Social Differences in Women’s Use of Personal Care Products:  
A Study of Magazine Advertisements, 1950-1994  

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Personal care products are of concern for their potential effects on women’s health. Most women use some personal care products, and some women use numerous products daily over long periods. Many personal care products contain synthetic chemicals, including some that may alter the body’s natural endocrine system. Research over the past 10 years has revealed that many compounds in everyday products can weakly mimic hormones, including estrogen, or block the action of natural hormones. Such compounds, known as endocrine disruptors, may affect breast cancer risk, for example, since a woman’s risk of breast cancer is related to her lifetime exposure to estrogen.

This study of magazine advertisements for women’s personal care products from 1950 through 1994 gives a picture of products that are likely to have been widely used by women since the advent of synthetic organic chemicals. This effort serves the broad objective of identifying differences in product use across age, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups—differences that could affect women’s risk of breast cancer or other health problems. By including magazines with different audiences, and by identifying a broad range of products marketed to women up to 50 years ago, this work will inform future study of demographic differences in women’s use of personal care products.

Methods

The study examined advertising for women’s personal care products from 1950 through 1994 in widely read, long-lived magazines whose audiences have different demographic profiles: Ladies’ Home Journal, Mademoiselle, and Essence (see Table 1). Readers of Ladies’ Home Journal are older and less educated than readers of Mademoiselle, are more likely to live in suburban rather than urban areas, and are more likely to be married or widowed. Because the readership of both magazines is mostly white, a magazine with a predominantly African-American readership, Essence, was included. In median age and marital status, readers of Essence are closer to those of Mademoiselle; in education, they are closer to readers of Ladies’ Home Journal. They are more urban and have lower income than readers of the other magazines. Because Essence began publication only in 1970, Ebony was examined in its place for the earlier years, when there was no national magazine for African-American women.

For each magazine, we selected a one-in-five sample of all issues 1950-94. Specifically, for each five-year period, we randomly selected one of the five January issues, one of the five February
issues, and so forth through December, yielding a "constructed year" of 12 issues. In each issue
selected, we recorded all advertisements for a list of products developed for the study. The list of some
40 products included hair and scalp care products, skin and nail care products, deodorant and
antiperspirant products, and feminine care products, as well as laxatives and nonprescription products
for urinary tract infections. Ads for products specifically for men were not included in the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The study documented differences in advertising across magazines that suggest women with
different backgrounds have different habits of product use. Although the largest number of individual
products was advertised in Essence/Ebony—25% more than in Mademoiselle and more than twice as
many as in Ladies' Home Journal—the number of advertisements and the number of pages devoted to
advertising were highest in Mademoiselle (see Figure 1). By all three measures, advertising was about
twice as intensive in Mademoiselle as in Ladies’ Home Journal.

In all the magazines, most of the advertising for the products studied was devoted to hair/scalp
and skin/nail care products (see Figure 2). In Ladies’ Home Journal and Mademoiselle, more than half
of the products advertised were for skin care, and about one-quarter for hair care. In Essence/Ebony,
by contrast, hair care products predominated: about one-half of the products advertised were for hair
care and one-third for skin care. (The same pattern holds when the Essence years are examined
separately.)

Selected findings about specific types of products are described below.

Advertising for Hair and Scalp Care Products

Somewhat different products for hair and scalp care, with distinctive features, were marketed to
the readerships of the three magazines. Advertisements for lice shampoos appeared only in Ladies'
Home Journal (see Figure 3). Scalp treatments were advertised almost exclusively in Essence/Ebony,
and most of these products were creams. Hair pressing products were advertised only in
Essence/Ebony and mostly before 1970—that is, in Ebony. Hair styling products other than pressing
products were advertised in all the magazines, but appeared much more frequently in advertisements in
Essence/Ebony than in the other magazines. Almost 90% of such styling products advertised in Ebony,
and about 25% in Essence, were creams—a form that was unusual in Ladies' Home Journal and
Mademoiselle. From 1970 on, hair sprays were the most common styling products in Ladies’ Home
Journal, Mademoiselle, and Essence. The form of a product may determine how most exposure to it
occurs—through the skin, for example, or by inhalation—and may also affect its chemical formulation.

Hair care products were advertised as containing hormones or placenta only twice in the
sampled issues of Mademoiselle, and never in Ladies' Home Journal. By contrast, in the sampled
issues of Essence/Ebony, more than 70 hair or scalp products were advertised as containing either
hormones or placenta (see Figures 4 and 5). This finding is of particular interest in the context of recent
research suggesting that use of hair products containing placenta or hormones may be linked to
premature sexual development in African-American children (1). In all three magazines, a small
number of skin products, mostly facial moisturizers and foundations, were advertised as containing
hormones (see Figures 6 and 7).
Advertising for Nail Care Products

From 1970 on, nearly 250 nail polish and nail strengthening products were advertised in the sampled issues of Mademoiselle—more than twice the number in Essence and more than three times the number in Ladies' Home Journal. Such nail products contain phthalates, many of which have been identified as endocrine-disrupting compounds. The advertising pattern observed in this study has special interest in light of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recent finding that the phthalates detected at the highest concentrations in people’s urine are those used in cosmetics, including nail products (2).

Advertising for Specific Ingredients

Other ingredients of personal care products, in addition to hormones and placenta, were also explicitly advertised for their effectiveness. The study highlights the prolonged marketing of two chemicals that were later restricted in cosmetic products. The antibacterial hexachlorophene was frequently advertised in deodorant products during the 1950s and 1960s (see Figure 8) and, to a lesser extent, in scalp treatments. Similarly, ammoniated mercury was regularly advertised as the active ingredient in skin bleaching creams in Ebony in the 1950s and 1960s (see Figure 9). Use of both hexachlorophene and mercury in cosmetics was restricted by the US Food and Drug Administration in the early 1970s because of their neurotoxic effects and ability to penetrate the skin.

Since 1970, nonoxynol-9 has been regularly advertised as the active ingredient in vaginal spermicides in all three magazines studied (see Figure 10). In the issues studied here, several ads for spermicides claim that nonoxynol-9 has no hormonal side effects. Research on nonoxynol-9’s possible systemic effects in women’s bodies is in fact limited—although a breakdown product of this chemical has been shown to have estrogen-like effects on cultured breast cancer cells in laboratory experiments (3).

Limitations

This study is several steps removed from linking the use of personal care products to health effects in women. We do not know how advertising of products corresponds to women’s use of products, what chemicals are actually in the advertised products, how the body takes up or transforms those chemicals, or how such exposures may be linked to disease. In addition, the lack of a national magazine targeted specifically to African-American women before 1970 limits our understanding of products marketed to this group in the 1950s and 1960s.

Conclusions

This research reinforces the understanding that women in different age, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups are likely to have different patterns of use of personal care products. By characterizing products advertised to women as far back as 1950, including some no longer in use, the study lays a foundation for future research on social differences in women’s use of personal care products. Such work in turn may inform the study of demographic patterns in women’s health. The present study also reminds us that we have sometimes been slow to appreciate the limits of our knowledge of health risks from familiar products.
References


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Silent Spring Institute is a nonprofit research organization dedicated to identifying links between the environment and women's health, especially breast cancer.
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<th>Magazine</th>
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<th>% Married or Widowed</th>
<th>% At Least Some College</th>
<th>Median Household Income ($)</th>
<th>% Urban</th>
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<td>Essence</td>
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<td>88.7</td>
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Figure 1: Advertising for Selected Women’s Personal Care Products in Sampled Issues, 1950-94

Figure 2: Major Groups of Products Advertised in Sampled Issues, 1950-94

Figure 3: Number of Hair Care Products Advertised in Sampled Issues, 1950-94
Figure 4: Advertisement for hair care product containing hormones: LeKair Hair Treatment, *Essence*, 1980
Figure 5: Advertisement for hair care product containing placenta: Perm-Aid with Placenta, *Essence*, 1984
Figure 6: Advertisement for skin cream containing estrogenic hormones: Satura, by Dorothy Gray, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1956
Figure 7: Advertisement for skin cream containing estrogenic hormones: Anatome, by Germaine Monteil, Mademoiselle, 1956
Figure 8: Advertisement for deodorant containing hexachlorophene: Mum Cream Deodorant, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1956
Figure 9: Advertisement for skin bleaching cream containing ammoniated mercury: Dr. Fred Palmer’s Skin Whitener, *Ebony*, 1965