

Social comparison in the natural hair care community: How Black women utilize social media influencers during their natural hair care journey

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Abstract

Social media is a staple thing in many people's lives. Without it, we would not be able to connect with old friends or keep up with the latest trends. Social media must be examined closely because of its continued growth, particularly among young adults and minority communities (Borden, 2022). Social media has been around for over 15 years, and the platforms continue to grow, from Facebook to TikTok (Routley 2019). According to Nick Routley, in 2019, Facebook had the most monthly active users at 2.2 billion. This year alone, it was expected that at least 3.9 million people would be using social media, which is a 4.8% increase from 2021 (Georgi Todorov). As stated in my previous research, how social media affects and changes lives in the natural hair community is immaculate and understudied (Borden 2022). In addition, some members leave the natural hair community to join a new group. This affects the Black community and its impact on others. This research explores how and why black women transition from the natural curly state of their hair to an alternative such as locs, perms, and relaxers, or doing the big chop. It also examines their personal effects on parasocial relationships, social identity theory, and parasocial breakups. Utilizing in-depth interviews with seven Black females that have left the natural hair community, the findings of this research will provide an extension to my previous study, as well as social comparison effects within and outside of the community.

Keywords: parasocial relationship; social identity theory; parasocial breakup; Black Beauty; Black women; social media; influencers; natural hair; locs; curly hair

Introduction

Social media is a staple thing in many people's lives. In 2021, 72% of U.S. adults utilized social media regularly, a dramatic increase from 50% just a decade earlier (Pew Research Center, 2021). Today, most social media is viewed through video. According to Cisco, they predicted that about 82% would be called consumer Internet traffic by 2022. The industry also relies on social media for growth, with 93% of marketers landing customers through social media videos (Colormatics, 2021). Today, social media continues to grow and dramatically impacts young adults, minorities, and the teenage population.

Social media has its pros and cons and can sometimes become problematic or traumatic. At its best, it can be a place where individuals can connect with others, learn, express unique identities, and create a sense of community (Borden 2022). It can also become influential enough for one to make life-changing changes in their life. This can become challenging for Black women because social media often makes suggestions, but it brings new problems to light. This affects the Black community and its impact on others. This research explores how and why black women leave the natural hair community for a new lifestyle, their perceptions and feelings on how social media impacted this decision, and the personal effects experienced in terms of parasocial relationships, social identity, and parasocial breakups.

In the social identity theory, a social identity is a person's knowledge of belonging to a social category or group (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J.). It aims to specify and predict the circumstances where individuals think of themselves as individuals or group members. It originated from conviction and group membership can help people instill meaning in social situations. The social identity theory was developed to explain how people create their place in society. Within it, there are three psychological processes: (1) social categorization: the

tendency of people to perceive themselves and others in terms of a particular social category or interchangeable group members; (2) social comparison: people determine the relative value or social standing in a group with the members; and (3) social identification: notion that people don't perceive social situations as attached observers; their sense of who they are and how they relate to others is typically implicated in the way they view others around them. A person's social identity indicates who they are in the group they belong to.

The parasocial relationship theory features one-sided relationships, where one person shows emotional energy, interest, and time while the other is unaware of the other person. It is most familiar with celebrities, major sports teams, or TV stars, and it was created by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in the 1950s. On the other hand, parasocial breakups essentially say that we form bonds with people in media that we have never met, and these media figures either upset us or leave the community.

Social media and Black beauty

Many studies have shown social media use negatively affects individuals, pushing users to engage in unhealthy behaviors to meet unrealistic beauty standards. Regular social media use has been linked to higher susceptibility to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and more (e.g., Bissell & Zhou, 2004). Unfortunately, this can be found in mostly all identity groups, but they are much worse for adolescents, women, and racial minorities (Hoffman, 2018; Escobar-Viera et al., 2020; Borden, 2022). On social media, women may see several influencers brands have likely sponsored. Influencers are people who make content to get more followers and social/cultural power for either themselves or the brands they represent (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020; Borden, 2022). Research shows these influencers are becoming critically important to shaping societal and cultural standards of beauty. Users are more likely to trust and

identify with them (either personally or through wishful identification where the users hope to share an identity with the influencer one day) than celebrities (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020; Borden, 2022). Without influencers, there would not be people to promote brands and products or help make big hair decisions. The content produced by influencers can affect the decisions an individual makes about their hair and what will happen to it in the future. This study seeks to fill that gap in the literature by exploring a particular group, Black female social media users that have left the natural hair care community.

In February 2021, 77% of Black U.S. citizens regularly used social media, above the national average; additionally, new social media users are higher among the Black population than any other race in America (Pew Research Center, 2021; Borden, 2022). Of that percentage, 78% of them are women. YouTube and Facebook are the most common, with Instagram coming in after (Pew Research Center, 2021). Studies have shown that Black women struggle with social and racial identity negotiations during social media and vlog use, with adverse mental and physical health effects (Stanton et al., 2017; Borden, 2022). Aside from the possible negative aspects of social media, it is a place for social and cultural growth. This goes for minority communities as well as others.

In the social media or internet world, anyone who has access to the internet can contribute thoughts or ideas online. Research shows that social media has been necessary to challenge deeply set historical notions of Black female beauty (Monde, 2018; Borden, 2022) and often use hashtags like #locs, #locstyles, #naturalhair, #loclivin, #explorepgae, #protectivehairstyle, and #curlygirlcommunity. These hashtags help to define what it means to be a Black woman.

Additionally, social media is often used by minority communities as "essential tools for 21st-century social movements" (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016, p. 2), including information

sharing for the Black, Lives Matter movement and other critical social justice issues (Cox, 2017; Borden, 2022).

History of the natural hair movement

Before social media, women used blogs and forums to find the needed information, such as tips and techniques. Until the mid-1960s, African American people wore their hair straightened according to the European aesthetic (Drumond, 2020). A 'real' Black person adored a 'natural hairstyle,' while those who straightened their hair were deemed "fake" during the Civil Rights Movement (Thompson, 2009, p. 835; Borden 2022). Once the natural hair community gained popularity, those who initially were straight picked a different path and decided to wear their hair's natural curly state. In addition, some women who opted out of wearing their hair curly chose to get a perm or relaxer, which uses chemicals. These often damage the hair and scalp (Borden 2022).

Dreadlocks or locs are connected with African heritage and the European colonizers (Margherita Pletti). According to Knotty Emx, the first known examples came from ancient Egypt. The hairstyle appeared on some artifacts; even today, some of these are still being discovered. Vedic scriptures have references to locs dating back to 1500BC (Kyle Ring, 2020). Vedic scriptures are holy Hindu texts. Back then, dreadlocks may have been referred to as 'jata,' which means, "twisted locks of hair" in Sanskrit (Ring 2020). Although it was a common hairstyle to see back then, it was to have dreadlocks in some cultures. In some cultures, it is considered a rejection of materialism and vanity. In other places, it is a sign of spiritual connection to a higher power (Ring 2020).

Aside from ancient times, a well-known Jamaican artist, Bob Marley, had a lot to do with the cultivation of the hairstyle. Marley (born Robert Nesta Marley) was a Jamaican singer-

songwriter and an international superstar (Britannica). During his life, he had Rastafarian beliefs, and because of this, he grew free from dreadlocks. In the Rastafarian culture, dreadlocks represent a connection to Africa and a rejection of Babylon (Ring 2020). Back in the 70s, it was believed to be a sacred hairstyle and was not as popular as today. According to the Black Doctor, dreadlocks were a symbol. They displayed power for African warriors. In Jamaica, people with dreadlocks did it to show their natural beauty (Kali Johnson, 2015). Bob Marley once said, "To tell you the truth, all you gotta do is leave it, wash it, and don't comb it. Keep it clean, and it will dreadlock itself".

Perms and relaxers are often a choice for natural hair. However, if you were to think back to 25 years ago, naturally curly hair was not as popular as it is today. Before we begin, there is a distinct difference between the two as they are not the same. A relaxer straightens your curl pattern, and a perm help to create an unnatural hair texture, curls, and waves (Maya Allen, 2022). Perms became first popular in the early 1900s. German Karl Nessler was the first to invent the wave machine (Catherine Heuzenroeder, 2017). He created this thinking it would change women's hair, and he first tested it on his wife. Relaxers are said to have been created by Garrett Augustus Morgan around 1909. According to Zkhiphani, Morgan accidentally invented this hair straightening cream while he was trying to find a way to "ease the friction of his sewing machines" (Thato Tinte, 2016). To test this out, he tried it on the fur of his neighbor's dog and his hair, learned that it interested the curl pattern, and straightened the hair. Morgan later started his own company, G.A. Morgan Hair Refining, to sell this product. Eventually, it was bought by Proline, the manufacturers of Dark and Lovely (Thato Tinte, 2016). Over time, he created other products, but this was essentially the start of an era of primarity for Black women.

The following research questions I will be forcing on are:

RQ1: How do Black women, former members of the natural hair community, utilize social media?

RQ2: Why do Black women leave the natural hair community?

Methods

For this project, qualitative in-depth interviews were utilized with former natural hair care community members to understand better, how Black women interact with and compare themselves to natural hair care influencers on social media. In this study, the interviews allowed a former member of the natural hair community to explain their reasoning on why they left the community and how social media impacted their decisions.

Sample

To be interviewed, participants had to be over 18 years old, female or identifying as female, Black, who have previously been a part of the natural hair community, and use social media. A purposive snowball sampling method (Robinson, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) used personal contacts first to identify others who met the inclusion category requirements (Borden, 2022). Seven participants were recruited; all were between 20 and 26 and considered young adults. They all identified as Black. They lived in various regions of the United States, but most participants were from the Southeast. Participants' diversity of hair types and skin tones was purposely sought to capture potential variations in experiences.

Data Collection

After IRB approval, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, using respondent-type interviews focusing on individuals with similar identities and shared experiences (Tracy, 2013; Borden, 2022). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were utilized to capture the lived experiences of the former destroyed community members. In addition, they provided

insight into the reasons for using social media during their hair change. Finally, the use of semi-structured interviews consisting of structured interview questions gave the researcher freedom to probe beyond the initial stage of questions while engaging in understanding and allowing elaboration through narratives (Lindlof & Taylor 2017; Borden 2022).

The interview protocol guide walked participants through their previous natural hair care journey and their new journey. It also explored their use of social media and how it has impacted their decisions. The interview questions focused on leaving the natural hair community and the overall sense of Black hair content on social media. The order of the interview protocol allowed the participants to consider these items separately before determining their general perceptions of the natural hair community on social media and what is done to make them change their hair.

Interviewees were assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity. All interviews were conducted by phone or Zoom/Skype video due to the COVID-19 pandemic and for the safety of the researcher and participants. Virtual interviews were easier to conduct because the interviewer and interviewees lived in different states. Discussions took between 30 and 90 minutes and were recorded upon the participant's permission for transcription purposes. With seven participants, researchers collected over 12 hours of interviews and more than ten pages of data and transcripts.

Findings

The finding suggests that social media has dramatically impacted a Black woman's perception of natural hair in its kinky, curly state. For our participants, there would be some differences in hair practices if there weren't any social media. However, as my previous research states, social comparison with natural hair influencers played a prominent role in how females talked about their beauty and identity journey (Borden 2022). Since social media has affected an

essential change for women, so much as to change their hair's texture completely, it is safe to say social media is a game-changer.

Black women's social media usage

In examining RQ1, how do Black women who are former members of the natural hair community utilize social media, the researcher found that social media is used frequently, but not always for hair purposes. Instead, it is primarily used for entertainment, keeping up with friends and family, or promoting a business, as one of the participants said. Out of all the participants, they have been using it for an average of 10 years. Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok are among the most common platforms, while Pinterest and Snapchat were briefly mentioned.

Leaving the natural hair community

In examining RQ2, why Black women leave the natural hair community, the researcher found outstanding reasons why these participants no longer want to be a part of the natural hair community, including family and friends, social media, and impulse decisions.

The most common reason is family and friends. These family and friends can have a significant impact on life-changing decisions. Participant 3 said. "My mother relaxed my hair for the first time when I was about eight. I did a competition dance, and relaxing my hair made it more manageable when wearing its buns... I cut my hair into a pixie cut when I was 22. I continued with protective styles, and last July, I decided to relax my hair and recut it into a pixie cut. My hair is still relaxed and has been in protective styles for the last five months". Since her mother made the change for her at a young age, it started a trend for her up until her 20s. Even with friends and family helping to make decisions, you can also make some for yourself and decide what you want to do. "At first, I thought me doing at-home DIY hair mask was the issue with my hair breaking, but I realized it was all the sweating from sports... Relaxers were the

easiest for me because the hairs on my scalp were very curly. I needed the relaxing at my scalp to help all the breakage" (Participant 1).

Although leaving the natural hair community is a choice, there are some key "breaking points" for when the participants leave. "I wouldn't call it a breaking point, but I never wanted to go back natural. It was something that was decided for me. And I've always enjoyed keeping my hair short, and I felt I would rather have short straight hair. So I went for it when I could afford to get my hair relaxed on my own and pay for the upkeep" (Participant 2). After making the switch, many participants doubted that they would be returning to their hair's natural state. However, they are pleased with their choice and will continue with it.

For those considering making the switch, one of the participants says, "It's okay. When using the chemicals in a relaxer (if you choose that route), space them more than the instructions say. It usually says 6 to 8 weeks, and I double that. It helps her not to be so damaged from the touch-ups".

Overall, the participants have made up their minds about their hair and have shared their thoughts about the natural hair community. The adverse outcomes have created a new lifestyle and positive impact now. In addition, these decisions have led to more self-confidence and a better sense of identity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how social media affects Black women, formerly members of the natural hair community. Utilizing in-depth interviews with Black females who do not have natural hair, these findings provide insight into how these women use social media throughout their hair journey. Additionally, this study allows future researchers to understand better the impact social media influencers have on Black female beauty standards and identity.

While the inclusion requirements of our study did not require participants to use social media during their natural hair care journey, every participant had done so and used social media regularly. In addition, all participants used social media daily for entertainment or connection purposes.

While previous research has discovered the extraordinarily harmful and adverse effects of social media use on Black women (i.e., Hoffman, 2018), this study offers some hope for those who were in the natural hair community to find information, inspiration, interaction, and identity confirmation through social media outlets reflecting their standards of beauty. In addition, this research contributes to the previous study of Black women utilizing social media during their hair care journey.

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