when they show their advertising campaigns and influencers using their products and they do feature people of color, they often have Eurocentric features such as lighter skin or straighter hair (Fleming, 2019). It's important that brands put more dark skinned Black women in their advertisements and show more Black influencers and models on social media (Christiansen, 2020).

Increasing Employee Training

Employees of color can help a brand make products that are good quality and market them correctly (Fleming, 2019). But no matter the skin color of an employee working on the floor of a cosmetic store, they should be able to match anyone's complexion, not just those that have similar skin (Fleming, 2019, Marshall, 2020). Maddie Saunders, one of the brand leaders for Lush Makeup, says that they are a brand that values employee diversity and shade matching training (Fleming, 2019). She and the Lush Makeup team know that it's terrible when someone has a bad shade matching experience, so it's one of their principles of employee training (Fleming, 2019).

Conclusion

American beauty standards and the country's long and shameful history of racism are what perpetuate racism in the beauty industry (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986, Poran, 2002, Harper & Choma, 2018). Though this has greatly improved, the industry still has lots of work to do (Marshall, 2020, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). Beauty standards and racism, internalized or external, continue to dictate some of the products that brands sell and consumers buy, such as skin bleaching creams (Hall, 2018, Zota & Shamasunder, 2019). Racism within beauty brands influences who is hired, and to combat this, they must hire more women of color (Fleming, 2019). These women can help these brands market towards darker skinned women so no one is excluded and they don't lose any money by ignoring a large demographic (Fleming, 2019, Christiansen, 2020). Employees at beauty counters at stores such as Sephora or Ulta must be trained

to match even the darkest of complexions no matter what foundation they wear on their own face (Fleming, 2019, Marshall, 2020). This is also true for hair stylists (Marshall, 2020). No matter what type of hair they have, they should be able to deal with anything from straight, blond hair to kinky, dark brown hair (Marshall, 2020). Brands need to increase the presence of Black women on their social media and in their advertisements and increase the amount of shades available for darker skinned women in their lines of foundation and concealer (Fleming, 2019, Marshall, 2020, Christiansen, 2020). Brands have their work cut out for them, but it's regular people on social media that will really be the driving force for brands to do better (Shacknai, 2020). "Pull Up or Shut Up" was very effective in getting brands to reveal their statistics and do more than just say that Black lives matter (Shacknai, 2020). The public needs to continue to hold brands to a higher standard, and brands need to start the long journey to end racism in the beauty industry (Fleming, 2019, Shacknai, 2020).

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