



# You Have the Right to Know About Clean Beauty

Black Women for Wellness

September 2023

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# Who We Are

**Black Women for Wellness (BWW)** is a grassroots non-profit committed to the empowerment, health, and well-being of Black women and girls. Our work aims to heal, educate, and support Black women and girls through health education, empowerment, and advocacy.

BWW utilizes a reproductive justice framework to engage in policy, advocacy, outreach, research, civic engagement, and education toward increasing the health and well-being of Black women and girls locally in Los Angeles and throughout California. Part of this work involves shining light on the intersections between reproductive and environmental justice.

The **Urban and Environmental Policy (UEP)** department at Occidental College recognizes that economic and environmental justice are inextricably linked to where and how we live, work, play, eat and go to school. The **Environmental Justice Research Group** led by Dr. Bhavna Shamasunder supports community engaged research on the harmful effects of industrial pollution, environmental exposures, and chemical exposures experienced by people of color in urban settings.



# Background

The chemical policy structure in the United States allows consumer products (including beauty products) to be sold without first testing them.

Beauty products marketed to Black women often contain the most toxic ingredients used by the cosmetics industry. These can include hair straightening chemicals or dangerous leave-in hair products.

As Black communities increasingly embrace their natural hair, we wanted to learn more about the **Clean Beauty** market, since these products are also unregulated.

We wanted to learn more about:

1. **Black individuals' hair care routines and the products they use to style their hair**
2. **What Black consumers are looking for when selecting products.**
3. **How Black consumers are choosing natural and clean products; and what they think product labels mean**

Our survey focused on natural and clean hair products. Through the generous support and funding from the [Rose Foundation](#). This report describes our findings, which is a preliminary look at Black consumer ideas and preferences.



# Background

**Black women purchase and use more beauty products per capita than any other demographic group, spending more than \$7.5 billion dollars on beauty products a year and nine times more on hair products than any other racial-ethnic group.**

Black women also face many health disparities, including the highest breast cancer mortality rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States.

There are clear patterns of inequity regarding exposure; women of color use products with more toxic chemicals than other races/ethnicities.



**One area of concern is endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDC).**

EDCs act as hormone mimickers and can influence hormonal processes in the body.

Products used by Black women are more likely to contain parabens (one common EDC found in beauty products) and other hormone-like chemicals than products used by white women.

# Background

**For far too long, there has been a severe lack of regulations placed on what chemical ingredients can be used in cosmetic products, and existing regulations are seldom enforced.**



Though public knowledge and education around chemicals of concern in hair care products is increasing, Black women and girls need more than just education - they need safe products to use instead of those containing toxic ingredients.

Products have increasingly been marketed as “clean”, “natural”, or “green”. However, there is no federally regulated definition for these terms so *there is no clear or uniform meaning behind these labels*. Furthermore, the products with these claims can be costly and hard to find. We applaud efforts to remove phthalates, parabens, and other harmful ingredients, but still we need both uniformity and transparency in the market.



# Our Goal

There is a gap in the ability of nonprofits, healthcare institutions, and universities to intervene to protect Black women and girls from harmful products because there are limited adequate alternatives. It is clear that *policy change* is needed to require brands to omit harmful ingredients from their products.

**We created this report to support our understanding of how Black women and girls currently feel about truly safe hair care options so we can better intervene in the meantime.**



# What We Did

BWW in collaboration with the Environmental Justice Research Group at Occidental College, conducted a screening assessment to learn more about *how Black consumers choose products, and what Black consumers look for when selecting hair care products.*

This survey was administered online through our network of community partners, and the BWW member base.

We surveyed 102 Black individuals about their thoughts on “clean” natural hair care, what they look for in “clean products”, and where they shop for these products.

Our participants opted into our survey, and were eligible if they self-identified as Black and over 18.





# Questions We Asked

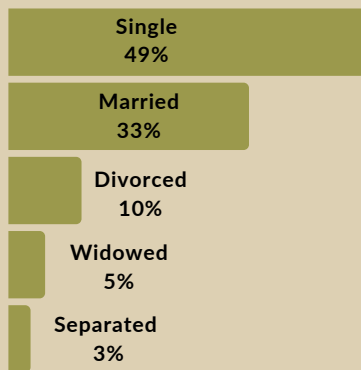
- Are your hair care or styling decisions impacted by your job or work? (Yes/No)
- Describe your hair (e.g. texture, curl pattern).
- How many hair products do you typically use each day?
- What do you consider when looking at the packaging or labeling?
- Do you actively purchase hair products labeled as "natural", "clean", "organic", "green", or other related descriptions?
- How do you most often wear your hair?
- What types of labels do you actively seek to purchase? (select all that apply)
- When I see hair products advertised with labels identified as "natural", "clean", "organic", "green", I am: (select all that apply)
- Does affordability influence your decision to purchase products labeled as "natural", "clean", "organic", "green"?
- Of the products you use to style your hair, approximately how many products do you use with the labels such as "natural", "clean", "organic", "green"?
- When I see NO labeling on product labels or in descriptions, I ... (select all that apply)
- If you do seek out "natural" or "clean" products, where do you purchase these? (select all that apply)
- Do you have any other issues or concerns when it comes to selecting "natural", "clean", "organic", or "green" labeled hair care products?



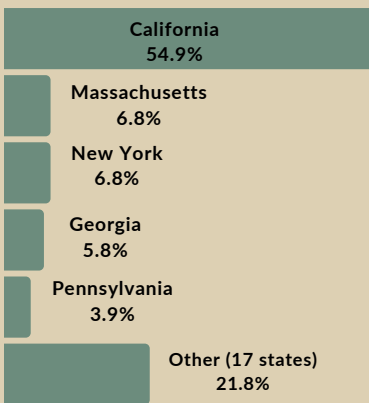
# Who Responded



96% of participants identified as women. Two participants identified as men, and one identified as gender variant/non-conforming.

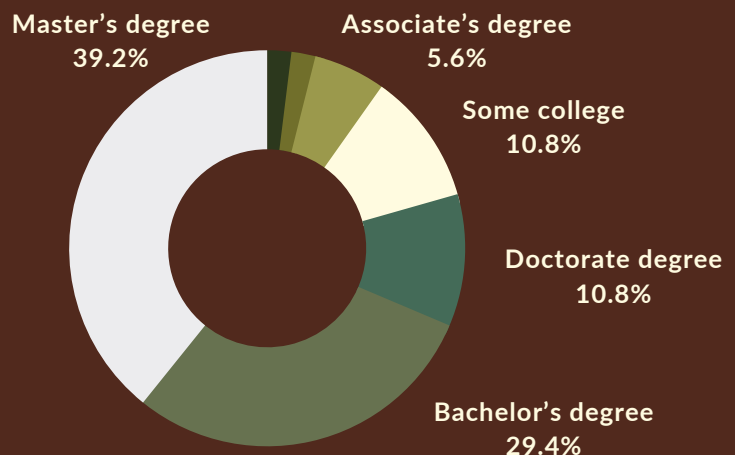


49% of participants were single, 33% of participants were married, and 18% were separated, divorced, or widowed.



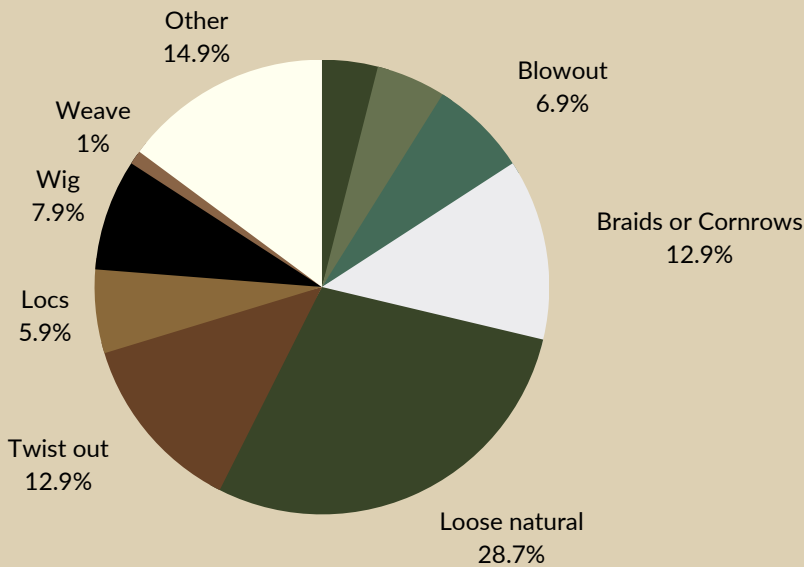
54.9% of respondents were from California and most of these respondents lived in Los Angeles with the top 3 zip codes being 90008, 90043, and 90047. All other participants lived across the US in 21 other states.

The majority of the respondents had an advanced education. 39% earned a Master's degree, while 29% earned a Bachelor's degree.



# What They Said

## How participants wear their hair most often:



76% of participants actively purchase hair products labeled as “natural”, “clean”, “organic”, or “green”.

41% of participants were somewhat more likely to purchase products with these labels, and 31% were much more likely to purchase products advertised with these labels.

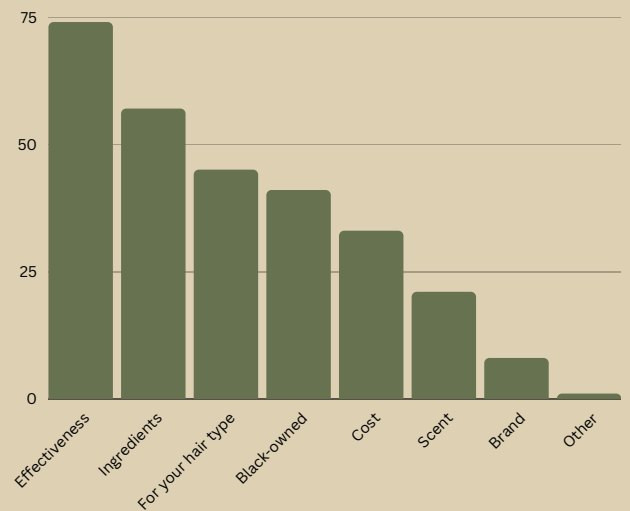
79% of participants reported that affordability sometimes or often influenced their decision to purchase products with “natural”, “clean”, “green”, or “organic” labels.

84% of participants used between 1 and 3 hair products a day.

46% of participants reported that they used 1-2 products that were labeled as “natural”, “clean”, “organic”, or “green”, and 32% reported they used between 3-4 of these products.

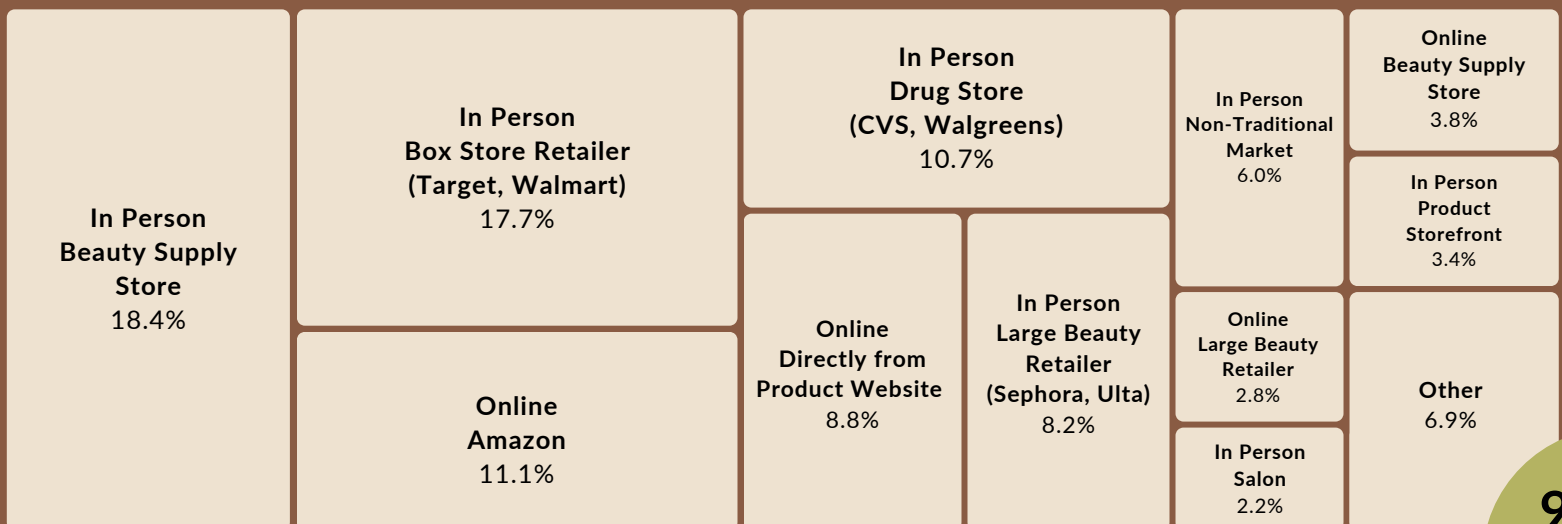
Participants felt the most important factor when purchasing a product was effectiveness (74%), followed by ingredients (57%). Participants were most likely to consider design of the packaging of a product (76%), followed by the key words on the front of the package (16%) when purchasing their products.

## Important characteristics for participants when selecting a product



## Where do participants shop for products most often?

Participants shop for products in person at beauty supply stores and big box stores most often.





## What We Found

### ***Participants value effectiveness***

When selecting a product, respondents' top three most important characteristics were effectiveness, ingredients, and what hair type and texture the product is marketed towards.

### ***Survey respondents look at ingredients***

When looking at the packaging or labeling, participants overwhelmingly stated that they looked at ingredients, with a smaller portion stating that they focus on key words on the front of the bottle.

### ***Labeling can make a difference for some consumers***

When participants see hair products advertised with labels identified as “natural”, “clean”, “organic”, “green,” the majority are “somewhat more likely to purchase these products” and a lesser portion are “much more likely to purchase these products”. *Thus, clarity, transparency, and honesty of labels matter.*

### ***Participants trust clear labeling***

When considering common product labels on packaging such as “natural”, “clean”, or “green”, participants responded that the *top three labels they actively seek out are paraben free, sulfate free, and natural*. However, products labeled “natural” do not have a clear definition.

### ***Affordability is a large factor***

Among survey respondents, 79% stated that affordability is a factor in their decision to purchase products labeled as “natural”, “clean”, “organic”, or “green”.

### ***Participants don't trust “marketing terms”***

Participants overwhelmingly commented about the vagueness of these terms and the possibility of greenwashing. As a whole, participants seem to trust ingredients over these “marketing terms that have no real meaning”.

### ***Survey limitations***

Future research on this question can recruit a larger population of Black individuals to increase the sample size.

Most participants in our sample were college educated women. Future studies can gather information from a greater diversity of individuals who have different levels of education and are different genders.



# What This Means

The participant's responses suggest that labels like "natural", "clean", "organic", "green" are not the driving factor for most participants when purchasing a product. **The aspects that are most important to consumers are the affordability and effectiveness of the product, as well as what hair type a product is marketed towards.**

Participants did not necessarily trust the packaging of products, even when they are marked as "natural", "clean", "organic", or "green", and instead look to ingredients when considering a product.

The participants were also wary about the possibility of greenwashing. **Participants were more interested in products suggesting concrete claims – like sulfate-free – rather than general statements like "clean" or "natural".** Thus, companies and the federal government should work towards clear and uniform standards. **Consumers have a Right-to-Know what is in their products**

## What is Greenwashing?

The unethical marketing tactic "greenwashing" occurs when 'green' and 'clean' labeling on product packaging or used during product marketing do not match the ingredients in the product itself. Since there are no federal or state regulated definitions for terms like "green", "clean", or "natural", companies can appeal to chemical-conscious buyers by adding these labels to product marketing without ensuring the products are in fact safer.

# Takeaways

While organizations like BWW are fighting for stricter chemical policy, **YOU** deserve to feel empowered to find safe hair products wherever you shop.

You can join **Black Women for Wellness** in the fight for chemical policy reform to ensure that labels are clear, and that all chemicals in your products are defined. To learn more about how you can support policy reform, visit [www.bwwla.org](http://www.bwwla.org)

## Tips for Safer Shopping:



Read labels before you purchase a product. Avoid products that contain sulfates, parabens, phthalates, fragrances. Reduce the overall number of different products you use.



Conduct independent research on marketing claims such as “clean”, “natural”, or “green”. They may not be what they seem.



Research how safe your favorite products are by using databases like the [Non-Toxic Black Beauty Project Database](#), [Clearya](#), the Environmental Working Group’s [Skin Deep Database](#), or [Detox Me](#).



# References and Acknowledgements





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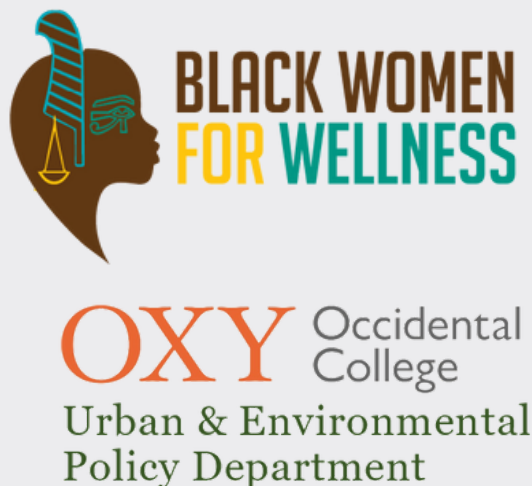
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For more information, to volunteer, share information, ask questions, comment or otherwise communicate with Black Women for Wellness use the information below

[www.bwwla.com](http://www.bwwla.com) • [www.bwwla.org](http://www.bwwla.org)

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