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Sarauna Moore
Black Women's Natural Hair
Care Communities: Social,
Political, and Cultural
Implications

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was undertaken to explore the social, political, and cultural implications of Black women's participation in the natural hair care community. The narratives of ten women who participate in the online natural hair care community were used to explore how this participation may effect personal and cultural identity, ideas of beauty, and social and economic capital. Women were interviewed and asked 13 questions to elicit the personal experiences of women, and their thoughts on patterns in larger society.

The findings suggest that women's interactions with the online natural hair care community is dynamic on both a personal and cultural level. It is a site of active cultural critique and resistance, and a place where Black women interact around the many facets of racialized beauty. Through the receiving and giving of feedback and affirmation, and sharing journeys, women help codify a Black aesthetic. Participants shared increased self-love and self care as a result of participating in the online community. Participation in the online community affords women social and economic opportunities. The women in my study have hope that the collective voice of the community will affect change in narratives surrounding Black women.

Black Women's Natural Hair Care Communities:
Social, Political, and Cultural Implications

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

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Chapter I

Introduction

Blonde, straight hair, blue eyes, and porcelain skin have long been the standards of female beauty, and every person regardless of race or ethnicity is subject to this bias in their daily lives. African American women tend to have brown skin, and coily or kinky hair, which has been systematically devalued by American culture. Over the years we have seen the development of skin lightening creams and hair relaxers to straighten our hair. The practice of chemically straightening hair as a response to Eurocentric beauty standards, and as a way to make Black hair more “manageable” has become the standard for the vast majority of Black women, so much so that most Black women are unfamiliar with working with their natural hair texture. The natural hair¹ care movement that is currently occurring is a group of Black women actively promoting, sharing, and supporting each other in the process of learning how to care for natural hair textures. The rise of social media has promulgated the wearing of natural hair into a movement, complete with slogans, websites, and now even accessories. Hair care regimens, hair styles, alternatives are all shared largely via social media such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. While it is not my wish to engage in a history of the online natural hair care movement, as a Black woman who has worn her hair naturally, consistently, for over 10 years, I can offer that my experience with the online natural hair care community went from a few forums and educational websites in the late 1990s to present day where my favorite natural hair Instagram account has 113,000 followers, and one of the top natural hair websites boasts an email subscription list of over 70,000 (this is email subscribers alone, not individual site visitors).

¹ Natural hair is used to mean hair that has not had its texture altered by any chemical. Hair that has had its color altered by chemicals is usually still considered natural if the texture has not been altered.

This pales in comparison to the sheer amount of blogs, videos, and websites available that are dedicated to natural hair, which is staggering.

This movement is a push against Eurocentric standards of beauty and more importantly a reinforcement of an aesthetic based solely on characteristics people of African descent. Through the natural hair care movement, Black women are creating our own aesthetic practices, languages, and community. This is reminiscent of the 'Black Is Beautiful' movement in the 70s where African Americans rejoiced in and reinforced their own aesthetic. Just as with any community, there are cultural and political meanings and benefits in participating in it. My research will examine the potential personal, social, and cultural benefits of participating in the natural hair care movement for black women.

Narratives of self and cultural identity building is an important factor in exploring the natural hair care community, and is especially important in the field of social work where understanding diverse cultural experiences and meanings is imperative. This work will explore ideas of self-esteem and definition, ethnic identity, identity politics, and community practices among Black women who wear natural hair. Creating and performing an identity that is counter to dominant Eurocentric narratives about what is valuable in American society is important and difficult work. It speaks to anti-racism work and cultural expression, and gives insight into the values of women who participate in natural hair care communities. The examination of biases and benefits inherent in this work and presentation is important.

Recently more research is emerging that delineates the importance of hair in Black women's daily life and of the journey Black women take in order to 'go natural'. In Black feminist theory, theorists are concerned with intersectionality and how it affects the daily lives of Black women. Hall (2009) goes over several theories in her paper concerning stress and coping

in African American women, including Black Feminist Theory. It covers the facts that Black Feminist Theory was created by Black women to explore the ways in which race, gender, class, and the unique socio-historical position of Black women has affected our identity. Not giving one particular model for development or a “Black experience”, Black Feminist Theorists attempt to complicate notions of culture and meaning making for Black women, while exploring common themes. Hall states:

One feature of this struggle for a self-defined stand point involves taking advantage of sources of everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in white, male-controlled institutions. For Black women, the struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously African centered and feminist. (p. 11)

I find this especially relevant when thinking about Black women using their bodies as 1) sites of resistance to cultural hegemony, and 2) affirming both African centered and feminine practices. What seems like a fairly benign act becomes complicated when considering social and historical factors of Black women’s beauty, which as far back as slavery has been controlled and informed by White male ideals of beauty. Recent literature concerning counseling women of color asserts that it is important for clinicians to understand the importance of hair in a Black women’s daily life. This study will add to this literature.

Researchers (Ozakawa et al., 1987; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Sekayi, 2003; Robinson, 2011; Tate, 2007) have studied the historical roots of devaluation of Black hair and preference of Eurocentric aesthetics, the effects of discrimination, cultural expectations, and self-esteem in relation to Black hair from the perspective of Black women themselves. Many of the studies recognize the confluence of hair texture and skin color in the perceived beauty, value, and sexuality in relation to Black women. However, only recently have discussions of the

empowerment Black women can find in their hair have been added to this discussion (Banks 2000; Johnson 2013). These discussions have not sought the narratives of women from the natural hair care community exclusively, instead making use of either conversations between both women with natural and women with chemically altered hair, or bypassing narratives and making use of online blogs and vlogs for data.

The literature is missing the narratives of women belonging to online natural hair care communities. This difference lies in the fact that the online, largely unmediated communities, are user generated content. What this means is that women's participation is simultaneously creating the culture. On Instagram and YouTube you can use hashtags to be invested as little or as much as you would like. The online community offers much greater visibility, more widespread communities, and a greater platform to share cultural practices. Many of these practices are forms of resistance in that they teach you about your natural hair (which many black women forget after having worn perms since being old enough to do their own hair), they teach you not to rely on the largely white owned black hair industry which has benefitted gloriously from Black women by giving tools to make your own hair care products, and offer instruction and examples of Black women entrepreneurs. Getting Black women's narratives on the complex uses of the online natural hair care community is the next step for the literature.

Understanding the nuances and complex messages that can be conveyed in natural hair care, and realizing how these choices are fostered can be important for the field of clinical social work; specifically therapeutic dyads that arise within the field. Gatzambide (2012) explores the cultural impasses in therapeutic relationships. My study would expound on the literature that highlights the complexity of Black hair, specifically natural hair and explore how Black women use the online natural hair care community, and the social, financial, and cultural capital

contained therein. It could speak to a method of cultural empowerment that many clinicians might not be aware of. Missing or invalidating someone's sociocultural location, and the experiences therein, may and often does cause ruptures in the therapeutic relationship. If someone's involvement in a community is a salient portion of their identity, having narratives reflecting and exploring that can be helpful to clinicians.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

West (1995) talks about the history of Black women stereotypes related to skin color and physical appearance that have persisted through the years. These stereotypes have not only aesthetic purposes, but she speaks about the everyday racism and attendant stress that Black women experience while navigating these identities. West talks about the real-world privilege and biases that can come along with each of the stereotypes she outlines. Specifically she speaks about increased educational and financial opportunities given to people who fit more closely to European ideals of beauty (lighter skin and long, straight hair) and the role strain that happens when women try to live up to or negate stereotypical roles.

West uses her analysis to conclude that that race and racism is a salient portion of Black women's identity, and therefore understanding how interacting with these pervasive stereotypes effects their psyche would be beneficial for therapists. Her research shows that Black women's bodies are inherently political and have a space in American imagination, and this political body has implications for the way that Black women experience their everyday lives. While West talks about the history behind stereotypes of Black women, making it clear that Black bodies and representations have long been political, she doesn't address beauty aesthetics.

Ozakawa et. Al. (1987) reviews empirical studies and literature to explore the politics of skin color and hair texture for Black women. They discuss the historical roots of racialized attitudes of beauty. They also review the way that these views have affected society, which perpetuates the idea that physical representation closer to White features is preferable, and has real life advantages to those who possess them. What is especially useful about the article is that the notion that Black people who strive to attain straighter hair or lighter skin are battling self-

hatred or internalized racism is not left as a given. They cite practicality, economic/employment gain, and other choices that Black women make about their aesthetic. They posit that an affinity to a specific Eurocentric aesthetic is not necessarily a rejection of African American culture, which I believe is an important distinction.

Vetta Sanders Thompson (2006) surveyed 319 African Americans to discern attitudes concerning ideas about attractiveness. The survey was handed out door-to door and then used samples of convenience, making sure to include a diverse income bracket and age range. She also reviewed the historical factors that have added to ideas concerning attractiveness, including bias against skin color, experiences of discrimination, and preference for Caucasian features.

In her study she found that Black women were more accepting of African American facial features. They also found, interestingly that “The influence of family norms, preferences and pressures appears to be a stronger influence on female physical racial identity attitudes” (Thompson, 2006, p. 60), which really supports the idea that hierarchies created and perpetuated within communities of Black women has a large impact on Black women’s internalized view of natural hair and Afrocentric representations of self.

Pyke (2010) talks about the theory of internalized racism. The idea is that oppressed populations take in, internalize, and repeat patterns and thoughts concerning oppression. This is relevant in that American culture is so entrenched in racist ideologies, that it’s almost impossible to break free from all of the trappings and hierarchies therein. Specifically to my research interest is the idea of “good hair”. While the decision to wear African American hair unaltered by chemicals can be seen as a rejection of the notion of “good hair”, there is still an internal hierarchy that gets played out in natural hair communities. When exploring these hierarchies I hope to use theories of internalized racism in a non-pathologizing manner. Understanding the

real life advantages of looking closer to mainstream attitudes, trying to benefit from these attitudes should not be looked at pathologically.

Goodstein & Ponterotto (1997) explored how racial and ethnic identity correlates with self-esteem among White and Black people. Using racial identity, ethnic identity, and self-esteem scales they found that racial and ethnic identity affected self-esteem for Black participants. For White participants there was no correlation between any racial identity and self-esteem, though there is a slight relation between ethnic identity and self-esteem (288). The most important finding in that study was that “results...indicated that celebrating one’s Blackness was more important in predicting self-esteem than hating one’s Blackness or experiencing a strong ethnic group affiliation” (p. 288).

Sekayi (2003) uses a quantitative study to explore the views that college-aged women have concerning their own beauty and their perspective on what the media portrays as beautiful. Sekayi discusses the traditional depiction of beauty in both the American imaginations and media portrayals and messages, and how it aligns with White physical features. In exploring the ways that Black women do or do not align with these standards, Sekayi specifically used the school setting as a context. She discusses implications for beauty on teacher perception of students, and how they perceived themselves. She used both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain an idea of how college age women’s ‘socio-academic’ (p. 470) lives were impacted by perceived notions of beauty. She concluded that women perceive the dominant Eurocentric standard of beauty, and have a different standard of beauty that does not coincide with the dominant view and that they are more interested in keeping close to their own standard. She also concludes that the women in her study did not enjoy the way that media defined Black beauty. She connects this to implications for education. This study contributes to the idea that Black

women are actively creating and resisting ideas of beauty perpetuated by mainstream thought and media. She employs surveys, interviews, focus groups, and document and media reviews in order to get a complex look at how women build and interpret definitions of beauty. Sekayi used Black women between 18 and 23 years of age from an HBCU. She used information from 219 survey respondents, a focus group that contained 6 people, and interviews from 5 individuals.

Cynthia Robinson (2011) interviewed 38 Black women that varied in hair texture, hair state (natural vs. unnatural), and of different racial presentation (different shade and racial presentations), ranging in age from 19-81 to analyze the connection between race, Black female beauty, and hair texture. Where Robinson talks about hair texture thoughts among black women regardless of hair texture, this study will do it for attitudes within the natural hair care community.

In her study she explores a hair hierarchy where hair that is classified as coily, kinky, and course is at the bottom, and hair that reflects more Asian and European traits (straighter or more wavy) is better. She goes more in depth to explore how race and maintenance are factors in desired hair type. She also explores the “glaring differences that racialized hierarchies [concerning Black hair textures] make intra-culturally as a result of inter-cultural discrimination” (Robinson, 2011, p. 372).

Similarly Ingrid Banks (2000) interviewed 43 individual women, and had 5 focus groups with black women and interviewed them about Black hair. Banks analyzed the narratives and found themes of economic empowerment, gender roles and expectations, messages that could be conveyed by hairstyles, autonomy, and cultural authenticity. What was compelling in Banks’ book, is that the women she interviewed spoke about the power in choosing what you convey to the world with your hairstyle, the importance of empowerment in the choice, no matter what the

choice might convey to the outside world. Matters of hair were looked at from the perspective of personal motivations and influences, and also the perception of other people.

Inherent in the conversation were considerations about economic, social, and racial implications about Black hair. The conversations were not devoid of the complexities of colorism along with hair texture. Conversations of the effects of “good” vs “bad hair” were also prominent in the conversations of the women.

Banks also included an analysis of media messages present in magazines marketed towards Black women. As Banks’ book was published in 2000 there is no analysis concerning online engagement or marketing around Black hair. She speaks about the power in media images, but also about whom the marketing benefits financially. Black women spend large amounts of money on hair care, and corporations can easily exploit this. It’s important to note that one of the functions that the online natural hair care community can serve is to debunk myths about what your hair needs, and gives women information concerning DIY hair products.

Tate (2007) writes an article about the confluence of skin shade and natural hair in anti-racist aesthetic. She posits that Black women wear natural hair as a way to push against dominant White aesthetics surrounding beauty. She traces the different movements that have led up to current feelings about natural hair. However, Tate adds the concept that the ‘Black anti-racist aesthetic’ lends itself to exclusion and creates a binary between natural and unnatural that erases (and creates hostility towards) the natural hair and shade of mixed race women. She studied conversations between women of color and concluded that through performativity of natural or unnatural hair, women are creating (and racializing) what counts as Black beauty. However, Tate’s over reliance on the idea that natural hair is equivalent to short and tightly

coiled is narrow and not a general view, which could be due to either the date of the study or the country where Tate is based (she is largely using norms from the UK).

Tate (2007) used focus groups of Black women to explore their use of antiracist aesthetics in their presentation and the way that color and hair texture intersect in their worlds. She also explores the binaries that she detected during the women's conversations concerning what constituted "natural" and not natural in terms of Black hair styles. As she was using testimony from a previous project, she did not specify the number of women, but did state that they were Caribbean and Caribbean English women that lived in Britain.

Johnson (2013) examines Black women's hairstyles through a historical, economic and sociocultural lens. Johnson starts with a history of the Black hair during the time of slavery. Looking at mentions of hair in runaways slave posters the role of hair texture and style in the white imagination and as a sign miscegenation, Johnson questions the ways in which Black women created their identity in the face of a Whiteness as the ruling aesthetic. While skipping any time period between slavery and the 80s, Johnson moves onto an analysis of Ebony and Essence magazines. She explores the hair care ads and ownership of hair care companies from the 1980s to present day. She interpreted her findings to say what is almost predictable, that White owned companies and ads tended to show dominant (read: not afro-centric) beauty standards. And in more years than not, White owned businesses advertised more heavily in Black magazines.

Johnson's book has an added component that other studies in the same realm do not; it includes a chapter considering "The Marketing Natural Hair and Natural Hair Blogs/Vlogs" (p. 79). While only focusing on a few blogs, and not really engaging in a study of user generated content (such as Instagram or YouTube), she does explore the uses of blogs in the natural hair

community, as well as the opportunity it creates. Johnson argues that these natural hair communities offer affirmation and a sense of belonging to women who are bucking a mainstream trend of perming or chemically altering ones hair. She argues that this can be exclusionary in some ways in that there is policing that goes on, stating, “What network members/subscribers think and relate to are based on parameters set by the group. Thus, those outsiders who do not comply with the constraints of the group are in a sense ostracized or restrained” (p.83).

However, it should be pointed out that the pages she examined were “closed groups” with moderators, versus the newer manifestation of online communities which are less closely moderated which may have an affect on the amount of policing and constraints. This open community that is prevalent now (unlocked profiles, using hash tags to be identified with a specific group without any monitoring) is also important when considering another idea that Johnson brings up, which is the idea that Black women have been socialized to be ashamed of or hide the state of their natural hair. What do unlocked profiles and higher visibility via blogs and vlogs mean for Black women and the way that they view natural hair. What does it mean to expose white people to greater information concerning natural hair?

Finally, Johnson briefly explores some of the marketing done through the natural hair care community. Individuals and businesses are able to market hand-made hair accessories or products, there are ads for natural hair meet-ups and connections, where more economic opportunities await. I believe that this is a very important point as many small businesses have blossomed into lucrative business, including Carol’s Daughter and Mixed Chicks product lines, not to mention women who have become celebrities for their presence on the online natural hair care community, who have been able to garner income and other tangible benefits from the online natural hair care community.

One gap in Johnson's research is that she does not take any narratives from women. Though she does explore some postings of women on natural hair blogs and vlogs, there is no comprehensive use of women's voices in her book. Because technology has advanced to the point where culture is almost simultaneously being documented and created (through user generated content and social media), capturing the narratives of members of the community is really important.

In my research I hope to explore narratives of women in the natural hair care community and explore the ways that they make meaning of any politics that have pervaded a culturally affirming space. In Tate's and Johnson's work, they acknowledge that natural hair communities and ideologies already have politics that work towards defining what is and is not politically and aesthetically 'in line with' natural hair. Understanding what aspects of natural hair communities are affirming towards cultural identity and which aspects are not may bolster a community and process that is important to many Black women today. Information in these narratives and also add to a body of work that explores an integral space of resistance for women of color.

There is a lot of literature that outlines the way that hair plays an important role in daily life of Black women. However, only recently have discussions of the empowering effects that come from being in a natural hair care community have been added to the research. A part of my study is to explore the ways that Black women make meaning out of their own natural hair in light of being ensconced in a Eurocentric culture and the effects that this meaning-making has on the individual. In addition, because the community building aspects of becoming a part of the natural hair care community has been identified as important sources of support, these areas will be thoroughly explored.

In looking at meaning making in online communities, Anita Harris (2008) looks at the way that young women use new technologies and suggests different ways these uses could be considered a political act. She begins by exploring the previously gendered notions of political participation and citizenship. Noting that an old paradigm for political activism was running for office or joining a political party, she uses feminist approaches to citizenship to include less formal work. Historically this includes organizing and grass roots campaigns, etc. Her assertion is that political activism looks different across many different groups (gender, race, and class), and that marginalized groups' activities shouldn't be discounted. She carries this over to youth engagement, and connects a lot of the online activity and activism to globalization and shrinking physical space. Harris uses the language of "online DIY culture" (p482) to describe online magazines and blogs, and social/personal uses of technology to describe social media, personal homepages, Facebook, etc. (p. 482).

She argues that for young women (though without specifying an age range) use online DIY culture, which are neither public nor private, to contend with,

shifting boundaries between public and private, their interpellation as consumer citizens, the contraction of a traditional public sphere - in particular the absence of spaces for critique, self-expression and peer dialogue - and a loss of faith in conventional politics and formal political institutions. (p. 485)

She argues that online spaces can be a way to share and communicate, but also a way to avoid outside patrolling and appropriation. Social networking, she argues is more about creating a public self. She explores two arguments about social networking and its political uses. One argument asserts that creating a public self and the sharing of stories is an important step towards citizenship. On the flip side, some may argue that as social networking may not lead to real life

activism, it is less valuable. However, some of these arguments may be dated, as recent events show that online movements resulting from social networking are often translated into public action (the riots in the UK, rallies for social injustice in the US, etc.). Her stance is that social media shows a new kind of political action, and brand new “participatory communities” (p. 482).

In the end, Harris argues that both online DIY cultures and social networking are a move towards young people being cultural producers, rather than consumers. She sees an agency in the use of online space for negotiating and creating identities. She also sees it as a place of political action, if the definitions of “political” can be separated from old and narrow definitions. Though I don’t necessarily agree that social networking avoids outside policing and appropriation, the idea that participatory communities are doing political and cultural identity work is really important.

There have been studies about the use of internet among immigrant communities and the ways in which the internet is used to share information, resources, reaffirm cultural identity as minority groups, and also as a support system in the face of acculturation (Parker and Song, 2009; Thompson 2002). However, studies on African American internet usage tend to focus on the racial divide. E. Bun Lee (2012) conducted a study specifically about Black college students and Facebook use, and concluded that Facebook is used heavily, and that it is a place to display and interact with racial and cultural signifiers. This leaves a large gap in information concerning how African Americans, and women in particular, use online communities. Online natural hair care communities are a great intersection of cultural production, community involvement and participatory communities, and identity, racial, and gender politics. Hearing narratives, much in the way that Ingrid Banks did, would help avoid monolithic views of the community. Narratives also highlight voice and empowerment, which Ingrid Banks points out, is an especially integral

piece of understanding the importance of African American hair care choices.

Concerns of empowerment, choice and agency, anti-racism work, experiences of marginalization and avenues of resistance, should be of interest to any social worker.

Gatzambide (2012) explores the cultural impasses in therapeutic relationships. Being able to explore the cultural meaning of Black natural hair, and the importance of found communities may decrease cultural impasses and or microaggressions that may devalue the meanings involved in participating in the online natural hair community or even the politics of Black hair.

Gatzambide goes on to say that “patients’ perception of microaggression predict weaker therapeutic alliance and poorer treatment outcome” (p.185).

Summary

The literature review explores the levels of meaning fraught in Black hair, and the Black female body in general. The distance between Black bodies, especially the interplay of hair texture and skin tone, and Eurocentric ideals of beauty have played a role in the value of Black bodies in American Culture, and this has obviously led to real world affects for Black women. The affects that have been studied have been self-esteem, stress, and internalized racism. Studies have also explored Black hair as a source of empowerment, agency, political voice, and self-esteem.

Studies strictly about the natural hair care community have been few, and almost none focus on the online community. This study explores the social, political, and cultural implications of women participating in the online natural hair care community.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This is an exploratory study into the potential personal, social, and cultural benefits of participating in the online natural hair care movement for black women. How do women's experiences with the online natural hair care community effect their personal and cultural identity? What positive benefits or negative occurrences result from participating? What opportunities does the online natural hair care community afford women, and how does participating affect their personal landscape?

Researchers (Ozakawa et al., 1987; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Sekayi, 2003; Robinson, 2011; Tate, 2007) have studied the historical roots of devaluation of Black hair and preference of Eurocentric aesthetics, the effects of discrimination, cultural expectations, and self-esteem in relation to Black hair from the perspective of Black women themselves. Many of the studies recognize the confluence of hair texture and skin color in the perceived beauty, value, and sexuality in relation to Black women. However, only recently have discussions of the empowering effects that come from being in a natural hair care community have been added to the research (Banks, 2000; Johnson, 2013), and only a miniscule amount of work has been directed at exploring the dimension that social media and user generated content has given to the natural hair community. Eleven women were interviewed to gain their narrative on this phenomenon. Sample information, data collection and analysis will be discussed in this chapter.

Sample

I interviewed twelve participants, however one person decided not to participate in the final project, and my final findings present information from eleven (n=11) people who self-

identified as Black women. The requirements for participation were that people self-identify as Black women who have worn their hair natural (without any chemical straightening) for at least 2 years. Participants needed to self-identify as having worn their hair naturally for at least 2 years so that they would have had time to learn about caring for their specific texture of hair and have lived with natural hair long enough to have had time to experience and evaluate potential changes of habit and attitude due to wearing natural hair. As most women have worn their hair chemically treated for the many years, it takes quite a while to grow, and then learn how to style and care for natural hair.

The purpose of having only female identified participants is that Black women have been socialized to wear their hair chemically treated to do away with curls and kinks, to wear it straight in a very Eurocentric manner. Black men are not socialized to emulate a Eurocentric standard of straightened hair though I acknowledge that men have their own expectations surrounding hair and facial hair. Therefore, in investigating the ideals behind natural hair, it is important to focus on women, who are members of the natural hair movement. Moreover, a key portion of the natural hair movement, and one of my research interests, is the idea that Black women are celebrating and creating their own aesthetic based on the natural texture of their own hair, which has not been traditionally celebrated. Excluding men from the participants helps me to focus on this aesthetic that Black women are creating and shaping.

Participants ranged in age from 24-48 years old. The median age was 29. I also asked the women how long they had worn their hair naturally, and their answers ranged from 2 to 13 years. The average amount of years that my participants wore their hair naturally was 7 years. I did not ask women information concerning socioeconomic status or sexual orientation, though the participants' education level did range from high school completion to graduate level work.

One participant identified as queer during the course of interview, and while other participants did mention male significant others, no one else identified their sexual orientation.

Data Collection

Recruitment was done through contacting members of the natural hair care community via the social networking sites of Facebook and Instagram. Using the social networking sites I placed announcements (please see Appendix C) with my email address so that qualifying members of the community were able to reach me and this began a snowball sampling for the specific population. Despite large interest showed on social media, I only received around 20 emails as per the directions. I answered as emails came in, and set up interviews with women who set their appointments first, as some women responded that they would like to participate but weren't able to set up interviews or did not respond to follow-up emails before I had set my 12 needed interviews.

Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview with the researcher concerning their experience with the online natural hair care community. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for some variance in the phrasing of the questions and conversation, but there was an interview guide with 13 questions used to better understand participants' interactions, intentions, and the consequences of their participation with the online natural hair care community. Questions such as "How have you experienced the online natural hair care community?", "What practical uses did you get from the online natural hair care community?", and "Have any of your ideas concerning beauty, black culture, or yourself changed since participating in the online natural hair care community?" were asked. To see a full list of questions, please see Appendix D. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were

conducted by online video chat or telephone as available in order to accommodate participants who were not local. I did not conduct any follow up interviews with participants. Despite some technical issues, each interview was completed on the day scheduled, and participants were notified that if they had any further questions or comments to add that they were welcome to contact me.

Each participant signed and returned the informed consent form approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (please see Appendix A). Two participants did not mail their consent form in time to be included in the study. Participants' rights and content of the informed consent form were reviewed at the beginning of each interview as well. Some of the questions asked about personal experiences with racism and sexism, which had the potential of making some participants uncomfortable. Each participant was informed that they could opt out of any question should they feel uncomfortable. Participants were also able to ask that their interview not be used if they asked by a specific date. Participants were not compensated for or incentivized to participate in any way. All participation was voluntary. Interviews were audio recorded with a device with participants consent. I manually transcribed each, making each interview anonymous and storing any identifying information separately. All information stored and maintained in accordance with federal guidelines.

A note about transcription: Each participant's words were transcribed verbatim with a few exceptions. Out of habit I may have sometimes replaced peoples more colloquial use of "cause" with "because", and if there were repetition due to hesitation, I have omitted that for the quotes in the paper. It's important to me to preserve my participant's language and meanings, so the use of quotes in the 'Findings' section may be long and I will have left in explicit language. It

was hoped that the questions used would elicit both narratives about their personal experiences and thoughts on patterns they see in a larger context. One quote emblematic of the themes found in the interviews also models participants' combining of personal and political thoughts throughout interviews is found below:

But I do make [my pictures] searchable. I think we need to keep hearing our journey, so we can normalize our hair. You know? And not, and I'm not saying that we are the ones that made it not normal, because I think that's not true. I think that we participated in it, but I don't think that we were the impetus for it not being normal. But I think I'm kind of tired with the 'Omg, look at your locs!', you know, I want it to be like, you know, in your face all of the time. And I feel like that's what's happening, to be honest with you....

And the reason that I'm excited about it is...it's because of what I know has to do with this love of self. So much of our own internalized racism and the stuff that we sort of walk around with partly is, of course, laid up with how we, the relationship we have with our own natural hair. And I'm not saying that folks that have straight hair can't feel that way. ...I'm just saying that it's important to have that relationship at least once in your life.

A lot of women's answers hold many different levels of experience and so I chose to keep quotes rather long, despite allotting them to specific themes. For instance, here a woman is speaking about sharing pictures and normalizing natural hair, but also speaks about microaggressions and internalized racism, and her hope for a change in these attitudes. In order to honor my participants, I chose to keep their rich narratives intact as often as possible.

Data Analysis

I utilized a content analysis in order to analyze data from the interviews. While transcribing the interviews, I took note of broad themes and patterns. Specific attention was paid to narratives about what women did and how they felt about it. Themes weren't hard to find, as most participants spoke about how they felt, what they did, other's expectations, and what they hoped. Any other themes that were frequently mentioned were noted as well. Women frequently spoke about their fears of acceptance, especially in terms of being employable, and also the change in the choices of hair products made available due to the presence of the online community.

The transcribed interviews were then coded using these broad themes, and each theme was compared to expose across interview to find if any more specific topics were available. Commonalities, differences of opinions, and outliers were considered. Contradictions within each interview were also noted in the course of the transcribing. Interviews were constantly analyzed, and codes compared against each other to ensure consistency. Quotes from the interviews were used in the Findings section to emphasize the most prominent themes. The discussion will hold information on how these themes relate to significant literature, and implications for future study

Limitations

As a result of having a random sampling of women participate on a first come first served basis, my sample had no women who ran their own blog, microblog, or group that was dedicated to natural hair. My data would be enriched by the view of someone with a different role than

most of my participants. That is not to express preference or an idea of hierarchy in voice, rather a desire to explore all possible motivations and types of interactions with the online community. The low number of participants and the narrow type of online participants means that my study is not generalizable.

A topic that came up during the course of interviews is the opportunity for exclusion or silencing of multi-ethnic women. In the online natural hair care community as in many other venues, multi-ethnic women's experiences of being made to feel that they weren't considered "Black enough" may have affected my sample. While there was an opportunity to define 'Black' in my recruiting literature, I thought it would be best if people self-identified. Had my recruiting parameters invited women who self-identified as Black or multi-ethnic with at least one Black parent, my sample may have been more inclusive.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Twelve women were interviewed about their experiences while participating in the natural hair care community in general, and specifically the online natural hair care community. In order to have a consistent forum of participating, the online natural hair care community was chosen. This community consists of blogs, social media pages, and video blogs that are devoted to the subject of natural hair. Women were asked about their experiences with the online natural hair care community, their intentions and expectations, benefits of participating, changing attitudes within themselves, and their thoughts on changes within larger society as a result of the online natural hair care community.

Self-Reported Participation

Participants shared their thoughts on the different ways they contribute to the online natural hair care community. Most participants devalued their contributions to the online community. These two snippets of interview show the disparity in opinion on the matter:

S: Umm, I watched a few YouTube videos, I read a few blogs, but I didn't do anything too heavy online.

Me: What does that mean? Nothing too heavy?

S: Well, I wasn't interacting with anybody online about hair care products, I wasn't responding to stuff; I was just researching like hairstyles and stuff.

However, even a participant who posted pictures of herself and commented on things, felt similarly:

It's not a big...I don't really contribute more than I take, I guess. Umm, I watch the YouTube videos, I go on Instagram, I 'like' the pictures, I comment on the pictures of hairdos. Umm, I don't put up any of my own videos. I guess when I take pictures they have my natural hair in them, so that's a minor contribution. But, yea, I guess just taking pictures and commenting and 'liking' other people's pictures and videos.

It was clear from all of the participants that the pinnacle of interaction with the online nhcc was to have a blog or site devoted to natural hair or to post video tutorials. It is important to note that none of my participants engaged at this level with the community. Many participants 'like' pictures, share pictures of themselves and other women with natural hair, discuss information with and give feedback to other women online. It is generally agreed upon that reading but not commenting or at the very least 'liking' a post is akin to voyeurism and the lowest level of interaction. However, one participant made a very astute observation concerning visiting sites without interacting. She shared,

I feel like it's very passive, and I feel like I do play a role in the online community, even though I'm not very vocal 'cause I feel like there's always gonna be someone who either doesn't have time to speak or I feel like is too shy to speak or they just want to know that it's there. So it's like I feel that there has to be lots of kind of satellite people who participate in the communities. Uhh, definitely I am contributing to ad revenue. Umm, I work in publishing. [laughter] Umm, by visiting and getting ad to go there so umm, I'm pretty sure the site owners are not complaining about that.

Literal and Figurative Transitions

Reasons gone natural. Participants were asked what prompted them to go natural, as a way to explore what their intentions were in joining this specific online community and what they hoped to get out of it. There were two reasons that were most prevalent. Five women mentioned that damage from perms were their motivating factor. Heat damage, damage from perms and their previous hair care regimens prompted these women to stop chemically straightening their hair as a gateway to healthier hair and they chose not to go back to it. It is important to note that most [7] women mentioned experiencing hair damage from chemically treating their hair, but only 5 said that it was their motivating force behind their transition. Five women stated that they had never liked perms, or didn't know why they had been wearing perms in the first place and so decided to stop. Of those 5, two mentioned not wanting to be beholden to hair salons for their hair care, and one mentioned self-love and reclamation along with a consciousness about where she was spending her money as a motivating force. The final two participants stated that changes in geography affected changes in their hair routines, which led them to go natural.

It's OK to be natural. When asked about the way that the online natural hair community helped their transition, if at all, the answers were evenly split. Half of the participants used the online community during their transition- the other half of the participants completed their transition with the help of hair care specialists or professed not to use the online community in their initial transition- and had fairly uniform responses. Participants felt helped by seeing the pictures of other women and received guidance from the information about hair care, products, and styling available. Even among those who didn't use the online community at

first, these were common responses for how it helped when they did begin interacting with the online natural hair care community.

This theme of guidance and encouragement came up in every single interview that I did. While participants, shared that they gained guidance on how to style and care for their hair, a lot of the encouragement mentioned in interviews went beyond that. One participant shared the complexity of her concern when she stated,

There would be a lot of times when I would have a lot of doubt, especially when I was transitioning, and like your family members would be telling you like “You’re ugly, don’t do that”. And like, you were never ugly, your hair was never ugly, umm, it was just this issue of like you’re just not used to seeing yourself this way. It’s basically beaten into you that like your curly kinky hair is bad and that makes you ugly to have curly kinky hair. Umm, like, I felt like it was really helpful to have an outlet- so that was back when I was participating more online. It’s to have an outlet to talk to other people who are going through the same thing or women who are older who were going through that in the 70s and just never turned back. So like, that was cool, and I guess I’ve always felt it’s affirming to see people like you.

Likewise, another participant shared,

They show you their growth, not just like their hair, but also as a person, as an individual. So I think that’s important, because you start out probably a little doubtful about it, and kind of scared to take that big step, and you don’t know what the outcome will be, you don’t know how you’re really going to feel about it. I mean, for a time I was kind of a little insecure about chopping all of my hair off and being natural. So, seeing other

people do it and seeing, where they've come, and seeing where they've gotten to is very encouraging.

Participants expressed both the concern of dealing physically with a hair texture they weren't aware of and have dealing with societal expectations. Most prevalent is the idea that wearing ones hair is not "normal" or "acceptable", and 9 participants shared that they've dealt with this sentiment.

I still felt like I should feel self-consciousness about my hair in certain settings, so the natural hair community was helpful that way. Like, you know, it's ok to have, like the way our hair is, it's ok, and you don't need a relaxer in order to be beautiful, in order to be fashionable, in order to be professional. So, that's why, that's what I've appreciated and gotten from the online natural hair care community.

Another shared "*...I've always been like inspired, or more like a reassurance, like, 'oh, ok, I can do my hair this way and it's acceptable. Or I can do my hair this way and it's acceptable'.*"

Only one participant noted that she felt wearing your hair natural has become the norm, or was unsurprising, within the Black community. However, even she admitted that there is a change in views that has to happen in order to be able to, as one participant put it, "*not just go natural, but to feel good about going natural*".

Five participants stated that either they held the belief or were negatively responded to because other people felt that straight, long hair was better. Two participants had to contend with stereotypes about natural hair specifically. One shared that her mother always thought natural hair made people look unintelligent, and the other shared that she contended with the stereotype that wearing your hair natural meant that you were poor and dirty.

Another major ingrained belief participants had to deal with was the idea that natural hair was not professional. Participants shared that they gained encouragement and guidance in order to get over this bias, and know that their hair is acceptable in all areas.

I think the online community provides a lot of examples that there are people with natural hair in the corporate world, in the legal world, in the medical profession, so that's ok.

Like you don't just have to be someone who's not in those sectors in order to wear natural hair.

And another added,

[In terms of entering the legal field] And people aren't gonna be ok with like me having natural hair, like they're not going to understand it and think it looks ok. But umm, I think being a part of the natural hair care community and seeing people of all different industries and careers, with all different lengths and styles and cuts of hair that are doing well in what they choose to do for their work, it was helpful for me to be like, "ok, if I'm qualified for the job, then what my hair looks like, as long as it's not messy and like dirty, then it shouldn't effect what my chances are of getting the job or keeping the job.

Participants shared that seeing other Black women wearing their hair natural, in a plethora of styles, and in a plethora of settings was encouraging and affirming. They shared:

...it's like [people say] "Oh, this isn't professional", and you can show like all of these women online [with natural hair] who are professional, who have Master's and who are earning 6 figures.... You have these examples of successful women, you have these examples of women who are beautiful women who are getting a man- because that matters to some people- you have an example of all of the things that you're striving for.

In the same vein, one participant shared that beyond personally affirming, she sees it as a step to normalizing natural hair in the work place.

And then other people will be **forced** to accept us. If everybody's hair is natural then everybody...if you're going to have a Black person then you're going to have a natural haired person working. You know it's not, there's still blogs about "what should I do with my natural hair for work?" and stuff like that. So, if people feel good about their hair, they'll wear it. So I won't have to feel weird at work 'cause everybody who's Black is gonna have natural hair, and I won't have to look like some type of rebel just for having my hair.

While participants express gaining some reinforcement and encouragement from going online, what else are participants doing online?

What's Online?

Education. Every participant noted that they went online to educate themselves about how to care for their hair and inspiration on how to style their hair. Participants shared that they followed blogs, looked at video tutorials, and learned how to make or enhance hair products to maximize the health of their natural hair. One participant shared

Where the online community has been helpful for me is actually in the upkeep, sustaining, and styling of my hair. And that was actually about establishing a relationship with my hair that I didn't have the chance to cultivate from early on because my hair was relaxed at a very young age...I had to get some help with figuring out how to care for my hair and products that were natural, or making my own products, my own hair remedies. And styling, how to make it look how I wanted it to look and match how I felt.

Two other participants echoed the sentiment that the online natural hair care community filled in gaps in knowledge. One stated, “people are like ‘I wanna [go natural], this is healthier for my hair, but I don’t know what to do with it’. They don’t know what stuff to put in it, what stuff don’t put in it.”

And another stated,

I think that you have examples of what your hair could be like. You have examples of all the different kinds of hair, which products work for your hair. Like, which hairstyles work for your hair. I mean like, heck, I remember we only had like Pink oil moisturizer...

One woman I interviewed shared that she got a variety of information from the online community and she spoke about the usefulness of tutorials.

some of the recipes, some of the hair care tips, some of the things that I just did not know or would not have thought of before. Especially when it came to ingredients, and what to look out for, what to avoid in shampoos and conditioners, even though they might say ‘for natural hair’, and tips of that nature. I really like the YouTube tutorials. Those are awesome. ...[the] breakdown and being able to actually see what they’re doing to their natural hair

Another participant mentioned that the education is not just one-sided. That there is a back and forth that happens, that there are discussions, forums, and conversations. She shared,

The purpose is to educate women who are, men too, but it’s to educate people about our hair. How to care for it, how to style it, all the, you know, unique and interesting things we can do it.... It’s also a forum, I guess, for us as Black people to appreciate our natural

hair, because I think there's still some sense of a stigma with our hair that it's not good enough or that it's too hard to maintain.

Community

Discussion & Feedback. The information found online is user generated, and so conversation and sharing feedback to develop and grow the well of knowledge is a large portion of what happens online. When asked how they participated in the discussions and forums and their experiences of it, the majority of participants shared that they had positive experiences:

Most of it was a positive experience. Sometimes I think, I've found that a lot of people just had a lot to say, or maybe wanted to be online and share their own personal experiences, and they didn't always help me. But there were some people, like some of the people who had a larger following [who had more useful information].

I subscribe to some pages. I give feedback, I don't give much advice in the online community, but I do take advice, and I definitely give feedback when I've had a positive experience after trying something that someone online has recommended.

One participant shared that the feedback is one contributing factor to her engaging with the online community. She stated

Just going back to what's being shared and- this may sound weird but- the perceived friendliness in YouTube videos of wanting to share and wanting to be informative to people who may not know. So just the little things like that I guess. And the positive feedback you see from the viewers. I don't necessarily give any but you know just seeing people who do give the positive feedback.

While not all participants gave feedback or posted pictures of themselves, all but one participant stated that they either shared (reposted a picture of someone with natural hair or a natural hairstyle) or “liked” a natural hair post (on many social media platforms your friends can see images that you “like” or favorite, and therefore it becomes a passive way of sharing). Two participants said that the way that she shares and “likes” photos has a deeper meaning than thinking that something is aesthetically pleasing. She shared,

Yea. I think I mean, once they’ve taken the picture they know it looks nice. But it’s still, it’s just like affirmation. Especially because there’s different types of hair and probably you know more, umm, still closer to straight hair gets more positive feedback. So, I try to ‘like’ all types of pictures, or it’s like, you know certain, umm, if the girl is prettier like she’ll get more, like it’s like she **can** be natural but you know, people think of less traditionally attractive woman with natural hair might not be as popular. So I try to ‘like’ all different types of people, all different body sizes, all different skin tones of natural hair and to I guess to add to the positive feeling.... So it’s not just, like I don’t get anything out of ‘liking’ a picture. Like, I know at home I like it. But letting the world know that I like it, I feel like it’s shared with my friends more that way and the person in the picture knows that people like it.

The other shared

...I think ‘liking’ it is just a nice reinforcement. Like, ‘looking good, doing good’ [laughter]. You share it and it goes around, I enjoy that. And it’s nice too because sometimes people who ‘like’ those pictures aren’t always people who have natural hair or people who are African American or who have different texture hair. It could be some of my friends who are like ‘oh, I like that’ or ‘that looks good’, it’s nice.... It’s encouraging.

When asked what she thought it meant when people who weren't Black or African American liked her posts, she shared,

I wouldn't go as far as to say what it means for them, but I know for me when I see them liking it, it's nice because I know that it's that much more accepted without having so far to look in the other extreme. Without having to assimilate to an extreme, but still looking good. ... You know what I mean, and it doesn't put you in the mindset that you have to change your hair so much in order **for it** to look good. To wear your hair natural, to have people be like 'yea, that really looks good'. To have it be accepted.

When speaking about sharing pics of herself, one participant shared,

I always get positive feedback. You know, because I'm posting in a group that supports my natural lifestyle I guess. So, you know, everyone's pretty positive about it. I never post pics that aren't really flattering anyways [laughter]. If my hair turns out the way I wanted it to, I'll post and I get a lot of positive feedback. ...it just starts out as me being proud of what I've done. But I do realize the importance of sharing what I've done, because it was important for me to see that from others. So, you know, hopefully someone will see it, and maybe as 'how did you do that?', or 'I want my hair to look like that', or whatever it might be. So I think it's a little bit of both. I want others to maybe ask questions and I'm also kind of proud of what I've done, so.

Policing & Responsibilities

When I asked participants about negative experiences that they might have had online, most participants' first reactions were to say that they didn't experience anything negative on the online natural hair care community, but their narratives reflected something more.

well there's like different parts. There are people who just like the look of the hair and just talk about that, but then there's people who bash like weaves, and relaxers, and stuff like that. Which, even still, now after being so long without a relaxer, I don't feel negatively towards other hairstyles, so I kind of try to stay away from that stuff. But, umm, in general it's just informative. People, it's not really people pushing their views on anybody, its people who are just there for people coming to look for what they offer.... Some people want to persuade people to go natural, some people want to help other people who have gone natural, some people probably just happen to be natural and then realized- because part of it is about popularity, I think.

Only one participant shared that she actively attempted to use the online natural hair care community to persuade someone to go natural. She knew this person in real life; she did not attempt to post anything persuasive. However, other participants shared that they've has seen this trend of divisiveness between women who wear their hair natural and women who do not.

One shared

I definitely see people misunderstanding things, maybe feeling like they are being somehow, by someone sharing their natural hair story or what they do, that that somehow means that not being natural makes them bad. Or something like that. I've seen people kind of assume that, I've seen people project that a little on to people as well. There's that fine line for me, because I think sometimes we can get so passionate, and happy, and feel joy because of something that we've done, and then therefore we want to go out and make everybody do that, right now. [laughter] And if you're not doing this right now then you are the enemy, or a sellout, or anything else that they wanna say.

And another shared,

I think people within the online hair community can be very defensive and very attached to their natural hair. Like it really is a strong part of their identity. So, I think that could be negative in the sense that if someone that decides that they're natural for a couple of years, and...then they decide to relax their hair again, I noticed that that stirs up a lot of controversy, criticism, and negativity. ... There's a little bit of elitism even, that people with natural hair are better or have it together more than people with relaxed hair. And that if you, you know, have natural hair but then you relax it or get a perm again, then you've gone astray and how could you do that, what's wrong with you? I've noticed that kind of sentiment online. ...So that's some of the negativity I see within the community.

One participant shared her own personal experience with this divisiveness. She shared that she no longer feels as comfortable wearing weaves because it doesn't as clearly mark her as having natural hair. She shares:

But it's almost like, [wearing natural hair is] not really a struggle because it's popular, but it's like you're not alone, there's people who are with you and there's people who rely on you. So, you can't just turn your back [laughter]. Like if I get a weave tomorrow, it's like people aren't going to understand [laughter] that I'm like part of the group too. Like, I understand all of the great things about natural hair and all of the negative messages that I could be sending with non-natural hair. ... I feel so positive and connected being a part of this group that takes care of and shows off their natural hair, that when I do wear a weave, it's a weird thing, but it's almost like I'm in a disguise and I want to reach out and still people. Like, just like, 'I'm gone for the day, but I really do,

like I'm really, you know, I'm really involved still'. So, it's like I have this connectedness now that I miss out on when I wear other styles.

She later continued

I think some people are judgmental. Umm. They're more strict about what natural should be. They even care about, whether other people's hair is natural. ... So people are a little bit intolerant. It seems like if you're, I guess...I have the assumption, that if you've gone natural or you were always natural, and you're participating in these forums and stuff like that, that you're just, I don't know, you're just more passionate and understanding because you know- I don't know, you're kind of in a minority. I'm pretty sure. And so you think that people who are in a minority feel oppressed so would want to be nicer to each other, but that's not always the case.

Another participant shared their disappointment with this divisiveness and judgmental attitude.

I feel like it's gotten really clique-y. Umm, like before I kind of felt like "hey, you know, we're still learning these things, let's explore, let's explore our feelings, let's get our doubts, let's learn to love ourselves and get used to our hair the way it's supposed to be". And I kind of feel like it became like "you got a texturizer, get out" [laughter] or like, "uhh, she's got a weave, she's not natural"... It was just like these really nasty comments, and it just. I don't know, I kind of feel like it's like team natural versus relaxers and I'm just like why, why can't it just be an exploration of like, you know "I'm learning to like care for my hair, and like maybe I'll go back, maybe I won't, maybe, but I'm just learning to do something for me, I'm learning to appreciate myself as a black woman.

And I feel like it's kind of just become not vicious, maybe it is vicious, it's like watching "Mean Girls" on the internet.

Only one person shared that there is blatant bashing of women wearing natural hair and racial slurs in the pages that she's visited.

I've actually seen some people join the FB page specifically and then like bash, so it's like why did you join the page? They're like, 'I don't understand why everybody's going natural. It doesn't look good on everybody, not everybody can wear it'. You know, various racial slurs, you know, nappy headed, jiggaboos, all, any name you can think of about people not having hair relaxed. They like join the page just to like bash their efforts. And even with the YouTube videos...

Friends and Networking

Participants spoke about the online community that they have the opportunity to create by engaging in the online natural hair care community. Three participants shared that they begun online relationships with women from the online natural hair care community that have traversed both subject and platform. "I got to like connect with people I may not have connected with, online. So that's nice. Just about different things that come, not necessarily **just** about natural hair, but building general relationships online."

This feeling was echoed by another participant who stated:

I have gained some, they're kind of what I call online friends [laughter]. A lot of them through Instagram and even some through FB or YouTube, but definitely I think Instagram is one of the bigger communities that I participated in. And what's great to me about Instagram is that even though it's all these images and short videos, you know

people can still, you can still connect to these individuals other sources. So a lot of the people I know on Instagram for example around hair remedies or hair styles or things like that that I can do.

Being connected to and being made aware of various resources comes up in many participants' narratives. One participant shared that she enjoys facilitating this process among her friends online and in real life. She shares

But I think as far as the relationship building...a couple of them have transferred into the offline world, [indecipherable] ongoing online relationship, and it's nice. And then like friendship, and it's nice to, just like people to have resources and connections, people regarding maybe like beauty products and beauty tutorials. And, other like other aspects like blogging or other aspects of the online, you know, online world. Umm, and maybe the like connecting, umm, like people in my network to other people that they might not know. I like doing that sometimes. If they were looking for someone to help them with a blog, I know someone who you know does graphic design and things of that nature, so I can connect two people and multiple people together and help them with whatever their goals are.

One woman felt that her having natural hair online helps facilitate networking and social resources. She feels it forges a connection between women. She shares,

I feel like people will see my hair online. Like even if it's just an, like I run a, like events brunch meet-up, and it's like they'll say 'oh, you have hair like me, that means I can participate in this too' or 'you look like me, I can participate in this too'. I mean, just like having your avatar somewhere or just having some visibility or somebody seeing your

face with like that Facebook like associated with it. I mean, I feel like, although I'm silent I still have some visibility and we have some connection there.

Another participant noted simply, "I like that there's a place to get camaraderie. Just to see camaraderie..."

Some participants spoke about how the online natural hair care community impacted their interactions with other women who wear their hair natural in real life, though they had differing opinions. One shared:

It's more accepted I think, I think people when they see other natural hair people, they kind of maybe feel more connected. I don't know how it was before the internet, but now you know, you might be, you might ask them how they got their hair that way since you're so, like all day you're looking at and reading about how people got their hair a certain way, like so and so did this twist-out, or this is a braid out on blow-dried hair, whatever.

Another felt that person-to-person sharing slowed down. She believes,

I don't really have to do that [approach women about their natural hair]...because chances are, I mean if you're sharing online you probably have a tutorial or a video up. So I kind of feel like some of the conversation slowed down, like because of the internet. I do feel like there's ample sharing, just not as active with person to person when you're writing versus walking up to somebody.

The rest of the participants shared that they hadn't made the move to online friendships

I mean, not many relationships beyond simple ‘hi and goodbye’ on FB stuff. I haven’t really benefitted in that way. I mean, I think I could if I wanted to, but I haven’t pursued anything in the online community.

As the above quote shows, there was generally a positive feeling about the possibility of networking. Another participant shared, *“I mean, if you have thousands of women who are reaching out to their peers, I mean that right there alone speaks volumes.”*

Self-Love

Another major theme participants discussed was the ways that the online natural hair care community has impacted their personal sense of self. Women shared that they were able to make changes concerning health and lifestyle, gain more confidence and feel more beautiful.

...the whole self-love piece, that’s really layered around self-worth, around-not only as a woman, as well, but as a black person...my hair in particular, I also see, and my crown, I also see as something sacred...

One participant noted that issues with hair can be rooted in an absence of love in a larger sense. She states

So my thing is, the only reason it [how Black women wear their hair] is that serious, in my opinion, is because we don’t love ourselves enough. Or that issue wouldn’t be such a big deal. Why is hair a big deal to begin with? Do you know what I’m saying? Maybe that’s too much information, but that’s part of that package for me. Because I walk around and I want people to see that we are beautiful in our natural state.

She later shared,

It conveys self-pride. Love of self, love of your culture, love of nature. No matter what. Not that you can only love yourself to be natural, but accepting natural along with everything else that you're accepting

Enjoy your hair & feel pretty. A few participants shared that participating in the online natural hair care community added an element of fun and appreciation to doing their hair. Participants shared that they found their relationships with their hair as important to their journey of self-love and confidence. One woman shared, "*It's allowed me to enjoy my hair and not think of it as something I have to fight. Like I enjoy it. I think it's beautiful. Yea, I just love myself a little bit more.*" Similarly, one participant shared that in her own personal journey, she is at a place where she uses the online nhcc to help in her journey to accept adorning herself.

[I now feel that] it's actually ok for me to play around, sometimes I really love like making my locs into a crown, or you know just spending time with my hair and with myself. Just adorning myself. I see it as loving myself, you know? I think sometimes we don't get the right- that's a luxury in our lives, especially as brown women, like we always gotta be fucking struggling and shit. [laughter] It's like if I'm going to struggle can I at least look fly. You know? And decide what that is for myself. To not even necessarily have to buy into this larger system again.... I really enjoy being fun and creative and playing around and expressing myself in this way. In a bold way too, which is awesome.

The theme of having an opportunity to think of hair as fun is also reflected in this participants observations that:

It's fun, it's a fun journey, or it can be, depending on how you look at it. There are times when, you know, I'm tired of doing my own hair, and I'll go to the hair dresser, but it's

kind of like a quick fix versus me spending 2 or 3 hours learning how to do something with my hair. It's a nice feeling to say that I put in this much work and here's my outcome, here's my finished product. And to know that I did that. It's a good feeling. And a lot of the things I have tried, I've found online.

Other participants stated that the engaging in the online community bolstered self-esteem.

I think I feel a lot more confident and beautiful being natural than I did in the very beginning without any of that support, and now that I've had an opportunity to see all of the different pages and sites and all of these other things dedicated to being natural and being a Black, natural woman, and how beautiful it is.

I think with any community, no matter whether, depending on what the group is, I think there's a lot of self-esteem that goes along...I think even within the nhcc that's something that's like in any, across the board in any community. You want to feel happy in the skin you're in, so they have a lot of promoting of, you know, 'be glad that you're natural', 'embrace who you are', you know whether you have a big 'fro, a little 'fro, whether your hair is curly, you know, embrace who you are. And I think umm, within, across that, we want you, people want you to be happy with who you are.

Two participants shared appreciation that there is more than just information on hair aesthetics that they glean from the online nhcc. She shared, "Yea, you do learn about make-up, or like hair and skin stuff is kind of all wrapped up together."

I think a lot of self-confidence...a lot of make-up tips to wear with your natural hair, because like sometimes the make-up that you would wear with your straight hair doesn't

look as good with natural hair. So I think just self-confidence, letting people, you know, it's ok that you wear your hair naturally, you don't have to feel any type of way.

Self-Love & whole health. Participants made clear connections between their increased love and confidence in their natural hair to increased self-care in other venues. Every woman interviewed noted that they felt better about themselves knowing that their hair was healthier and some related that this has led to other healthier practices. Some of their sentiments were as follows:

I have noticed that ... since I've gone natural, I have made some changes in the way that I eat, some things that I eat, some things that I do and don't do now. And not saying that because I changed my hair I've become some afro-centric high and righteous person, but I have made some lifestyle changes since I have changed my hair like I may be eat some more natural stuff now, like it's a whole process for me. And it still is a process, you know, it's not over.

And one noted,

I just love that without a doubt I've consistently seen people that are doing this work around natural hair have either started somewhere else or ended up somewhere else, but have still this kind of whole health, love of self, as you are, you know. And that manifests in food, herbal remedies, small businesses, and people writing, and all kinds of things.

Earlier in her interview, the same participant noted

[Online participants] make jewelry, or they are doulas, really interested in holistic health, you know and do things like make smoothies or have great recipes. You know, they're just doing all kinds of really great things. So we're all, I think, helping to heal and uplift

each other, you know? And I really, that's what I'm about. That's where I'm at right now. We as a people have been fighting this fight, we have gone through severe trauma in our history's culture, like severe trauma, like no one's ever said that, I feel like, but that is what our history has done to our people. And I think it's time to, I think all these little things, stuff in our culture we have labeled as luxury – which I do not believe is luxury, I believe they are ancient, old, ways in which we have taken care of our bodies, is actually our medicine. I really think that is a part of healing each other, and I feel it's going to take us to a different place as a people, you know? I really do. Call me silly, but I believe that. I want to be a part of that.

One participant observed that some of the ways that women were damaging their hair was related to shame, and that she now sees the reverse of that happening with the online natural hair care community. She states

I feel like women are becoming less reliant on chemical processes. They're becoming less reliant on “what is it that a chemical can take **out** of my hair to make it look a certain way. Versus what natural products can I put **into** my hair, to make it look a certain way”. It's kind of like a reverse process. Instead of damaging their hair, they're trying to help it. They're becoming acceptant of whatever their hair is, whether it's curly, bushy, kinky, I mean there's all kinds of adjectives, but it's actually that they're embracing it, as opposed to trying to hide it or being ashamed of it.

Shadeism and texture hierarchies. However, it's important to note that three participants spoke about the exclusion that they see in the online natural hair care community amongst women with natural hair. One participant shared that there are aesthetic biases going on

I guess, that there's still some exclusion going on. Because the most popular images are the longer hair, you're going to be more popular if your hair is long, umm, the more curly/straight than actually real real curly. Umm, I feel like the tighter curls are probably underrepresented. And, you still have to be, to be popular, I don't know, it's still like the more.... It's just, its still, I don't know how to describe, but it's still one look, one specific way is more accepted and more popular. Made-up, long hair, curly hair, lighter skin probably. So, there still could be more diversity, but it's still better than every other area.

These women share that even in the online natural hair care community, the intersection between skin color and hair texture still holds value judgments and is a source of emotion for Black women. One participant shared a story about a blog that featured a mixed race woman. She shared,

Like of course there are positive comments, there are also the people like "You're not a real Black woman. Why are you featuring her?". And I kind of feel like umm, that kind of puts mixed race women in the margin in way. It also kind of puts them on a pedestal, because I feel like some of the more popular blogs, like, have women with hair types that a lot of women don't have, and they're trying to emulate that.

One participant shared her personal experience with such bias.

[It gets negative] when some people think your natural hair is better than the other because yours is more curlier and hers is more nappier and you know, just, you know the texture of it and stuff. That could be negative that I've experienced before... I've been told both sides. I've been told by people "oh, your hair is better because...your hair is

curly so you can actually wet it and will curl, and some girls' is just a brillo pad and it's just matted and nasty". And I'm like it has nothing to do with mine being able to curl under water and hers not. It's all in how you take care of your hair, you know, at the end of the day. And you know I've also heard that my hair is nappy and it's thick and it's nasty. You know, so it's just like whatever, but you know I've heard it all really.

Creating New, and Disturbing Old Narratives

A few women pointed out the power of telling and sharing your own story. The idea that connections and shared knowledge is valuable in itself, but also can be a focal point for change can be seen in the women's views below.

It's definitely educational hands down, because most of it's tutorials and...but I also think there's a narrative and oral history sharing that's developing right now in this new age kind of way, and I don't mean new age "hippie", not that kind of way. I mean like current kind of digital age where social media is very present, I feel like we're actually in the midst of creating another group or oral history where we are sharing our narrative and our story and our relationship with our hair, and how often many of the women, and I know there are some guys out there too that are doing this as well, are often just sharing their own journeys. Their joys, their frustrations, the experience of the people maybe looking at them, or the way that they feel empowered in their own skin, or the joy that they're having. So I feel like that to me is an affirmation of my own journey, it helps to also cultivate community; it makes me feel like I'm not alone in this particular journey.

The same participant shared

I often think about, especially as a black woman or a woman of color, how much of our history has been stolen from us or not permitted to be told or shared, and the ways in which some of our culture has been able to be sustained and told thru our own voices have been in many ways under the current, you know, or just kind of, or in other ways that have not been sort of recorded in a way that may be taught in our schools. I feel like our hair piece is a part of that.... I sometimes really do feel connected to my ancestors or to my own cultural roots when I have this relationship with my hair. And nurturing care for my hair in the way that I'm learning to and even having fun creating expression with that.

One participant shared her views that social media can connect people, in particular user-generated content. She shares,

But it's like, you know...just to have a voice and say, "I have a voice, I am somebody, I'm real". And for all the people to rally around that, to be like 'I'm real too, you're like me', and to connect over that, I think it's a good thing. And so like, yea, I'm just as inspired as I think kids are inspired.

One participant shared the value of having an available source of aggregated and shared narratives and knowledge.

I personally feel like not everybody has a community where it's acceptable to wear your hair natural. And people don't always know how to take care of their own hair. Like, it's not like you can open up a magazine at any store or put the TV on any channel and learn things about your own hair, so, it's important for people to kind of pull together the information that they've gathered so that they can kind of share and benefit from it.

Stereotypes. Several participants spoke about the potential that the online community had to disturb stereotypes and be a tool for teaching people about Black culture. They spoke to the ability of user-generated content to add authentic knowledge of certain aspects of Black life.

One participant shared,

And so I just feel like, as like a global thing, it's just giving a larger presence to Black people. Globally, like changing and breaking down stereotypes, because I kind of feel like if you look at mainstream media you only see like sassy, bitchy ladies, or like these divas, or video hoes or like I don't know, this crazy welfare drug woman, or criminals, and like this is like mainstream media coverage. But like, you go online, and the world gets to see smart, hip, young, vibrant women who have various interests and they also love their hair, and they love themselves, and they're talking about it and they're like proud of it. And like, it's enthusiastic and heck yea...

Speaking about the ability to broaden people's knowledge about the Black experience, she states

And outside of the Black community I think like it's been really good at like just like breaking down stereotypes and showing different types of people and showing that like there's lots of diversity, there's racial diversity, that like Black hair isn't just confined to Black women. I mean, there's like women who are Latin or Jewish, or interracial, all of these people who are also marginalized and forgotten in the Black experience and in the Black hair care world. So it's like, to give a face to that, to give a voice to that too.

Although another participant did not agree that what was happening in the online natural hair care community was big enough to make changes. She posited,

No. Because a lot of times non-Black women are usually natural. You know what I'm saying? If you're walking around and you have natural hair to your butt, and you're not doing anything drastic, besides maybe a flat iron, to your hair. Then what is my contribution going to mean to you, other than show you how beautiful Black women are? Because I think that not enough people are even aware that black women can grow their hair, okay?

Three participants doubted that the online natural hair care community had any role in educating people from other cultures about Black hair and culture. One participant shared, *"I think you know now that it's becoming slightly more mainstream and more women are becoming more natural they're seeing it more, but they're still not really sure."*

Another participant had a similar experience, but felt more pessimistic. She shared,

Definitely. I've had many conversations with, especially, um, when I was in undergrad, for the last 2 years of undergrad I wore braids. So they didn't really understand what I was doing. But for grad school those 2 years I was there I got a lot of questions.... You know, which is fine. I don't mind answering questions. I don't, it doesn't bother me, I know a lot of people it does. It doesn't bother me for other people to ask questions, but umm, so I'm like 'I'm natural', and they go "what does natural mean... You know what I mean, we have to break down that, so I don't think people realize like oh, there's a whole world about people who wear their hair with chemicals in it versus people who don't wear chemical in it. "

... And I don't really think umm, when other cultures or races are looking up things, they're not typing into Google "what's the difference between Black women who wear

their hair natural or relaxed?”. They don’t really care. Until they may know somebody personally, you know?

Even if not breaking down large stereotypes or undoing, two participants believed that there is some education for other folks that might abate some of the microaggressions.

Like, when we don’t know about something or umm, we’re ignorant about something like we’re judgmental about it, or critical, or what’s the word I’m looking for, or, I guess like, I just had the word, not afraid but just umm, they just don’t understand it. So I know some, other individuals of other ethnicities, you know they’ll like, they look at it kind of like it’s an exhibit of some sort, I don’t know how else to put it. I know when I’ve worn some styles they’re like “oh, what did you do, how did you do that, can I touch it?” And then I’m like “no”. Or, I think for other, it’s also, and in that sense it’s also educational. Like I know there are some stereotypes around like everybody’s a Rasta or there are like, things living in the locs..... like that you can’t wash your hair, or you don’t do anything to it, or take care of it in any way. So like it’s educational in that way. Like, no, I do wash my hair, often. And no, I’m not a Rasta in any way. So like it’s educational in that way to show that like, to show people more about our culture, and to educate people more about our culture. Some of that is involved, you know, as the natural hair.

Another woman shared the thought that curiosity or spectator position would be an integral part in people of other races or cultures learning about natural hair.

Again, I think that as a source of curiosity, I think they find it interesting and fascinating that our hair can grow and the things that we can do with our hair. I think they also find it interesting to find out that there are many different methods to lock and that there are

many different reasons for locking. I think they are interested. But for completely superficial reasons, I think they see it and say ‘wow, I didn’t know their hair could grow like that’.

Generational Change. Two participants pondered the effect that the natural hair care community will have on future generations of Black people. One participant shared that she hoped increased knowledge on how to care for natural hair would lead to a change in the practice of automatically perming or pressing young Black girls’ hair.

I think another thing I think it’s [the online nhcc] done for black women; I think it’s changing what’s going on with the next generation. You know, Black women and their daughters. Just so that, you know, I think more mothers are accepting of their children’s hair, or more educated on how to manage it, how to care for their children’s natural hair. Umm, and for the long-term that like, you know, for a few years, and maybe when they’re a certain age they’ll get their hair pressed or relaxed. And I mean that’s fine, but I feel like that was more of the norm or a go-to situation, and now it’s not. Now I think more black women and more people in the nhcc are doing more and are more educated when it comes to their children, and not just their own hair.

Another participant hoped for a change in mindset about what is pretty or beautiful due to the change in adult Black women wearing their hair natural.

Black women feel better, the **kids** probably feel better ‘cause kids usually don’t get perms, so there’s like a period of their lives when they just know their hair is not “acceptable or beautiful” but they just gotta wait to get to that point...like that’s just messed up. And we can better role model [by showcasing natural hair]. When little kids

see that their [natural] hair matches the adult [with natural hair], so it's not, so they don't have to wait to be pretty.

One participant shared that she encouraged a young girl to go natural, and when she successfully transitioned she encouraged the young girl to start a blog. She shared, "I told her that she needed to go out there and show young girls how to properly take care of their hair".

Economic Considerations

One thing that my participants consistently spoke on was the economic portion of the online natural hair community. Some participants noticed the increase in consumer agency as a result of the online natural hair care community. The online natural hair care community teach Black women to care for their own hair which leaves them less dependent on salons and hair products traditionally marketed as specifically for Black Hair.

They shared they've noticed this change in their spending habits. One shared, "I didn't want to be, you know, constantly dependent on going to the hair salon, you know, all the time to get touch-ups and wash and sets, and spending all this extra money."

Another participant echoed this sentiment when she stated, "So I benefit because my hair is free, and I don't have to get it done [at a salon] in order to wear it natural."

One participant lauded her increased knowledge about her hair and the ways that it has changed her saved her money on the products she uses to do her own hair. She stated

I mean basically, I can use any sulphate-free shampoo. And you know how much money that saves me, to know that I can use any sulphate free shampoo? And its like I don't have to pay 30 dollars for this much shampoo, I can buy this much shampoo for like \$6. So like that's pretty grand. But umm, I actually feel like collateral I guess I feel a little

free from like the system of like ‘you have to do something a certain way to get the results that you want’.

And another uses this knowledge to continue to be socially conscious in her spending habits.

I particularly don’t like the idea of unnatural, harmful, chemical product being put into one of the places on my body that has the most pores and absorbent areas. And relaxing my hair, and really understanding what I was doing to my hair on a literal, physical level, and what I was supporting in my own consumption as a consumer and spending my money on products that are not good for me, and I also feel is a part of harming black people, black women, and our bodies. I was just not having that.

Product Availability & Corporate Notice. Some women noted that big companies have responded to this trend in buying and have created a variety of products for Black women with natural or transitioning hair.

One participant observed that there is an increased voice, which has added to a variety of products.

I feel like it pushes like demand with manufacturers, like you could get more product.

There are so many more makeup products for women of color now than there were like 10 or 15 years ago, I mean like, you go to Target and it’s like, it’s like this extension of colors that didn’t even exist. And it’s just because of the presence online and people are like, ‘oh, people want this? Oh, these women exist’? It’s like building a voice.

She continues,

I feel like a lot of like niche products are like, you can get them at Wal-Mart now because they’ve blown up so, the demand was there. And, I feel like, it doesn’t matter what part

of a store you're in, there will be like in big letters "Sulphate Free" like written across the front of a shampoo bottle. Or like brands that never made things for curly hair, like, I bought a shampoo yesterday that was like L'Oreal Curl Revive. I was like, "I have never seen this before in my life, 5 dollars!"

Similarly, one of the women noted

... Just having this surge of women, even with Google, typing in 'natural hair care products', I'm sure companies look at that. And they realize this is like becoming more than just a trend. There's a lot more women who wear their hair natural, maybe get it straightened, but they still need the products that help you know nurture their natural hair.

... I think that maybe with just the online community in general asking companies, 'do you have a line for natural hair care?', you know they just realized that this is a profitable business. ... Hair care companies are actually putting out products that cater to it.

...now, I can go into Walgreens and I'm like inundated with this and that and this and that. I think if anything that has made the biggest change in terms of hair care in the African American community, it's the products that they have out there.

One participant is expecting a chain reaction. She believes that if one big store carries it than more will, and she expects this to affect the number of women who can cater to their natural hair.

She shares

I think, just logically, like if someone popular starts talking about certain products, I think more stores will carry them. Like if more people are looking for Shea Moisture, or As I Am, all of those brands, and you go into Target asking "Well, one Target has it, why don't you?" then I think stuff becomes more available. We don't have to just go to one spot to get our hair care and like employers will start to realize this, you can't avoid it,

and you can't like make people not wear their hair. This is just how they're coming to you.

Another noted simply, "it's nice to see that merchants... starting to notice that there's a growing number in women that are becoming one with their own hair, and are catering to that need."

Business opportunities for participants. Women spoke about the ability for women to promote their own products online. They also noticed that larger store chains are taking note of and promoting lines of products started from small business and homemade models promoted on the online natural hair care community. One participant shared

And you there was a lot of, a lot of initiative, a lot more self-care, a lot of encouragement... A lot of entrepreneurial minded women are getting out there, making products, doing like subscription services. Like a lot of word of mouth, a lot of trading information.

The same participant observed

So like I'll see like, a lot of smaller brands in mainstream stores that like I know really only existed online or just grew word of mouth. Women that you really had to wait 4 weeks for your order 'cause basically she had to make it in her kitchen when she got some time from work. Or like full time people sending like 2 day shipping or whatever. And like Carol's Daughter is like an empire... [and is now available at] Target. Umm yea, so definitely some spill over from product and like eventually more diversity for services. Like, you can literally go anywhere and get your hair done now; there'll be somebody who knows how to do it.

Another participant shared that she makes the decision to buy from small producers and to continue to share information with other women who are interested in natural hair and remedies.

She shared,

Again not contributing to a certain kind of capitalistic, really, practices they sold us on the market. So, I'd much rather either give props to someone I see on the social media in the black or nhcc online who's done her research and does her practice and shares the everything. And is just kind of distributing this awesome shampoo that she made out of natural stuff at home and I'll give her props and I'll like post something that she did on my [Facebook] wall, and then make it myself and talk about how much I loved it. You know I'd rather do that, you know, support the real people, and do things on our own, then go to the Sally's Beauty Supply.

She later added that there is some cultural reclamation in this practice for her. She shares that she takes joy in not giving in to the big businesses that profit off products marketed to Black women.

They stole our shit, and they brought us to a place where they didn't know what the fuck we were saying, you know what I mean? They stole our shit. We didn't get our stuff back, because they stole it from us, then they repackaged it, and then they made it poisonous, but you know all these white people are making money off of this shit. Hell no. Really the truth is, it ain't your shit anyways, it's my shit. So I'm going to take it back, and do it myself. Thank you very much, and have a nice day. That's how I feel about that.

More than just hair products. Other participants spoke about alternative methods that women have been able to garner income from the online natural hair care community. One shared

[Women were] not selling their own products, but I know there are quite a few women on YouTube who make money promoting other products. They test the product and they give reviews of the product, and I think there are 2 women who I subscribe to who make extra money that way. So they'll test a hair care product, and tell all of their viewers all about it, it's like a job for them. ... Well, I mean, as a consumer I would buy those products, do you know what I mean? Because these women that I follow and have given me such great advice, telling me that this is a really good product.

Two participants noticed that bloggers who have large followings are able to use their recognition to move into other venues. One observed,

I'm noticing that, that it is possible and it is something more people are picking up on. Like not just Chescalocs, but Curly Nikki [popular vloggers], like she has a, I don't know if it's bestselling, but she has a book about her natural hair and her journey and her blog is one of the most popular blogs out there. And she has celebrity followers and all of this confirmation. So...I think having a social media presence, not just regarding natural hair, can definitely be something that is capitalized on, and can be transfers into and turns into a full time career or something that's lucrative. And I think that's remarkable that you can take something that starts out with your own journey or your own blogs, or your own videos that turns into this huge following or something that's beyond what you thought it would be. I think that's really a remarkable aspect of the online natural hair care community.

Speaking on the new trend of bloggers to be used on different media venues to capitalize on their followers, one participant shared

if you are a hair blogger, yet I, yet somebody's like 'oh, there's a black person let me get them on this segment to talk about the healthcare law or something'. I was just like, you know I'm pretty sure that there's someone who specializes in that that could talk to you.

Two participants spoke about the big business of hair expos. A staple in the Black community for years, the natural hair community has now become a noticeable part of the proceedings.

It's a whole bunch of vendors and they sell natural products, they sell skin products, hair products. Then there's some of them have made jewelry, some have clothes, make-up, they have food, entertainment, like it's a whole big deal. It's a lot of fun. You get a lot of good stuff there.

And the other added,

I went to a hair expo this past October. And what I did notice was, just as many booths they had for people who wear weaves specifically, they had just as many products for relaxed, I mean natural haired girls.... So, it's like they are capitalizing on this new wave of people who like may be a mixture of both. So they even had that like, 'This is our transitioning set. This is the set for people who are relaxed. This is the set for our people who are natural. What set are you?'.... I thought that was interesting because I'm pretty sure in the past they had maybe one or two booths that catered to natural hair, but I would say almost every single one of the booths, if not totally catered to natural hair, they had their line that helped people with natural hair.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

“ [The online natural hair care community says] we are here! We are here, we are some empresses, we are some high priestesses, we some fly ass business women, we are mommas...you know, that’s what I think it’s saying.”

This section explore where my findings supported the work of those authors in the literature review, such as meanings given to and social expectations surrounding Black hair, the use of online community for affirmation, and the divisions that have occurred in the community. It will also explore where my findings diverge from the literature review, such as intentional use of the community to combat internalized racism and shadeism, as well as economic opportunities that the online community affords users. Finally, the section will discuss areas of future research that my findings may have brought forth.

The fact that Black women’s bodies are political has been explored here and elsewhere (West, 1995; Ozakawa, 2008), and is taken as a given in this study. Messages such as race, class, and value are conveyed through body shape, size, skin tone, and hair texture. In exploring women’s experiences surrounding their hair and the online natural hair care community, we see the themes of race and racialized beauty, implications of class mobility, and social acceptance are prevalent.

Banks (2000), Ozakawa et al (1987) outlined that themes of social acceptance and economic implications, such as the effects on employment, would be prevalent and important in conversations about Black hair. Accordingly, women in my study expressed that what they gained most from the online natural hair care community was affirmation that it was socially

acceptable to wear their hair natural, and that their job prospects wouldn't be hindered by other people's biases against natural hair.

Johnson (2013) wrote that natural hair blogs were a way for women with natural hair to affirm their choice of going natural, which is mirrored by my participants. The sheer amount of participants who had received the message that natural hair was in some way jeopardizing to their personal value was overwhelming. Every participant showed that they use the online communities for affirmation. Beyond support and encouragement, a lot of my participants used this information in overcoming ingrained biases and fear of others' biases. Johnson's choice to not use women's narratives surrounding their use online spaces may have had the effect of obscuring the full extent of Black women's use of online spaces. Technology has made users able to generate and access online content almost continually through smartphone apps, and so this interaction between user and content, women and the online natural hair community, was not explored in Johnson's work.

In speaking of their interactions with the online natural hair community, many participants did not just get affirmation and feedback. They gave it. Women wanted to reciprocate the support that they found vital to their journey, and they were intentional about why and how they gave it, and that they wanted to share frustrations and journeys, and give other women a feeling of community where they might not have the support needed. Therefore part of the affirmation that women received and hoped to provide, by posting, sharing, 'liking', and providing feedback, were actions of codifying a Black aesthetic. Many women shared that without the online natural hair care community they would probably not have maintained their natural hair.

Tate (2007) used the terminology of a Black; anti-racist aesthetic to describe women who wear their hair natural's push against dominant White aesthetics surrounding beauty. She also wrote that in creating this aesthetic, divisions and contempt surrounding the skin shade and hair texture of mixed race women would arise in the natural hair community. My findings supported that there were divisions among women with natural hair, as three of my participants commented on it. However, the narratives of those participants showed that there was some preferential treatment towards women with lighter skin shade and looser curls, but there was also the presence of people that pushed back against that preference, which did have the effect of marginalizing those women. My participants noted this complexity, but there was no clear answer on which ideology was dominant within the community. These findings also reflect some Robinson's (2011) findings that hair texture and skin tone hierarchies were present with Black women regardless of whether they wore their hair naturally or chemically altered.

My findings also found some contention between women who wore their hair naturally and those who did not. My participants explored the ways that ideas of authenticity played out in their community. Not only who was "Black (enough)", but also who was "natural (enough)". These themes were also explored in Banks' (2000) work. However, my findings show that while using the online natural hair care community, Black women have the opportunity to push back against and critique the effects of these divisions. One participant showed that through her use of the online community she made sure to honor all body types, skin tones, and hair textures. Another noted that there were debates and discussions surrounding hierarchies and exclusion. These discussions are ongoing in the community, and while different platforms offer different ways to interact, it shows that the online community is a place where discussions about racialized hierarchies, cultural authenticity, and division occur.

Many women stated that through the knowledge of the online community, they learned to do their hair in its unaltered state for the first time in their adult lives. This aggregate narrative of knowledge online affords opportunities for learning new skills in hair styles, health and product making. Women showed pride in learning and mastering these new skills. Beyond that, some participants shared that they're new relationship with their hair helped them continue to have a relationship with their physical bodies, whether it be in the beauty or health realm, and an increased appreciation of self.

It was also apparent that the online natural hair care community was a space of human interaction. Some people gained friends, created communities, and shared resources through extending networks. And a few noted that their online interactions also affected the way that they created community outside of the online realm.

My participants also hoped that the information produced by and found in the online natural hair care community could help produce larger societal change. They hoped that it would help change stereotypes found in society, educate people about Black hair, and maybe even decrease microaggressions as a result of this. Participants also hoped for a change in attitude for future generations of Black women, manifested by a decreased stigma in natural hair and a change in the habit of perming young girls' hair.

Johnson (2013) and Banks (2000) both involved the issue of marketing and economics in their studies surrounding the issues of Black hair. However, their analysis stayed involved with marketing of hair products, media advertisements, and the way that hair effects job prospects. However, in my study I found that women were aware of their power in their collective voice on businesses, marketing, and products. Women were quick to recognize that the presence of the natural hair care community affected change in the kinds of products companies made available

and how they were marketed. Participants noted the appropriation of specific language and bloggers from the online natural hair care community in marketing and products. They also noticed the increase in services and availability of products used in the online natural hair care community.

Women also were aware of the many avenues participants could take to make money in the online natural hair care community. This moved from gaining popularity as a blogger and reviewing products, to selling hair and other products online, which in some circumstances has led to larger, and even nationwide, distribution of those products. Some bloggers and vlogger were able to use their celebrity to move into other venues such as writing and television. Participants also shared that they used the online community to be conscience about how they spent their dollars and whom they supported. The online natural hair care community doesn't just change the ways the businesses promote and produce, it also effects change in the way that Black women who participate produce their own goods, network for their own businesses, and patronize small businesses.

Anita Harris (2008) explored the new ways that social media afforded opportunities of political action that might be overlooked. She wrote about the agency in the use of online space for negotiating and creating identities. My findings concerning the online natural hair care community show that this particular online space is one where Black women negotiate identity, codify a Black aesthetic and subculture, work at undoing internalized racism, educate each other and provide resources, create friendships, participate in politics and cultural critiques, and have economic empowerment. This space is not without hierarchy, exclusion, contention, or even appropriation.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The online natural hair care community is one space where an intersection of race, culture, and gender norms play out. In examining this online community we can understand the resources available to, and used by Black women to assert agency, create community, and deal with racism. The narratives of my participants reveal sites of cultural resistance, avenues of cultural identity building and anti-racism work, and sites of cultural and self-esteem building, and increased self-care.

In becoming culturally competent clinicians (Comas-Diaz, 2007) evaluating differences in your own and your clients' sociocultural location is important. Aspects of Black women's sociocultural location can be connected to how their body is coded by society at large, and their hair is a part of that. Though it may seem something small, and easily overlooked, many studies have shown that there are a lot of heavily loaded things involved in Black hair. So how do our patients deal with these messages? How do they resist, interact with, or influence forces of oppression, whether external or internal? How are resources shared in communities? These are questions that social workers should be investigating with their clients. And, being able to interact with a salient portion of a clients' identity may be valuable to strengthening a therapeutic relationship. Conversely, missing or invalidating someone's sociocultural location, and the experiences therein, may cause ruptures in the therapeutic relationship. Gatzambide (2012) explores the cultural impasses in therapeutic relationships. Exploring Black hair, specifically natural hair and how Black women use the online natural hair care community, and the social, financial, and cultural capital contained therein speaks to a method of cultural empowerment that not maybe clinicians might not be aware of. And may be a way to explore sources of pride and resiliency in clients.

Areas of Future Research

Due to the use of the online community to overcome internalized biases and fear of others' biases, and the use of the online community to actively support women of all shades and hair textures, I would posit that the online natural hair care community plays a part in undoing internalized racism. This may be an area for future research with the use of a larger, more generalizable study. Research highlighting the effects of the online community natural hair care community on self-esteem in general would also be useful in understanding the importance of using this community. Finally, it seems that some women hoped that the presence of the online community would do work in changing larger narratives surrounding Black hair, Eurocentric beauty ideals, and negative stereotypes around Black women. It would be interesting to note how wide that wish is within the community, and whether or not the online natural hair care community is capable of affecting that change.

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Appendix A: Human Subjects Review Approval

February 12, 2014

Sarauna Moore

Dear Sarauna,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,



Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Danna Bodenheimer, Research Advisor

Appendix B: Consent Form

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College • Northampton, MA**

.....

Title of Study: Culture Building: The Participatory Politics of the Natural Hair Care Movement

Investigator(s): Sarauna Moore

Smith College School for Social Work, [REDACTED]

.....

You are being asked to be in a research study of the benefits of participating in the online natural hair care community. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a self-identified Black woman who has worn her hair natural for at least 2 years. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The purpose of the study is to explore the effects of participating in the online natural hair care community. This study is being conducted as a thesis requirement for my master’s in social work degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to have an interview with the researcher and answer questions about your own opinions and experiences. If you give permission, there may be a follow up interview to clarify some of your responses.

You will be asked about personal experiences that may include experiences of bias and prejudice, however this is a low- to no-risk study. You will be free to opt out of any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. The benefits of participation are having a space to explore your natural hair care journey and the forces that have influenced your experiences and beliefs.

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Your name will be kept separate from your recorded responses. Recorded interviews will be kept in a password-protected location and will not be shared with anyone besides the researcher. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. The data will be kept for at least three years according to Federal regulations. They may be kept longer if still needed for research. After the three years, or whenever the data are no longer being used, all data will be destroyed. You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If you choose to withdraw, the researcher will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify the researcher of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 1, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Sarauna Moore at [REDACTED] or by telephone at [REDACTED]. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher.

.....

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

.....

[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]

1. I agree to be [audio or video] taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Recruitment

Hello,

I am writing to ask for your help in recruiting participants for my master's thesis, a graduation requirement at Smith College's School for Social Work. I am exploring the experience of participating in the online natural hair care community. I am interested in interviewing women above the age of 18 who have completely transitioned from chemically straightened hair to natural hair no less than 2 years ago. For this study, participants will need to identify as African American or Black.

Would you be willing to speak with me about your participation in and experience with the online natural hair care community? If you know someone you feel may be interested in participating, please consider forwarding this email.

If you fit these criteria or have any questions concerning my study, please feel free to email me directly at [REDACTED]. All information will remain confidential, though the results of the study may be used in publications and presentations.

Thank you for your time and help in advance.

Sincerely,

Sarauna Moore

Appendix D: Interview Guide

1. Will you share with me what prompted you to transition to natural hair?
2. What do you feel is the purpose of the online natural hair care community?
3. How have you experienced the online natural hair care community?
4. What do you feel is your personal role in the natural hair care community? Are you an active participant? An observer? Do you like or share posts? What is significant about these actions?
5. Have you ever thought about what your participation in the online natural hair care community might mean to other women?
6. Have you ever thought about what your contributions to the online natural hair care community might mean to other naturalistas?
7. What practical uses did you get from the online natural hair care community?
8. What collateral benefits? (Did you gain any online friends? In person friends?)
9. Have you noticed any negative consequences of the online natural hair care community?
10. What do you think seeing the presence of the online natural hair care community conveys to other Black people?
11. Have any of your ideas concerning beauty, black culture, or yourself changed since participating in the online natural hair care community?
12. How would you describe the impact of the natural hair care community on larger society?
13. How would you describe the impact of the natural hair care community on yourself?