

'Does All Hair Matter?' Reflections on the increasing criticism BOB face when catering to Black and minoritised consumers.

Opinion piece.

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In recent years, hair care companies have attempted to be more inclusive of diverse hair textures and consumer needs within their product lines i.e. vegan, no parabens, or allergens. However, many companies still do not cater for the kinkiest and coiliest of hair types in tandem with other aspects of customer requirements. Despite a contemporary shift, which has seen numerous companies generating hair care ranges that caters to predominantly wavy and curly hair types, many brands have fallen short of meeting the specific needs of Black hair textures, which are multiplicitous in nature (kinky, coily and no kinks or coils at all). Alongside the struggle to “get it right” for coily and kinky hair types, concerns about the safety of hair care products marketed towards Black customers have been raised in a number of reports, which state that many of these products are full of harmful and toxic ingredients ([Environmental Working Group, 2016](#) and [Independent, 2022](#)). These noxious ingredients have been linked to serious health conditions such as tumours, breast cancer and respiratory illness, as well as endocrine system dysfunction. Further critiques have also been levelled at the safety and long-term effects of hair care products geared towards Black people, and women in particular, which contain ingredients formulated to prevent dryness, breakage and hair loss; with the main concerns centering around whether these products create temporary fixes while causing long-term damage.

The explosion of natural hair care vloggers and gurus on social media like Chime Edwards (Hair crush), Cassandra Beccai, Napturals, Fusion of Cultures and Curly Nikki has helped to raise awareness among Black women of the importance of having a regular hair care routines, gentle methods, moisturisation and knowing how to nurture and maintain our natural tresses, no matter what our specific hair type is. In addition to product reviews and recommendations, vloggers have dived deeper to share knowledge and expertise about which products contain harmful ingredients that can damage hair in the long run, and potentially have more serious side effects on scalp and skin integrity and general health. The need for safer products was clear, and a trend of women concocting their own hair care products in their kitchens emerged, whilst others went on the hunt for products that satisfied both their health and hair needs. Throughout the 2000s, the number of products on the shelves of beauty shops rose exponentially: new brands with the new message that they were taking Black women's demands for safe and effective hair care products more seriously, and we saw the likes of Shea Moisture, Miss Jessie, Curls, Mielle, Jane Carter, Alikay Naturals, Eden Body works, Kinky Curly, Camille Rose and others enter the market. Whilst some of these brands were available to the UK consumer, others were only available to customers through specific vendors. Fast forward to today and many of these brands are now widely available from online retailers and high street shops. However, around the time of new products for natural hair products appearing in the US market, UK

based customers and hair specialists were still left without a domestic hair company situated in the UK that was committed to consumers who lived here.

In the UK, we now have numerous small, medium and large hair care businesses that cater to Black hair textures and the products these companies produce can be used by people with most hair types. The safe and gentle formulas in these products and their carefully selected nourishing and conditioning ingredients extends their usefulness to all consumers and hair types, but the message is - Black women this is safe for you. This is made with you in mind. When Black owned organisations identify a gap in the market or services, and cater to a need of the marginalised, there is a trend of non-consumers and never-would-be customers attacking them for fulfilling that need and accusing them of discrimination. Similarly, businesses who aim to be inclusive face increasing backlash when attempting to represent the full spectrum of their audience and customer-base, for example the Sainsbury's Christmas ad ([The Guardian, 2020](#)). A recent victim, was the Black owned UK hair brand Afrocenchix. In an online rant via Trustpilot, an unnamed individual complained that 'This is only allowing products for black hair'. We're not sure exactly what that meant but based on the rest of the comment, they were implying that Afrocenchix were being exclusionary and racist, stating that "Racism works both ways". It is worrying that someone would attack a brand for filling a gap in the market, when so many people benefit from their products. The concerns of people with kinky and coily hair types are common amongst people with other hair types, the only difference here is that these products have been carefully formulated to combat moisture loss associated with drier hair types, and the ingredient list is vegan and allergen friendly. What's not to love!

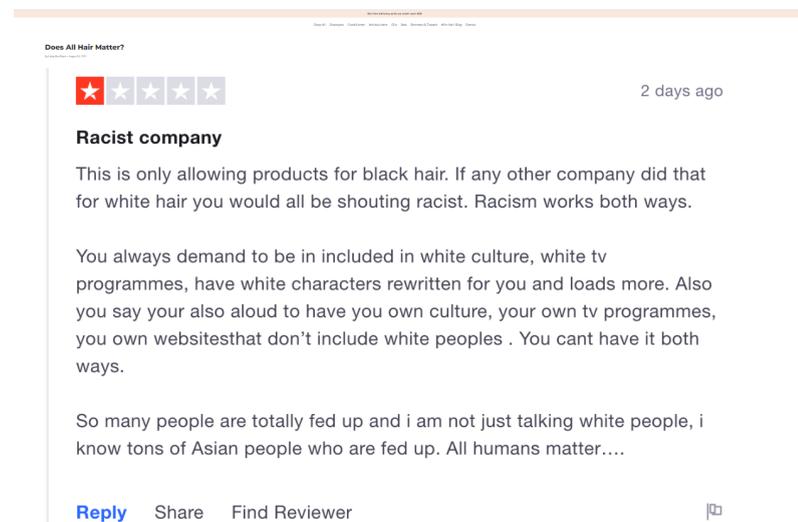


Image: From Afrocenchix *Does All Hair Matter?*

In our monthly support group for expectant and postpartum mothers, haircare is discussed a lot. From concerns about hair changes during pregnancy, to postpartum shedding, to alopecia, caring for your hair with a newborn, to acceptability politics and the triad of hair care-childcare-workplace respectability. Sometimes parents are concerned about what to use in their children's hair, they want safe and gentle ingredients for their little ones. They are looking for advice on what products parents of older children use or even just what works for other mums. Sometimes they are dealing with unwarranted and cruel comments about their child's hair texture from friends and family, and our

groups offer a safe space to offload and feel heard. Sometimes parents or their children have experienced microaggressions or hair discrimination, or mothers have anxiety about it when their child goes to nursery/school, or when they themselves need to return to work. In our group, Black women are encouraged to show up as they are and as they choose, no questions asked. They are encouraged to come with their large braids or twists if they want to; with a frizzy, unshaped, textured or messy bun if they want to; with a woolly fro, with a flop (afro hair that does not stand up), with their locs, with a durag or with a head wrap/covering. Without a word being spoken about their hair, their covering, their appearance, they are free to be who they are, no excuses needed and no judgments passed.

These brands often understand the deep and complex issues around hair care, and in particular the challenges that Black women face in society with their hair. For some women much of the effort that goes into hair care is linked to being accepted and respected at work, at health appointments and other social settings. It doesn't matter if it is some loose twists, a braid out, a fro, a bun or a puff, however we choose to style our hair, whether for comfort or to show out, we want to be able to do it with ease, and without damaging and losing hair in the long run. With Black people and children at risk of having high rates of allergies, eczema, respiratory conditions, hyperpigmentation and other health conditions, Afrocnchix is leading the way when it comes to holistic hair care products that have consumer health and well-being at the heart of what they do. Black brands and the formulators and scientists in charge of making their products are familiar with these nuances. Their aim is to make it easier for us to show up how we want, to feel comfortable and confident, whilst not compromising our health in the process.

Hair brands who make products with Black women in mind are not divisive and it doesn't need to be a divisive issue. Many non-Black women have similar hair, health and texture concerns and they too are not catered to within mainstream brands. Products that focus on moisture, strength and healthy growth are widely needed across all ethnicities, textures, porosities AND genders. Brands with a message that isn't about taming hair or referring to hair as wild, but rather a message about self-love and hair health is what we need.

In the words of Afrocnchix, "...some products are designed to provide for specific groups that have a different need to what the general market offers. This is the opposite of being discriminatory. **In catering for the most neglected markets, you often create better options for everyone interested.**" ([Afrocnchix, 2022](#))

Some UK brands that our service users, staff, and friends have shared with us:

Afrocnchix

Ivy Wild

Enitan London

Nylah's Naturals

Ava Estelle

Flora and Curl

Afro Hair Candy

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