

The business of black beauty: social entrepreneurship or social injustice?

Business of
black beauty

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the black beauty industry from a historical perspective and consider the fairness heuristic theory to determine if organisations in this industry are engaging in and promoting social entrepreneurship or contributing to social injustice. The paper explores the work of Annie Turnbo-Malone and Madame C.J. Walker, pioneers and stalwart entrepreneurs in the black beauty business, to discuss the controversial issue. Current and future applications are also investigated and presented.

Design/methodology/approach – Papers from earlier as well as more contemporary journals, news media and books were examined and synthesised to render a balanced view to aid in the entrepreneurship or injustice debate.

Findings – The paper concludes that decisions about fairness and justice involve perception and thus vary by individual, allowing a substantial case for the black beauty industry to both be commended for social entrepreneurship and condemned as a proponent of social injustice (distributive, procedural and interactional).

Originality/value – Organisations have substantial impact on individuals, groups, the community and society. A meaningful organisation encourages expression, perceptions of worth and constructive attitudes and behaviour, and refrains from reflecting excessive dictatorship or dehumanisation. This paper highlights both positive and negative organisational and societal issues concerning the business of black beauty, a relatively understudied topic in management in general and management history in particular, and it provides a unique lens from which to build awareness about entrepreneurship and justice and to effect needed change.

Keywords Social entrepreneurship, Justice, Fairness heuristic theory

Paper type General review

Introduction

Meaningful organisations care about more than high productivity and profit. Yes, these factors are important because without them, the chance of organisational survival diminishes. However, truly meaningful organisations understand that other factors also matter. These organisations value people – both internal (i.e. employees) and external (i.e. members of society) constituents. [Herman and Gioia \(1998\)](#) explain that this meaningful culture includes elements such as mutual respect, diversity, acknowledgement of the human spirit (e.g. allowing individual expression of values) and social responsibility. These dynamics are often also associated with justice ([Colquitt, 2001](#); [Jurkiewicz and Giacalone, 2004](#); [Roberson and Stevens, 2006](#); [Rupp et al., 2006](#)).

As such, one may argue that an organisation that wishes to be described as meaningful should strive to exhibit justice. Also, the point should be made that a firm that exhibits



organisational justice is also exhibiting social justice, as the former is related to the latter. Lambert (1993) argued that workplace policy constitutes an important form of social policy because it represents the vehicle through which social benefits are distributed by employers. Organisations are an important part of society, and their culture, which is reflected by the values they uphold, the norms they accept and the policies they establish, affects society as a whole.

In addition to being just and valuing people, meaningful organisations make a positive difference in society. A meaningful organisational culture demonstrates a recognition of the importance of being socially responsible. Herman and Gioia (1998) affirm that employees, customers and the general public are becoming more aware of company policies and standards, what organisations give back to the community and that societal perceptions do matter. The concept of social entrepreneurship has also been linked to social responsibility and societal enhancement. Ilieva-Koleva and Dobрева (2015) describe social entrepreneurship as an innovative form of business which successfully combines commercial practice and social aims and that it has emerged as a response to chronic social problems (e.g. poverty, unemployment, community fragmentation, etc.). Though their specific goals vary, all “social enterprises” endeavour to enhance societal well-being in some way, driven more by their mission than the market or profit (Dees *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, an organisation that engages in social entrepreneurship would be characterised by many as meaningful.

This paper focuses on the black beauty industry in the early 1900s and therefore begins with an examination of its history, followed by an investigation into its early contributors. It then explains the fairness heuristic theory and its link to justice, to facilitate a deliberation about whether the organisations within this industry could be acclaimed for promoting social entrepreneurship or whether they could be accused of being proponents of social injustice. After both cases for entrepreneurship and injustice are made, a brief look at the current state of the industry is provided.

History of the black beauty industry

The history of the black beauty industry in the USA can be traced back to slavery. According to Black (2004), before the mid-nineteenth century, white women desired creams and preparations (including lighteners) to provide smooth, white complexion signifying the genteel lady, and these preparations were borrowed from a variety of cultures, as well as from the slaves who brought hair and beauty remedies from West Africa. Soon, slaves living on plantations also realised that lighter-skinned blacks with straighter hair were favoured, as they worked inside the plantation houses where they performed less backbreaking labour than the slaves relegated to the fields, and they had access to hand-me-down clothes, better food, education and sometimes even the promise of freedom upon the master’s death (Byrd and Tharps, 2014). In the nineteenth century, commentators noticed that Africans and those of African descent stood at the base of the racial hierarchy, and as a display of whiteness-secured privilege, black women also made use of skin lighteners and bleaches (Black, 2004).

After slavery, trends did not change much in terms of the connection between appearance and opportunity. Byrd and Tharps (2014) explained that in the twentieth century, the politics of appearance played a pivotal role in the reconfiguration of black ideas, norms and ideologies as blacks aspired to gain access to the American dream. The authors stated that education and training made little difference if a person looked too African. For example, kinky hair, among other traits, translated to being ignorant, uncivilised and infantile. Therefore, blacks did what they could to emulate European standards of beauty, dress and behaviour (Byrd and Tharps, 2014).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, black women sold hair products (e.g. Madame C.J. Walker's straightening comb) in black communities (Harvey, 2005). In fact, the hair salon arose as a supplier of both employment opportunity and beauty treatments. Boyd (2000) explained that due to racial segregation, black women were excluded from most jobs and whites in the beauty industry often refused to provide service to black customers. Therefore, in response to labour market exclusion, black women became "survivalist entrepreneurs" who targeted a readily available customer segment of other black women. Entry into the black beauty industry allowed these women to become fully self-employed or to supplement their income because there was a demand for beauty services from black women who perceived that maintaining a well-groomed appearance was a necessity for securing employment (Boyd, 2000; Harvey, 2005).

In addition to hair products and services, the black beauty industry also included cosmetics. For instance, John H. Johnson, founder of *Ebony* (the first black-owned mass circulation periodical), launched Fashion Fair Cosmetics after he noticed that his models had to mix foundations to create the right blend for their complexions (Jones, 2010). Furthermore, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, skin-lightening or bleaching products and processes were often manufactured, advertised and sold. According to Lindsey (2011), numerous African-American women, impacted by the devaluation of their darker hues and the privileging of white skin, invested in these products and processes to achieve a re-creation of the individual and collective self.

By the mid-twentieth century, white-owned companies that sold hair products and cosmetics were also paying attention to the African-American market. For example, Jones (2010) revealed that Revlon and L'Oréal had specific products and brands for African-Americans, and Avon differed itself by selling brands that appealed to all ethnicities. Avon also gained credibility in the African-American market by utilising many black women in its army of neighbourhood sales representatives (Jones, 2010).

The black beauty industry provided occupational opportunities via entrepreneurship, as well as access to products and services to an underserved market. With its variety of offerings such as wigs, weaves and hair straightening and skin-lightening products, it also helped facilitate employees' conformity to the standards and expectations of more conservative organisations that frowned upon more ethnic hairstyles and other aspects of appearance. The industry, along with its offerings and promotional strategies, enabled individuals to fight the falsity that black was unprofessional, unattractive and inferior, so these individuals could be better accepted in the workplace and in society and allowed to progress.

Early contributors to the black beauty industry

Annie Turnbo-Malone (1869-1957) was an African-American entrepreneur who founded a beauty, haircare and cosmetic business targeting black women and grew it into an empire. She patented, manufactured and distributed beauty products and services (Phillips, 2003), and her products included hair straighteners, pomades (and other haircare products), soaps, face powders, deodorants and creams (including bleaching/skin whitening creams) (Ingham and Feldman, 1994; Trawick, 2011). She was so successful that imitators were emerging across the country, and thus, to stymie impostors' efforts, she adopted and copyrighted the trade name "Poro", a Mende word (Ingham and Feldman, 1994; Phillips, 2003), under which she continued to build her brand.

The daughter of former slaves (Witzel, 2009), Turnbo-Malone was a pioneer of direct selling in the beauty industry for the African-American market. According to Peiss (1998), in the 1890s, Malone began to experiment with hair treatments and preparations to solve the

problems of hair loss, breakage and manageability black women often faced, and by 1900, she was manufacturing and selling door to door. In 1902, she expanded by moving from Illinois to St. Louis, MO, where she became well established and continued expansion by travelling throughout the South adopting a sales strategy using agent-operators. The latter were trained and certified in her method, and earned money on hair treatments and a percentage of product sales. They also trained other agents, widening distribution regionally and across the nation (Peiss, 1998).

Turnbo-Malone has been heralded by some as the first black female millionaire in the USA, although others perceive this credit as belonging to another. Nevertheless, while this notable claim is still debatable (Trawick, 2011), the estimation of Turnbo-Malone's personal wealth in 1920 of \$14m (Miller, 2007) is remarkable and deserving of recognition. Poro became a multimillion-dollar industry that uplifted black women economically and empowered them to resist marginalisation (Phillips, 2003) and Turnbo-Malone was the entrepreneur who envisioned it and made it a reality.

Madam C.J. Walker (1867-1919), née Sarah Breedlove, founded the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company (Bundles, 2001) and was another successful African-American entrepreneur in the beauty and haircare business. In fact, she is arguably better known than Annie Turnbo-Malone, and is the other entrepreneur who is often perceived as the first black female millionaire in the USA. Trawick (2011) stated that Walker's story of success has been written and told far more extensively than Turnbo-Malone's, and that Walker is still identified by some as the first African-American woman millionaire. Like Turnbo-Malone, she was the daughter of former slaves (Witzel, 2009). In fact, coincidentally, she was actually inspired by Turnbo-Malone.

Peiss (1998) explained that after years of labouring as a domestic worker and laundress, Breedlove entered the beauty business in the early 1900s when she worked briefly as a Poro agent in St. Louis. Breedlove not only tried Turnbo-Malone's haircare products after meeting her at a fair in which Turnbo-Malone ran a stand but she was also offered a job by Turnbo-Malone as a sales agent, which she immediately accepted, seeing an opportunity to build a better future (Ingham and Feldman, 1994; Witzel, 2009). Breedlove also gained opportunities for growth and advancement in Turnbo-Malone's company. She rose to the rank of chief commission agent in the west, but after differences arose, Breedlove developed her own range of haircare products targeting the black female market (Witzel, 2009). She moved to Denver in 1905, and like Turnbo-Malone, began house to house canvasses among African-Americans and trained agents (Peiss, 1998). Her products included skin care and skin whitening products, and haircare and hair straightening products (including a special comb that would help straighten hair) (Lommel, 1993; Trawick, 2011). Thus, Turnbo-Malone's employee and mentee became her competitor.

Sarah Breedlove became Madam C.J. Walker after marrying Charles J. Walker. Her first husband died in an accident when she was only 20 years old (Bundles, 2001). Mr Walker, an advertising executive, helped grow the business and suggested, among other things, that she rebrand herself and her business, as such an imposing name (i.e. Madam C.J. Walker) would add status to her products (Witzel, 2009). His advice was indeed useful and, although not the only reason, Madam C.J. Walker's business increasingly flourished.

According to her great-great-granddaughter (and biographer), A'Leia Bundles, Madam C.J. Walker was one of America's wealthiest self-made businesswomen at the time of her death and in life, she was so financially successful that she was known as the wealthiest African-American woman and given the title millionaire before she was actually one (Bundles, 2001). She constantly used her wealth to help her community and like Turnbo-Malone, she uplifted black women economically and socially. According to Trawick (2011),

Madam C.J. Walker created financial independence and opportunities for African-American women all over the world through beauty culture. Both Annie Turnbo-Malone and Madam C.J. Walker achieved unusual success in manufacturing and marketing haircare products for black women (Peiss, 1998) and used their agent network and wealth to promote social issues (Keep and Vander Nat, 2014).

Justice and the fairness heuristic theory

Heuristic methods or processes facilitate self-directed learning, allowing individuals to discover or understand dynamics or to solve problems on their own. Heuristics are relevant to justice because people form their own judgements of what is (or is not) fair based on the information they have and their interpretation of it. According to Van den Bos *et al.* (2001), the fairness heuristic theory proposes that people use fairness judgements when they are concerned about potential problems associated with social interdependence and socially based identity processes, referred to as the “fundamental social dilemma”. The latter is concerned with the question of whether one can trust others not to exploit or exclude him/her from important relationships or groups, and the fairness heuristic theory argues that people start looking for fairness information to answer this question (Van den Bos *et al.*, 2001).

Colquitt and Rodell (2011) explain that the fairness heuristic theory suggests that individuals in organisations face this fundamental social dilemma wherein cooperating with authorities can lead to better outcomes but can also increase the risk of exploitation, and in an effort to cope with the dilemma, individuals use a “fairness heuristic” as a shortcut to determine if to accept authority and cooperate. Fairness information is used as a “heuristic substitute” to decide whether or not an authority can be trusted (Van den Bos *et al.*, 2001). One can argue that in general, individuals in society face this same fundamental social dilemma.

Organisations have a culture, usually established and sustained by organisational leaders, who are the ones in authority, and good organisational citizens are expected to conform to the norms of that culture. In the same way, there is national culture (which organisations often reflect), and individuals within a nation must determine whether to cooperate, and adapt to the norms that authorities deem suitable. Analysis of culture and its implications do not have to focus only on one tier, as relevant factors are usually not limited solely to the organisational level or solely to the societal level of analysis. There is overlap. As stated by Schminke *et al.* (2015), most individuals are members of many more organisations than those in which they work (e.g. professional, community, political, religious, recreational and civic groups), and they all represent social systems and reflect similar processes by which individuals make sense of their environments. The authors also mentioned the possibility of “top-down” effects as social institutions exert enormous pressures on organisations and their employees to conform to certain practices and behaviours (Schminke *et al.*, 2015).

Appearance norms are customary for both organisations and society at large, and expectations regarding professionalism and beauty are set according to these norms. Some may assert that the black beauty business has helped to shape perceptions and bolster certain norms. Will ceding to *authority* about appearance norms lead to better outcomes or exploitation? A historical examination reveals support for both sides. One can look at the information and form fairness judgements. Van den Bos *et al.* (2001) clarified that the most common approach to the resolution of uncertainty that is caused by having to cede to authority is to refer to impressions of fairness and form fairness judgements.

Fairness judgements imply decisions about justice. Research in organisational and social justice has introduced three types of justice (Bacha and Walker, 2013; Schminke *et al.*, 2015). Distributive justice pertains to the fairness of outcomes, procedural justice pertains to the fairness of processes used to determine outcomes, and interactional justice pertains to whether or not one receives treatment that reflects respect and dignity. Does the individual's input of conformance (facilitated by the black beauty industry) to appearance norms lead to favourable outcomes and are these outcomes fair? Should conformity to these appearance norms be considered as part of the process to determine outcomes? Does the expectation of compliance with appearance norms reflect interpersonal treatment with respect and dignity? These fairness judgements may be formed based on the information presented in this paper, as a determination is made concerning whether the black beauty business is linked to positive societal impact (i.e. social entrepreneurship) or organisational and societal unfairness (i.e. injustice). According to Gill (2010), the black beauty industry since its inception has served as an incubator for black women's political activism and a platform from which to agitate for social and political change.

The black beauty industry: the case for social entrepreneurship

Descriptions of social entrepreneurship vary. Dees (1998) explained that social entrepreneurs adopt a mission to create and sustain social value, pursue new opportunities to serve that mission, engage in continuous innovation, adaptation and learning and exhibit a heightened sense of accountability for outcomes created and to constituencies served. Defourny and Nyssens (2004) mentioned that the very nature of the social enterprise is that it presupposes a certain balance between its two major elements, the economic (i.e. taking risks and being market-oriented to create income and finance the enterprise) and the associative (i.e. meeting emerging but non-remunerative social demands). Campi *et al.* (2006) mentioned three elements of the social enterprise, namely the economic, the social and the socio-political or civic (i.e. promoting democratisation of decision-making and the inclusion of marginalised parts of the population).

The main idea is that social entrepreneurship innovatively blends the acquisition of business goals and social enrichment. Austin *et al.* (2006) explained that definitions of social entrepreneurship range from broad (inclusive of for-profit, non-profit and hybrid sectors) to narrow (non-profit sector), but that regardless of the characterisation, the common thread is the underlying drive to create social value. It may be argued that some of the key ways the black beauty industry historically created (and still create) social value include employment, philanthropy, self-worth and social acceptance.

Increased employment opportunities have been generated due to the black beauty industry. Ingham and Feldman (1994) noted that Turnbo-Malone developed an efficient franchising system, and recruited women, whom she then trained to administer and sell her line of products. These ladies were her aforementioned sales agents (like Sarah Breedlove, later known as Madam C.J. Walker). In the USA, branches were established in major urban centres such as Miami, Los Angeles, WA, Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, New York City, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, KS City, Omaha, Cincinnati and Cleveland; and worldwide, African-American women represented the Poro product line in areas in Canada, the Philippines, the Caribbean, Africa and South America, creating almost 75,000 jobs in total (Ingham and Feldman, 1994; Trawick, 2011). These women would have had few other (if any) professional opportunities. According to Phillips (2003), most black women at the time were restricted to working as domestics or other marginalised jobs. Turnbo-Malone provided thousands of jobs in a variety of capacities including representatives, teachers and factory workers (Ingham and Feldman, 1994).

Madam C.J. Walker and her manufacturing company also opened doors to financial freedom. [Bundles \(2001\)](#) wrote that her great-great-grandmother was an early advocate of women's economic independence and that she provided lucrative incomes for thousands of African-American women who otherwise would have been consigned to jobs as farm labourers, washerwomen and maids. In fact, her company had trained and employed about 5,000 black female agents worldwide ([Ingham and Feldman, 1994](#)).

The black beauty industry has also enabled increased philanthropy. The latter is often associated with sizeable financial donations to worthy causes, as in [Porter and Kramer \(2002\)](#) consideration of corporate philanthropy, but philanthropy, in a more general sense, can arguably refer to any kind of contribution that supports and benefits the well-being of others and promotes their welfare. Charitable giving does not have to be solely monetary. [Sulek \(2010\)](#) considered a plethora of definitions of philanthropy, from ancient to modern times, including goodwill to fellowmen especially active effort to promote human welfare; general benevolence; the private giving of time or valuables (money, security and property) for public purposes; the voluntary giving and receiving of time and money aimed towards the needs of charity and the interests of all in a better quality of life; and the disposition or active effort to promote the happiness and well-being of others. Therefore, ideally, philanthropy embraces any action (financial or otherwise) geared towards doing good for others and meeting their needs so that their welfare is positively impacted.

According to the common and ideal definitions, one may assert that Turnbo-Malone was certainly a philanthropist, and Poro was a social enterprise that engaged in corporate philanthropy. Turnbo-Malone has been credited with making many sizable charitable donations. [Ingham and Feldman \(1994\)](#), [Miller \(2007\)](#), and [Trawick \(2011\)](#) stated that her activities and energies transcended her business interests as demonstrated from the money she gave to a variety of black organisations, including an orphanage, hospitals, churches and schools, to how she depicted her race in advertisements.

Also, in one of St. Louis, MO's black neighbourhoods, she constructed Poro College, which served as a factory and beauty-training school, and incorporated much more than simply the company's operations, as it included many amenities including (but not limited to) modern classrooms, auditorium, cafeteria, bakeshop, dormitory, guest rooms for travellers, business offices and facilities to accommodate needs of religious, fraternal, civic and social functions ([Ingham and Feldman, 1994](#)). In those days, access to such amenities was quite limited for black individuals. Hence, Turnbo-Malone's vision and provision facilitated inclusion, as minorities could take advantage of particular social experiences formerly outside their reach, or at least, they lessened the blow of general exclusion. According to [Ingham and Feldman \(1994\)](#), prominent black figures were guests at the Poro complex, and other blacks who were denied admittance to venues in the city's popular restaurants and hotels were welcome to use the modern facilities at the so-called "Showplace of St. Louis". Turnbo-Malone and her company provided opportunities and did substantial good to benefit both employees and the community at large, and could thus be commended for philanthropy.

Madam C.J. Walker was also a philanthropist who donated money to worthy causes, created training opportunities, and served as an activist, fighting against social evils. [Bundles \(2001\)](#) explained that Walker reconfigured the philosophy of charitable giving in the black community with her unprecedented contributions to organisations such as Tuskegee Institute, the YMCA and the NAACP; and that she was also a political activist protesting lynching and racial injustice. Walker also opened Lelia College and at least one other training school to train and develop hair culturists and Walker agents, who were also allowed to sell Walker products and open beauty salons that practiced the Walker method of

treating hair (Bundles, 2001; Stille, 2007; Trawick, 2011), thus providing the instructional foundation many needed to seek financial security and a better life. Her many contributions, monetary and otherwise, met both economic and social needs that were essential for the welfare of others. According to Bundles (2001), Madam Walker paved the way for the profound social changes that altered women's place in the American society.

The case can also be made for the black beauty industry helping to facilitate self-worth and social acceptance for minorities, and thus, added professional opportunities as a result of the increased acceptance. Phillips (2003) mentioned that during the Jim Crow era, many Whites considered "a beautiful black woman" an oxymoron, and this affected black women's sense of self and restricted their opportunities in the job market. Black women who were seeking white-collar jobs such as stenographers, telephone operators, receptionists and clerks, had difficulty in obtaining employment in these jobs, and needed straight hair and light skin to have a chance of obtaining these positions, as they were usually closed to anyone known to be coloured (Boyd, 2000; Drake and Cayton, 1945).

The strategic use of beauty culture affirmed their beauty, sustained their self-worth and ensured their economic well-being, thus uplifting them psychologically and socially (Phillips, 2003). The author explained that Turnbo-Malone helped transform black women's lives by creating a platform for racial uplift as much as commerce, tying disparate groups of colonised women together as Poro agents, and meeting many of the psychological, social and economic needs of African-American females in a white-dominated political economy, as she generated and expanded their opportunities for mobility.

Madam C.J. Walker also played a role in increasing self-worth and social acceptance for black women. Stille (2007) mentioned that Walker taught her agents to feel special and beautiful, but also gave them a deeper meaning of beauty. In addition, one of Walker's graduates appreciatively declared that Walker opened up a trade for hundreds of coloured women to make an honest and profitable living (Stille, 2007).

Today, the black beauty industry has also been credited with the provision of employment opportunities, philanthropy and the facilitation of increased self-worth and social acceptance. Currently, black beauty salons are a large sector of American business, and in recent years, there has been significant growth in black female entrepreneurs in this arena (Wingfield, 2008). In addition, companies that promote skin-lightening products geared towards black individuals and other minorities with darker complexions are finding ways to give back to society. For example, Unilever markets a skin cream called "Fair and Lovely" to India and countries in Africa (including Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania, Cote D'Ivoire, Egypt, Malawi, Rwanda and Mozambique) for lightening the colour of dark-skinned women (Davidson, 2009; Karnani, 2007; Unilever, 2015). The company has also launched project Shakti in India and Africa to address social issues like poverty, women empowerment, and education, by bringing profitable micro-enterprise opportunities for rural women (Kreckova, 2015). As regards self-worth and social acceptance, African-American women associate well-styled hair with beauty, confidence and self-esteem, so the close relationship between a nice hairstyle and feelings of self-worth translates into African-American women accounting for 30 per cent of all hair maintenance business in the USA, despite African-Americans only comprising 13 per cent of the US population, due to a history conveying that straightened black hair is necessary for acceptance and advancement (Stenson, 2012).

Considering the information on the positive contributions of employment, philanthropy, self-worth and social acceptance that may be partly attributed to the black beauty industry and its pioneers, one may use heuristics in general and the fairness heuristic theory in particular, to interpret the information and decide whether this industry, and the

organisations and business owners within could be trusted not to exploit and/or exclude individuals and groups. Based on the information, one may assert that many internal and external constituents benefited from better outcomes and experienced inclusion, emancipation and justice, rather than exclusion, exploitation and injustice. Employees of Poro, Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company and other companies still existent in the industry, as well as community members and others in society at large who have gained opportunities (or heard of others gaining opportunities) owing to the industry and its affiliates may form the judgement that the black beauty industry is indeed comprised of social entrepreneurs. They may form the judgement that the industry and its affiliates can be trusted and should receive cooperation to continue their admirable work; and that the organisations are meaningful and a valid representation of social entrepreneurship as they help address social problems and assist in the promotion of social enrichment.

The black beauty industry: the case for social injustice

It was previously mentioned that some may argue that the black beauty culture helps to inspire and sustain self-worth and a sense of self. However, arguments may also be made to show how the black beauty industry does the exact opposite, undermining self-worth and destabilising one's sense of self. Some may assert that the main setback partly attributable to the black beauty industry is an arguably apparent loss of identity. Identity plays an important role in organisations, and is therefore acknowledged as an essential organisational construct that can help explain attitudes and behaviours. Identity is associated with several other organisational constructs including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, performance and turnover intentions (Cole and Bruch, 2006; Van Dick *et al.*, 2004; Voss *et al.*, 2006). An individual's identity is related to his/her sense of self, and allows the person to ascertain who he/she is. When the individual experiences loss of that identity due to organisational and societal values or ideologies that are also reflected by the black beauty industry, there is organisational and social injustice.

Hair and hairstyle are essential part of embracing one's identity, and in the case of black hair, that identity is not only African-American. According to Byrd and Tharps (2014), the story starts in Africa, where hair and hairstyle have intrinsically held social, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic significance for centuries, and have been fundamental aspects of individuals' and groups' sense of self. Today, many individuals wish to wear their hair "natural" (i.e. unaltered by chemicals or other straightening methods) or in an African style (e.g. locks) to celebrate their link to their original homeland, (re)claim their identity, and/or demonstrate their pride in who they are as people of African origin. However, despite the desire to embrace their identity, due to history that seems to repeat itself in different ways, there is often concerned pause.

As individuals use a "fairness heuristic" to help decide whether or not authority can be trusted, and if to accept authority and cooperate by conforming to appearance norms, they may make their own judgements about the worth of conformance to them. They may deem it worthwhile if it results in better outcomes for them, but it also depends on the value placed on certain outcomes. For example, for one individual, a promotion may be considered a better outcome, and thus worth conformity, but for another, the value of the promotion is diminished if the cost of conformity is his/her identity or sense of self, and then, it may be interpreted as exploitation. Individuals may also strive to determine the worth of conformance through fairness judgements of a distributive, procedural or interactional nature.

Distributive justice pertains to the fairness of outcomes. Conformity to appearance norms may lead to favourable outcomes. However, are these seemingly expedient outcomes fair?

Hurley-Hanson and Giannantonio (2006) made the point that physical attractiveness, personal appearance and image are important influences on organisations' employment decisions regarding hiring, promotion and compensation. Applicants may decide to conform to the image norm of the organisation (e.g. via hair extensions or straightening) to be perceived as a good fit and get the job. Some may argue that this is a fair outcome because everyone is expected to conform to some degree to be hired. For instance, some individuals may exhibit conformity through the opinions they voice. According to Jones (1964), ingratiation is the use of specific actions such as opinion conformity, other enhancement and favour doing in an attempt to increase the target person's liking of the individual. Higgins and Judge (2004) found that ingratiation had a positive effect on perceived fit and recruiter hiring recommendations, and indirectly on receipt of a job offer. However, conforming one's opinions and conforming one's image are very different actions. In the grand scheme of things, conforming to image norms to gain a desired outcome such as a job offer, and in the process, losing one's identity, may be likened to the proverbial gaining of the world but losing the soul. This may be considered by some to be the greatest distributive injustice.

Procedural justice concerns the fairness of processes used to determine outcomes. It has been found that many employment decisions are the result of a process of elimination according to a variety of image perceptions. As aforementioned, one such image perception is physical attractiveness. The latter has been associated with more favourable occupational decisions and outcomes such as suitability for hire, higher earnings/income, higher overall performance ratings and organisational progression (Drogosz and Levy, 1996; Judge *et al.*, 2009; Marlowe *et al.*, 1996). The meta-analytic research of Hosoda *et al.* (2003) also failed to show that the physical attractiveness bias is stronger when decision makers have less job-relevant information, suggesting that even when decision makers have job-relevant information, they may still use attractiveness information in making decisions. This finding supports the argument that although attractiveness may not be the most important determinant of personnel decisions, it may be the deciding factor when there are applicants with similar qualifications or records of job performance (Hosoda *et al.*, 2003).

Quite often, physical attractiveness is associated with whiteness. Blay (2011) noted that Queen Elizabeth I's already pale complexion, further aided by cosmetics and whitening commodities, was the inspiration for the Elizabethan ideal of beauty that was popular in Europe, later adopted in the USA (including communities of colour), and now a widespread global phenomenon (including several countries in Africa). As whites are often perceived as more attractive, and attractiveness is organisationally and socially useful, it is not surprising that whites benefit from better organisational and other social experiences, opportunities and outcomes. For instance, a study by Greenhaus *et al.* (1990) indicated that whites were rated higher on job performance and received higher promotability assessments, whereas blacks were more likely to be at career plateaus and reported having less job discretion and lower feelings of acceptance. It is also not surprising that blacks often attempt conformity to "white" beauty ideals, aided by products offered by the beauty industry. These attractiveness perceptions are biased, and one may argue that conformity to appearance norms, fashioned on the basis of these attractiveness perceptions, should not be considered part of the process to determine outcomes, whether consciously or subconsciously. Such process considerations may be deemed procedural injustice.

Interactional justice involves whether or not one receives treatment that reflects respect and dignity. Gatison (2013) noted that black women and girls constantly are confronted with the reigning standard of beauty – long, straight hair, light or white skin and thinness – as television, music videos and magazines are the main purveyors of this standard, along with

trendsetting celebrity users of products that endorse the standard. This prejudiced standard is not relegated to entertainment (which already impacts numerous aspects of society) only, but bleeds its way into other industries and their organisations as well. In fact, beauty is linked to professionalism.

The latter connotes attitudes and behaviours that reflect characteristics such as expertise, ethics, commitment and collegially maintaining standards (Bruce and Ahmed, 2014; Kerr *et al.*, 1977). Beautiful or physically attractive individuals have been found to be perceived as possessing attributes like expertise, trustworthiness and likeability (Ahearne *et al.*, 1999; Liu *et al.*, 2013), which aligns with the “beautiful is good” stereotype (Lorenzo *et al.*, 2010). Trustworthiness is associated with ethics and commitment (Bews and Rossouw, 2002; Colquitt *et al.*, 2007), and likeability, especially for women, with collegiality and maintaining standards (Bolino and Turnley, 2003).

It is no wonder, then, that those perceived as beautiful benefit from employment and organisational and other social progression opportunities. It is very likely that they are often perceived as professional as well. As whiteness is associated with beauty and professionalism, blacks may feel the need to conform to benefit from opportunities as well, even at the expense of identity. Rosette and Dumas (2007) noted that many recognise the importance of projecting a professional image at work, and the role that their demeanour, clothing and grooming play in successfully crafting this image, but minority women in particular suffer a disadvantage in crafting this image due to negative stereotypes, lower expectations and workplace norms that run counter to their cultural values and reward white standards of behaviour and appearance.

The authors explained that minority women often feel they must compensate for both their gender and race in attempting to present a professional image that renders them credible, and hairstyling is one of the most central decisions in managing perceptions. Long, straight hair has generally been considered the gold standard for attractiveness and the expectation of a straight, conservative hairstyle is present in corporate organisations, but because of the fundamental, physical differences between white and black hair textures, a great deal of time and a variety of expenses are required to transform black hair to conform to traditional (i.e. white) workplace norms for appearance (Rosette and Dumas, 2007). It may be contended that the very expectation of compliance with these appearance norms insinuates inferiority of those that do not “naturally” fit the standard and emanates a signal for interpersonal conduct that overlooks respect and denies dignity, hence demonstrating interactional injustice.

Some may argue that the black beauty industry should not be blamed for the injustice (s) perpetuated by organisations and societies that do not truly embrace diversity. They may argue that these organisations and societies are the ones that should be criticised for not being meaningful. However, it may also be argued that the black beauty industry, with its products that promote straight hair and light skin as the mark or standard of ideal beauty and/or true professionalism, helps facilitate the erosion of identity and pride in one’s identity, and contributes to the preservation of the myth that characteristics of blackness are to be viewed as negative both professionally and by extension, socially. Thus, with this in mind, the judgement may be formed that the industry and its affiliates help pressure members of society (including organisational leaders who make decisions, and employees who want to succeed) to conform, and therefore, to be exploited, for fear of exclusion if they decide to stay true to their identity or encourage others to stay true to theirs. Far from meaningfulness and social entrepreneurship, this would be the case for social injustice.

Current state of the black beauty industry

The beauty industry is a global, multi-billion-dollar industry encompassing numerous products and services. According to Jones (2010), the beauty industry overlaps with many others including fashion, beauty salons and hairdressers, as well as medical products and services such as Botox and plastic surgery; and consumers around the world spend \$330bn a year on hair and skin care products, fragrances, colour cosmetics, toiletries and other merchandise. This was a 2008 estimate, and thus, the size of the industry today is in all probability represented by a much larger figure. In fact, the black beauty industry alone, which can be described as a subset of the general beauty industry, is also a global industry arguably worth billions of dollars. Opiah (2014) asserted that the black haircare industry, specifically is grossly underestimated and quoted market research firm Mintel, which estimated the size of the 2012 market at \$684m, with a projection of \$761m by 2017. Mintel clarified, however, that general market brands, weaves, extensions, wigs, independent beauty supply stores, distributors, e-commerce, styling tools and appliances were missing from the figures (Opiah, 2014). Therefore, if all relevant products and services were included, the evaluation would be substantially higher. The \$684m could reach half trillion dollars (i.e. \$500bn), according to Mintel (Opiah, 2014). If the black haircare industry alone is so significant in size, one can only imagine the magnitude of the black beauty industry in general.

Today, the black beauty industry still promotes products and services such as hair straighteners and lightening creams that some would argue encourage the masking of black features in favour of adopting the historically white standard of beauty, thus defying the idea that black is naturally beautiful and professional and preventing a genuine embracing of diversity. As aforementioned, these products and services are not only marketed in the USA, but worldwide. For example, skin lighteners are rife in the continent of Africa. Thomas (2012) highlighted Abraham and Solomon Krok (twin brothers born to Jewish immigrant parents), who dominated the region's skin lightener market and amassed a fortune from the manufacture and sale of skin lighteners to black South Africans until a ban on skin lighteners was passed and apartheid ended. Ironically, these brothers who earned their wealth by profiting from a system that classed blacks as inferior, pushing them to become consumers of dangerous products they viewed as enabling them to elevate their status, later became the financiers of the much-admired Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. According to Thomas (2012), like many other whites, the Kroks sought to forge reputations better attuned to post-apartheid politics, through projects like the Apartheid Museum, which memorialises those who suffered and/or died under the racist South African state. Despite the ban, many in South Africa still use skin lighteners. Skin-lightening/whitening/bleaching products are widespread in South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Togo, Cote D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Zambia, Ghana and other African countries, and it seems that in many parts of the African continent, skin bleaching is nothing less than a way of life (Blay, 2011; Kpanake *et al.*, 2010; Roby, 2015).

Although products and services that debatably aim to conceal black physical traits are still very popular, some individuals have accepted the charge to introduce and promote products that celebrate natural black beauty and black identity. For example, Grace Amey-Obeng, a successful Ghanaian entrepreneur, has become a millionaire by advising against skin bleaching and promoting products that emphasise the beauty of the black skin. According to BBC News (2013) and CNN (2014), Amey-Obeng's empire, which includes a beauty clinic, a firm that supplies salon equipment and cosmetics and a college (which has trained more than 5,000 young people, mostly women), has eight branches in Ghana, and exports to Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Togo, Ivory Coast, Switzerland and the UK. BBC News

(2013) quoted Amey-Obeng as noticing that “the women had destroyed their skin with bleaching products”, and seeing “the need to assist them because otherwise it would become a social problem”.

In the USA, another example is Lisa Price, the founder of Carol’s Daughter, a line of natural beauty products for hair and skin, and also a provider of fragrances/body sprays. The company’s mission is to fulfil the beauty needs of the diversity of skins that make up the tapestry of our world by creating high-quality hair, body and skin care products, made with natural ingredients (Carol’s Daughter, 2015). Due to wording that demonstrates that all are welcome to use her products, on the surface, the mission may connote that the products are not geared towards black consumers. However, Carol’s Daughter is considered to be a black-owned company that mainly targets the black audience. Zukin (2010) described it as a black-oriented cosmetics firm. Byrd and Tharps (2014) classified it under black-owned manufacturers of black hair products. Although the *Wall Street Journal* revealed Carol’s Daughter’s acquisition by beauty industry giant L’Oréal (Gleason, 2014), Lisa Price was expected to remain creative visionary and spokesperson for the brand, and to continue to lead product development (Bates, 2014), thus retaining creative control, and ensuring the continued authenticity of the brand and its commitment to its main target audience.

According to market research firm Mintel’s multicultural analyst, Roberts (2014), there is a natural hair trend, and several brands of natural haircare products that nearly died have resurrected, and in some cases, rebranded and recreated themselves and their image. In addition, some marketers have incorporated tried-and-true home ingredients in products aimed at the black community (Roberts, 2014). With this natural hair trend, and an increasing number of products and services that promote black hair and acknowledge its beauty, fewer women may feel the intense pressure that exacerbates their desire or need to straighten their hair in conformity with societal expectations of professionalism or ideals of beauty.

Discussion and future inquiry

This examination of the black beauty industry and its effects bring to mind a particular brewing company’s effort to market a malt liquor to urban blacks. According to Brenkert (1998), Heileman Brewing Company sought to market “PowerMaster”, which contained an amplified percentage of alcohol, to inner-city blacks, using black male models and advertisements assuring consumers that the malt liquor was “bold not harsh”. In this case, fairness perceptions and views about moral and social responsibility could very much vary. Some may consider that the product instilled a sense of courage, power and worth in a frequently dehumanised segment of the population, while others may claim that it unjustly exploited an already vulnerable target market. Brenkert (1998) concluded that when products targeted at particular market segments cause consumers to suffer disproportionately, it is only fair that measures be considered to reduce the harm produced, and that both individuals and corporations should accept collective responsibility to the targeted market segments for the effects of their products and marketing campaigns.

Fairness heuristic theory helps explain how justice evaluations are formed. The theory argues that individuals are often placed in the fundamental social dilemma (Lind, 2001). They encounter situations where they must cede to authority, providing an opportunity to achieve their goals and secure social identity, or a risk to lose their identity and be exploited, excluded and rejected (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2001). Thus, they make decisions about whether the authority can be trusted to be fair and nonbiased, and to view and treat them as legitimate members of the work group, organisation, or society (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2001).

As individuals form their justice evaluations pertaining to organisational and societal norms (including appearance norms), as well as the industry that helps propagate those norms, they may consider whether society benefits or endures disadvantages due to the standards or customs upheld and deemed acceptable. They may also consider the magnitude or degree of significance of the benefits or disadvantages. Future inquiry can shed further light on the “fairness” of the black beauty industry by not only exploring the issue through the lens of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, but also via the use of various ethical frameworks. For instance, *utilitarianism* is the ethical theory that advises one to choose the action that maximises the welfare of the most people or supports the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994); whereas *deontology* is a morality of principles instead of consequences, where individuals are encouraged to accept it as their duty to do what ought to be done based on what should be universally right (Van Staveren, 2007); and the *rights* principle is one of entitlement, protecting a person’s interests, and asserting that the morally correct action is the one that the person has a moral right to do, that does not infringe on the moral rights of others, and that furthers the moral rights of others (Schumann, 2001). Examination of these ethical frameworks may provide further insight regarding the benefits and disadvantages of the black beauty industry, and help lay a foundation for judgements to be formed.

Further investigation of ethical frameworks is especially valuable because they may overlap with the law. Although moral rights are not synonymous with legal rights (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985), in some cases, they are one and the same (e.g. freedom of speech, as long as the speech does not infringe on the rights of others). Some may argue that an individual’s rights are infringed upon when they are expected to conform to an organisation’s appearance norms. Lawsuits document the complexities associated with grooming decisions for black women in professional settings, and several cases show that hairstyle and garb choices (e.g. braids, dreadlocks, African clothing) may have serious repercussions (Rosette and Dumas, 2007). If not overt discrimination, one may consider whether the expectation of such conformity can be considered a micro-aggression, where blacks are consciously or subconsciously sent disparaging signals that they and their culture are inferior, thus insulting them and making them feel excluded and unwelcome. These issues warrant further attention.

With the eating away of manifestations of identity comes the disregard for the importance of diversity. Herman and Gioia (1998) noted that diversity, placing emphasis on celebrating differences among people and making active use of the varied perspectives that workers bring to the job from different backgrounds, is much more than a racial issue. Diversity facilitates learning, growth and organisational and societal success. Future research should explore whether the beauty industry in general and the black beauty industry in particular could help shape perceptions so that black beauty and professionalism is not judged by conformity to white appearance norms. If perceptions are changed, organisations and societies may be more prone to embracing diversity in its totality. Jones (2010) mentioned that historically, the commercial beauty industry made no provision for blacks’ distinctive hair texture or skin tones, and that the treatment of black hair became the basis for a large ethnic beauty industry and a fertile area for black entrepreneurs. Possibly, if all entrepreneurs (and not only the black ones) in the industry made the effort to promote products and services that highlighted black features and portrayed them as beautiful and professional, perceptions would be changed, and diversity would not only be tolerated but enthusiastically accepted and endorsed.

It should be noted, however, that perceptions vary according to individuals and the lens through which they view issues, as their lenses may be crafted differently due to

background, culture, experiences and other factors. Therefore, future inquiry should take variables such as race, gender and nationality into account. For instance, [Jones \(2010\)](#) stated that although the beauty industry is global, it has some decidedly local characteristics. This is also true for the black beauty industry. Thus, variables like race, gender and nationality may influence not only perceptions of beauty and professionalism but judgements about the black beauty industry as well.

Conclusion

As the fairness heuristic theory is used to form judgements about the black beauty industry, and the information is considered, individuals will have their own perceptions and interpretations of what is good and fair and some may determine that they are caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. Can the black beauty industry and the organisations and leaders/decision-makers within be trusted not to exploit internal and external constituents' biases and insecurities knowingly or unknowingly thrust upon them by society? Are they, in fact, valiantly serving constituents by helping them to avoid exclusion (e.g. from employment in certain organisations); or are they further propagating unfair stereotypes, thus assisting in the facilitation of exclusion of those who choose not to conform and exploitation of those who do conform? Do they deserve cooperation? The information in this paper presents valid arguments for both positive and negative outcomes of the black beauty industry, and thus, the same industry that can be commended for social entrepreneurship can also be condemned for social injustice.

This disparity in perceptions is understandable because social enterprises essentially strive to combine business ventures and social missions and when this combination occurs, perspectives about what matters and what makes strategic sense may differ. [Smith *et al.* \(2013\)](#) state that social missions and business ventures are associated with divergent goals, values, norms and identities, and attending to them simultaneously creates tensions, competing demands and ethical dilemmas. Thus, it may be argued that for the black beauty industry to survive in terms of business, some social missions can be pursued while others must be overlooked. Organisations need to choose their priorities regarding social missions and their choices may not be the priorities of the individuals who consider the information and form their judgements and justice evaluations. These individuals may have different value systems that influence their interpretations of what is good and fair.

[Gill \(2010\)](#) named economics and entrepreneurship as important variables in black women's activism and community building and argued that the beauty industry played a crucial role in the creation of a modern black female identity. Certainly, pioneers like Annie Turnbo-Malone and Madam C.J. Walker, as well as more recent black entrepreneurs in the beauty industry like Grace Amey-Obeng and Lisa Price have been instrumental in contributing to the upliftment of their communities in numerous ways. In fact, [Trawick \(2011\)](#) did assert that assumptions regarding black entrepreneurs (like Turnbo-Malone and Walker) as villains preying on their race to capitalise on products/services that physically transform them into white ideals of beauty often were not true; although the author did admit that advertisements promoting straightening kinky hair and bleaching dark skin were discovered. According to Madam C.J. Walker's great-great-granddaughter, straight hair was not Walker's primary goal, but better employment and financial opportunity were her main concerns; and wanting to have hair (her scalp had bald spots) had nothing to do with mimicking whites ([Bundles, 2001](#)).

Although [Gill \(2010\)](#) credited the beauty industry with playing a crucial role in the creation of a modern black female identity, some may argue that the industry helped facilitate the destruction of black female identity. [Wingfield \(2008\)](#) argued that black

women's history of entrepreneurial work in the hair industry represents the influence of systemic gendered racism; where historically, not only were blacks inferior to whites but also black women were precluded from achieving dominant ideals of femininity (and beauty) and thus experienced economic exploitation. According to Wingfield (2008), black female entrepreneurs responded to this systemic gendered racism by engaging in business ownership in a field shaped by these messages, therefore creating and selling products that enabled black women to conform.

Research has already shown that perceptions instigate differential treatment for blacks and whites in organisations and in society. For example, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found that job applicants with white-sounding names like Emily or Greg received 50 per cent more callbacks for interviews than job applicants with black-sounding names like Lakisha or Jamal and that callbacks were also more responsive to resume quality for white names than black ones. One's name is part of his/her identity. Yet, as applicants with black names find it hard to overcome the hurdle in callbacks even by improving observable skills or credentials (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004), they may find it necessary to resort to changing their names or using a more "white" version of their names. In fact, long before the job search, parents are considering these biases when choosing names for their children. Before children are even born, some parents are concerned that a uniquely black name would lessen the chances of that child being cleared for a job interview (Ghatt, 2011), and thus, these parents decide to "toe the line". Conformity to image norms may be seen by blacks as another way to influence perceptions when they pursue opportunities. Thus, they may choose to use "beauty" products that enable them to appear more "white", hence, denying a part of their identity.

All organisations (whether in the black beauty industry or not) should be aware of the social (including professional) issues faced by minorities, and do their part to address them. Yes, increased employment opportunities and philanthropy are essential, but so are feelings of self-worth (without having to conform to ideals that betray one's identity) and true acceptance of those who may be different. Thus, organisations must avoid being "modern plantations", and also promote impartiality and eliminate prejudice in whatever form it may take. In doing so, they will be striving to engage in entrepreneurship with a social conscience, and thus, to nurture a more meaningful organisation in particular, and just society in general, where the justice is distributive, procedural and interactional.

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