

Visual Representations of Black Hair in Relaxer Advertisements: The Extent to Which It Shapes Black Women's Hair Preferences and Attitudes towards Hair Alteration

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Abstract

This article focuses on how the black body, particularly black women's hair, is represented in advertisements for hair relaxers published in *True Love*, a South African magazine directed at black women. Using qualitative visual semiotic analysis, this article focuses on the process of dehumanisation through visual representation by paying attention to hair, a highly politicised subject in South Africa. In addition, using pre-group questionnaires and focus-group interviews, the article examines to what extent the images possibly shape hair styling practices of black female readers, aged between 18 and 45, who live in urban areas in South Africa.

Keywords: Visual representation; *True Love*; black hair; black women; hair alteration; hair advertisements; length preference; (dis)empowerment

Introduction

Hair maketh a woman; it is an integral component of a woman's appearance and holds cultural significance. It is one of the first features to catch the eye because it reflects perceptions of attractiveness and unattractiveness. Black hair,¹ which is thicker, curlier,

1 For the purposes of this article, the terms "black hair" and "African hair" are used interchangeably and are used to refer to black people's hair in both its natural and heat or chemically altered state; because

and often frizzier (Thompson 2009, 78) than Caucasian and Asian hair, sets Africans apart from other racial groups. But there is more to black hair than meets the eye. In the South African context, the topic of black hair is politically charged; hence, it is frequently used as a metaphor for discussing other issues such as race, gender, culture, and identity.

This article² examines the representation of black hair in relaxer advertisements in the South African magazine, *True Love*, published between June 2015 and May 2016. During the 12 months under study, the magazine carried a significant number of hair altering product advertisements such as relaxers (out of a total of 75 hair products featured there were 11 relaxers, translating to 15 per cent). Therefore, drawing on this empirical evidence, this article uses advertisements for hair relaxing products to examine the manner in which black hair is framed in these representations. From June 2015 to May 2016, 11 hair relaxing products were featured in eight hair advertisements. The advertisements from the seven brands that were featured, are: Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus No.1 Relaxer Kit (Figure 1); Sofn'free HairXperts (Figure 2); Caivil Luxurious Hair (Figure 3); Dark and Lovely Fat Protein Bodifying Relaxer (Figure 4); ORS Hair Strengthening Argan Oil Hair Care (Figure 5); Sta-Sof-Fro Blow Out Relaxer (Figure 6); Afri True: True to African Hair (Figure 7); and Revlon Realistic Hair (Figure 8).³ The eight advertisements are analysed using visual semiotic analysis to explore the meaning of signs at the denotation and connotation levels. In addition, 30 survey questionnaires and three focus-group interviews, each comprising six people, are used to highlight black women's perceptions of black hair, hair preferences, and their attitudes towards hair alteration. Employing the questionnaire and focus-group interviews gives an opportunity to include the black women's perceptions to a debate that often excludes their views. Furthermore, some correlation and discrepancies between advertising messages and respondents' beliefs are explored to shed light on the extent to which *True Love* texts influence the perceptions and hairstyling routine of black female readers living in South Africa.

Virginia Woolf (1947, 197) suggests that women have no specific country; their country is the whole world.⁴ However, globalising and divesting women of their geographical location is problematic, particularly when studying the representation of black women in a South African magazine. The specificities of black women's struggles, which in turn inform their hair care and styling practices, are unique because of their situatedness. Locating the issue of the depiction of black women and black hair within a particular geographical location—that has a specific history—aids in providing a better

even in its altered form, black hair is distinctive from other hair types such as Caucasian and Asian.

2 This article is drawn from a doctoral thesis, which examines the representation of black women's hair on the covers and in advertisements of *True Love*, a South African women's magazine in editions published between June 2015 and May 2016.

3 See figures in the section below.

4 In the *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf (1947, 197) notes “as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.”

understanding of the issue. In this article, it is understood that the experiences of black women in South Africa are distinct from those of their counterparts living in other parts of the world. Moreover, the experiences of black women living in South Africa are different from those of their white counterparts owing to South Africa's history. This article analyses how race, gender, culture, and economic and political factors intersect and impact on the representations and perceptions of black hair.

Owing to its history, South Africa provides a rich backdrop for a study exploring visual representations of black hair and black women's hair preferences and attitudes towards hair alteration. During apartheid rule, the Population Registration Act of 1950 introduced the pencil test,⁵ which used hair for racial classification and segregation purposes. Muriel Horrell (1971, 9) observes that "basic to the rest of the apartheid legislation was the classification of the population into racial categories" namely white, Asian, coloured and black. At its inception the Population Registration Act of 1950 stipulated that people should be categorised "on the basis of their 'community acceptability'." However, "later amendments (1962, 1964) placed greater stress on 'appearance' in order to deal with the practice of light-coloured blacks 'passing' as whites" (Clark and Worger 2016, 47). In 1967 a further clause on descent was incorporated to prevent assimilation. This form of social engineering promoted perking social order, and positioned blacks at the bottom of the racial tier. Under the apartheid dispensation, black hair was regarded as dirty, ugly and inferior to Caucasian hair and African hairstyles described by some white people as s**t (Barnard 2000, 351). The coloureds, who had light skin tone and hair texture that resembled Caucasian hair, were considered superior to dark-skinned people with short afro-textured hair. The hierarchy created, based on an individual's hair, has resulted in some black women and men, mainly beginning from the 1960s, altering the texture of their afro hair by using hair relaxers and hot irons. Similar practices of using hair as a tool for classification were witnessed in America among slaves. Patton (2006, 28) observes that during this era the texture of black hair was used to determine "free versus slave; employed versus unemployed; educated versus uneducated; upper class versus poor." Using hair as a symbol of upward social mobility resulted in some black slaves altering the texture of their hair to resemble the "white" ideal.

During the 1960s counter-hegemonic movements in the USA, South Africa and other parts of the world promoted black pride and Afrocentric hairstyles such as the afro; however, hair altering practices still persist to date. Although most of the hair altering procedures are harmful, some black women still opt to use them rather than be stigmatised and be called ugly. This shows that denigrating black hair has psychological effects as it impacts on black women's self-esteem and self-confidence.

5 During apartheid, the pencil test was used as some form of eugenics. It involved inserting a pencil into a person's hair, if it did not fall but remained in the hair, the individual was classified as black and was not allowed to live in "white areas" without a pass as per segregation laws at that time.

However, although some studies have shown that hair alteration is often viewed as a vestige of slavery and a colonial past, it is worth noting that some black women alter their hair to make it more manageable, easy to style and to save time, as the Kenyan study of Beatrice Amunga Etemesi (2007, 24) reveals. For some black women relaxing hair is associated with coming of age and pride. American black feminist, bell hooks (1989, 1) asserts that relaxing hair is not “a sign of our longing to be white ...” but a means of moving “from being perceived as a child (whose hair could be neatly combed and braided) to being almost a woman.” In her autobiographical account Zimitri Erasmus (1997, 16), a South African of mixed race heritage, explains that relaxing her hair was not a means to look white but she did it because it made her feel “proud and confident.” Most of the studies cited above were conducted many years ago; therefore my goal, in part, is to add fresh knowledge to this body of scholarship on black hair. Moreover, a literature search revealed that most of the studies on black hair have been conducted among black women living in diaspora. In this article, I want to add the African context to the black hair discourses.

In democratic South Africa, hair is no longer used to segregate different races; however, although people with afro-textured hair are a majority in the country, practices that promote the Western ideal of straight hair and accord lower status to natural afro hair endure. Several years after the inception of democratic rule, black women are still stigmatised and discriminated against on the basis of their hair. A few examples of the policing of black hair include statements by influential people. For example, in October 2015 the late jazz musician Hugh Masekela famously declared that, “if you are wearing a weave, don’t be surprised if I refuse to be photographed with you. I will not be part of betraying our African heritage” (Masekela 2015). The late Masekela, who ran a foundation that seeks to restore culture and identity, felt it would be “hypocritical of me to appear in photos with people donning foreign wigs, chemically altered hairdos, and Asian, European and South American extensions, except in cases where my refusal could result in my imprisonment, deportation or demise” (Masekela 2015). He pointed out that he felt women who wear hair enhancement products betray the African heritage because he has never seen people from other racial groups wearing African hair, yet black women wear weaves and wigs that resemble Caucasian and Asian hair. South African President Jacob Zuma has also contributed to the hair debate by speaking out against hair alteration; he admonished black women about copying certain practices from other cultures. Zuma was quoted as saying, “even if you apply any kind of lotion and straighten your hair you will never be white” (Hans and Moolla 2012). He warned that hair alteration strips women of ubuntu and dignity.

Other notable incidents took place at schools. The first one occurred in August 2016 at Pretoria Girls High School where black girls were instructed by white teachers to chemically straighten their “untidy” natural afro hair, with one of the teachers allegedly describing afro hair as resembling a “bird nest” (Ngoepe 2016). The girls were threatened with being barred from writing examinations if they did not comply with the

school's rules governing hair styles. Another incident of discrimination based on hair happened at Windsor House Academy, a private school in Kempton Park, where black female pupils were sent back home at the beginning of a new term in July 2017 because their hairstyles (braids and dreadlocks) were considered "messy" and "inappropriate" (Lewis 2017). There was public outcry following these incidents, where politicians, legislators and ordinary citizens expressed their views on social network sites and mainstream media. The sentiment expressed by many was that these practices promote white assimilation by denigrating black aesthetics and have a negative impact on black people's confidence, identity and pride. Some people, including Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader, Julius Malema, even called for the closure of private schools that discriminated against black pupils based on their hair and colour of their skin. Malema was quoted as saying, "all private schools with white people in them are racist. Why are these people so obsessed with our hair? We never talk to them about their fluffy hair but they attack our children" (Wicks 2017).

It is worth noting that victimising black people, especially black students, based on their hair is not exclusive to the South African context; it also affects diaspora communities across the world. For example, in the USA, five years ago, a 12-year-old African American girl from Florida was threatened with expulsion over her natural hair (*Fox News* 2013), while in the UK, a 12-year-old boy of African Caribbean origin was refused entry into a school because he had cornrows (*Daily Mail* 2017). In Brazil, Afro-Brazilians, particularly women, are discriminated against because of their hair and skin colour. Entertainer Tiririca's 1996 song *Look at her Hair* caused an uproar in Brazil for comparing black hair to a "scouring pad for cleaning pans" and describing the woman as a "smelly *nega* (black woman)" and a "stinking animal that smells worse than a skunk" (Rotella 1996).

The above examples indicate that black hair continues to be a sensitive political subject that is policed and debated on different platforms by people from various sections of the South African and global communities. In this article, I want to show how race, gender and class dynamics influence the way black hair is constructed and perceived by people from different backgrounds. It is against this background that I highlight the rhetoric of hair that is promoted in advertisements for hair relaxers more than 20 years after the end of apartheid rule. My article focuses on hair advertisements rather than general personal care products because these seem to suggest that a black woman's beauty is linked to a single body part, that is, her hair. Consequently, I want to highlight that hair is an important aspect of black femininity and unpack how the advertisements promote classed, gendered and racialised beauty ideals.

I start with a brief consideration of advertisements as cultural artefacts, followed by a detailed analysis of the eight advertisements. Through a semiotic analysis of the advertisements for hair relaxing products I seek to answer the question: Are the negative associations related to black hair perpetuated, or are new codes used to represent black hair in advertisements for hair alteration products such as relaxers? Thereafter, the results

of focus-group interviews give an insight into the respondents' hair length preferences and attitudes towards hair alteration.

Advertisements as Cultural Artefacts

It is important to analyse advertisements because the media, especially print magazines such as *True Love*, are largely dependent on advertising for revenue. Moreover, publications such as magazines are “both economically driven business enterprises and culturally fuelled vehicles of social mediation” (Abrahamson et al. 2003, 1). Therefore, I argue that the hair advertisements published in the 12 issues of *True Love* do not merely advertise hygiene products, but also promote certain beauty standards and black aesthetics. The advertisements, whether intentionally or not, promote certain attitudes about what constitutes ideal hair. Advertising reflects the values of the magazine in which they are published, and conversely influence the content that is published. Abrahamson et al. (2003, 1) concur and argue that in addition to being cultural markers, magazines are “economic entities, inherently subjected to their industry’s traditional business parameters.” Adding to the debate, David Croteau and William Hoynes (2014, 181) argue that women’s magazines are “advertising oriented and consistently promote the ideology of consumerism.” Even the non-advertising content also serves as covert advertising. Moreover, there is symbiotic relationship between advertising and non-advertising content, for example, the hair rhetoric espoused in the hair advertisements is mimicked in editorial content on the covers and inside pages, and vice versa. This reciprocal relationship was confirmed by *True Love* staff (Madlela 2018) and my quantitative and visual semiotic analysis. In view of this, I therefore argue that advertisements are cultural artefacts that play an important role in the “shaping of a ‘community of discourse’” and providing a common language for a diverse audience (Marchand 1985, xx). Since the advertisements are targeted at a heterogeneous readership in terms of age, style taste and class, they construct and introduce diverse representations to the South African discourse.

In the semiotic discussion below, reference to the advertisements will correlate with the figures presented here.



Figure 1: Advertisement for Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus No.1 Relaxer Kit, *True Love*, June 2015, 41.



Figure 2: Advertisement for Softfree HairXperts, *True Love*, June 2015, 107.



Figure 3: Advertisement for Caivil Luxurious Hair, *True Love*, August 2015, 41.



Figure 4: Advertisement for Dark and Lovely Fat Protein Bodifying Relaxer, *True Love*, September 2015, 12–13.



Figure 5: Advertisement for ORS Hair Strengthening Argan Oil Hair Care, *True Love*, October 2015, 119.



Figure 6: Advertisement for Sta-Sof-Fro Blow Out Relaxer, *True Love*, March 2016, 11.

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Figure 7: Advertisement for Afri True: True to African Hair, *True Love*, March 2016, 89.

REVLON
REALISTIC

Discover Beauty

REVLON

Figure 8: Advertisement for Revlon Realistic Hair, *True Love*, April 2016, 73.

Semiotic Analysis of the Advertisements for Hair Relaxing Products

This section identifies the themes used to construct the black female body and black hair. It also explores the stereotypes, myths and ideologies, which the advertisements seem to promote. Drawing on William O'Barr (1994), this article explores the primary discourse of advertising, which is mainly concerned with what the visual and verbal texts say about the advertised product(s). In a sense, O'Barr's primary discourse corresponds to Barthes's (1977) denotative meaning, which focuses on the advertised product's quality and attributes. The "primary discourse" or "denotative elements," to use Barthes's terminology, constitutes the literal components that the reader sees on the advertisement (for example a woman with long hair sitting on a swing). This article further examines the "secondary discourse" or "connotation" to use to Barthes's parlance, and delves deeper into social and cultural or ideological meanings promoted by the products (for example, what the image of the woman on a swing signifies). At the connotative or second level of signification also resides myth, which naturalises and normalises things through use of signs and associations with other meanings. For Barthes (1973, 110) myth is a "type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things." In addition, myth "does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent ..." (Barthes 1973, 109–117). According to Barthes's semiological system, myth uses the signifier, signified and the sign. It is important to note that a sign can signify various things depending on the context within which it is used and to point out that signs are polysemic and can signify many things and at times different things, depending on context.

Seven out of the eight advertisements incorporate a woman's body, particularly her hair, to construct black femininity. The seven advertisements (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8) feature a picture of a black woman either as a main image or on the product packaging, or on both. Only one advertisement, for Afri True: True to African Hair Relaxer Crème (Figure 7), does not feature the image of a woman. In most of the advertisements the women are shown with long (chin length) to very long (shoulder length and longer), straight hair, except for two, where they are depicted with curled/wavy hair.

Black Hair Is Difficult to Manage and Needs to Be Tamed

One of the recurring discourses throughout the advertisements is that the black female body is a site of struggle. The myth used in the Revlon advertisement (Figure 8), for example, advances the notion that black hair is riddled with problems. It plays on consumers' self-esteem by suggesting that using certain products will improve their status. Most of the products use textual signs that seem to suggest that afro hair should be altered to make it easier to comb. Caivil declares that the No-lye Relaxer (Figure 3), makes hair "easy to manage and style," and this is reinforced by a testimonial from a user who states: "Now my hair is healthier and easier to manage." The Sta-Sof-Fro advertisement (Figure 6) states that using the Blow Out Relaxer softens the hair for

“Combing manageability,” while Afri True’s No-lye Relaxer Crème (Figure 7) promises “Maximum softness and shine.” Through use of the aforementioned signifiers, readers are made to believe that solutions come from using the products that are available on the market. The message being promoted is that consumption and possession of the relaxer products lead to beautiful, manageable hair, which in turn leads to a stress-free happy life. By linking attractiveness, success and happiness to consumption, these advertisements encourage the ideology of consumerism. As Croteau and Hoynes (2014, 182) aptly observe, advertisements in women’s magazines use both direct and covert mechanisms to “promote an ideology that celebrates the consumption of gender-specific products as a means to identity formation and personal satisfaction—the dream of the ‘good life’.” The advertisements that constantly entice people to buy products, support stereotypical views and may result in a hyper-consumerist society, which is instrumental in promoting the status quo and sustaining capitalist ideology.

Some advertisements, such as Dark and Lovely Fat Protein Bodify-ing Relaxer (Figure 4) allude to problems like the pain linked to relaxing by mentioning that the relaxer is enriched with fat proteins that replenish “for scalp comfort”; whereas Afri True No-lye Relaxer Crème (Figure 7) contains jojoba oil which “helps protect the scalp and keeps hair moisturised” and lanolin which has “excellent barrier properties to protect your hair.” In the same vein, the ORS Hair Strengthening Argan Oil advertisement (Figure 5) mentions that “frequent use of chemicals ... can lead to hair loss and breakage.” However, these advertisements neglect to mention the full extent of the challenges but tell half the story, leaving out the pain and the dangers associated with relaxing hair, such as burning the scalp, and that frequent relaxing results in over-processed hair that can easily break. They are also silent on the problem of growth, yet for most black women hair is a work in progress. It is continuously worked on to achieve the desired feminine look. This is understandable in view of their commercial purpose.

Black Hair Is Dull and Ugly

The advertisement for Revlon Realistic Conditioning Creme Relaxers (Figure 8) seems to naturalise the ideal of long hair that is promoted by most media outlets and juxtaposes it against dry, dull, frizzy afro hair, alluded to through binary oppositions in both the visual and textual messages, which by implication is presented as ugly. The woman shown in the image is praised for her beauty because she has long, wavy hair. Relaxed hair is presented as beautiful and binary oppositions are implied; that is, afro hair is naturally and inherently ugly, hence it needs to be altered through using products. In the advertisement for Sofn’free HairXperts range (Figure 2) an expert gives tips and tricks for transforming afro-textured hair to beautiful relaxed hair “As seen on TV.” Introducing the medium of television in the Sofn’free advertisement increases the allure quotient, since the world of television evokes images of glitz and glamour. Through associating relaxed hair with television it becomes synonymous with luxury. In the

Caivil advertisement (Figure 3), it is billed as “Luxurious hair for the woman who’s busy with life.” Reading between the lines, this bold declaration implies that hair which is not altered through relaxation is not beautiful and is for women who lead boring lives.

These advertisements appear to strip black women, particularly those who adopt the preferred reading (Hall 1980, 134), of their power and self-esteem since they suggest that black women’s beauty and solutions to their problems do not come from within but from outside. Both visual and verbal texts suggest that their escape route to a stress-free, happy life lies in the products. The myth created is that products have the power to transport them to a place where they feel comfortable. However, questionnaire and focus-group interview results revealed that some black women employed negotiated or oppositional reading (Hall 1980, 137) and resisted the intended messages. The respondents who engaged in negotiated reading used their existing social and cultural capital to read and question the dominant code and came up with their own interpretations, which were not necessarily in line with the coder’s intended meaning. Some black women, due to their personal circumstances and beliefs, adopted the oppositional position and totally opposed the dominant message that promotes relaxed hair as the ideal standard of beauty. The different types of reading suggest that texts are ideological sites of struggle and that black women have agency and are not passive dupes that are manipulated by media messages. On the contrary, findings showed that the 30 selected black women have the power to “actively interpret media texts and sometimes in ways that are at odds with the intended meaning of their producers” (Seidman 2004, 137).

Unearthing Beauty through Product Use

In the Revlon Realistic advertisement (Figure 8), the written text “Discover beauty” signifies that the beauty of black hair lies hidden and can only be found or revealed through the intervention of products. It seems to suggest that beauty is something that is acquired, not something that an individual is born with. Beautiful hair is presented as something that is of great concern to black women. Again, by implication, the signifier “Discover beauty,” in the Revlon Realistic advertisement seems to connote that black hair in its natural state is innately ugly. The beauty myth appears to suggest that beauty is not a work of nature, but a result of working on nature. In other words, beautiful hair must be earned and it involves labour, therefore a woman should work hard at maintaining her hair in a good, acceptable state.

The emphasis in some advertisements is on the quality and unique qualities of the ingredients in the hair products. This is further reinforced by the product packaging featuring pictures of the ingredients such as fruit of the argan tree, nuts of the African shea tree and olives, which signify nature (Figures 1, 5 and 8). The benefits of the ingredients are listed; for instance olive oil nourishes the hair and relaxers contain natural conditioning agents that protect the hair and scalp. Moreover, the sheen spray, which contains olive oil, is believed to leave the hair “naturally healthy.” The irony

is that the products are believed to restore hair to its natural health, yet natural hair is depicted as ugly; it seems as though nature or the “natural” becomes a cultural product. This raises the question: what is natural African hair? The message in the text seems to imply that natural hair is simultaneously both processed and unprocessed hair. In its unprocessed, virgin state it is ugly, but it transforms into a beautiful and somehow more “natural” attribute when processed using chemical relaxers.

Still on the theme of nature, the green colour on some product packaging connotes nature. The natural ingredients such as olives are beneficial, yet on the other hand, modern scientific methods are used to manufacture the products. There is an appeal to modernity wherein nature is used in conjunction with science. The myth promoted is that nature can be tamed or improved on.

African/Black Pride

Some advertisements promote black pride and African heritage. While the dominant code that is promoted by most media outlets tends to associate beauty with light skin, some relaxer advertisements link dark skin with beauty and black pride. For instance, advertisements for hair relaxers such as Revlon Realistic Conditioning Creme Relaxers (Figure 8), Sta-Sof-Fro Blow Out Relaxer (Figure 6), and Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus No.1 Relaxer Kit (Figure 1), feature black women with dark skin tones to highlight and affirm black pride. In some advertisements, the verbal text is used to assert blackness, for instance, “I am dark and lovely” in the Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus No.1 Relaxer Kit advertisement featuring a woman with a dark skin tone. However, in some cases the visual and verbal texts promote contradictory notions, as is evident in the Dark and Lovely Fat Protein Bodify-ing Relaxer (Figure 4) where the words “I am dark and lovely” are placed on top of the image of a woman with a lighter skin tone.

Furthermore, in the Dark and Lovely Fat Protein Bodify-ing Relaxer advertisement (Figure 4), while the verbal text upholds black beauty ideals, the image appears to advance the Western-centric standard of long, straight hair and light skin tone. Likewise, the verbal text “I am dark and lovely” serves as a double entendre because at one level it can be perceived as the model’s exclamation, which can be read to mean “I am the product” or “I am the commodity”; therefore can be perceived to imply that black women are objects or commodities. At another level it can be read as a play on the brand’s name (Dark and Lovely), which is used to entice the reader to buy the “lovely” product. While these texts seem to support African pride, this is undermined by the fact that they seem to still subscribe to the dominant Western-centric beauty myth that is promoted by most media platforms. In South Africa, preference for long, straight hair among some black women is partly rooted in the apartheid past where skin colour and hair texture were used for racial classification and discrimination. Whiteness and Western-centric ideals were considered superior to blackness and Afrocentric notions of beauty and culture. This negatively impacted on black women’s self-esteem.

The Sofn'free advertisement (Figure 2) seems to promote natural black beauty by showing what it refers to as the "Model's Natural Hair." This is a sharp contrast to the Revlon Realistic advertisement (Figure 8) which admits to using extensions on the model's hair (see Western-centric ideal below). However, it is worth noting that the so called "Model's Natural Hair" is long and straight, a look that a black woman can achieve through hair alteration or use of hair enhancements such as weaves and wigs. Therefore, delving deeper into this raises the question: what constitutes natural black hair? It appears as though according to Sofn'free, (Figure 2) both afro hair in its unaltered natural state and afro hair that has been altered through the use of relaxers constitute natural black hair. Also noteworthy is that the "natural" is attained and maintained through product use.

Western-Centric Ideal

Most of the advertisements promote the Western-centric straight hair ideal, for example Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus relaxer (Figure 1) promises to give "silky-straight hair" and "richer, fuller straighter hair"; using Sofn'free (Figure 2) results in "silky-soft, super-straight hair"; and Caivil (Figure 3) guarantees users "softer, straighter hair with a healthy shine." Only a few depart from the dominant ideal; for instance, the Sta-Sof-Fro Blow Out Relaxer (Figure 6) depicts waves and curls that closely resemble afro hair. The impression created is that the Blow Out Relaxer does not alter the appearance of afro hair but only softens it for "combing manageability."

Although relaxing lengthens the hair, none of the advertisements mention this benefit in the verbal text. Most advertisements claim to straighten and soften; the lengthening benefits are depicted in the visual text. To advance the long hair ideal, the Revlon advertisement (Figure 8) uses hair enhancements. On the spine on the left hand side of the page there is a disclaimer stating: "Hair extensions used on model's hair." The advertisement invokes nature by using green and featuring images of natural ingredients on product packaging; however, it is ironic that hair extensions are used on the model's hair. Use of hair extensions is an example of hybrid hair since it involves sewing or bonding the hairpiece into the woman's own hair. Hair extensions are believed to give volume and lengthen the hair. When attached properly, they pass off as natural hair.

There have been complaints from black consumers, living in Africa and diaspora, in social media (Black Hair Media 2012; Clutch 2010), where they have pointed out that some companies use extensions, weaves and wigs in advertisements for hair relaxers, and this advertisement proves that those claims are true. For Revlon (Figure 8) to acknowledge that it has used hair extensions could be seen as a counterproductive move that may put the company's reputation at stake. However, specifying that hair extensions have been used on the model's hair can serve as an ideological tool, signifying that the brand is trustworthy and forthright with its consumers. The subtle message conveyed is that the brand is honest enough to point out something that may not be easily identified

by readers because establishing trust ensures credibility. Additionally, if consumers trust the brand they are likely to believe the performance and quality claims of its products. The visual text promotes unrealistic standards as it implies that after using the relaxer, hair lotion and sheen spray a person's hair will look like that of the model. Using hair extensions on the model's hair may lead to dissatisfaction since the result will not resemble the hair in the image. Stacey (2009, 116) concurs and argues that cultural artefacts like advertisements circulate "idealised images, constructed as desirable and yet unattainable" and may be harmful to some women.

Freedom of Choice

The advertisements present many products with some offering product ranges and this creates the illusion that black women have the freedom to choose what they want. These visual and verbal signs seem to address black women as consumers. Consumerism is closely related and to some extent sustained by profit maximisation in capitalist economies. To survive in a competitive environment, companies come up with innovative strategies, which in turn result in increased productivity over a period of time. It therefore becomes essential to inform consumers about these new products and their attributes through advertising. With many relaxers on the South African market, to set their products apart, brands use certain claims to create the illusion of superiority of their products. The Sta-Sof-Fro Blow Out Relaxer (Figure 6) claims to be "safe and gentle," while the Afri True No-lye Relaxer Crème (Figure 7) gently relaxes by removing "curl and frizz for fine and coarse hair." Touted as the Ultra Moisturising Conditioning Creme Relaxer, the Revlon Realistic (Figure 8) comprehensive range comprises relaxers of different potency/strength that purport to be suitable for diverse hair textures. The verbal text shows that "Regular" is suitable for normal hair; "Mild" for fine, colour treated (not bleached) hair; "Super" for coarse hair; and "Olive oil" for all hair types. These advertisements create the impression that if the reader chooses and consumes the "appropriate"/"right" products she can achieve a happy life.

The verbal text "all hair types" is misleading because it seems to suggest that the products can be used on ethnically diverse hair types such as African, Asian and Caucasian hair. However, read together with the image of the black woman and taking into consideration the intended purpose of the product range, it becomes clear that it is targeted at a specific racial group, that is, black women. The relaxers come in four types to cater to the different textures and thicknesses of black hair. It is commendable that Revlon acknowledges that black hair varies in terms of thickness and texture.

However, the above advertisements do not simply transmit information about the attributes of the products; they promote certain values, myths and ideologies. Some products connote status and individuality as evident in the signifier "For me only the best" (Figure 6). A consumer is addressed as an individual, who has the power to make her own purchasing decisions; in this case she chooses to buy the best product to increase

her social status and worth. In addition, in the Revlon advertisement (Figure 8), the myth constructed and promoted is that consumers have freedom to choose products that cater to their needs. Viewed this way consumerism is believed to democratise access to products, thus Falasca-Zamponi (2011) suggests that “consumption has sold capitalism to the world!” The woman seems to be empowered to make purchasing decisions for herself. In line with postfeminism, the implication is that black women have agency and know their hair texture and are in a position to choose products that are suitable for their needs. However, provision is made for those who do not know their specific hair type; they can fall back on the relaxer for all hair types. There are real concerns that black women face other than possessing knowledge about their hair type, for example the affordability and efficacy of the products. Moreover, the consumerist myth that women have freedom of choice and that this provides agency, obscures the fact that these products provide a very limited freedom of choice and in fact force women to conform to certain beauty ideals.

The advertisements use scare tactics to encourage women to conform to the ideal. On the one hand, the inclusion of hair care and lustre-enhancing products suggests that bad hair that is dull and dry is an embarrassment and compromises a woman’s beauty. These unfavourable conditions can be remedied using products; for example, the moisturising lotion provides instant “shine, moisture and protection” while the sheen spray reduces frizz. The products offer quick solutions to black hair problems and give instant gratification. On the other hand, the advertisement reinforces that good hair, which is shown in the image, constitutes well-moisturised, shiny hair and accentuates feminine beauty and results in social acceptance. The presence of hair nourishers demonstrates awareness of the unique needs of black hair, which is delicate, especially after using harsh relaxers that strip it of moisture and nutrients.

The Aspirational Rhetoric

The advertisements do not just promote the products and their benefits, but also construct the consumer. Sut Jhally (1990, 1) aptly argues that “advertising is the most influential institution of socialisation in modern society.” The images of people featured on the advertisements shape the consumer’s perceptions and consumption norms. The advertisements expose readers to a diverse consumption reference group. Furthermore, they construct consumption as a way of life by representing the ideal discourse of ideal femininity that is tied to the management of physical appearance and status.

The message is female-centred and focuses on personal hair care needs, as is evident in that the women are featured alone, signifying that they are not shackled with familial responsibilities and domestic life. This resonates with Gauntlett’s (2008, 248) observation on texts published in women’s magazines that “the traditional view of a woman as a housewife or low-status worker has been kick-boxed out of the picture by the feisty, successful ‘girl power’ icons.” The products are aimed at women and

this seems to be a reflection of their financial independence; however, the *True Love* readership employment status tells a different story. The AMPs results show that 33 per cent of the readers are employed, 28 per cent unemployed, 14 per cent are students, 7 per cent are self-employed, 7 per cent work part-time, 6 per cent are retired and 5 per cent are non-working housewives (South African Advertising Research Foundation [SAARF]) AMPS 2015 (14 July–15 Jun). Overall, the unemployed readers constitute a significant number.

In these eight advertisements, commodity fetishisation has replaced social relationships with a relationship with products. The focus is on self-beautification and self-fulfilment. In the advertisements that were analysed, beauty is associated with the good life, hedonism and escapism. This echoes Lasch's (1978, 72) remark that "advertising is the method by which the desire is created for better things." For instance, in the Revlon Realistic advertisement (Figure 8), this is reinforced by the woman's surroundings that allude to exotic locations and leisure pursuits such as reclining on a swing. The woman seems to be more concerned about pleasing herself and satisfying her own needs, as she is depicted relaxing in what seems to be an exotic place or a mansion in an affluent suburb. She seems to be in fantasyland. Her image signifies that entry into this world is gained through hair alteration using relaxers. Consumption is presented as the solution to all the discontents. However, her carefree attitude does not necessarily mean that she is free from societal influence because hairstyling decisions still have to be made within acceptable cultural values.

With her hairstyle and clothing, the woman who appears in the Revlon Realistic advertisement (Figure 8) fits in or blends into her luxurious surroundings. Sitting upright with her back arched a little and one hand resting on her waist, her pose signifies that she is playful and flirty. She is smiling and looking straight at the camera or the viewer. Her posture, facial expression and other related elements suggest that she is an active subject and her "demand gaze" calls upon the reader to respond to the image (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 122).

Hair is a potent tool and its ideological meaning can be interpreted when it is read together with other signifiers such as age, clothing and make-up. The women depicted in the *True Love* advertisements for hair relaxers during the 12 months of study were young, beautiful and glamorous. To increase the appeal factor of the products, the advertisements incorporate and promote fashion and beauty trends and an expensive lifestyle. As Croteau and Hoynes (2014, 183) note, advertisements "promote a commitment to the latest styles ... that require not just consumption but continuous consumption to keep up with stylistic changes." For example, the woman in the Revlon Realistic advertisement (Figure 8) is shown wearing a little black dress (LBD), which connotes elegance and an air of mystery. Moreover, a LBD is a wardrobe staple for most fashionistas. She is wearing high heels, earrings, make-up and has flawless skin. Her dress code and make-up connote femininity. In the other advertisements, the

women are depicted in evening wear. Judging by the women's clothing, accessories and surroundings, they seem to belong to the upper middle class or upper class.

At first glance, the advertisements appear to represent class bias as they seem to be directed at women who can afford a glamorous lifestyle. However, the advertisements could be targeted at all the readers and are meant to be aspirational. They invoke ambitions of glamour and opulence to appeal to different classes and promote upward mobility among black women. This resonates with John Berger's (1972, 142) assertion that "the purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life ... It suggests that if [s]he buys what it is offering, [her] life will become better." Drawing on Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (2011, 14) I argue that "consumerism equates personal happiness with the purchase of material possessions." To encourage consumption, consumers are steered towards aspiring for self-fulfilment and leading contented lives.

Consumption is presented as the route to self-improvement. The advertisements work on people's insecurities by implying that those who consume the products are rewarded, they gain personal and social acceptance while those who do not are ostracised by society. Moreover, consumerism is represented as something that "occurs under conditions in which people are free, if they so desire, to worry simply about purchasing what strikes their fancy" (Falasca-Zamponi 2011, 14) but does not take into account the financial implications. Noteworthy is that most *True Love* readers cannot afford the lifestyles depicted; however, the aim of the advertisements is probably to offer vicarious glimpses of the good life. This is reinforced by the fact that the advertisements do not use the images of celebrities but rather make use of images of "ordinary" people that many women can relate to and aspire to resemble.

Hair Length Preferences and Attitudes towards Hair Alteration

The eight advertisements analysed in this article mainly featured long, straight hair. Tracey Owens Patton (2010) observes that black women who are praised for their beauty tend to have long, wavy hair, which is in line with the white ideal. This type of representation privileges the narrow, biased view of beautiful hair. It advances the Western-centric ideal as a standard that all women should strive for while devaluing blackness and black pride. In view of the above, are black women enamoured with hair alteration? Does altering hair through relaxing and hair enhancements give the impression that a black woman is erasing her identity? The impact such representations have on black women was explored by means of pre-group questionnaire and focus-group interviews.

Pre-Group Questionnaire and Focus-Group Interviews

To explore to what extent the portrayals in advertisements shape black women's perceptions of black hair, self-esteem, and hairstyling practices, data was collected from

a sample of 30 women, who were selected using snowball sampling. The data obtained from the 30 questionnaires and three focus-group interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis. The coding categories and themes were developed based on the interview guide. The results showed that the motivations for hair alteration are numerous and not only influenced by what black women see in *True Love*. The findings are in line with Gauntlett's (2008, 255) observation that "the media's suggestions may be seductive, but can never simply overpower contrary feelings in the audience." The results from my research are similar to those of an American study conducted by Ingrid Banks (2000, 150), which found that "the reasons behind hair grooming practices among black women cannot be reduced to one thing." Moreover, my research revealed that the hair altering practice can empower or disempower black women.

The images analysed in this article seem to connote that black hair is ugly and dirty and should be transformed into something beautiful through the employment of hair relaxers. As depicted in the eight advertisements, relaxed hair is clean, healthy, shiny, neat and superior to black hair in its natural, unprocessed state. Contrary to the notion advanced by the advertisements for hair relaxers that black hair is only beautiful when it is altered, focus-group findings revealed that for the respondents, good hair is clean hair, regardless of its texture. According to a 26-year-old Tshivenda lawyer who lives in Pretoria, it is "any type of hair but as long as it's clean. You see dreadlocks for me if it's clean it's good hair" (Madlela 2018). This shows the different interpretations that are assigned to black hair. Nonetheless, while the respondent does not prescribe to the ideal of long hair, the discourses of "ugly," "dirty" and "clean" hair that hark back to colonial and apartheid era still persist.

Since black hair serves as a signifier of race, relaxing—which alters the state of black hair—can be seen as an erasure of blackness. From this perspective, hair relaxer advertisements published in *True Love* can be perceived as disempowering because they force black women to mimic the "white" ideal. Actually Ingrid Banks's (2000, 43–44) study among African Americans revealed that hair alteration through relaxing was associated with self-hatred and a desire to look white. However, the focus-group results from my South African study showed that the motivation for embarking on hair altering exercises is not a quest to look white or to emulate the dominant ideal that is promoted in *True Love* advertisements, but is rather related to hair maintenance. My findings are similar to Etemesi's (2007) Kenyan study; probably this shows that black women in Africa have different perceptions on hair relaxing compared to their counterparts living in diaspora communities that are predominantly "white." Another possible reason for the difference between my results and Banks's study, which was conducted nearly two decades ago, may be that the perceptions of black women have changed over the years.

In the eight advertisements, black hair is portrayed as problematic and in need of being controlled. The respondents' responses resonated with this observation. Most respondents pointed out that natural afro hair is difficult to maintain because it is painful to comb. Closely related, regarding hair length preference, most respondents said they

prefer short hair because it “brings out true beauty” (Madlela 2018). They went on to say they did not like long hair because it is uncomfortable to wear, particularly during summer when it is very hot and it sticks to the nape. However, they noted that they are compelled to keep long hair because they felt “short hair is a problem you know you must have a tong, a straightener, you must style it every morning so it’s still a problem” (Madlela 2018). These contradictions indicate that black hair care and styling is a difficult terrain to navigate. For most respondents, hair alteration is helpful in making hair more manageable in terms of combing and styling.

However, hair alteration encompasses far more than simply combing and styling, since the black body is defined, controlled and transformed by social, cultural, political and economic dynamics. Although the advertisements promoted the notion that a consumer has freedom of choice, the focus-group respondents said they are not entirely free to choose their own hairstyles because there are several factors that inform their choices. To gain social acceptance, a woman’s hair has to look a certain way that is deemed appropriate by society. A certain hairstyle or hair type can make one a social misfit, and to gain acceptance one has to transform one’s look. For example, during focus-group interviews it emerged that buzz cut and *chiskop* (clean shaven head) are considered inappropriate hairstyles in an interview setting because they are regarded as unladylike (Madlela 2018). Respondents also highlighted that in some professions such as the legal field short hair is not taken seriously. A respondent who is a lawyer explained “if you appear with your short hair let’s say you just cut it to that level [ear length] someone will just look at you and think she’s still probably learning she’s still a candidate ... You need to have that serious look” (Madlela 2018). The Western-centric long, straight hair ideal still dominates because as one respondent noted, some “people believe that if you’ve a long weave you know you’re beautiful” because “that’s how they define you because we looked so much at those ... I can’t say those people [referring to white people]” (Madlela 2018). In this regard relaxed, long hair is associated with acceptable beauty aesthetics, high social status and level of education. Binary oppositions are implied, that is, black women with short hair are ugly, belong to the lower social classes and are not well educated. To improve their chances of getting employment and advancing in their careers, black women have to conform to the standards set by society. My findings are similar to those of Mokoena (2017, 137–138) who found that some black women are “forced by circumstances to wear wigs, weaves, or relaxed hair.” Shaped by the challenges they meet while combing or styling their hair and societal pressures, black women adjust and redefine their look through the use of relaxers. Hair relaxers help make the hair easier to comb, lengthen it and make it easier to style and give themselves a serious professional look.

The respondents’ answers introduced another angle to the hair and race dynamics by showing that black hair care and styling does not just pit black against white, but also sets black against black, as the experiences of different black people differ. The findings expose apprehension among black women themselves. Interestingly, black women

compete among themselves, as one respondent pointed out that although it is known that some people have naturally long hair and others do not, “with us girls it’s always your hair looks longer than mine...” (Madlela 2018). She added that to increase the length of their hair, some people plait for a couple of weeks and then relax using harsh chemicals. Interestingly, although the long, straight ideal is rooted in Western-centric culture, the pressure to embrace this ideal seems to come from the black communities themselves. The above is an example of black women policing other black women’s styling and hair care regimens.

Drawing on postfeminist perspectives, hair alteration can be seen as empowering if it benefits the woman. Hair relaxing is seen as some form of self-fashioning as it gives black women an opportunity to experiment with different looks in terms of hair texture and length. Furthermore, self-commodification through relaxing and the use of hair enhancements such as weaves can empower and enrich a woman by enabling her to reap professional, economic and social benefits. Respondents confirmed that black hair can be transformed into a valuable asset through relaxing. Respondents pointed out that hair alteration can boost economic empowerment as it can increase the chances of getting a job. It can give a woman status at work since long hair is associated with professionalism and sophistication. A respondent noted that a woman with long hair exudes authority and appears knowledgeable. The advertisements for hair relaxers in *True Love* encourage consumption and advance the notion that social acceptance is gained through the products one consumes or possesses. Focus-group findings (Madlela 2018) revealed that hair is associated with sexual appeal and that beautiful hair is a powerful tool that can be used to get male attention. These findings resonate with results from Akkida McDowell’s (2000, 129) USA study, which found that some black women use hair to get attention from men. In her study, McDowell (2000, 129) quotes a black respondent who said, “to get a man, I need to beautify myself by any means necessary—including starving and having my power/telephone/hot water shut off—in favour of phat hairstyles.” This shows that regardless of geographical location, some black women use their bodies, particularly hair, for personal gain.

In a nutshell, hair alteration is mainly linked to manageability and easy styling rather than to the images that black readers are exposed to in *True Love* advertisements for hair relaxers. In addition, in keeping with postfeminist perspectives, the views expressed above show that the black women in South Africa have agency and can change their hair from being a symbol of oppression that was once used for racial discrimination, to a powerful tool of empowerment and aesthetic liberation.

Conclusion

During the period under consideration, the images of black women featured prominently in *True Love* hair advertisements. Seven out of eight advertisements featured images of black women (one advertisement did not feature a model). This study, therefore,

contends that *True Love* is giving a human face and increasing the visibility of black hair by featuring it on its hair advertisements. However, like all representations, certain aspects are privileged over others. During the period under purview, *True Love* promoted the long, straight hair ideal. Furthermore, all eight advertisements for hair relaxers seem to suggest that black hair is only beautiful when it is altered. It is important to highlight that the hair relaxer advertisements in *True Love* promote a wide spectrum of messages that are contradictory and cannot be reconciled. For example, while the Revlon Realistic advertisement for relaxers promotes the Western-centric ideal, some advertisements for relaxers, such as Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus No.1 Relaxer Kit, promote black pride through the tag line “I am dark and Lovely” and feature a model with a dark skin tone. In addition, some advertisements, such as the one for Sofn’free HairXperts range, use the model’s own hair, while Revlon Realistic range uses hair extensions on the model’s hair. I argue that the contradictions are inevitable because the magazine is targeted at a diverse range of female audience in terms of class, level of education, income, tastes and interests.

The above discussion shows that respondents have different views regarding hair alteration. It emerged that hair alteration is both empowering and disempowering; depending on who stands to benefit from the visual change. Disempowerment occurs when black women are forced to commodify themselves because of societal pressures while empowerment seems to be easier when they self-commodify their hair for personal gain. However, the results of empowerment and disempowerment are not always clear cut. For instance, not every black woman who wears long hair gets male attention. In addition, for those who do get male attention, the dangers associated with having multiple partners may outweigh the financial gains that accrue; for example, they may get sexually transmitted diseases. Altering hair to achieve the long hair ideal can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering in another respect. On the one hand, it is disempowering to the extent that an individual feels compelled to mimic the white ideal, while on the other hand it can be viewed as empowering because she earns higher status at work.

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Visual representations

True Love magazine hair relaxer advertisements

Figure 1: Advertisement for Dark and Lovely Moisture Plus No.1 Relaxer Kit, *True Love*, June 2015, 41.

Figure 2: Advertisement for Sofn'free HairXperts, *True Love*, June 2015, 107.

Figure 3: Advertisement for Caivil Luxurious Hair, *True Love*, August 2015, 41.

Figure 4: Advertisement for Dark and Lovely Fat Protein Bodifying Relaxer, *True Love*, September 2015, 12–13.

Figure 5: Advertisement for ORS Hair Strengthening Argan Oil Hair Care, *True Love*, October 2015, 119.

Figure 6: Advertisement for Sta-Sof-Fro Blow Out Relaxer, *True Love*, March 2016, 11.

Figure 7: Advertisement for Afri True: True to African Hair, *True Love*, March 2016, 89.

Figure 8: Advertisement for Revlon Realistic Hair, *True Love*, April 2016, 73.