

Hair Food: An Examination of Food Terms in the Hair Industry and the Adverse Effects of Hair Care Products Among Black Women

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Abstract. Hair food can be explored through the use of food terms in hair care products and the use of food items in natural hair treatments. Although most are beneficial, some hair care products contain harmful ingredients that may lead to undesirable results, such as alopecia, especially in black populations. This paper examines the uses of hair food by females of various ages and ethnic backgrounds in order to achieve healthier hair or a socially appealing appearance.

Introduction

Hair food; food for hair; that which nourishes hair; all seemingly a simple concept until closely analyzed. There are a few ways to interpret the term, leaving plenty of room for questions. First of all, hair seen on the outside of the body is dead (Harvard 2009:2), so how can it be fed? Secondly, if hair care products are considered hair food, then how nourished can hair be, considering the damaging chemicals some include? Thirdly, do different types of hair require different types of food? Also, how is hair taken care of? How is personal appearance affected by hair? What happens when hair is malnourished? Where can hair food be found? But most importantly, what is hair food?

In this paper I will discuss the use of food terms advertised in hair care products, the application of food items as treatment for hair, and the adverse effects of certain hair care products, specifically among black women. Through a biocultural perspective I will highlight the importance of hair maintenance as a societal expectation despite the possibility of traumatic physical cost.

This research is applicable in the field of cultural anthropology by providing insight into the attributing factors that link an essential element of life, food, with a physical feature, hair, that typically is not thought of as needing to be

fed. Because there are no published studies that directly use the term “hair food”, I have defined it in my own terms for this paper.

Hair food:

- Hair care products, especially those using food terms in the product name, i.e. Hair Mayonnaise
- Foods used in treatment for the hair or scalp

Though the two descriptions are different concepts of what hair food could be, both set out for the same goal- the healthy appearance of beautiful hair.

Obtaining and maintaining this image is important to women (and men, though my focus is women) of various ethnic backgrounds, ages and socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, for black women (African, African-American, and Caribbean), to achieve certain desired hairstyles may require the application of deleterious creams or tight pulling of the hair. The creams used in these popular practices directly oppose the concept of hair food, as they malnourish the hair and damage the scalp. I will review these products, risks associated with them, and reasons for their continued practice.

Methods

I carried out a literature review of information regarding food usage in natural hair treatment practices, the risks associated with chemicals found in certain hair care products, and the societal implications of hair maintenance among African American women. Additionally, I visited a local beauty supply

store and photographed products advertising food ingredients for children and adults.

Data

Mouthwatering Moisturizer: Food Terms in Hair Care Products

I found several hair care products that use a variety of food terms during my visit to Fat Boys Beauty Supply, Inc. in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Korean store owners explained to me that because the majority of their customer base is African American, the store is mostly stocked with products specifically for that texture of hair. I noticed a slight pattern with foods chosen for these products and divided them into two categories: oils and fruits. The oils advertised were: coconut oil, olive oil, sunflower oil, carrot oil, mayonnaise creme oil, shea butter, and tea tree oil. The fruits used in products were: strawberry, mango, kiwi, citrus, papaya, and passion fruit. I determined the difference between the two classifications as benefit versus fragrance. The oils are advertised for promoting hair growth or silkiness, whereas the fruits are simply added to give a fresh smell to the products. I also found two creams named as desserts: Curly Pudding and Curly Meringue. These two products include multiple oils in their ingredients such as avocado oil, shea butter, sweet almond oil, jojoba seed oil, and macadamia seed oil in order to reduce frizz and keep curls bouncy.



Photo 1: Olive and sunflower oil advertised in Hair and Scalp Nourisher (left), Leave-in Detangler (center), and Moisturizing Lotion (right).



Photo 2: Hair lotions advertising food oils as beneficial ingredients for moisturizing. Carrot Oil (left), Mayonnaise (center), Olive Oil (right).



Photo 3: Disney shampoo, conditioner, and bubble bath promoting tropical fruits such as mango, strawberry, orange, coconut, and papaya.



Photo 4: Mango and lime braid twist remover (left), mango and lime cactus oil leave in moisturizer (center), and papaya and passion fruit shampoo (right). These products are specifically designed for people with dreadlocks.

Vegetable and nut oils of various kinds are popular in hair care products for moisturizing. However, damaged hair, or hair with large loss of protein, are better treated with coconut oil than others (Rele et al. 2002:175). Though coconut oil is more expensive, greasier, and smellier than other oils, it is able to penetrate inside the hair shaft because of its low molecular weight and straight linear chain, allowing it to reduce protein loss in damaged and undamaged hair.

Although Fat Boys did not carry anything specifically called “hair food”, such items do exist. Most of these products are thick hair creams packaged in circular containers and are yellow or lime-green in color. They are to help nourish weak dehydrated hair of all types and rejuvenate damaged scalps. Common ingredients promoted in many of these “hair foods” include vitamins, especially Vitamin E, and oils, particularly coconut oil.



Photo 5: This hair food offers to moisturize and shine hair with its rich ingredients of Vitamin E and wheat germ and coconut oils.



Photo 6: Manufactured in Mumbai, India, this hair food contains Vitamin E, to improve scalp circulation, and coconut, vegetable, and olive oils to smooth and shine hair.



Photo 7: "Fortified with Vitamins A, D, E & Protein", this hair food claims to strengthen hair while nourishing the scalp.

Eating or Treating? The Use of Food in Hair Care Treatments

Unfortunately, research involving the treatment of hair with edible food items has yet to be conducted. However, healthyhairtips.org produced an article called Home Hair Treatment With Kitchen Ingredients, in which they explain seven do-it-yourself home hair treatments using common foods. Each regimen may easily be performed with common foods such as eggs, yogurt, avocados, and honey. Most foods are to be applied to clean wet hair and after sitting for 20 minutes may be rinsed and shampooed out.

The first treatment, using an egg, is for all types of hair. The yolk of an egg is a natural moisturizer because of its richness in fat and protein, while the enzyme-eating bacteria in the egg whites raise unnecessary oils.

Home treatment #2 is for dull hair and involves using milk products such as sour cream or yogurt. The lactic acid from these foods will gently clean dirt from air pollution while the milk fat moisturizes the hair.

Home treatment #3 is to cure the itchiness of the scalp by using a mixture of olive oil and lemon juice. The acidity of the lemon juice will help alleviate the dry skin while the scalp is moisturized by the olive oil.

Home treatment #4 involves blending half an avocado, and is specifically for those with curly hair. The oil of an avocado repairs damaged hair and its heavy nutrients pull down irregular hair to eliminate frizz.

Home treatment #5, the simplest, calls for cornstarch and is helpful for oily hair. Because cornstarch can raise oil from the hair, the basic act of combing it through the tresses will easily dry them.

Home treatment #6 is for heat damaged, or dehydrated, hair. Honey, or natural sweeteners, locks in moisture that may have escaped from over exposure to the sun or heated hair styling tools, such as flat irons.

Home treatment #7 is for those with too-smooth hair. Volume-less hair may be raised or thickened by yeast from fermented beverages, like beer. The protein from wheat or malt can strengthen and shape hair.

The remedies listed above clearly illustrate how food may be used in the home setting to clean or nourish hair. Likewise, they may be used in salons for the same purpose. Mikel's Salon, The Paul Mitchell Experience, in Tampa, Florida, offers a couple services on their Lather Lounge Menu that include food items (Mikel's). Natural Sugar Rush is a hair washing service that includes a scalp exfoliation with raw sugar. Similarly, Zesty Lemon Aid is a hair bath including fresh squeezed lemon juice to remove build-up and add shine, followed by a rinse with arctic sparkling water to seal and shine. Both services use food as

a form of hair rejuvenation. The harsh texture of the raw sugar scrub exfoliates the scalp, removing dead skin, leaving the scalp fresh with the exposure of new skin. The acid from the fresh squeezed lemon juice cleans the hair of product residue and dirt, leaving it with its natural healthy shine.

These practices demonstrate the versatile functions of food and prove how nourishment can be given to a part of the body that is mostly dead.

Balding, Breasts, and Babies: The Adverse Effects of Hair Products

Hair care products and natural treatments are great tools to utilize while exploring the beauty of the hair's capabilities, but what about the ugly side of possibilities hair care products may lead to? Sadly, many women face diseases or illnesses as a result of misuse or overuse of certain types of products. Black women suffer more than any other population in terms of hair related issues due to their extensive use of chemically based hair relaxers, in addition to other hair practices, like tight braiding. Consequently, continuous applications of relaxers leave black women at higher risk for central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia and breast cancer.

Central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia (CCCA) is the most common type of primary scarring alopecia and occurs primarily in black women (Olsen et al.2008:264). CCCA was initially named hot comb alopecia in a study done by Dr.Phillip LoPresti in 1968, in which he explained the irreversible alopecia experienced by black women was a result of the extensive use of physical hair straighteners, such as the hot comb (Borovicka et al. 2009:840). The term was

changed in 1992 by Drs. Sperling and Sau to follicular degeneration syndrome, and has recently been renamed CCCA by the North American Hair Research Society (Borovicka et al. 2009:840, Olsen et al. 2008:264). Said terms of alopecia are all best described as “alopecia from traumatic hairstyling”, including practices of braiding, use of extensions and weaves, and use of chemical and physical straighteners (Borovicka et al. 2009:840).

In order to obtain the highly desired look of straight silky hair, black women use chemical agents known as relaxers (Borovicka et al. 2009:844). The misuse of relaxers can cause ruinous damage to hair due to the harsh main ingredients they include, such as sodium hydroxide or ammonium thioglycollate. These chemicals may harm the body from skin contact or simply inhalation. Sodium hydroxide, specifically, is highly corrosive and can severely irritate or burn skin from extensive use (Fact Sheet 2010). Yet 70-80% of black women worldwide choose to chemically alter their hair using relaxers.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of understanding racial hair morphology differences, most physicians are unsure of how to treat black women with alopecia (Callender et al 2004:165). Dr. Valerie Callender (2004:173) suggests, for black women with CCCA who chemically relax their hair, to decrease the frequency of touch-ups, have a professional apply the relaxer, and/or choose a chemical-free natural hairstyle. There is also the expensive option of cosmetic procedures, such as hair transplant surgery. Although this option is not currently preferred in the black population, Callender notes how the rising number of black women with alopecia may bring a higher demand for the cosmetic operation.

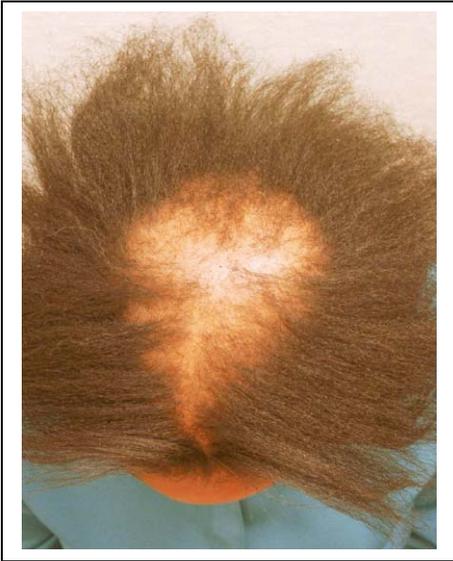


Photo 8: A vertex predominant pattern of hair loss on an African American woman with central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia. .

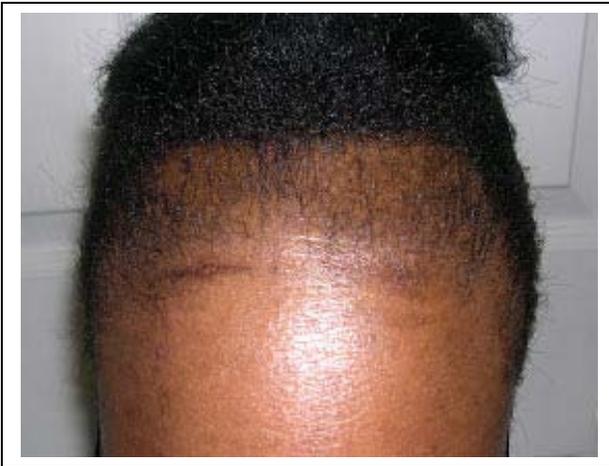


Photo 9: An African American woman with CCCA resulting from years of tightly braiding her hair. The hair loss stretches from the top of her head down the temples, exposing the scalp in a nearly linear fashion.

Moreover, relaxers are not the only hair product with biological consequences. There are many personal care products (PCPs) that contain hormones or placenta in their ingredients. Studies have linked the use of these products to premature sexual development and breast cancer (Donovan et al 2007:757). These products are used by people of all races, but reported being used 6-10 times more by black children and adults. Additionally, black women claimed to have been using PCPs with hormones, to treat their hair and skin, since their childhood and throughout their pregnancies.

In Maryann Donovan's (2007) study, she found that female children, especially black girls, exposed to PCPs containing hormones or placenta experienced early sexual development and are at risk of developing vaginal adenomatosis during adolescence or a rare adenocarcinoma of the vagina. She also noted "the continuous use of PCPs from a young age combined with earlier estrogen exposure as a result of early age at menarche may increase cumulative estrogen exposure and thereby stimulate the development of breast cancer" (Donovan et al. 2007:764).



Photo 10: Shampoo and conditioner made with Vitamin E and placenta from sheep. Note the endorsement of Cuban model and television star, Sissi Fleitas. In the advertising world, celebrity endorsements are one of the most popular ploys to recruit consumers (Tantisenepong et al 2012:57).



Photo 11: This discontinued item, Hormone Hair Food, previously proclaimed to help thicken and strengthen limp hair with daily use. Its replacement, Isoplus' Herbal Hair Food, is described to do the same. The only difference between the two is a missing ingredient: hormone constituents.

A case study from Italy reported a three year old female child who suffered from vaginal bleeding, breast enlargement, nipple hyper-pigmentation, and an enlarged uterus due to the exposure of her mother's hair lotion (Guarner et al. 2008:762). The report stated the child's unusual developments were a result of habitually playing with her mother's hair, hair combs and empty lotion vials, all the while becoming unknowingly exposed to the hair lotion's high concentrations of the xenobiotic hormone ethynilestradiol. Through skin absorption the girl was clinically said to have been intoxicated by estrogen. However, six months after the mother stopped using the topical products the young girl "had a complete regression of signs of feminization and a normalization of hormonal data and uterine size" (Guarner et al. 2008:762).

Hair Speaks: Societal Implications on African American Hair

After learning the terrible risks linked to relaxers and hormone hair lotions one would imagine black women giving up on the desire for European silky-smooth hair. The truth is the exact opposite. The ever-growing rate of women applying hair relaxers is currently between 70-80% worldwide (Callender 2004:173). Though this hairstyle practice started with African American women, Caribbean and African women adopted the technique and hold the same high risk as African American women for CCCA and breast cancer.

This topic is much too vast for one portion of this paper, yet its relevance is far too great to ignore, so I will briefly highlight key points: hair textures and

cultural identity, socially appeasing hairstyles, and the role of the beauty shop in the community.

African hair (passed on to African Americans and Caribbean islanders) is very different than the hair of any other ethnic background, so much so that some cosmetologists have been called hair doctors due to their expertise (Jacobs-Huey 2006:31). African hair, in its natural state, varies from wavy to curly to difficult-to-brush and easy-to-tangle tightly knit coils (Robinson 2011:363). Without treatment or maintenance the coils may appear messy, “nappy”, unattractive, unprofessional and socially frowned upon. Since childhood we are taught the importance of physical appearance as a direct link to our self-value, especially in young girls, explaining the expressed glorification of our hair (Weitz 2004:33). To carry out the desired look, a woman must first choose a hairstyle appropriate for herself. There are a large number of hairstyle options available for black women, such as dreads, braids (and micro-braids), weave (glued or sewn in), twists, wigs, and afro, just to name a few. However, the most commonly accepted and popular African hair is straight, smooth, and relaxed. The style a woman prefers may be based on several factors, including comfort, affordability, and social approval. In *Good Hair*, a comedic documentary directed by Jeff Stilson, Reverend Al Sharpton joked with Chris Rock that some women will not pay rent in order to have money for their hair. Sharpton shared his thoughts, declaring “You get up and comb your exploitation and oppression every morning; or you attach your economic exploitation to the back of your head” (Stilson 2009).

Clearly, hair upkeep is important to black women, but the significance of

pretty hair stretches beyond the physical image to the location from which hair doctors work: the beauty shop. Salons, especially in black communities, are known as social and informational centers (Battle-Walters 2004:3). These locations host (mostly) working-class women for hours of beauty services and girl talk. Social networking during these informal gatherings help community members establish close relationships with one another while building a strong foundation of familiarity in the neighborhood. While feeding their hair, they feed their souls.

Conclusion

Just as there are many ways to skin a cat, there are many subjective ways of defining hair food. In this paper I described hair food as that which nourishes hair, whether it be hair care products, with special regard to those advertising food items as ingredients, such as Hair Milk or Carrot Oil Moisturizer, or foods used in natural hair care treatments, like avocados or honey. I talked about the importance of hair upkeep and its significance as part of a cultural identity in African American communities along with the risks associated with certain hair care practices. My hope is for people to digest the idea of “hair food” as a positive, nourishing, and beneficial term. Uniting these words brings forth the concept of feeding the unfeedable- hair.

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Image Sources

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Photo 2: Hair lotions with carrot oil, mayonnaise, and olive oil

Parkin, Monica. 2012. Fat Boy's Beauty Supply, Inc. St. Petersburg, Fl.

Photo 3: Disney fruity hair and bath products

Parkin, Monica. 2012. Fat Boy's Beauty Supply, Inc. St. Petersburg, Fl.

Photo 4: Dreadlock products

Parkin, Monica. 2012. Fat Boy's Beauty Supply, Inc. St. Petersburg, Fl.

Photo 5: Blue Magic Hair Food

<http://www.stockngo.com/blue-magic-blue-magic-hair-food-12-oz.html>

Photo 6: Agarwals Hair Food

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Photo 7: Senorita Hair Food

<http://www.janbros.com/our-brands/senorita/senorita-hair-food.htm>

Photo 8: African American woman with CCCA from relaxers

http://www.carfintl.org/assets/images/new_alo_images/large/central_centrifugal.jpg

Photo 9: African American woman with CCCA from braiding

<http://www.hairlighttherapy.com/1302193546.html>

Photo 10: Placenta shampoo and conditioner

http://daddytypes.com/archive/shivvy_placenta.jpg

Photo 11: Hormone hair food

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