

Is “good” hair “bad” for young female black Africans? Consumers’ (dis)identification with natural versus synthetic hair care brands

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Abstract

Purpose – The social construction of “beautiful” hair has been a contested terrain between Afrocentric and Eurocentric ideals. This study examines the extent to which young black female consumers in South Africa (dis)identify with SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V which are perceived to further Afrocentric and Eurocentric ideals respectively.

Design/methodology/approach – An online questionnaire survey was used to collect data from 590 young black female consumers in South Africa. Data was analysed using structural equation modelling.

Findings – Brand-self congruity and self-expressive value were found to have a positive impact on young black female consumers’ identification with SheaMoisture, a natural hair care brand. Conversely, brand distinctiveness and self-expressive value emerged as positive antecedents of consumers’ identification with Pantene Pro-V, a synthetic hair brand. Consumers exhibited higher levels of loyalty to both SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V, although they indicated willingness to disseminate positive word of mouth only for the SheaMoisture brand.

Research limitations/implications – This study relied on self-reported data collected from two public universities in South Africa. Although universities are regarded as miniatures of society, the results of this study may not be generalised.

Practical implications – The results underscore the need for SheaMoisture brand managers to effectively communicate its differential attributes including allaying greenwashing perceptions through the use of clinically proven environmental claims.

Originality/value – This study contributes to literature by pointing to the emergence of cultural conjunction which is fast weakening the social chasm which was traditionally associated with the consumption of either natural or synthetic hair care products.

Keywords Consumer brand identification, Self-congruity, Brand distinctiveness, Brand loyalty, Young female black consumers, Hair care brands, South Africa

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Historically, the social construction of “beautiful” hair has been a contested terrain between Afrocentric and Eurocentric ideals (Henning *et al.*, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2023; Lisse and Milan, 2024). Central to this contestation is the apparent failure to harmonise the Eurocentric



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and Afrocentric conceptualisations of beauty (Moodley and Mthembu, 2020; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023). The Eurocentric perspective encompasses hair care practices such as hair straightening and relaxing with the aid of chemicals (Zollo *et al.*, 2021; Kumar *et al.*, 2021; Siebler, 2023). The Afrocentric perspective is aptly captured by the “go natural” trend (Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023; Siebler, 2023). The “go natural” is a colloquial phrase commonly used by African women to refer to hair that is not treated by chemical processors (Addie *et al.*, 2020). Self-identity, self-expressive value and the desire for distinctiveness are identified as some of the motivating factors for “going natural” (Shimul *et al.*, 2022; Zollo *et al.*, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2023). In 2016, South African students made headlines for protesting against the Eurocentric practice of hair straightening (Vilakazi, 2016). Since then, there has been a noticeable shift from the use of synthetic to natural hair care products (Shimul *et al.*, 2022; Mordor Intelligence, 2023).

Beyond utilitarian and self-expressive benefits, the appeal of natural hair care products among South African consumers is also deeply rooted in cultural identity (Oyedemi, 2016; Moodley and Mthembu, 2020). Advocates of the natural hair movement view these products as a means of affirming Afrocentric beauty ideals (Moodley and Mthembu, 2020; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023). In contrast, synthetic hair care products continue to be valued for their aesthetic appeal (Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023; Donahoo, 2023). However, the market appeal of natural alternatives is often hindered by greenwashing concerns and perceptions of unaffordability (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). Against this backdrop, the present study uses the concept of consumer brand identification (CBI) to explore the extent to which young Black female consumers in South Africa identify with SheaMoisture, a natural hair care brand and Pantene Pro-V, a synthetic alternative.

CBI refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as resonating with their self-identity (Anaza *et al.*, 2021). Research has shown that strong brand identification contributes to customer satisfaction, advocacy and loyalty (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Rather *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, consumer brand disidentification (CBD) reflects a psychological disconnect, often manifesting in brand avoidance, negative word of mouth and switching behaviour (Anaza *et al.*, 2021). Synthetic brands such as Pantene Pro-V are frequently associated with Eurocentric beauty standards, standing in contrast to Afrocentric ideals (Addie *et al.*, 2020; Essien and Wood, 2021). Interestingly, prior studies (e.g. Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Wolter *et al.*, 2016) have observed that consumers can simultaneously experience both CBI and CBD when certain brand attributes align with their identity, while others do not. This study investigates this duality by comparing consumer responses to SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V two leading brands with contrasting value propositions in the South African context.

Despite the strategic role of CBI and CBD in nurturing customer brand relationships (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Anaza *et al.*, 2021; Rather *et al.* (2022)), there is a dearth of research on their influence in fostering the consumption of natural hair care brands in South Africa. Drawing from the self-congruent and social identity theories, we argue that understanding the role of CBI and CBD is vital to promoting mainstream use of natural hair care brands. Prior research (e.g. Ndichu and Upadhyaya, 2019; Shimul *et al.*, 2022; Lupindo *et al.*, 2024) did not adequately address the underlying causes of the attitude-behaviour gap. This gap is represented by consumers who report a willingness to switch to natural hair care products but still use synthetic alternatives (Shimul *et al.*, 2022). By examining the influence of CBI and CBD on marketing outcomes such as brand loyalty and word of mouth, this study has the potential to provide valuable insights that may be used to position natural hair care brands competitively in the marketplace.

Although the “going natural” trend is gaining momentum in South Africa, this trend cannot be generalised to all young black female consumers. Lack of a collective South African cultural identity (Moodley and Mthembu, 2020), the desire for distinctiveness (Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023) and the conjunction of global consumption culture (Norwood, 2018; Essien and Wood, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2023) are identified as factors that have the potential to drive black South African female consumers to opt for synthetic hair care brands. Thus, the overarching research question central to this study was:

- Q1. Does young black female consumers in South Africa (dis)identify with natural or synthetic hair care brands?

This research question was addressed in the context of two recognised hair care brands in South Africa, SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V. Specifically, this study aims to address the following sub-questions:

- Q2. What antecedents of CBI influence young female black South African consumers' relationship with natural and synthetic hair care brands?
- Q3. Does CBI influence young female black South African consumers' loyalty towards natural or synthetic hair care brands, including their propensity to propagate positive word of mouth?

The consumption of natural hair care brands offers the opportunity to reduce the health and environmental risks associated with the use of synthetic hair care brands (Henning *et al.*, 2022; Shimul *et al.*, 2022). This study is therefore motivated by the need to understand the underlying factors that drive the consumption of natural hair care brands to promote brand loyalty. Historically, the hair care discourse has been dominated by politics of beauty and cultural identity contestations (Addie *et al.*, 2020; Henning *et al.*, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2023). However, with the growth of a global consumption culture supported by consumer traits such as cosmopolitanism and global mindedness, this study seeks to understand the extent to which politics of beauty influence the consumption of hair care products. By so doing, this study aims to provide valuable insights to brand managers to craft effective marketing strategies. Moreover, by testing two competing models (SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V), this study provides a nuanced perspective on understanding the consumption behaviour of natural and synthetic hair care brands.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows: Firstly, CBI literature is reviewed, leading to the development of hypotheses. This is followed by the description of the research methodology, data analyses and presentation of results. The last sections focus on a discussion of the results, implications, limitations and conclusion.

Literature review

Consumer brand identification and underpinning theories

There is a growing perception among consumers that brands are failing short in fulfilling their promises (Mckinsey and Company, 2021; Delgado-Ballester and Fernandez-Sabiote, 2024). This perception accentuates the importance of creating and sustaining consumer-brand relationships that foster brand loyalty (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020). This can be achieved by nurturing perceptions of CBI and minimising the development of brand disidentification sentiments (Wolter *et al.*, 2016; Ruppel and Einwiller, 2021). CBI captures the emotional bond between a consumer and a brand that emanates from consumption experiences (Wolter *et al.*, 2016; Rather *et al.*, 2022). Conversely, CBD refers to a deliberate act by consumers of rejecting a brand that is not congruent with their self-identity

(Anaza *et al.*, 2021). Prior research (e.g. Becker and Tausch, 2014; Wolter *et al.*, 2016) found that CBI and CBD are not mutually exclusive. A consumer may identify with a specific brand attribute while at the same time disidentify with the overall brand personality (Wolter *et al.*, 2016). It is for this reason Kumar and Kaushik (2020) underscore the importance of delineating antecedents that positively influence CBI to create an enduring bond with customers.

The idea that consumers seek to establish relationships with brands gains theoretical support from the self-congruent theory (Sirgy, 1982) and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). The self-congruent theory posits that individuals are favourably inclined to buy brands that are aligned to their value system (Sirgy, 1982). In South Africa, hair care practices are construed as a form of identity that conveys an individual's class and race (Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023). Accordingly, brand value congruity is identified as a precursor of CBI, while brand value incongruity is expected to have a positive impact on CBD. The self-congruent theory further posits that the desire to maximise self-interests also influences behavioural performance (Sirgy, 1982). Thus, self-expressive value and brand distinctiveness are postulated to have a positive impact on CBI.

The social identity theory (SIT) posits that individuals have an inherent desire to belong to a group that aligns with their self-identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The consumption of natural hair care products is mainly promoted under the auspices of the natural hair movement and the black is beautiful campaign (Essien and Wood, 2021; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023). Thus, in-group identity is also expected to influence perceptions of CBI and CBD. Consistent with prior research (e.g. Wolter *et al.*, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2017; Anaza *et al.*, 2021), brand loyalty and positive word of mouth are identified as outcomes of CBI and CBD.

Hypotheses development

Brand self-congruity and consumer brand identification

In the context of this study, self-congruity refers to the degree to which a hair care brand matches with the consumers' self-identity and consumption values. The proposition that consumers identify with brands that align with their self-concept gains theoretical support from the self-congruent theory (Sirgy, 1982). When a brand's value proposition is consistent with the consumer's self-identity, CBI is strengthened as consumers perceive a sense of oneness with the brand (Wolter *et al.*, 2016). Brand-self congruity is identified as a precursor of CBI because consumers are favourably inclined to buy brands that are consistent with their self-concept (Shamah *et al.*, 2018; Anaza *et al.*, 2021). Conversely, when consumers perceive that a brand embodies incongruent values and disrupts their perception of self-identity, feelings of CBD sets in, leading to brand rejection (Anaza *et al.*, 2021; Delgado-Ballester and Fernandez-Sabiote, 2024).

Previous research (e.g. Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Matzler *et al.*, 2016; Anaza *et al.*, 2021) found that brand-self congruity leads to CBI while brand-self (in) congruity triggers perceptions of CBD. The consumption of natural hair care products signifies a connection with the Afrocentric identity for black female consumers (Norwood, 2018; Essien and Wood, 2021). Proponents of the natural hair movement perceive that synthetic hair care products fall short in reinforcing the African perception of beauty (Addie *et al.*, 2020; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023). Thus, it is postulated that:

- H1. Brand self-congruity influences young black female consumers' identification with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V.*

Self-expressive value and consumer brand identification

Self-expressive value measures the extent to which a brand allows an individual to convey a sense of self-worthiness to others (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012; Wallace *et al.*, 2021). Self-expressive value is also construed as a symbol of personal achievement, status and individuality (Moliner *et al.*, 2018). In the context of hair care products, consumers were found to value reputable brands associated with status, such as Pantene, as a way of enhancing public self-worth (Addie *et al.*, 2020). The use of natural hair care also acts as a signal of environmental consciousness as well as green status because it shows one's willingness to pay the premium price associated with such products (Shimul *et al.*, 2022; Lupindo *et al.*, 2024). Prior research (Leckie *et al.*, 2016; Anaza *et al.*, 2021; Wallace *et al.*, 2021) revealed that consumers identify with brands that offer high expressive value and disidentify with brands that score low on self-expressive value (Puzakova and Aggarwal, 2018; Essien and Wood, 2021). There is a possibility that self-expressive value is another factor that motivates consumers to identify or disidentify with natural or synthetic hair care brands. Thus, we hypothesise that:

- H2. Self-expressive value influences young black female consumers' identification with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V.

Brand distinctiveness consumer brand identification

The SIT posits that in addition to the desire for belonging, individuals also have an inherent desire for uniqueness (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The SIT further posits that individuals strive to reconcile the competing interests of belonging and self-distinctiveness (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Drawing from the SIT, brand distinctiveness is used in this study to measure the extent to which consumers perceive that natural or synthetic hair care brands are unique. Brand (in) distinctiveness was found to play a critical role in influencing CBI or CBD (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012; Wolter *et al.*, 2016). In the context of hair care brands, natural hair care products are perceived to epitomise a distinct sense of African beauty (Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023), while synthetic alternatives are associated with higher aesthetic value and a professional outlook (Essien and Wood, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2023). For black African women, Smith *et al.* (2023) note that the preference for natural hair care products is a way of re-asserting the Afrocentric perception of beauty. Drawing from the foregoing, we posit that:

- H3. Brand distinctiveness influences young black female consumers' identification with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V.

In-group identity and consumer brand identification

The SIT posits that individuals strive to belong to a group of like-minded individuals (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In consumer behaviour, in-group identity refers to the emotional bond shared by consumers based on their brand consumption experiences (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020; Rather *et al.*, 2022). The concept of in-group identity is based on the view that consumers buy brands as a way of complying with social norms and developing social relations (Sangroya and Nayak, 2017; Kumar and Kaushik, 2020). Related to this study, the role of social groups and brand communities in promoting consumption sub-cultures is well established in literature (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020), and this extends to sharing information on hair care products (Addie *et al.*, 2020).

The proliferation of brand communities is an indication that consumers are coalescing into sub-groups with a shared commitment to a brand (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020). For

example, the natural hair movement and black is beautiful campaign are driven by female black consumers who value the identity associated with the consumption of natural hair care products (Canella, 2020; Henning *et al.*, 2022). When consumers perceive that the group is no longer consistent with their values, beliefs and morals, they also disassociate or disidentify with the group (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Kumar and Kaushik, 2020). Both SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V use celebrities as endorsers on their online platforms (Addie *et al.*, 2020). Based on the foregoing insights, we argue that consumers are favourably inclined to identify with brands that help them to develop an in-group identity. Thus, we hypothesise that:

- H4.* In-group identity influences young black female consumers' identification with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V.

Outcomes of consumer brand identification

When consumers identify with a brand, it translates into improved brand performance (Reitsamer *et al.*, 2024). Such improved brand performance is driven by brand loyalty and positive word of mouth (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's behavioural and attitudinal disposition to consistently buy a brand despite the availability of alternatives (Reitsamer *et al.*, 2024). Brand commitment, repeat purchase behaviour and brand attachment are indicators of brand loyalty (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). CBI is also associated with brand advocacy, which is a form of positive word of mouth (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). Prior research (Popp and Woratschek, 2017; Coelho *et al.*, 2018; Reitsamer *et al.*, 2024) report a positive impact of CBI on brand loyalty and positive word of mouth.

Conversely, when consumers disidentify with a brand, it leads to brand avoidance and negative word of mouth (Kim *et al.*, 2016; Anaza *et al.*, 2021; Ruppel and Einwiller, 2021). Brand avoidance is known to be driven by personal and social concerns. When consumers perceive a gap between the expected and actual brand performance, brand avoidance may result as a response (Kim *et al.*, 2016). Despite this, there are mixed consumer perceptions related to the consumption of hair care products. Natural hair care products are perceived to be of lower quality as compared to the synthetic alternatives (Ghazali *et al.*, 2017; Zollo *et al.*, 2021; Siebler, 2023), and this has the potential to translate into brand avoidance. Similarly, synthetic hair care products are regarded as unhealthy and harmful to the environment (Ghazali *et al.*, 2017; Kumar *et al.*, 2021). Drawing from the foregoing insights, it is therefore hypothesised that:

- H5.* Young black female consumers who identify with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V exhibit a higher level of brand loyalty.
- H6.* Young black female consumers who identify with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V are more likely to disseminate positive word of mouth.

Consistent with the posited hypotheses, it is proposed that brand-self congruity, self-expressive value, brand distinctiveness and in-group social identity are antecedents of CBI. Brand loyalty and positive word of mouth were identified as outcomes of CBI. Figure 1 shows the proposed conceptual model.

Materials and methods

A cross-sectional quantitative approach was used to test the hypothesised relationships between study constructs in the conceptual model.

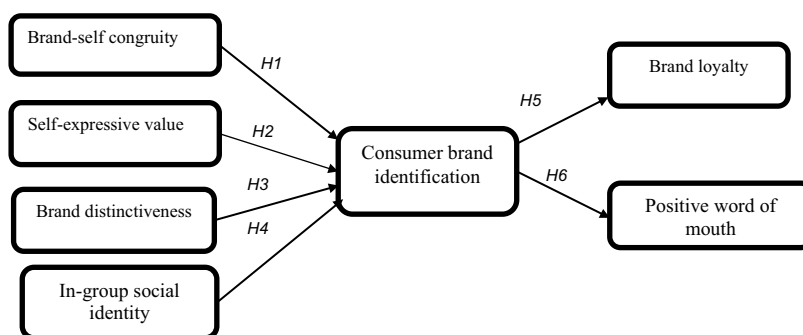


Figure 1. Conceptual model (Studies 1 and 2)
Source: Authors' own work

Research context

South Africa is a multicultural emerging economy in Southern Africa, characterised by the use of several hair care practices (Shimul *et al.*, 2022). Prior research (e.g. Glapka and Majali, 2017; Henning *et al.*, 2022; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023) report that the Eurocentric perception of beauty is still accorded more prominence as compared to the Afrocentric alternatives. Despite this, there are concerted efforts to promote the use of natural hair care products through celebrity endorsements (Glapka and Majali, 2017; Mordor Intelligence, 2023). To test the proposed conceptual model, SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V, the major competing brands in the hair conditioning category, were selected. Hair care brands were selected because they play a key role in the construction of female consumers' personal brand identities (Addie *et al.*, 2020; Shimul *et al.*, 2022).

SheaMoisture which is one of Unilever's flagship brands with an African origin, is positioned as a natural hair care brand (Addie *et al.*, 2020). According to its value proposition SheaMoisture strives to empower and invest in the improvement of black communities (Unilever, 2024). The natural hair movement is credited for popularising SheaMoisture among black women (Addie *et al.*, 2020). Pantene Pro-V is a synthetic hair care brand owned by Procter and Gamble, a global consumer goods company. In contrast to SheaMoisture's value proposition, which emphasises the use of natural ingredients, Pantene Pro-V follows a science-based approach (Procter and Gamble, 2024). Due to its scientific grounding, Pantene Pro-V is commonly associated with Eurocentric ideals of beauty (Addie *et al.*, 2020). Due to their status as leading global brands in the hair conditioning category, an examination of the extent to which consumers' (dis)identify with SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V is expected to provide valuable insights.

Measurement scales

To ensure reliability and validity, all constructs were operationalised using validated scales that were adapted from previous studies. A five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used to measure all scale items. CBI were measured using a five-item scale, which was adapted from Stokburger-Sauer *et al.* (2008). We adapted a four-item scale developed by Rather *et al.* (2022) to measure brand-self congruity. Brand distinctiveness was measured with the aid of a three-item scale, which was adapted from So *et al.* (2017). A six-item scale adapted from Anaza *et al.* (2021) was used to measure positive word of mouth. Self-expressive value was operationalised using a four-item scale which was developed by

Wallace *et al.* (2021). In-group identity was measured using a three-item scale that was adapted from Wallace *et al.* (2021). Finally, we used a three-item scale adopted from Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) to measure brand loyalty.

Sample and data collection

The sample consisted of young black females who were recruited from two metropolitan public universities in South Africa. Young black female consumers were selected due to their heightened sense of beauty and their constant social interaction with hair care products (Shimul *et al.*, 2022; Macheka *et al.*, 2024). Young black female consumers were defined as university-aged students between 20 and 35 years. Universities were selected as the setting of the study because institutions of higher learning are regarded as miniature communities where emerging consumption trends are idealised. Purposive sampling was used with the aid of a screening question to select respondents who had the experience of using either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V. Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Business Sciences Ethics Committee (CBUSE1454). Prior to the main survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested with 60 respondents who shared similar characteristics with the target population and minor corrections were effected.

An online cross-sectional survey was used to collect data. Respondents were recruited with the assistance of programme administrators who shared the URL for the online survey. A two-stage procedure was followed to collect data. Data for Study 1 (SheaMoisture) was collected from April to June 2023. After accounting for incomplete questionnaires, a total of 280 questionnaires were valid for analysis. After a 2-month interval, data for Study 2 (Pantene Pro-V) were collected from the same target population from August to October 2023. There were no major changes in the form of the marketing environment, which could have caused a significant variation in the data between the two studies. After screening invalid and incomplete responses, 310 questionnaires were usable.

Data analyses

SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 26 were used to analyse data. SPSS was used to compute descriptive statistics, assess data normality and common method bias. AMOS was used to validate the measurement and structural models as well as to test posited hypotheses.

Results

Sample profile

A total of 280 and 310 valid responses were received for Studies 1 and 2 respectively. The sample profile for both studies is presented in Table 1.

Preliminary data analyses

Prior to the validation of the measurement and structural models, data for the two samples were checked for normality and common method bias. Data normality was assessed by computing the Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K–S) and Shapiro–Wilk (S–W) statistical tests. The two data sets returned statistically insignificant K–S and S–W values ($p > 0.05$), which signifies that the data was normally distributed (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Data normality was also established by inspecting the normal probability plots. The observed values for all the scores were tangential to the normal distribution line, thereby confirming the normality of data.

This study relied on self-reported data which made it susceptible to common method bias (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). As recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2012), both *ex ante* and *ex-post*

Table 1. Sample profile

Demographic variable		Study 1 SheaMoisture count (%)	Study 2 Pantene Pro-V count (%)
Age	20-25 years	<i>n</i> = 65 (23%)	<i>n</i> = 58 (19%)
	26-30 years	<i>n</i> = 172 (62%)	<i>n</i> = 185 (60%)
	31-35 years	<i>n</i> = 43 (15%)	<i>n</i> = 67 (21%)
Education program	Degree	<i>n</i> = 222 (79%)	<i>n</i> = 228 (74%)
	Masters	<i>n</i> = 52 (19%)	<i>n</i> = 71 (23%)
	Doctoral	<i>n</i> = 6 (2%)	<i>n</i> = 11 (3%)
Racial group	Blacks	<i>n</i> = 280 (100%)	<i>n</i> = 310 (100%)
Monthly hair care expenditure (ZAR)	< 1,000	<i>n</i> = 53 (19%)	<i>n</i> = 539 (19%)
	1,001–2,000	<i>n</i> = 102 (36%)	<i>n</i> = 111 (36%)
	2,001–3,000	<i>n</i> = 97 (35%)	<i>n</i> = 104 (34%)
	> 3,001	<i>n</i> = 28 (10%)	<i>n</i> = 36 (11%)

Source(s): Authors' own work

measures were used. The *ex-ante* measures included the separation of independent and dependent variables scale items in the questionnaire and pre-testing of the questionnaire. The *ex-post* assessment was done by computing Harman's single factor test. The variances explained by the first factor following an un-rotated exploratory factor analysis were 35.2% (Study1) and 34.8% (Study 2). The variance explained by a single factor was below the recommended upper limit of 50% which shows that common method bias was not an issue in this study (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012).

Measurement models

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the measurement models using the maximum likelihood estimation method. The measurement model was specified as comprising seven latent variables and 28 indicator variables. The initial measurement model for Study 1 returned poor model fit. The model was modified by dropping three items; two items from positive word of mouth (PWM3, PWM5) and one from self-expressive value (SEV2) due to low factor loadings (< 0.5). Moreover, following the inspection of covariances of error terms, as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2019), additional covariances were added between errors terms of BD3 and BD5 as well as IGI2 and IG4 to improve model fit. The measurement model for Study 2 was also modified by dropping three items; two items from positive word of mouth (PWM3, PWM6) and one from self-expressive value (SEV3) due to low factor loadings (< 0.5). The modified measurement models for Studies 1 and 2 fitted well with the data as shown in Table 2.

Following the confirmation of the fitness of the measurement models, the reliability and validity of the measurement scale items were assessed. The reliability of measurement scales was confirmed as the Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values for all constructs surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Convergent validity was evident as factor loadings for all scale items exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.5 (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012). Convergent validity was further confirmed with average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Tables 3 and 4 provide reliability and convergent validity indicators for Studies 1 and 2, respectively.

Discriminant validity was established by comparing the square root of the AVE and the correlation coefficients. As shown in Table 5, discriminant validity was attained as the square

Table 2. Measurement model fit statistics

Goodness-of-fit statistics	Acceptable threshold	Initial model	Re-specified model
<i>Study 1: SheaMoisture</i>			
CMIN/df	≤ 3	3.080	2.667
GFI	≥ 0.800	0.780	0.824
TLI	≥ 0.900	0.901	0.936
CFI	≥ 0.900	0.902	0.927
IFI	≥ 0.900	0.901	0.923
NFI	≥ 0.900	0.793	0.916
RMSEA	≤ 0.080	0.084	0.068
<i>Study 2: Pantene Pro-V</i>			
CMIN/df	≤ 3	3.030	2.582
GFI	≥ 0.800	0.792	0.854
TLI	≥ 0.900	0.903	0.966
CFI	≥ 0.900	0.912	0.963
IFI	≥ 0.900	0.911	0.943
NFI	≥ 0.900	0.829	0.936
RMSEA	≤ 0.080	0.086	0.058

Source(s): Authors’ own work

root of the AVE (in diagonal) was greater than the correlation coefficients (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 5 provides discriminant validity indicators for Studies 1 and 2.

Structural model and path analyses

Prior to hypotheses testing, the fitness of the structural models was assessed. The fitness of the structural model for Study 1 was confirmed as follows: $X^2/df = 2.82$, CFI = 0.943, GFI = 0.868, TLI = 0.941, RMSEA = 0.068 (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012). The structural model for Study 2 also fitted well with the data: $X^2/df = 2.89$, CFI = 0.952, GFI = 0.864, TLI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.063. After the assessment of the structural models, posited hypotheses were tested. Table 6 shows the hypotheses testing results for Studies 1 and 2.

Discussion of results

This study examined whether young black female consumers in South Africa (dis)identify with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V. In support of *H1*, young black female consumers were found to perceive a higher level of brand self-congruity and identification with SheaMoisture than Pantene Pro-V. This result, which aligns with previous research (e.g. Ndichu and Upadhyaya, 2019; Addie et al., 2020; Jacobs and Kelemi, 2020), suggests that young black female South African consumers perceive that the consumption of natural hair care brands such as SheMoisture resonates with their self-identity. By identifying with natural hair care brands, Jacobs and Kelemi (2020) argues that black female consumers are challenging the entrenched Eurocentric perception of beauty. Similarly, Ndichu and Upadhyaya (2019) characterises the transition to natural hair care practices as a growing form of social change. This result is encouraging for the “go natural” movement as it suggests a step towards the subversion of Eurocentrism perception of beauty.

The results also showed that young black female consumers perceive that Pantene Pro-V offers more self-expressive value than SheaMoisture. This result, which refutes *H2*, suggests that young black female consumers feel that SheaMoisture does not adequately enhance their social self-expression. This finding is consistent with findings from

Table 3. Reliability and convergent validity indicators (Study 1)

Constructs	Measurement scale items	Factor loadings	CA	CR	AVE
CBI	SheaMoisture gives me a l a strong sense of belonging.	0.813	0.918	0.920	0.700
	SheaMoisture embodies what I believe in.	0.868			
	SheaMoisture is like a part of me	0.866			
	SheaMoisture has a great deal of meaning for me.	0.850			
	I identify strongly with SheaMoisture.	0.789			
BSC	SheaMoisture reflects who I am.	0.740	0.919	0.920	0.74
	SheaMoisture's values fits well with what I value in life.	0.833			
	My personal values match with values of this SheaMoisture.	0.942			
	People similar to me prefer SheaMoisture.	0.915			
BD	SheaMoisture is different from other hair care brands.	0.808	0.847	0.850	0.650
	SheaMoisture is different from other competing brands.	0.800			
	SheaMoisture stands out from other competing brands.	0.803			
BL	I am more likely to continue buying SheaMoisture in future.	0.749	0.856	0.860	0.670
	I always actively search for SheaMoisture to buy it.	0.817			
	I intend to remain loyal to SheaMoisture.	0.878			
PWM	I am more likely to spread positive word of mouth about SheaMoisture.	0.772	0.889	0.890	0.680
	I am less likely to bad-mouth SheaMoisture to my friends.	0.808			
	I will not recommend SheaMoisture to my friends.	0.870			
	I will always share positive stories about SheaMoisture.	0.844			
SEV	SheaMoisture reflects my personality.	0.897	0.898	0.900	0.750
	SheaMoisture is an extension of my inner self.	0.884			
	SheaMoisture mirrors the real me.	0.848			
IGI	SheaMoisture to the social 'role' I play in society.	0.840	0.864	0.880	0.710
	SheaMoisture has a positive impact on what others think of me.	0.842			
	SheaMoisture improves the way society views me.	0.843			

Source(s): Authors' own work

previous research (e.g. [Kim and Seock, 2009](#); [Ndichu and Upadhyaya, 2019](#); [Shimul et al., 2022](#)) where natural personal care products were reported to be of lower quality than conventional alternatives. As hair care products are characterised as a conspicuous form of self-expression, this study underscores the need to improve on the self-expressive benefits of natural hair care brands.

SheaMoisture was also rated low on brand distinctiveness as compared to Pantene Pro-V. Thus, *H3* was not supported. This result concurs with previous research (e.g. [Norwood, 2018](#); [Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023](#)) which found that the Eurocentric perception of beauty represented by chemical enabled brands such as Pantene Pro-V is still rated higher on aesthetic value. This finding, according to [Le Roux and Oyedemi \(2023\)](#) points to the existence of multiple consumer identities related to the consumption of hair care products. Although young black female consumers may proudly identify with natural hair campaigns, [Le Roux and Oyedemi \(2023\)](#) argue that the pervading force of globalisation and the personality trait of global mindedness may entice young consumers to show allegiance to synthetic hair care brands such as Pantene Pro-V.

Contrary to our prediction, in-group identity was found to have an insignificant impact on young black female consumers' identification with either SheaMoisture or Pantene Pro-V. This result, which refutes *H4*, is not consistent with previous research (e.g. [Liobikienė and Bernatoniė, 2017](#); [Song et al., 2019](#); [Essien and Wood, 2021](#); [Grappe et al., 2021](#)). This

Table 4. Reliability and convergent validity indicators (Study 2)

Constructs	Measurement scale items	Factor loadings	CA	CR	AVE
CBI	Pantene Pro-V gives me a l a strong sense of belonging.	0.908	0.956	0.960	0.82
	Pantene Pro-V embodies what I believe in.	0.911			
	Pantene Pro-V is like a part of me	0.913			
	Pantene Pro-V has a great deal of meaning for me.	0.912			
	I identify strongly with Pantene Pro-V.	0.905			
BSC	Pantene Pro-V reflects who I am.	0.847	0.900	0.910	0.72
	Pantene Pro-V’s values fits well with what I value in life.	0.850			
	My personal values match with values of this Pantene Pro-V.	0.848			
	People similar to me prefer Pantene Pro-V.	0.846			
BD	Pantene Pro-V is different from other hair care brands.	0.833	0.903	0.870	0.692
	Pantene Pro-V is different from other competing brands.	0.836			
	Pantene Pro-V stands out from other competing brands.	0.828			
BL	I am more likely to continue buying Pantene Pro-V in future.	0.903	0.926	0.930	0.810
	I always actively search for Pantene Pro-V to buy it.	0.905			
	I intend to remain loyal to Pantene Pro-V.	0.900			
PWM	I am more likely to spread positive word of mouth about Pantene Pro-V.	0.802	0.878	0.880	0.640
	I am less likely to bad-mouth Pantene Pro-V to my friends.	0.806			
	I will not recommend Pantene Pro-V to my friends.	0.798			
	I will always share positive stories about Pantene Pro-V.	0.803			
SEV	Pantene Pro-V reflects my personality.	0.912	0.936	0.940	0.830
	Pantene Pro-V is an extension of my inner self.	0.910			
	Pantene Pro-V mirrors the real me.	0.908			
IGI	Pantene Pro-V to the social ‘role’ I play in society.	0.836	0.878	0.880	0.71
	Pantene Pro-V has a positive impact on what others think of me.	0.840			
	Pantene Pro-V improves the way society views me.	0.843			

Source(s): Authors’ own work

result is also at odds with the SIT that posits that individuals seek to identify with a group cultural identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This finding suggests that group norms shared during campaigns such as the “go natural” are yet to be internalised as personal norms that shape consumer identification with hair care brands. The most plausible explanation to this result is that personal factors such as the desire for distinctiveness significantly influence young black female consumers’ choice behaviour of hair care products than group social influence.

Intriguingly, young black female consumers were found to be loyal to both SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V, thereby lending partial support to H5. An inspection of the standardised estimates (Table 6) however indicates that consumers are more loyal to Pantene Pro-V than SheaMoisture. This result is consistent with previous research (Ghazali *et al.*, 2017; Zollo *et al.*, 2021) which found that synthetic hair care products are perceived to offer more aesthetic value than natural alternatives. The value proposition of natural hair care brands is centred on safety and environmental sustainability (Kim and Seock, 2009; Ghazali *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 2023). However, as synthetic hair care brands such as Pantene Pro-V are now incorporating natural ingredients (Addie *et al.*, 2020), this result may suggest that the safety gap between synthetic and natural hair care brands is gradually narrowing down.

Finally, in support of H6, young black female consumers were found to be more inclined to disseminate positive word of mouth for SheaMoisture than Pantene Pro-V. This result is

Table 5. Correlation matrix and discriminant validity – Studies 1 and 2

Study 1	CBI	SEV	BD	IGI	BL	PWM	BSC
CBI	0.836	–	–	–	–	–	–
SEV	0.625**	0.860	–	–	–	–	–
BD	0.367**	0.338**	0.806	–	–	–	–
IGI	0.302**	0.302**	0.483**	0.819	–	–	–
BL	0.277**	0.337**	0.346**	0.313**	0.824	–	–
PWM	0.300**	0.317**	0.365**	0.526**	0.448**	0.867	–
BSC	0.396**	0.488**	0.297**	0.267**	0.435**	0.405**	0.843
<i>Study 2</i>							
CBI	0.906	–	–	–	–	–	–
SEV	0.471**	0.849	–	–	–	–	–
BD	0.631**	0.488**	0.832	–	–	–	–
IGI	0.074	0.170*	0.701**	0.900	–	–	–
BL	0.474**	0.473**	0.208**	0.320**	0.800	–	–
PWM	–0.014	0.008	0.234**	0.433**	0.328**	0.911	–
BSC	–0.005	0.127*	0.058	0.244**	0.234**	0.303**	0.843

Note(s) : **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). CBI = consumer brand identification; BSC= brand-self congruity; SEV = self-expressive value; BD = brand distinctiveness; IGI = in-group social identity; BL = Brand loyalty; PWM = positive word of mouth

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 6. Hypotheses testing results- Studies 1 and 2

Study 1	Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	<i>p</i>	Decision
H1	BSC -> CBI	0.262	0.045	5.768	***	Supported
H2	SEV -> CBI	0.205	0.047	4.380	***	Supported
H3	BD -> CBI	0.044	0.055	0.808	0.419	Not supported
H4	IGI -> CBI	0.072	0.039	1.862	0.063	Not supported
H5	CBI -> BL	0.220	0.044	5.034	***	Supported
H6	CBI -> PWM	0.247	0.043	5.702	***	Supported
<i>Study 2</i>						
H1	BSC -> CBI	–0.023	0.024	–0.961	0.337	Not supported
H2	SEV -> CBI	0.521	0.044	11.766	***	Supported
H3	BD -> CBI	0.518	0.040	12.962	***	Supported
H4	IGI -> CBI	–0.071	0.034	–2.127	0.033	Not supported
H5	CBI -> BL	0.352	0.040	8.852	***	Supported
H6	CBI -> PWM	–0.020	0.088	–0.224	0.823	Not supported

Note(s): NCBI = consumer brand identification; BSC = brand-self congruity; SEV = self-expressive value; BD = brand distinctiveness; IGI = in-group social identity; BL = Brand loyalty; PWM = positive word of mouth

Source(s): Authors' own work

consistent with prior research (Addie *et al.*, 2020; Jacobs and Kelemi, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2023). The “go natural” and “BlackIsBeautiful” campaigns have played a critical role in disseminating positive word of mouth on the benefits of natural hair care products. At the same time, Pantene Pro-V is still perceived as an exclusive elite brand and there is a possibility that word of mouth is not regarded as an effective promotional strategy. Overall,

this result, challenges marketers of natural hair care brands such as SheaMoisture to leverage on the power of positive word of mouth to foster brand loyalty.

Theoretical contributions

This study offers three major contributions to existing literature. Firstly, this study extends the current understanding of self-congruent and social identity theories by confirming the prevalence of multiple consumer identities in the consumption of hair care brands. Although the prevalence of multiple identities was confirmed in other contexts such as fashion consumption (Hammad *et al.*, 2019) and sustainable consumption (Randers and Thøgersen, 2023), its existence in the hair care industry was not yet fully understood. As young black female consumers showed loyalty to both SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V, this study accentuates the importance of effective identity priming when marketing hair care brands. This study also contributes to literature by pointing to the emergence of cultural conjunction which is fast weakening the social chasm which was traditionally associated with the consumption of either natural or synthetic hair care products.

Secondly, this study contributes to literature by revealing the complexities associated with the consumption of hair care products. Although campaigns such as the “go natural” and “BlackIsBeautiful” are credited for promoting the use of natural hair care products (Addie *et al.*, 2020; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023), this study revealed that group norms related to the consumption of natural hair care products are yet to be assimilated. In fact, individual factors such as self-expressive value and need for distinctiveness were found to play a central role in influencing behaviour. Thus, this study contributes to literature by revealing that individual factors as opposed to group factors play a significant role in the consumption of hair care products.

Finally, although the consumption of hair care products is associated with personal identity construction (Norwood, 2018; Le Roux and Oyedemi, 2023), until now, little was known about the extent to which young black female consumers identify with either natural or synthetic hair care products from a brand management perspective. Prior studies (e.g. Kim and Seock, 2009; Ghazali *et al.*, 2017; Kumar *et al.*, 2021; Zollo *et al.*, 2021) mainly researched on the rational and normative factors that influence purchase behaviour. As far as we can establish, this is the first study in the context of South Africa, an emerging market, to apply the self-congruent and social identity theories to understand the extent to which consumers (dis)identify with hair care brands. This study enriches literature by identifying brand self-congruity as the major factor that influence young black female consumers to identify with natural hair care brands, while self-expressive value and brand distinctiveness emerged as the key factors that motivate consumers to identify with synthetic hair care brands.

Managerial implications

The results of this study offer three valuable insights to brand managers of natural and synthetic hair care products in emerging markets such as South Africa. Firstly, SheaMoisture scored low on self-expressive value and brand distinctiveness as compared to Pantene Pro-V. This finding challenges brand managers to reinforce the differential attributes of natural hair care brands in marketing communications. This will go a long way in addressing the homogeneity tag attached to natural hair care products (Ghazali *et al.*, 2017; Siebler, 2023). There is also a need to allay greenwashing perceptions through the use of clinically proven safety claims. This, according to Shim *et al.* (2024), may be achieved through the use of independent third-party eco-labels.

Secondly, in-group identity emerged as the least influential factor that influences young black female consumers' identification with SheaMoisture. This is despite the fact that the drive to transition to natural hair care products is socially constructed through group based campaigns such as the "go natural". Drawing from insights from this study, brand managers of natural hair care products may leverage on group norms imparted during the pro-natural hair campaigns to develop brand stories that resonate with the target market. Prior research (e.g. [Parahia et al., 2011](#); [Wallace et al., 2021](#); [Siebler, 2023](#)) indicates that the use of context-specific narratives with a focus on brand origin, brand authenticity and cultural identity has the potential to build a bond with consumers.

Finally, Pantene Pro-V scored low on self-congruity. This result underscores the need for marketers of Pantene Pro-V to align the brand's image with that of the target market. Such a realignment, according to [Addie et al. \(2020\)](#), may be primed on addressing the prevalent view that Pantene Pro-V furthers a Eurocentric perception of beauty that devalues an Afrocentric perspective. The adoption of the think-global-but-act- local strategy is recommended as a potential strategy for Pantene Pro-V to build a strong bond with young female black consumers. This strategy may be implemented by using local black celebrities to endorse the brand as well as acknowledging the role of South Africa's cultural heritage when developing marketing strategies.

Limitations and further research

This study has three major limitations that are worth noting. Firstly, this study relied on self-reported data collected from two public universities in South Africa. Although universities are regarded as miniatures of society, the results of this study may not be generalised. Future studies may address this limitation by collecting data from a broader sample. Secondly, this study notes the complexities associated with the consumption of hair care products. Future studies may use more objective methods of data collection such as field experiments to assess the cause and effect relationships between study variables. Finally, this study should be considered as a pioneering effort to examine the extent to which young black female consumers in South Africa (dis)identify with natural or synthetic hair care brands. Thus, the model that was proposed in this study should not be considered as conclusive. Future studies may also consider the potential influence of other variables such as product involvement and consumer ethnocentrism.

Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which young black female consumers in South Africa (dis)identify with natural or synthetic hair care brands. Brand-self congruity and self-expressive value were found to have a positive impact on young black female consumers' identification with SheaMoisture, a natural hair care brand. Conversely, brand distinctiveness and self-expressive value emerged as positive antecedents of CBI for Pantene Pro-V. Young black female consumers also reported higher levels of loyalty to both SheaMoisture and Pantene Pro-V, although they show a willingness to disseminate positive word of mouth only for the SheaMoisture brand. The results of this study underscore the need for brand managers of natural hair care brands to effectively communicate the differential attributes of natural hair care brands and allay greenwashing perceptions through the use of clinically proven safety claims. Brand managers for Pantene Pro-V are also urged to address the perception that the brand epitomises a Eurocentric view. The implementation of the think-global-but-act- local strategy is recommended as a potential strategy to build a strong bond with young female black consumers.

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Author contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this study.

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