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# Thesis of Shari E. Drumond

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

## Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University  
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

April 2020

Approved:  
Thesis Committee

Thesis Advisor: Rachel Panton

Thesis Reader: Janine Morris

HAIR: HOW NATURALS ARE USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO RESHAPE THE NARRATIVE  
AND VISUAL RHETORIC OF BLACK HAIR

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Shari Drumond

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

November 2020

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## ABSTRACT

Black women's natural hair has been subject to both praise and scrutiny, though the latter is more common despite the steps taken towards inclusion and diversity. In the age of social media, members of the natural hair community have been able to voice and communicate ideas and issues that are specific to their discourse community. This study explores how the natural hair community uses social media, more specifically Instagram, to discuss the complex issues that surround natural hair including historicization, workplace bias, colorism, and social justice. Additionally, this study argues that natural hair is a form of visual rhetoric as well as a metaphor for rhetorical reappropriation both visually and textually. The concept "good hair" continues to be significant in natural hair discourse as it can be associated with numerous artifacts and ideas of what "good hair" means to Black women with natural hair. A theoretical approach was taken to investigate textual trends in user discourse as well as visual rhetoric on one Instagram page using André Brock's Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) as a model.

*Keywords: Natural hair, visual rhetoric, social media, Black body politics*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by thanking my thesis committee. Dr. Panton, thank you for working with me over the course of my last year in this amazing program. You've given me a space to be real and talk about us Black girls as well as guide me in navigating the intricacies of Black hair politics. Every face-to-face meeting and phone call meant so much to me, and I appreciate the time you took to talk before and through this pandemic. Thanks for believing in me and this project and helping me contribute to our respective discourse communities. To Dr. Morris, none of this would have been possible had we hadn't discussed reappropriation in Rhetorical Criticism. Thank you for letting me write about hair for my seminar paper. Seeing how that idea has blossomed into the most significant project I've ever worked on makes me so proud to say that it all started in your summer class. You've given me so much guidance on the theoretical side of things—thanks for your patience and pushing me to think about natural hair in a more rhetorical way. Sitting down in your office and talking about sources has allowed me to explore a world of scholars that I will continue to draw from in future work. To the admin and my professors, thanks for always supporting me and allowing me to cry in your offices! I appreciate you more than you'll ever know. To my colleagues, you've been wonderful. Thank you for the great discussions, game nights, serious laughs and just doing grad school together. And to my amazing family... Thanks for supporting me from the minute I was accepted into this program. All that talk about video games, rhetoric, hair and thesis has been worth it. I'm sorry for talking your ears off but thank you for listening and understanding! It takes a team to make anything happen, and I couldn't have done this without y'all and I thank God for your love and support. Me ah gwon wit it! Onward and upward, always!

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## Introduction

Over the summer of 2019, I was enrolled in a rhetorical criticism course. Our class was discussing the idea of reappropriation and the way in which certain words, phrases and ideas have been repurposed to create new meanings. Recounting my own personal experiences suddenly struck a nerve in me and I immediately thought about the natural hair of Black women. The word “nappy” has always had a negative implication both within and outside of the Black community; the notion that one’s natural hair was something that needed to be fixed, more specifically straightened, to be socially acceptable has plagued Black women and how they perceive beauty standards. The word has been used by my immediate family as well as friends and acquaintances, but I never really thought much of it until I decided to grow my natural hair out in 2014. It is often said that we don’t realize how prevalent elements of our surroundings are until they affect us directly. Going natural opened up an entirely new world to me—it reaffirmed that being Black came with a host of challenges that were almost always out of our control and that hair, especially when it came to school and professional settings, is often seen as a political statement that can supersede the talent, ambition and intelligence of Black individuals. With all of these ideas in mind, natural hair was my topic for a reflection I wrote and the ideas I presented soon became the central figure in my seminar paper for that course. The final draft of the latter would then become the basis for this project, my master’s thesis.

Being a millennial has allowed me to interact with technology and digital media—in 2010, I joined Facebook. At that time, I was still relaxing my hair, but as I began transitioning, I started following a lot of Black hair pages before joining Instagram five years later. Originally, I envisioned social media platforms digital spaces to reconnect with family and old friends; it wasn’t until I started posting pictures of my transition on Facebook and Instagram that I realized

there was an entire community of Black women experiencing similar instances. Friends of mine would ask for specific products that I used or how I achieved a certain style, and we would have these conversations in the comments under my pictures. Becoming an Instagram user broadened the notion of Black hair discourse simply because Instagram was mostly used for posting pictures at the time. I followed at least three or four natural hair pages after making my account, and I was struck by all of the unique ways in which Black women were styling their natural hair. One major difference I noticed between Facebook and Instagram was the type of content that was being posted. Facebook tended to highlight women with long, loosely curled hair whereas Instagram had pictures of women with all kinds of curl patterns in addition to locs, twists and braids. I also noted that there were more pictures of little Black girls rocking their natural hair, and it honestly made me happy to see youth embracing their hair before being taught to hate it. Due to the heightened use of technology amongst members of Generation Z and Generation Alpha, social media has granted Black individuals, regardless of age, to convene and create niches specific to their respective discourse communities.

Social media has helped create spaces for a wide range of conversations to be had. One of ways in which it allows this is with pages. Whether someone uses Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, they have the agency to choose what kind of media or content they are exposed to based on the pages they follow. There are hundreds of natural hair pages on Instagram alone—these pages repost media from individual pages which often helps with reach (the frequency at which someone's content travels and how often users interact with it). Prior to Instagram and Facebook, there was YouTube and Myspace, but neither really created a niched space for natural hair discourse to occur. With more Black women utilizing digital media, accessing information has become extremely rapid, almost instantaneous. When learning about something that most Black

women have been taught was socially inappropriate, it has bridged somewhat of an information gap in terms of caring for natural hair (what products work best for certain curl patterns and porosities, for example). In the case of this project, I chose one page on Instagram (@naturalhairloves) to monitor and collect data from to create an argument concerning how Black women are using social media to not only make rhetorical arguments, but how they have reappropriated what it means to be natural and how all of these microcosms constitute a larger rhetorical statement.

Natural hair has been viewed as a political statement since the establishment of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the emerging notion of Black pride. In 2020, natural hair can still be viewed as political—in the age of social media and resisting dominate narratives surrounding Black women’s existence, natural hair can be considered a retort to the concept of social assimilation. This was made clear in the data collected for this project. Personally, I used to be embarrassed about my natural hair because I didn’t understand it. Now, hundreds of thousands of Black women are posting pictures of their hair on social media while employing natural positive hashtags such as #teamnatural. In that sense, it could be argued that in engaging in these conversations and forwarding a discourse through community building, natural hair has become a metaphor for how Black women can relate to each other through their experiences with their hair. Additionally, it could be implied that natural hair is a metaphor for Black women’s acceptance of their hair as well as their place in digital and physical spaces.

By closely examining a single natural hair page on Instagram and delving into a wealth of literature, this project presents the rhetorical and metaphorical significance of natural hair and how Black women are using social media to make these arguments. Coding the comments of a variety of posts has supported the idea that Black women understand that their hair is unique and

many of them have come to love and accept their natural hair. This is why natural hair pages exist. This project used one social media page to make this argument, but the conversation doesn't stop here.

## Literature Review

For many years, natural hair has been an indicator of one's wealth and social status (Randle, 2014, p. 114). Due to the Atlantic slave trade however, Afro-textured hair was considered something foreign and unwelcomed by a Western Europeanized society. Because the Black aesthetic was not accepted as ideal or becoming by European beauty standards, antiquated perceptions of Blackness came to the consensus that something as simple as the texture of one's hair was unfitting of European standards of beauty or beauty in general (Thomas, 2013, p. 2). In combating these perceptions, Black women began to straighten their hair in hopes of being able to assimilate themselves in a predominantly Europeanized culture to meet these beauty standards. Historically, natural hair has been labeled as ugly and unprofessional or as Tiffany Thomas (2013) mentions, "militant" and "unkempt." Several establishments such as professional workplaces, corporations and schools have been notorious for ostracizing those with natural hair because of these archaic societal ideologies which bled into many of their policies regarding grooming and attire. Natural hair itself is something that can only be changed by means of extreme heat or chemical relaxers which often leaves the hair and scalp damaged. Historically, natural hair has remained a longstanding social and cultural indicator and, in many ways, that has not changed; today, Black women, especially those in North America, refer to themselves as natural if their hair hasn't been altered by any means. Since the eruption of the Natural Hair Movement, Black women have been encouraged to stop straightening their hair and embrace their curls in an act of self-reclamation.

Natural hair, both in the rhetorical and metaphorical sense, is the visual representation of cultural reappropriation and self-reclamation among Black women, and the conversations that surround natural hair as well as its complexities mirror the Burkean Parlor, also known as the

“unending conversation.” This conversation, rather, natural hair discourse, iterates issues which concerned Black women during the 60s, 70s and 80s and continue to affect Black women to this day. Though the manner in which these societal devices have devalued the significance of natural hair, be it dress code or grooming policies, the underlying messages and connotations associated with Black hair have remained stagnant. For example, many African warriors wore locs, a matted hairstyle which became one of the signifying factors of Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Today, Black athletes and musical artists are able to sport locs without the same level of scrutiny or criticism however, individuals with locs have faced scorn and contempt from a host of establishments such as public and private educational institutions as well as corporate America. Shauntae Brown White (2005) suggests that choice of hairstyle is indeed rhetorical and can hold several implications in regard to Black body politics (White, 2005, para. 6). Social media has allowed these conversations to continue in spaces that were created explicitly for Black women—in creating said spaces, vernacular created by and for Black people both male and female can be utilized in a way that fosters inclusion and positivity where they never existed in terms of social constructs and beauty standards (Davis, Mbilishaka & Templeton, 2019, p. 106). Terms such as “queen,” “Black girl magic” and “team natural” play substantial roles not only in the digital sphere and the use of hashtags, but they have been vital in reshaping the manner in which Black people address and identify themselves.

It is argued that in specific arenas such as education and the corporate world, natural hair is deemed unfitting and warrants discrimination toward the individual wearing her natural hair. Social media is taking on a new purpose that wasn’t necessarily intended. In the case of the natural hair community, it serves as a platform to exercise agency and propagate positive imagery of Black women, especially Black women with natural hair. This project in particular

investigated one Instagram page and found trends in post types as well as the plethora of Black women who use social media to talk about hair.

The focus of this project is to analyze the complex issues surrounding the natural hair of Black women through its rhetorical and metaphorical significance. More specifically, this project aims to analyze how the perception of natural hair is being changed by the influence of social media and how social media is being used to spread the Natural Hair Movement's message as a means of social justice by educating Black women on natural hair as well as creating a space where natural hair is not an anomaly and can be celebrated for what it is. To analyze this artifact further, Natural Hair Loves, LLC's Instagram page (@naturalhairloves) was used for this specific study; its posts, both visual and textual, as well as its followers' comments were examined to identify trends in user discourse as well as visual rhetoric. André Brock's Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) was used as a model in examining the textual trends—those found in users' comments on Instagram—observed in this study in addition to statements that were being made through the visual images Natural Hair Loves posted over the course of the data collection period.

### *The Natural Hair Movement*

Though many believe the Natural Hair Movement started in the 2000s, origins of the movement can be traced back to the 1960s when the Black Panther Party was established as well as the Rastafari Movement which gained traction even earlier on, originating in the 1930s. When looking at the African diaspora, it's imperative to note the longstanding history of locs and Rastafarianism and how both have molded Black identity and beauty standards. Locs, much like the afro, have gained a rather infamous reputation of being "wild and unattractive" especially from individuals outside of their respective communities (Barrett, 1997). Before locs were worn

by Rastas, the style was originally worn by several African peoples such as the Somalis and the Maasai (Edmonds, 2012). Locs have become a prominent feature not of just Rastafarianism but of West Indian culture as well. In the States, however, natural hair was often associated with the BPP and Black Power—the Black Panther Party originated in 1966, the same year the afro, a hairstyle worn naturally by Black people, was made famous. The style remained prominent throughout the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s and soon became a staple of neo soul and Afrocentrism. When looking at the word *afro*, it can be associated with the hairstyle worn by Black people, or it can refer to anything that relates to Africa in some way.

Many prolific figures who sported the style includes Erykah Badu, Maxwell, Angela Davis and Lauryn Hill. Tiffany Thomas argues that Black people were encouraged to wear afros and other natural hairstyles because of the Black Power Movement—given the time period all of these revolutions were taking place, natural hair had a great deal of political meaning (Thomas, 2013, p. 3). It can be argued that the afro is still being used as a political statement through its visual rhetoric. Today, Black celebrities that wear their natural hair include Childish Gambino, Solange Knowles, Janelle Monáe and Lupita Nyong'o, just to name a few. Generally speaking, natural hairstyles such as the afro and locs as well as the affordances they offer younger Black women (and men) came at a cost to those who fought to embrace their natural hair. In choosing to wear their natural hair today, celebrities are not only acknowledging the paths that were paved for them by other Black musicians, actors and actresses; they are also choosing to recreate a social norm for Black beauty and what is deemed acceptable both within and outside of the entertainment industry.

The metaphorical significance of Black hair can be traced back to even earlier moments in history, specifically during the 15<sup>th</sup> century which was dubbed the “Age of Discovery”



(Mancall, 1998, p. 27). It can be inferred that Europeans always understood Black hair's complexities and cultural importance as they "were often struck by the various hairstyles that they saw within each community" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 87). In a rush attempt to further dehumanize African slaves that were shipped to Europe and the Americas, the slaves' hair was shaved. Often, this act was completely intentional—it was a rhetorical action that stripped slaves of their culture. The action itself "represented a removal of any trace of African identity" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 87) which had long standing impacts on the significance of Afro-textured hair especially. By wearing different hairstyles, human hair can become a "symbol that 'speaks' or expresses or becomes certain human and social ideas" (Botchway, 2018, para. 2). There are many hairstyles worn by Black women that are named after the places and or people from which they originated. For example, Bantu knots<sup>1</sup> are popular amongst Black women (see Figure 1). They are a traditional hairstyle in Africa that has existed for more than a century. The term Bantu refers to the 300 to 600 ethnic groups who speak the Bantu language in southern Africa (Tipton, 2018, para. 3). Another popular style is known as Senegalese twists, named after a specific twisting technique which originated in Senegal. When



Figure 1: Bantu knots worn by Gerilyn Hayes (Tipton, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Although Bantu knots are a rather ancient hairstyle, African American women still wear the style after the influence of celebrities such as Rihanna. Refer to Figure 1 above.

looking at the history of Afro-textured hair, it has been used an indicator of one's social status as well as what contributes to an individual's overall identity.

Like the African diaspora, the concept of hair's significance didn't concern African descendants in a single area. Afro-Latinos and Latinas still face discrimination because of their hair, especially in countries where White Hispanics are the majority. For example, Black or Afro-Costa Ricans—or Afro-Latinos in general—experience similar instances of bias because of the natural texture of their hair. A parallel can be made in this case as most Afro-Costa Ricans' parents and grandparents were shipped from Jamaica and “endured an even more violent experience...” (Miller, 2016, p. 80). Afro-Costa Ricans' roots can almost always be traced back to Jamaica, parallel to Black Americans' African lineage. Like Rastas who experienced hardships because of their hair, Afro-Costa Ricans and their parents faced similar tribulations. To further support this claim, Johnson and Bankhead note that:

With the oppression and enslavement of Africans came the oppression of Black hair. From the arrival in the Americas to plantation life and beyond, history shows a common trend of repressing African hair. On the plantation, the men who worked the fields wore their heads shaved, while women were expected to cover their hair with rough, coarse fabric because Europeans considered it unattractive and offensive. Enslaved Africans who worked closer to the plantation “masters,” wore hairstyles that emulated the dominant trends of the times, such as wigs in the 18th century. Africans on the plantations either had to emulate white people or cover their heads in effort to not offend Whites, a concept that carries into our present society, in a somewhat more nuanced manner. (p. 88)

It can be argued that Black history would include the history of Black hair and what those with Afro-textured hair had to endure. To further support Johnson and Bankhead's point, Vanessa King (2018) comments on African Americans' longstanding relationship with "systemic discrimination and institutional racism." She states that "Enslaved Africans were forcibly transported from Africa to the United States in the 1600's [...] house slaves endured a different form of racialization than field slaves. Enslaved women who worked in the home were forced to groom and straighten their hair to look like White Europeans" (King, 2018, p. 5). The division created between house and field slaves caused a tumultuous rift that still afflicts the Black community to this day. In terms of issues such as colorism, the historicization of the "divide and conquer" strategy is evident in discourse surrounding natural hair, especially that of Black women with darker skin.

It would be too easy—and frankly, quite obvious—to say that Black people have experienced unfair treatment due to the pigment of their skin and the texture of their hair. The metaphorical and rhetorical significance is reflected in and how Black women currently treat and speak about the hair they're reclaiming after years of oppression and racism. Social media platforms such as Instagram or Twitter weren't tools Black women could use during the 60s, so women used their physical bodies and simply wore their natural hair to make rhetorical and metaphorical statements in declaring stances of social and political defiance. Angela Davis, a significant Civil Rights activist, was known for wearing her hair in an afro, adding to the weight of one's hair and style of choice and where natural hair stood in sociopolitical discourse (Edwards, 2015, para. 4). In terms of social media and using it to battle hair bias, André Brock argues that the "paradox of constructing an embodied identity in a virtual space helps to open up an ontological consideration of racial identity—that it is a socially constructed artifact with more

to do with social and cultural resources than with skin color” (Brock, 2009, p. 2). Black women are able to use social media for reasons other than leisure or enjoyment. They have been granted the opportunity to convene in a space where their physical bodies cannot however, their presence is almost tangible. In creating natural hair pages, the natural hair community has a residence within the digital realm as it does in the real world. Due to the increasing number of Black women who identify as natural, more social media users relate to these natural hair pages and feel encouraged to follow as well as interact with hashtags such as #teamnatural. In that sense, what Brock calls an “embodied identity” could be a combination of the Black woman’s agency within a set structure such as societal norms or religion as well as how each individual woman defines the concept of being natural.

To further emphasize the historical weight that natural hair holds, one must consider that Black hair sustained spiritual, social, cultural and aesthetic significance among African people from the Ancient Nile Valley civilizations to the movement West as well as the establishment of Western African empires (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 87). Crystal Powell (2018) adds that hair has played a dynamic role in how women have been perceived in terms of their beauty, wealth, marital status, religion, and rank; hair could also be specific enough to express where a woman came from (Powell, 2018, p. 935). One could assume that these factors never really went away over the course of hair’s evolution but rather, these things were suppressed but not completely wiped away. In its entirety, afro-textured hair has always been one of many cultural indicators (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 87). Because of the Natural Hair Movement, Black women have been encouraged to wear their natural hair and push the boundaries of what “standard” beauty actually means to people of color. The term “natural” is a reference to those who don’t alter their hair with chemicals or heat, though the term “Afro-textured hair” is

synonymous to “textured hair” which can also mean “natural hair” or “natural,” so in many cases, these terms are often used interchangeably. However, the concept of natural hair or simply being “natural” has become an anomaly though there are still issues that surround the concept of natural hair both within and outside of the natural hair community.

In terms of beauty norms and standards, natural hair has been on the outs since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Because of Eurocentric customs that have influenced almost all aspects of Western societal norms from religion to language and the family hierarchy, something as simple as beauty standards have been morphed into a fixed idea rather than something that is subjective and changeable based on the interpreter. Kaili Moss defines Eurocentric beauty standards as “the bias shown towards European or Caucasian culture and the physical traits associated with it” (Moss, 2018, p. 191). She goes on to say that because of the United States’ immense power and influence, “our standard of beauty has seeped into other countries as a result of globalization, influencing the way other cultures define beauty” (Moss, 2018, p. 191). In many cultures, a woman’s hair is considered “her crowning glory and manifestation of her femininity” however Afro-textured hair is deemed unattractive by Western beauty standards as it isn’t long or straight; therefore, Black hair falls into the lowest level of a hair hierarchy (Thomas, 2013, p. 1). When looking at the history of Black Americans’ relationship with American society and their fragile attempts to achieve cultural assimilation, Black women experimented with different methods to beautify themselves in a manner that would be considered fair by the majority or rather by their White counterparts. That in itself created areas of concern within the Black community as a whole—the idea of colorism and women (and men) who possess naturally straight or wavy hair gradually became tolerable by the majority’s standards while becoming somewhat of a substandard, the “face” of what actual Black people should look like. Alice Walker defined

colorism as “preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their skin color” (Tharps, 2016, para. 5). Walker is credited for coining the term as it didn’t officially exist; one couldn’t find it in a dictionary and the autocorrect function couldn’t recognize it (Tharps, 2016, para. 5). The preference for light skin has been quite commonplace within the Black community however, Walker has called it an evil that, if not eliminated, will continue to prevent the Black community from advancing and growing.

Like the hair hierarchy, there has been the presence of a “colour caste system within the African American community [which] has perpetuated internalized racism and selfhatred” (White, 2005, p. 2). This ideology suggests that more “European” features—lighter skin, less ethnic facial structure and straighter hair—deems an individual who possesses these traits more valuable socially and culturally (White, 2005, p. 2). The idea that African features are less valuable than those of European women, in addition to other European customs, bled into societal views of how women should look, regardless of race or hair type or even what constitutes that which makes an individual beautiful. White furthers her argument in stating that “one of the primary interests in both Afrocentric and black feminist criticism is to understand how oppression is constructed and eliminated [...] and how a Eurocentric standard of beauty is constructed and perpetuated in American culture and how some women have challenged and transformed this universal standard by the choice they make in how they wear their hair” (White, 2005, p. 3). Due to years of negative connotations and the notion of textured hair being the opposite of “good hair”—hair that is naturally straight or possesses looser curls—there has been friction within the natural hair community as a whole. Although many Black women are still refusing to buy into Eurocentric beauty norms, the historical significance that colorism and texturism hold still influence and affect the manner in which beauty is presented by companies

(Mitchell, 2018, p. 2). In a 2016 survey conducted by Perception Institute, the term “good hair” was associated with styling, curl patterns, manageability and racism (McGill Johnson, Godsil, MacFarlane, et al., 2017, para. 1). Though the Natural Hair Movement has been a catalyst in encouraging Black women to embrace themselves from the inside out, archaic mentalities that created cracks in the foundation have managed to spill into conversations amongst Black women, especially on social media.

### *Natural Hair in the Workplace*

Although the Natural Hair Movement sparked a fire among Black women around South Florida as well as the rest of the country, there are still areas of society that scorn natural hair despite the steps taken to create a broader scope of societal representation. The best way to illustrate this would be to simply Google search “unprofessional hairstyles” and look at the image results. Saying that the results are shocking would be an understatement. It wouldn’t be necessarily true to state that there isn’t representation of natural hair, but the kind of representation that society chooses to forward and circulate is what counts. It can be argued that women of color have been given the task of challenging society’s idea of “professional” hair in one’s workplace as well as other entities such as school and in the media. Chelsea Candelario of Mashable claims that “more than ever, powerful characters are showing off their natural hair” (Candelario, 2018, para. 3). Social media has granted Black women a space to discuss issues that relate to natural hair and the concept of “professional hair” is one of the most common trends that emerge in the discourse.

Black women have faced continuous perceptions that are not only offensive but stereotypical and derogatory—in the case of natural hair especially, naturals have been labeled as “messy,” “unkempt,” “dirty,” and “unprofessional.” These discernments have not only disrupted

the Black woman's hiring process, but it has seeped into her employment as well. Wendy Greene argues that "women don straightened hairstyles to avoid the stigmatization of their natural hair, which often engenders harassment, unfavorable performance evaluations, as well as loss or denial of employment" (Greene, 2017, p. 991). To further this point, numerous iterations are found in the literature that suggest that though many Black women have made the decision to stop straightening their hair and start loving and embracing their natural hair, there are also Black women who remain indecisive in regards to their hair as "the wrong decision can cost them their jobs" (Moss, 2018, p. 194). Despite the weight behind hair decimation, the idea of "professional hair" has turned into a running gag, something that the natural hair community has made into a joke, even. By these means, naturals have developed a defense mechanism of some sort. In many ways, terms such as "inappropriate" and "unprofessional" are used rather loosely when discussing Black hair—especially if it is natural hair. Rather, these descriptions could be considered responses created amidst inequity and inequality of Black people as a mask of "the way things are" (Sutton, 2016, para. 12). In many ways, this could be said about other aspects of society. When looking at educational establishments, it is important to note that Black students are being monitored for their hair, so it's imperative that they have spaces where they can be celebrated and represented (King, 2018, p. 34).

In the case of Black women around the country, policies like these were either set in stone already or created after African American employees wore their hair in such a way that was deemed offensive somehow. Rather than enforce these policies to maintain "professional" and "appropriate" workplaces, occurrences such as these reflect the subtle racism that manifest into workplace microaggressions. Jenée Desmond-Harris of Vox offers that "The renewed embrace of the concept has aggravated some who think "microaggressions" simply describes



situations in which people are being much too sensitive [...] Microaggressions are more than just insults, insensitive comments, or generalized jerky behavior [...] microaggressions often appear to be a compliment or a joke, but contain a hidden insult about a group of people” (Desmond-Harris, 2015, para. 2). It can be argued that Black women with natural hair are viewed as “self-hating” and not quick enough to catch an insult when it’s disguised as a joke. Of course, this is not true at all, but it goes back to the notion of Black women not being taken seriously in their places of work, especially when they wear their natural hair.

In many ways, society has created extremely negative metaphors for the Black woman. When entering these said professional working environments, Black women are constantly needing to transform their voices. They can’t speak too much or too loudly, and they tend to refrain from pointing out things they don’t agree with or find offensive because suddenly it means they’re “having an attitude” or being “difficult to work with.” Western society has been heavily influenced by European customs; merely existing in what was created or “White spaces” can be daunting. In turn, Black women have mastered the art of voicing different personalities. Dr. Teresa Neely argues that “You have to constantly watch your mouth and what comes out of it, and mind your countenance when you hear what comes out of the mouths of everyone else” (Neely, 2018, p. 5-6). To be labeled an “angry Black girl” is every Black woman’s worst nightmare—Dr. Neely recalls that “we all know the angry Black woman caricature, and no one wants to be labeled that. Even if we are, justifiably angry” (Neely, 2018, p. 6). It’s as if to say that the Black woman’s outwardly perception of herself has been predetermined before she could even exercise her knowledge and intellect through her words. Black women work tirelessly to disassociate themselves with stereotypes but due to conscious efforts made to adjust their tone of

voice by employing hyper-politeness and only speaking when they find it fitting, what deems them unprofessional in the end is their hair.

Not only is this idea that Black women with natural hair are unprofessional incredibly unfair and biased, it reflects how this European mentality affects the minority “[...] especially when you know that your hair and appearance have nothing to do with the quality of your work, your level of education, or your ability to perform the tasks of the job in question” (Williams, 2018, p. 141). The idea of “professional” hair has come to be synonymous with straight hair as an afro is still considered political and rebellious. To further both Dr. Neely and April Williams’s points, Crystal Powell argues that “Minority women add the extra burden of negotiating how to present their racial identities. While women in general must balance femininity and attractiveness, “traditional American culture views Black women as less feminine and less attractive, as well as less intelligent, competent, and dependable in their professional positions than their White counterparts” (Powell, 2018, p. 944). Changing one’s hair often comes with a plethora of challenges ranging from cold stares, offensive questions and microaggressions as well as other issues that create tension within one’s workplace. Of course these factors can fluctuate in intensity based on which part of the country the individual is working, but Maya Allen argues that these issues are present across the board “when you walk in with natural hair and no one else looks like you. This is especially heightened when you work in corporate America, a historically white, patriarchal space” (Allen, 2019, para. 3). Professionalism is often thought to be a high level of competence and skill that are exercised within a specific field. The increased number of Black women gaining employment in highly regarded professions or better yet, becoming their own bosses through entrepreneurship, are continuing to push the standard of what is considered “professional” in terms of hair.

To combat these frustrations, many naturals often turn to social media, as other Black women share their natural hair woes. To further support this notion of Black women seeking solace within online communities, Andre Brock suggests that “Where some viewed Black Twitter as ‘play’ or framed Black Twitter discourse through racial stereotypes, others argued for its legitimate technical discourse as well as implicit political action” (Brock, 2018, p. 3). The use of hair blogs, vlogs and other social media has allowed naturals to educate Black women who are transitioning—or growing out their relaxers—and in doing so, they often advise their audiences which products may assist them in attaining healthy hair. Due to the lack of knowledge on how to properly care for natural hair and its many unique types, naturals have turned to social media, obtaining information and support through crowd-sourcing, and debated about hair bias within their own ranks, sharing thoughts on colorism within the natural hair community and bias against tighter curl types, and what natural hair styles are considered “professional” (McGill Johnson, Godsil, MacFarlane, et al., 2017, p. 3). Despite a Black woman’s education and ability to work—which is often compared to those of White male and female coworkers—Afro-textured hair continues to be a debate of whether an individual is capable, or even worthy, of holding certain “professional” positions.

### *Culture Appropriation and “Blackfishing”*

Outside of professional working environments, natural hair salons have become a safe haven for many naturals in addition to social media platforms. However, hair products and protective style ideas have been made extremely accessible more so because of social media and the impact it is making on how natural hair is perceived. At the same time, many “influencers,” (those who influence their audience to use certain brands or products, especially in terms of skin and hair care) are argued to have lighter skin and looser curl patterns than other Black women

and therefore become the “face” of Black beauty. Because of these damaging ideals and practices, the natural hair community still experiences its own racism and biases which ultimately cripple what the Natural Hair Movement worked to achieve in the first place. Additionally, there has been a string of influencers who have been accused of being “Blackfish” or a person “who pretends to be Black or mixed-race for financial and social gain” (Santi, 2018, para. 1). This concept is both disturbing and detrimental for several reasons. Being Black and having to deal with how society treats blackness aren’t choices that Black people get to make. There are many aspects of Black fashion culture that have been labeled as “messy” or “ghetto” post-Natural Hair Movement—box braids, cornrows, locs, hoop earrings, bright, multi-colored hair, just to list a few—that suddenly become “trendy” when employed by non-Black women and men. To add, celebrities often adopt Black hairstyles as Shalenah Ivey notes: “Celebrities like Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner, and David Beckham have not only been spotted donning cornrows but have received praise for their edginess, evoking trends...” (Ivey, 2016, p. 8) In many ways, ideas birthed in Black culture and fashion are used to “enhance” the appearance of those who are not Black. Often, especially when it comes to Blackfishing, these attributes are accessorized and only used to fulfill a trend.

The beauty industry has been notorious for creating a culture that celebrates certain images while disregarding those which represent minorities and people of color. Like every other aspect of Western society, the beauty industry has longed favored and celebrated models with fair skin and long, flowing hair. Eric Garcia of *iNews* states, “Not so long ago, women have been neglected and shut down because they have to look a certain way, skinny body and white. But now, our society corrects itself into allowing all women to be celebrated” (Garcia, 2019, para. 2). The fact that the features that an entire population was nearly criminalized for are now seen as a

new and trendy wave within the fashion industry—especially among non-Black people—is quite distressing. People have the option of choosing how they look whether they are Black or not, but Black people will still be Black even after these new trends go away. The question is will Black features be seen as beautiful on people who naturally possess them rather than on those who appropriated these features to jump on a trend, and is this trend a form of blackface? Black women have experienced hair shaming of the highest degrees despite natural hair becoming something more of a societal norm, so it seems extremely unfitting that non-Black women get praised for features they don't possess but choose to use as enhancements and accessories. Further, “looks” or fashion that are deemed interesting are often used by those that have no cultural or historical ties to them. Shirley Tate put it this way: “pre-occupation with beauty is not new but is a part of a continuing historical trajectory of how to locate oneself within beauty both as a matter of aesthetics and politics” (Tate, 2007, p. 301). With this, it could be argued that from a rhetorical and political standpoint, Black women are often on the bottom of the totem pole in terms of beauty and aesthetics even when their features receive praise when they appear on anyone other than them.

### *Politics of Hair*

The simple notion of natural hair being the least attractive type of hair not only stems from the racism it's faced but also how that racism trickled into a highly Europeanized society. There are various terms that have been aimed at Black people and in terms of natural hair, one word used is “nappy.” Deena Campbell of *Essence* recalls her relationship with the word stating, “As a child when friends and family referenced my hair as “nappy,” it was a term of endearment. It was my special James Brown moment [...] but it fosters a different emotion when my white counterparts use it [...] when African Americans use it, it's rooted in positivity. When non-

Blacks use it it's often rooted in negativity and is awash of cultural insensitivity" (Campbell, 2016, paras. 2-3). Though the word "nappy" may have been used with good intentions in Campbell's case, the word doesn't always carry endearment when addressing natural hair. Like the concept of "good hair," certain words and phrases become derogatory, especially those with any kind of historical context. The word "nappy," coming from the English word "nap," refers to the raised hairs, threads, or similar small projections on the surface of fabric or suede. The word was initially used during the Atlantic slave trade in describing African hair. To early Europeans, African hair wasn't considered aesthetically pleasing; they hardly considered it hair at all because "for them, it was considered the fur of animals and was referred to as wool or woolly" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 88). Unfortunately, the term is still present in the lexicon of Americans, Africans, Caribbean islanders and elsewhere. Johnson and Bankhead observed that several accounts that originated in the 1800s and 1900s are still prevalent despite societal shifts (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 88). Another way to augment this idea would be to compare the words "nappy" and "kinky." Although "nappy" and "kinky" are often used interchangeably, kinky doesn't share the negative context or connotation that nappy does (Ellington, 2015, p. 27). Regardless of the word's racist history, descendants of the African diaspora have appropriated and repurposed the word as a portmanteau of the words natural and happy. Natural hair influencer Whitney White created a new word which she employed as a username on social media—Naptural85. The word is a combination of the words natural and nappy. Social media has also allowed many Black women to reclaim certain words by creating usernames and webpages.

There are still issues within the natural hair community which affect the discourse community though. A discourse community is defined as a group of people who share a set of

discourses and manners of engaging in conversations regarding specific topics (Borg, 2003, p. 398). Based on the conversations observed in comments on Natural Hair Loves's Instagram page, this idea is absolutely applicable to natural hair as well as how the natural hair community talks about hair. The natural hair community uses unique terms that are specific to its discourse. For example, the term "protective style" refers to any manner in which the hair is styled, and the ends are tucked away or protected. Protective styles can include braids, twists or cornrows with or without synthetic extensions.

Despite the complex issues surrounding Black hair and professionalism, Black women often express frustration rooted in not being able to reach out to other women who share their hair texture or issues concerning their hair. One major hurdle is the notion of representation and what kind of hair "behaves." Zeba Blay from *HuffPost* states that "in the natural hair community, hair that doesn't perfectly "lay," that doesn't respond to gels and pomades...is neither celebrated nor admired nearly as much as hair that does" (Blay, 2016, para. 4). In addition to Blay's observations, it can be argued that the politics of hair aren't exactly free from White beauty standards that have managed to seep into the natural hair community; the community has had space to point out a number of "unfortunate trends" which almost always concern an obsession with longer hair and looser curls (Blay, 2016, para. 6). Though the Natural Hair Movement pushed for love and acceptance of all Black hair types, there is an invisible hierarchy within the natural hair community that seems to favor natural hair with looser curls and seems easier to manage and style. While these hair types—loose curls and longer appearance—have been deemed a substandard to White people and what they will tolerate, this image has suddenly become what natural hair "should look like," but this ideology dismisses what the Natural Hair Movement worked to achieve.

Rather than completely straighten one’s hair, some Black women have come to believe that their hair would look better if it had more definition and reacted to gels and other styling products. Blay expresses the discontent that many Black women experience: “Deep down, perhaps part of my desire to deal with my hair as little as possible is a symptom of colorism in the hair community—the fact that because my hair is more kinky than curly, I shouldn’t be as proud to show it off” (Blay, 2016, para. 3). When discussing the different hair types, many naturals will identify as anything from 3a to 4c (see Figure 2). 3a hair is the loosest kind of curl—anything from 2c and lower becomes less curly as the



Figure 2: A generic grading chart displaying different curl patterns. 1a is straight whereas 4c is extremely curly (Adunni, 2014).

scale decreases where 1a is extremely straight—and 4c is the tightest kind of curl that tends to shrink when it comes in contact with any kind of moisture (refer to figure 2 pictured above). Though all curly hair experiences shrinkage to an extent, 4c tends to shrink the most and is often thought to be much shorter than its actual length. There have been ongoing debates over natural hair pages on social media, especially Instagram, that feature more women with 3a hair than women with 4c hair. It could be argued that these instances are a blatant reflection of the lack of



diversity within the natural hair community and how Black women are represented on social media.

On the other hand, there is a rather damaging notion that embracing one's natural hair also means embracing her Blackness. When a Black woman chooses to conduct a "Big Chop" (to cut her relaxed ends), it is considered a political statement of metaphorical and rhetorical resistance against White beauty norms. Though the Natural Hair Movement has strived to promote both diversity and inclusion among the natural hair community, this mentality still poses a threat to the movement's overall message. As Blay expressed, textured hair is seen as the closest a woman can get to her "true self" in that the basis of her beauty—her hair—suddenly equates to her Blackness, especially in the eyes of the Black community. However, there are women who still choose to relax or straighten their hair which is believed to be a weak attempt to become less "ethnic." To add, Shirley Tate states that "Dark skin shade and natural afro-hair are central in the politics of visibility, inclusion and exclusion within black anti-racist aesthetics" (Tate, 2007, p. 300). These lapses in judgement of healthy, natural hair have caused division within the community but it also shows that coming to a clear resolution after years of self-deprivation is never easy.

Politics of hair or hair politics are interesting terms in that they emphasize how hair, a tangible and inanimate thing, can actually be a political statement without the person wearing it having to say a single word. Deciding to stop straightening one's hair is a voluntary act, one that the Natural Hair Movement definitely encourages, but the decision to start anew or to conduct a "big chop" bears a great deal of both rhetorical and metaphorical weight. Long hair has been perceived as more attractive and there are still women that cling to the idea that beautiful hair has to be long. To meet these expectations, many Black women purchase weaves or wigs. It is

crucial to note that these hair alterations are not always straight—these days, women prefer to wear them curly or wavy. On the other hand, women will also purchase hair extensions that have a more textured look in order to add volume to their hair and make an even louder rhetorical statement. Making the decision to purchase a more natural-looking weave or wig is indicative of Black women’s fading preference for long, straight tresses. Tiffany Thomas states “they [Black women] are slowly moving towards their natural hair texture and eventual length, be it short or long” (Thomas, 2013, p. 8). Even if natural hair tends to appear much shorter than it actually is, it still has the “ability to be sculpted and molded into various shapes and forms” (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 87). Hair holds prominence to Black people, and it is expressed even further because of the distinct nature of its textures. Despite Afro-textured hair’s distinction, Black women have developed a rather strange and toxic relationship with the length of their hair due to Eurocentric beauty standards; however, the Natural Hair Movement pushed to bury the notion of beautiful hair equating to long hair. Though many women still struggle with this—based on conversations read on different social media platforms—the act of cutting off one’s hair not only takes courage but understanding of how and why it’s significant.

Being members of a minority group, it’s imperative that Black women support other Black women in their natural hair journey; when a woman chooses to cut her hair, she is disassociating herself with wanting or needing to be accepted by the majority—thus, cutting one’s hair becomes a rhetorical and metaphorical statement that disassociates an individual’s fascination and need for length. The term “natural hair journey” has been used more frequently in the past few years and though it does indicate a journey in embracing one’s hair, the term itself also involves self-discovery and self-love—it has come to imply that Black women embrace not only their hair, but their physical features as well as the melanin in their skin. To

many Black women, this journey becomes “life changing” (Ellington, 2015, p. 27). Though one’s natural hair journey encompasses much more than accepting her natural hair, it also comes with its unique set of challenges and trials and errors (Allen, 2019, para. 2). Getting to know and understand one’s hair after years of having it straightened isn’t as easy or smooth as some would think; all of the things Black women used to avoid—something as simple as water—are now things that their hair depends on to thrive and grow. A Black woman never actually “goes natural”; rather, she simply returns to being natural. One’s natural hair journey entails her coming to know and understand the texture of her hair and the fact that it will never be straight and flowing, and that there is nothing wrong with that.

### *Black Women in the Media*

Despite all of the complex issues that surround natural hair, social media has given a voice to the natural hair community as well as a space to further engage in discourse concerning natural hair. With all of the digital resources available today such as social media and the Internet, groups of people, especially minorities, have been able to share content at an increasingly nimble pace. Additionally, social media is being used to educate members of the Black community about natural hair as well as transform how natural hair is addressed within the Black community. The notion could be compared to how one looks at or within oneself before mirroring that image outward. It is argued that social media is “a point where the discursive meets the material” and “where meanings are articulated and re-articulated [...] within a sexist/racist society” (Edwards & Esposito, 2018, p. 2). There are hundreds of natural hair pages and websites that have allowed naturals around the country and beyond to let loose and talk about hair with other naturals in spaces that were made specifically for them. The manifestation of self-love and celebration within the Black community has increased exponentially. This re-

found love and jubilee is partially due to the increased use of social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (King, 2018, p. 36). According to Ramia Mitchell (2018), natural hair brands specifically for Black people use Twitter as a way of navigating their products through promotions and how they bond with Blackness as well as their audience. She refers to three themes—“the presence of a reliance on black cultural references, the use of hashtags, and the use of images”—that are entwined with these processes and connect these brands with their consumers more than ever before. Further, positive hashtags on social media and in Black children’s books grant the creation of celebratory spaces for natural hair.

Running a simple search for #naturalhair on Instagram yields 7 million results (King, 2018, p. 34). Hashtags have played an especially large role in creating an online space for the natural hair community. The hashtag #teamnatural has ramped up the amount of traffic that is drawn to different natural hair pages as well as to specific topics that happen to be trending. Other popular hashtags include #naturalhairjourney and #blackgirlmagic. The first time #blackgirlmagic was used was in 2013 by CaShawn Thompson to “describe Black women who persevere in the face of adversity” (Neely, 2018, p. 11). We understand that natural hair has undergone discrimination and mistreatment however natural hair positive hashtags continue to battle the stigma surrounding natural hair. Historically, Black women have had to battle visual social norms such as fixed beauty standards. Natural hair positive hashtags have granted Black women agency to forward and circulate promising ideas associated with natural hair. Now more than ever, Black and brown people have casted relaxers asides and “cross over to #teamnatural” (Harris, 2014, para. 5). In terms of natural hair and social acceptance, Black women’s hair underwent decades of exploitation and abuse in order to “attain status and economic mobility” (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 88) so the use of hashtags within these digital environments have

not only helped create a community—it has created another branch of natural hair discourse. It's important to note how Black women communicate their ideas with each other on social media. The hashtag has become just as important as a photo of a woman sporting her hair in its natural state. Additionally, rhetorical moves towards social justice travel quicker and to a larger audience through different digital media platforms as they attract users from all over the world, thus diminishing large spatial divides within smaller online spaces.

There have been several arguments made about Europeanization and how it has affected the Black woman's idea of self-beauty. An example of this could be found in the modern entertainment industry—Hollywood is a notably White space where most of the leading women in major roles are White. As a result of the limited variety of Black representation in the media, an individual who is foreign to the States would assume that most Black women have light skin (Moss, 2018, p. 191). When analyzing Black representation outside of the States and focusing on how Blackness is embodied in European media, it seems that is almost nonexistent. The literature strongly suggests that there are “almost no black women” on televised shows in the United Kingdom (Wilson-Ojo, 2017, para. 2). One would expect increased diversity on-screen as there is off and behind the screen, but often times, “the British black woman is left wanting” (Wilson-Ojo, 2017, para. 3). This disparity could also be a reflection of the United Kingdom's views on diversity and inclusion in their mainstream media. Even the simple manner in which Black women, and Black people in general, have used media and the Internet differs from their White counterparts due to the “exponentially smaller amount of content published for and by Black online sources of information” (Brock, 2018, p. 11). Today, most media is consumed or accessed on the Internet. The existence of spaces created specifically for Black women is

essential in “evaluating technologies as an assemblage of artifacts, practices and cultural beliefs” as expressed by Brock.

The music industry has been an interesting space for natural hair as many artists have rocked afros, locs and twists, often due to the influence of legends such as Aretha Franklin and Bob Marley. Certain hairstyles can distinguish certain groups of people from others (Dash, 2006, p. 10) and this syllogism could be backed by how “we categorize people by their look,” (Dash, 2006, p. 10) especially when it concerns Black entertainers. Erykah Badu is known to sport grandiose afros and faux locs though it would make sense as she is a neo-soul artist whose lyrical content could only relate to a Black listener. Bob Marley was a trailblazer in the world of reggae and spreading a large part of Jamaican culture around the world. One major component though was his hair. Today, Black people are able to wear natural styles such as afros or locs regardless if they are involved in the music industry or not. Beyoncé’s younger sister Solange Knowles has used her platform and her music to express the delight she holds for her natural hair. On the other hand, her 2016 song “Don’t Touch My Hair” discusses the complex issues surrounding her hair and how it is perceived by other people who are not members of the natural hair community. Janelle Monáe and Childish Gambino are two artists who also sport their natural hair. Viola Davis made history after revealing her natural hair on the series *How to Get Away with Murder* in addition to wearing an afro on the red carpet. It could be argued that these individuals are making rhetorical statements with their hair, especially in industries that normalize homogeny. However, there are still ideologies and prejudices held against natural hair though the extent to which these prejudices are expressed almost always depends on the individual’s profession.

The Black woman has unique experiences in terms of how they are treated, how they are viewed societally and how they are represented in mainstream media; these representations are

often reflections of how Black women are perceived and how they perceive each other. Black women's experiences are unique in that they are rooted in systemic oppression the meets at an intersection of merely being Black and female (Jackson, 2018, p. 3-4). Tiffany Francois argues that women "have long been negatively stereotyped in American society, usually portrayed as submissive and passive while at the same time see as disobedient and pushy. These contradictory representations are doubly imposed on Black women" (Francois, 2018, p. 2). While social media is somewhat newer than traditional media (i.e. television, film, print), Black women have always had to fight against the societal representations that have been created for them. During the days of slavery, Black women were forced to express themselves as "sexually neutral, unattractive and dedicated domestic servant" (Francois, 2018, p. 10). In turn, this stripped them of their femininity, and they were often referred to as 'mammies' who placed priority on their White owners and their families before their own. The late American actress Hattie McDaniel was famous for her role as "Mammy" in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*. This depiction of the self-sacrificing Black women has remained rocksteady over the years; this caricature has been referred to in all forms of media and perpetuated this stereotype within American society.

On the latest season of the ABC reality series *The Bachelor*, which aired on Monday, March 2, 2020, contestants opened up about "racist and hateful" direct messages, or DMs, they received on their social media. During the special, titled "The Women Tell All," former bachelorette Rachel Lindsey led a discussion with the show's host, Chris Harrison (Carlisle, 2020, para. 1). Sydney Hightower, a contestant from Alabama expressed that growing up as a biracial youth was difficult and that "when these things are said about you, those wounds from your past, they're never fully closed" (Carlisle, 2020, para. 11). Alexa Caves was the only woman who wore her natural hair on this particular episode; she recounted that although she has

received negative messages because of her hair, she's received a lot of positivity as well. Caves stated that "it meant so much to get messages from people saying it's important to have representation and thank you [...] The love is louder. You just can't listen to that negativity" (Carlisle, 2020, paras. 12-13). In the age of social media, the manner in which negativity, as well as positivity, is directed at Black women and other women of color is more immediate and intentional. In the case of *The Bachelor* and "Bachelor Nation," there is an unofficial demographic that the franchise aims for. Rachel Lindsey was the first Black bachelorette—in a sense, her taking on this role was a rather significant shift in how Black women are perceived on reality television and how Black women can take back their images.

On the other hand, several global brands depend on minorities to connect with multicultural audiences. Ashley Smalls of Ebony Magazine notes that "many global brands prefer to make cultural assumptions, rather than allocating resources to help gain a better understanding of how to meaningfully connect with people of color. They need that one (preferably multiple) person in the room who has the wisdom to say, "Actually that's not how we see ourselves," or "That's really offensive, so why don't you consider my ideas. My experiences" (Smalls, 2017, para. 3). Social media, by Wilson-Ojo's accord, has "stepped in and filled the racial inequality gap [...] It has given us a much-needed gift, which is a voice. A voice that can reach anyone with an internet connection—uncensored and uninterrupted..." (Wilson-Ojo, 2017, para. 3). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube have presented Black women "winning." Rather than images of Black women appeasing the majority, social media has showcased Black women living their best lives, striving in healthy relationships, earning a host of degrees, writing books, purchasing homes and becoming entrepreneurs. Most, if not all, of these things would have been nearly impossible for a Black



woman to achieve, even with all of the intelligence and drive she possessed. Of course, this new wave of Black excellence is challenging the existing state of affairs. Social media has not only become a place where natural hair discourse can take place—it has become a tool to forward and circulate Black women in a positive light as well as become a beacon for other Black women to shake the paradigm.

### *The “Good Hair” Narrative*

Another popular phrase amongst Black women and on social media is “Good hair is healthy hair”; it was created in hopes that the notion of “good hair” being straight would someday be discarded for good. Despite this combative phrase, it is argued that the standard of “good hair” might still hold a significant influence on how natural hair is discussed in addition to how Black women are treated and perceived (McGill Johnson, Godsil, MacFarlane, et al., 2017, p. 3). The Black community has attempted to redefine the terms “good hair” and “bad hair” as many individuals consider them derogatory. For Black women with naturally curly or kinky hair, “fitting into the European standard of beauty (long, flowing, straight hair) can be difficult, expensive, and even unattainable” (Ellis-Hervey, Davis, Doss, et al., 2016, p. 20). In this sense, the concept of “good hair” and what the term means to Black people remains one of the trickier concepts to dissect and another cultural obstacle to overcome. For years, the physical attributes of Europeans have been used—and continue to be used—as a yardstick in determining beauty in Western society; these homogenous standards created sharp contrasts as dual counterparts in order to differentiate African features from European features. Due to the sheer weight of these ideals, they have trickled into communities of color, poisoning the language around natural hair and how African communities as well as descendants of the Diaspora define “good hair” (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 91). To further this point, it is imperative to note that using

whiteness as a yardstick “reinforces a system of white supremacy” (Moss, 2018, p. 191). Comparing one set of features to another will always place the minority in a negative light, especially when these features are being compared to people who see themselves represented positively in the media all the time. Regardless of how Black and White people are being compared, by these standards, White people are the epitome of attractiveness. The term simple “good hair” has created a host of complexities that still affects how Black women discuss natural hair. However, the term is constantly being reappropriated—in other words, it’s imperative that Black hair is considered “good” in addition to the hair it has always been compared to (and celebrated since the beginning of time). Through hashtags and social media, there has definitely been some pushback towards the more derogatory nature of the term, but it could also be argued that the term must be redefined at a micro level by the individual before its meaning can truly be redefined culturally.

Black women have been badgered and provoked because of their physical features for decades. However, because of the Natural Hair Movement, these features—hair, face, nose, body—have been encouraged to be viewed as beautiful and unique. Understanding that these features which were once deemed ugly or even “animalistic” as well as learning how to accept them is a much larger rhetorical action. Being able to support other Black women whether they choose to wear their hair naturally or not is rhetorical action. An individual’s natural hair journey encompasses understanding many things, both good and bad as well as those within and outside of the natural hair community such as colorism and the pursuit of representations of all kinds of Afro-textured hair in the media (i.e. television commercials, shows, movies etc.). It is a reminder to love and embrace hair at every stage of one’s journey—this proves to be difficult for some as there is the lingering fascination with length, especially when an individual’s hair experiences

shrinkage. What users usually comment on posts revolving around this topic in particular is that Black hair does indeed grow. A person's hair may appear short, but that doesn't mean it actually is or that the hair itself isn't actually growing. Understanding the nature of natural hair and how it behaves as well as having conversations about these things could have only been made possible because of the Natural Hair Movement's influence.

### *Natural Hair as Metaphor and Visual Rhetoric*

Natural hair is, as many naturals would argue, a form of visual rhetoric. To support this notion, we must first establish how *visual rhetoric* is defined. Rhetoric scholar Sonja K. Foss describes visual rhetoric as “visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric” (Foss, 2005, p. 145); additionally, Foss argues that visual rhetoric has a second definition which she identifies as a scholarly perspective which “focuses on the symbolic processes by which visual artifacts perform communication” (Foss, 2004, p. 304). Although hair can't necessarily speak for itself, it does possess a level of agency in that it speaks to an individual's truth as Black person with natural hair as well as offer a means of cultural and personal expression for those who choose to wear their natural hair. Being that non-discursive occurrences are included in rhetoric's spectrum, visual images such as a hairstyle are actually rhetorical (White, 2005, p. 5). Given that Black women can congregate on social media, they have agency to make arguments about and through their hair. Black women who make the conscious decision to wear their natural hair are “making a rhetorical statement that resists Eurocentric standards of beauty by engaging in an act of self-definition and liberation” (White, 2005, p. 5). To add, Amber Pineda notes that “style and fashion are not mutually exclusive in a rhetorical context. Rather, the two often coincide with each other to formulate a rhetorical action that [is] potentially used to communicate a personal and cultural identity” (Pineda, 2014, p. 2). In comparing metaphor and rhetoric in this case, it can

be argued that visual rhetoric is in fact a form of metaphor which would ultimately mean that natural hair is actually a metaphor. To complicate this idea further, a Black woman's hair can be considered a metaphor for political and social resistance in the face of adversity and homogeneity.

Metaphor can be associated with a plethora of different arenas. In the case of Blay cutting her hair, the act could be seen as a metaphor for cathartic release of needing to have relaxed hair in order to feel beautiful. Though there are many societal facets that tend to fluctuate with time, more notably fashion and music, Natural hair has become a physical metaphor for growth and self-acceptance. The Natural Hair Movement's aim was to argue is that being natural isn't just another trend among black women; if anything, it's actually a metaphorical agreement Black women make with themselves to simply love themselves and embrace the hair they were given, unapologetically. In turn, the same thing can be said about #naturalhairjourney. This is a term that was birthed and circulated on social media. Rather than being synonymous with a short-term goal, one's natural hair journey has become more of a lifestyle change for many naturals.

About two years ago, the words "mane" and "crown" became more present in discussion on social media. The word "mane" is particularly interesting because the average person would probably associate it with a horse or a lion. On the other hand, the word "crown" is associated with something different; connotations to which this word is tied include royalty, beauty and exclusivity. To Black community members, specifically those in South Florida but not limited to South Florida, the word "crown" has been become synonymous to the word "hair." Bankhead and Johnson referenced a study conducted by Chapman where one thread that was found was the emphasis of one's hair being her "crown and glory" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 89). It has become quite common for Black people to address each other as kings and queens, which in

itself is another rhetorical action because of course, these terms are not meant to be taken literally. As a minority group, Black people are constantly working to redefine the way they view and value themselves as a people. Tiffany Thomas states that, “History has shown that blacks, especially black women, had less power in shaping ideas about themselves” (Thomas, 2013, p. 5). The idea of referring to our hair as crowns helps to eternalize the notion that natural hair isn’t something that needs to be fixed or ashamed of. Additionally, using terms such as “queen,” “queening,” “Black girl magic” and a host of other terminology, Black women engage in a conversation within a space that would otherwise not exist had they not created it. The public sphere includes what is considered normal or standard; Black women are excluded from these arenas when it comes to hair and feminine beauty, so having a set of terms to exalt themselves is essential in reshaping not only the visual rhetoric around natural hair, but the social and cultural rhetoric of natural hair as well.

A substantial element of Black culture is the call and response. Its African origins laid the foundation for cultural traditions as it is diasporic, creating a distinctive set of traditions in the United States (Epstein, 1977, p. 97). Producing digital spaces where natural hair discourse can occur with little to no outside influences is expresses how the natural hair community continually responds to all of the calls directed at natural hair. Though a woman’s blackness comes down to more than the hair on her head, it has become a significant representation of the Black woman’s idea of self-beauty. The Natural Hair Movement has helped Black women come to terms with the notion of reclaiming themselves physically, mentally and emotionally which ultimately makes a rhetorical statement that regardless of what a Black woman decides to do with her hair, she knows that her natural hair is still significant and beautiful, and that she can use that affirmation to respond to calls which concern her hair.

In a sense, this call and response could be argued to be a scratch or interruption—Adam J. Banks explains that this scratch “breaks the linearity of the text, the progressive circularity of the song” (Banks, 2011, p. 1). Like the call and response effect, this scratch, this break in a discord gives room for alternate voices and narratives to be heard, taking its audience “back and forth” over the course of the discussion at hand. When looking at how Black women utilize social media, their comments on a post or the simple act of uploading pictures of their natural hair can all be considered scratches or halts talking back to a dominant voice.

Despite issues within the natural hair community, one could argue that there are more moments of solidarity than there are moments of division. Social media, like any other aspect of one’s every day, has its pros and cons, but it’s exhibited how it can bring people together more than it can tear them apart, especially when looking at something like natural hair. Because of the growing use of hashtags and images, naturals around the country and the rest of the world have been able to participate in an ongoing movement both in real life as well as online. The Natural Hair Movement, as well as all of the participants involved, is one larger metaphor for social defiance and self-reclamation, especially in the age of social media. Black women have not only embraced their natural hair, but they have embraced their cultures and where certain hairstyles originated from as well. Though natural hair has been associated with negative connotations, the Natural Hair Movement created a wave of self-acceptance and a demand for change in terms of media and circulation. Pineda goes on to explain how “urban street styles are used rhetorically within local boroughs in New York City as a form of resistance to the dominant fashion industry that dictates what is “in fashion” through media” and that “themes of a rhetoric of style, consisting of primacy of text, imaginary communities, aesthetic rationales, market contexts, and stylistic homologies [...] suggest that individuals engage in street styles as a form of anti-fashion

to convey cultural ideologies, which can possibly be used to create societal change” (Pineda, 2014, para. 1). Due to years of racial oppression, much of which has become less blatant in the past few years, Black people, especially women, felt the need to “fit into” these spaces that were not created for them systemically. When using visual rhetoric such as natural hair to challenge social norms, the “Other,” as Jacqueline Royster notes, starts to become more normal and less of an abstract idea. At the same time and in the case of natural hair, something different is not expected to be bad simply because it is different.

To argue that social media—more specifically so, Instagram—has given Black women a space to discuss and celebrate their natural hair would be too easy. Furthermore, the increased use of social media amongst Black women has decreased the distance between them in terms of physical location or even geographical range; in other words, women are able to communicate with each other regardless of where they’re from or even where they live. In this case, it could be argued that an “Other” doesn’t actually exist amongst Black women nor within the natural hair community. Jacqueline Royster (2011) mentions the idea of the well-mannered “Other,” a state of tolerance that requires one to remain silent while others speak from areas of privilege and entitlement (Royster, 2011). Because Black women are all engaging in conversations concerning their hair, the hierarchy which was created through Europeanized beauty standards doesn’t exist in these spaces. This idea does not diminish the fact that colorism and texturism are issues within the natural hair community however, it aims to prevent comparing the hair of Black women and women who aren’t of color. As this is the usual case with other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram has been a pivotal tool in circulating Black women in a positive and uplifting light. Because the app was originally used for photo sharing, Instagram still focuses more so on visuals (photos and video) however, more traffic is drawn to said visuals through

hashtags; this phenomena grants users control over what images they want to be circulated using specific hashtags and thus reaching an even larger audience.

In the case of this particular project, the notion of natural hair as metaphor and visual rhetoric drove what was analyzed in terms of user discourse, or as Brock calls digital media discourse in addition to visuals—more specifically, pictures of Black women wearing their natural hair. It's imperative to note that though one page was examined, it represents the embodiment of a small community within an entire network of online spaces for natural hair. When gathering data from the Instagram page, it was crucial to note what kinds of photos were being uploaded despite the overwhelming majority of the images being photos of natural hair. The page's founder reposts a variety of hair types, thus highlighting Black women of all shades. There is also a celebratory manner in which photos of younger Black girls are presented. More details regarding data collection and trends, both visually and textually, can be found in the appendices.

### *Maintaining Natural Hair Discourse*

The notion of “talking back” to a White, male dominated narrative is arguably the most significant reason for these trends in natural hair discourse and Black vernacular in general. These digital spaces provide Black bodies a place to assemble and engage in conversations that they were never given space to have. Through these social media pages, Black women exercise their agency through their posts and comments. Hashtags such as #teamnatural or #blackgirlmagic—or any hashtag promoting Black positivity—have become more than just hashtags; in the age of social media and the Natural Hair Movement, they've become reminders that natural hair is something to be celebrated. #allhairisgoodhair has sparked a wave that all hair, regardless of texture, color or length is indeed good hair. Hashtags each have a level of



agency in being used to continuously commemorate Black women in numerous digital spaces all around the world.

Metaphor can be a strong indication that something within a culture is changing and in the case of social media, Black women are continuing to make metaphorical and rhetorical statements with and about their natural hair. Although the discussions surrounding natural hair today are not identical to the discussions that took place a decade ago, the roots of these conversations are still the same. What has changed however is how Black women are communicating their thoughts and ideas and which mediums are being used to communicate. This exemplifies the metaphorical weight the Natural Hair Movement holds, and that natural hair isn't simply another passing fad. As Pineda states, "Since fashion is not a static symbol, the meaning behind particular fashion items changes over time. Therefore, the meaning behind signs has started to reflect different attitudes in Western society's culture" (Pineda, 2014, p. 33). Attitudes towards natural hair may be shifting whether those shifts are happening within the Black community or out in other arenas. Despite how individuals outside of the natural hair community would view natural hair—be it exotic or "militant"—Black women are wearing their natural hair in resistance to the dominant voice which has narrated their existence for decades.

Natural hair has become a metaphor for growth, self-acceptance and self-awareness. It has become a metaphor for understanding who we are as individuals and how we each play a role in the meta of life as Black women with natural hair. It would be too easy to state that natural hair is hair that hasn't been straightened, so what does it actually mean to be natural? Does it mean being able to engage in "cultured" conversations about elitist topics such as art and the humanities? That in itself is metaphoric for the Black woman because it isn't what society necessarily expects of her, especially if she wears her natural hair. Unfortunately, there is still a

stigma that is associated with natural hair which often affects how naturals are treated despite their tact and intelligence. These kinds of conversations are more common than one would like to think; they usually occur both within and outside of the workplace and it usually grants the individual in question a comment on how “well-spoken” or “articulate” she is. Disheartening as this exchange is, it has become the reality for many Black women who have made the choice to go natural.

Despite the harsh realities Black women face, the Natural Hair Movement did much more than encourage individuals to embrace their hair; it woke people up. It demanded that the hair industry not favor one hair type over another or even determine straight hair the majority. It has allowed Black women to create a space for themselves through the use of social media and establish a level of resistance in meeting Eurocentric beauty standards. Although there are still issues regarding colorism and Blackfishing as well as favoritism within the workforce, there are more people rallying for true and definitive diversity in the media and in society holistically. Black women now have options. Whether they want to straighten their hair, wear braids or wigs or simply leave their hair as it is are decisions that can make on their own accord.

Ultimately the concept of choice is what drove and continues to drive the Natural Hair Movement. Black people, especially women, can choose to stop altering their hair and simply wear it as it grows from their scalps, or they can choose to straighten their hair or wear wigs and weaves, but being natural will always be a choice individuals are free to make for themselves. No one gets to choose what kind of hair they are born with, so it is imperative that love and appreciation are especially given to things that members of a minority group can't change. Rather than continuing to attempt making others—individuals outside of the Black community, in particular—feel comfortable, minorities, specifically Black women, have come to the

consensus that they themselves have been uncomfortable for decades. Black women have gone from royalty to mending plantations to straightening their hair, but the latter was unnecessary. Being a Black individual is not a choice. It comes with a great deal of historical baggage and internal conflict that has affected the way women were spoken to as girls and how they grew up feeling about their hair. Black women are one of the most marginalized groups in the United States yet they have proved that they can persevere time and time again but even with all of their intellect, ambition and beauty, they were succumbed to straightening their hair to meet a fixed and unrealistic beauty standard that was created to favor European features and make the Black woman think of herself as anything but beautiful.

Social media has helped change the discourse surrounding natural hair or at least, it has provided Black women a space which they created to engage in this discourse. It has shown that Black women who wear their natural hair are intelligent, ambitious and beautiful and that they can still succeed in a White male-dominated world; in taking metaphorical actions such as conducting a big chop, using a pro-natural hashtag, or simply posting a selfie online, Black women are constantly responding to a dominant narrative which has subjected them to finding space in places which were never created for them. Rather than hide their hair, Black women are becoming more comfortable with wearing their hair to work and school and other “special occasions” that would otherwise call for them to “do something” with or fix their hair. Seeing more and more women wearing their natural hair on television and in movies is creating a new generation of Black women that will never once have to question the beauty of their hair. Additionally, Black youth have grown up with technology, granting them agency in how they are represented in the media. Conversations amongst their mothers and grandmothers may share similarities but even then, they—these young naturals—can be considered a metaphor of how the

Black woman's "true" standard of beauty has actually come full circle. Ultimately, natural hair is an aesthetic, something that Black people are born with and should be able to wear without the looming feeling of needing to alter it. However, this is the main difference in comparing natural hair to a fashion statement or any other form of visual rhetoric—almost all kinds of visuals fluctuate with time, but natural hair is something that Black women especially are learning to love for life.

## Analysis

André Brock's Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) was used as a model in analyzing posts and comments made on Natural Hair Loves' Instagram page. There were many reasons this specific page was used for this project. In terms of natural hair appreciation, NHL seems to focus on natural hair in all of its unique forms as well as feature Black women with various skin tones, facial and body features. Another appealing feature of NHL's Instagram media is the variety of posts present on its page. Quotes and memes felt authentic and easily relate to the Black woman's experience. The manner in which posts were presented to followers almost always included dialogue such as "Good morning, loves" (sometimes abbreviated as "GM, loves") or a phrase such as "mood," "queening," or "queen energy." These instances may seem small, but they support the literature, specifically the ideas presented by Mitchell (2018), Neely (2018) and Harris (2018), in the sense that Black women are constantly working to address themselves in a positive light, and NHL does this through their captioning and their hashtag usage.

Brock states that this analysis is "a multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture" and that it combines "an analysis of the technological artifact and user discourse, framed by cultural theory" in order to deconstruct both the symbolic and physical relation between "form, function, belief, and meaning of information and communication technologies" or ICTs (Brock A. , 2018). In the case of Natural Hair Loves' followers, their specific discourse was manifested through their comments. CTDA was employed to further analyze these comments and detect any trends in addition to discussing the actual media in question, more specifically still photos as well as videos.

According to Natural Hair Loves, LLC's website, it aims to "inspire others to embrace themselves for who they are, naturally" (Hester, n.d.). It has created a space for Black women to convene online and engage in discourse that not only revolves around hair, but simply being a Black woman in general. In posting a plethora of different ideas ranging from hair to motivational quotes and even memes, NHL appeals to the broad scope of Black women who follow their social media, regardless if the women wear their hair naturally or not (this notion has actually been discussed on posts regarding the health of hair that has been chemically treated versus that of fully natural hair). However, it could be argued that the simplicity of the name "Natural Hair Loves" could be a juxtaposition when compared to the complex conversations which take place among its Instagram followers. Additionally, there is a specific vernacular that Black women use including certain terms such as "queening" and "Black girl magic." It is important to note that these terms and phrases are not only used by Black women in their comments on social media; they have been used as hashtags by hundreds of natural hair pages on Instagram alone, including Natural Hair Loves' page. A more detailed analysis of user discourse and hashtags could be used in future research not only pertaining to Instagram but other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as suggested by Mitchell (2018).

### **Methods of Data Collection**

From late September of 2019 to about early February of 2020 (roughly three months), NH's Instagram page (@naturalhairloves) was monitored and a combination of approximately 90-150 photos and videos were saved and categorized based on the subject or purpose of the media, but at least one post in each of the categories listed below was used solely for this study. All of the posts were saved under my personal Instagram account. Instagram grants users to organize everything they save and thus, the posts that were saved were put into six categories:

Black women looking directly at the camera, Black youth (specifically Black girls), Black events both current and historic, hair memes and quotes.

To better understand the virtual conversations taking place among Black women in addition to what was being shared visually, both the captions and comments under the collected posts were deconstructed. Certain words and phrases such as “Queen,” “queening,” “Black girl magic” and even “sis” have been employed in African American vernacular for years, and the popularity of social media among Black women has heightened the usage of such terms in a more open, digital space. Despite the fact that most natural hair pages are public forums, these digital spaces are niche, and the conversations which take place are more often than not about Black hair. Additionally, it is important to mention that conversations surrounding Black women’s hair have shifted due to the current COVID-19 pandemic as well as the state of affairs affecting the U.S. in terms of social justice and reform, acknowledging the importance of both digital and physical Black bodies as well as their agency and roles in public and private arenas. There are still exchanges concerning issues of Black hair politics however, there has been an obvious shift concerning the notion of access, or lack thereof, to hair stores, salons or home stylists and just recently how and where Black bodies fit into the equation concerning modern American society.

The Black woman’s existence has been up for discussion through photos, videos and comments posted on social media. Although the literature suggests that online spaces have allowed Black bodies to convene in their respective communities (Brock, 2018), this project took that idea a step further in analyzing the rhetoric presented both textually and visually. Investigating social media platforms such as Instagram and its use and purposes calls for one to look at every facet of said media such as content, audience, admin-audience relationship and of

course, user discourse. This study not only examined what was being presented to a specific audience via posts on Instagram, but it began to explore the ongoing conversation amongst Black women which is now occurring in digital spaces as well. The trends that were found in the comments on this particular Instagram page can be used to delve into a more in-depth discussion regarding natural hair discourse and Black vernacular and how both are being expressed on social media. Although one Instagram page was used for this project, it could be used as a springboard for future research pertaining specifically to user discourse and why Black women use certain words and phrases when addressing themselves and each other in addition to the transfer of information from a digital space to a physical space.

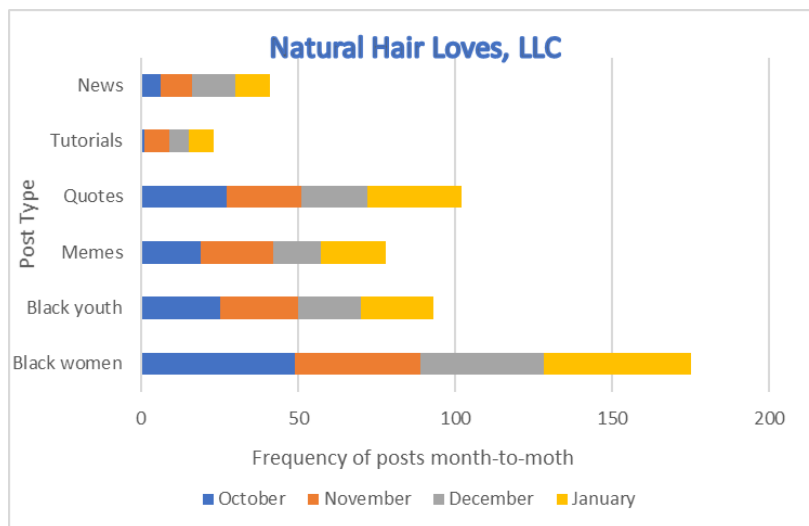


Figure 3: A visual depiction of the kinds of posts NHL shared in addition to how often they were posted.

Figure 3 depicts the frequency of the various kinds of posts that were collected on a monthly basis. In addition to the categories listed above, Natural Hair Loves occasionally posted sponsored ads. Though these posts were not included in this study due to the scope of content matter, it was noted that there was an apparent decrease in user interaction with posts of these kind. The most notable indications of this were less likes and little to no comments from the page's followers.



## **Natural Hair Loves**

The following text provides detail regarding content posted by Natural Hair Loves (@naturalhairloves) on Instagram. Due to the wide variety of content, posts were placed in five different categories: 1) affirming diversity amongst Black females, 2) video tutorials, 3) past and current events, 4) hair memes, and 5) quotes.

### *Affirming Diversity Among Black Females*

Natural Hair Loves posts on their Instagram page several times a day, and its content is almost always centered around Black females. Though most of the pictures that are posted depict Black females with natural hair, NHL will post photos of females with straight hair, braids or locs as well; normally, this includes extensions such as faux locs, box braids or twists or weaves, regardless of length or texture. Posting and reposting these pictures in a digital space allows Black girls to be presented in a positive light as it showcases their individual beauty and uniqueness. Videos demonstrating how mothers style their daughters' hair is also included in this section because the focus of the tutorials are little Black girls and their natural hair. Posts like these are important because in the age of social media and high technology usage amongst adolescents, young Black people are being represented in a celebratory manner to people outside of their families and respective communities through social media. It also helps foster an online presence and creates a space which is constructive and grants young Black girls the opportunity to witness the celebration and appreciation of other children that look like them. Though there aren't as many posts with Black teenagers, Black youth is often highlighted through tags and mentions—this is the case for almost everything that NHL posts. NHL also tags the person or page whose content is being shared—should NHL not know who is in the photo or video that

they post, they often leave the phrase “Please tag” in the caption and users can tag the original source as well as NHL in their comments so appropriate credit can be given.

Interestingly enough, majority of the literature focuses more so on women (White, 2005)—though children are discussed, there isn’t as much detail surrounding Black female youth. However, the research suggests that Black youth is heavily represented on social media (Mitchell, 2018). Several of the photos that were collected for this study appeared to be taken professionally whereas a great deal of other photos seemed to be taken by the children’s parents. Over the course of a week for example, NHL would post at least 3 to 5 professional photos of Black youth. This could be a suggestion that NHL encourages that Black youth of all backgrounds be represented using its platform. Moreover, numerous pictures depict Black children of all shades; this is significant because the photos can be considered a visual resistance on colorism within the natural hair community. Figure 2 in Appendix B was reposted by NHL; pictured are three Black girls wearing afros. Two of them have darker skin and the girl placed in the middle has a lighter skin tone. Colorism is still an ongoing issue that cripples not only the natural hair community but the Black community as well, so it is crucial to note that NHL posts photos of Black youth with different curl patterns and skin tones.

This notion is applied to photos of Black women as well. A major theme that was noted in terms of visual rhetoric displayed on Natural Hair Loves' Instagram page is the way women look directly into a camera. NHL often posts Black women making direct eye contact with the camera as their picture is being taken. It could be argued that this gesture is evidence of Black women exercising their agency in wearing their natural hair and posting pictures of it on social media. It could also be argued that by making direct eye contact with the camera allows Black women’s hair to speak for itself without the need for props such as signs for printed shirts.

Selfies are more common; however, professional photos or headshots are also posted. The subject usually has her hair in a fro or some other natural hairstyle. Figure 4 in Appendix A pictures what appears to be a headshot of a young woman wearing a yellow scarf. Scarves are normally worn by Black women as a means to protect their hair from the elements in addition to making a fashion statement or a rhetorical statement. Depending on the location of where a photo was taken, it could be inferred that scarves are also worn for religious purposes. Several of the comments under this specific post were positive; users constantly used the word “beautiful” to describe the subject in question. These kinds of pictures can speak volumes—the rhetorical statement that is being made can be that Black females have pride in their hair and are not shy about sharing it through pictures social media. In light of the recent social justice movements which have erupted around the country, scarves and hair have been used to take political stances. Over the course of three months, a collective 268 posts were saved for this category.

When looking at the comments on posts focused on Black women, users were generally positive. Most of the comments on figures 1-4 in Appendix A had used terms such as “beautiful,” “stunning,” “cute,” and “love.” One trend that was noted was that the word “cute” or “cutie” was used more often when the subject of the post was a Black youth. Posts with Black women were more associated with the word “beautiful,” especially if a woman happened to have darker skin or a tighter curl pattern. Another trend that is common amongst these types of posts are questions regarding hair type. Users may ask what hair type is being highlighted in the featured post and that one comment can receive numerous replies, in turn starting a new conversation within the existing exchange. It could be argued that users make intentional comments when interacting with posts regardless of what social media platform is being used, and through their comments, they are able to continually engage in conversation regarding their

hair. These conversations can then be taken from digital spaces and be had in real life, otherwise known as “irl.”

### *Education via Hair Tutorials*

Although Instagram is known for uploading and sharing still images, NHL uses their page to educate its followers through video tutorials, one of the more popular posts on NHL’s Instagram page. These videos can range from 30 seconds to a minute or longer depending on what is being performed (i.e. hairstyle tutorials or hair treatment preparation). Instagram’s IGTV has allowed NHL, in addition to other Instagram pages, to upload longer videos for their followers to watch and comment on.

Instagram users use these videos as educational tools for learning how to style and care for their own hair as well as other females in their lives. This is significant because educating other women could be seen as an act of social justice as well as bridging the gap between generations both in natural hair knowledge and technological know-how. Protective styles (i.e. box braids, faux locs, Cuban twists, etc.) that Black women wear are often self-taught. Social media such as YouTube and more recently, Instagram’s IGTV offers a plethora of content that is specific to a discourse community and promoting education via video recordings. The notion of natural hair is collective—it encompasses both the transitioning of processed hair which includes protective styles. Additionally, comments posted on these videos usually include what kind of hair to use for a particular style as well as what products to use in order to preserve the style and make it last longer. Instagram users can also engage in conversations about their actual hair and how to care for it. One of the most common questions asked on tutorials concerned the woman in question’s hair type and what products she used in the video.

Several videos that get reposted by NHL depict mothers styling their daughters' hair, and that in itself creates a unique conversation in the comments. There are also several videos of Black women styling their hair. Figure 5 from Appendix B pictures a screenshot of a video reposted by NHL. The woman in the video has darker skin and she demonstrates how she installs and styles clip-ins. One user commented that the video was “the best clip-in post” she’s ever watched and that it made her want to try them out. Most of users’ comments on this post were positive and commended the execution of styles in the video. Although there are Black women that still prefer additional length, clip-ins offer them that without having to straighten their hair (in the case of this specific video gathered for this study. Normally, clip-ins are available in numerous textures however, this individual went for a more natural look). Figure 6 is a screenshot of a video demonstrating how to achieve “space puffs” or afro puffs. The style has been around for a while, especially among young Black girls but it has become quite popular among Black women as well.

NHL posts several tutorials over the course of a month, roughly 20-25. Over the course of the three months, the average number of hair tutorials posted was approximately 22, however, this number was smaller than those of other categories such as Black women, quotes and memes. These videos can be considered educational in that they depict Black women and how they achieve certain styles—or in many cases, preserve a style. It was noted that one video demonstrated how to work with clip-ins or weave whereas the other video showed how to achieve a style with one’s own hair. Despite the differences, it appeared that both videos were shot in each individual’s homes which demonstrates a level of relatability among Black women. User also ask questions regarding products or styling tools (i.e. specific creams and perm rods) that create small chains of comments as other users reply to an original comment, furthering the

argument that education and teaching don't need to be in a formal setting to actually take place. NHL's use of Instagram's IGTV function doesn't necessarily act as an avenue for advertisement however, it gives smaller and less popular brands a platform to showcase their products and how they can help naturals attain healthy hair. 78 posts of this kind were also saved.

### *Acknowledging History and Current Events*

In addition to posting photos and videos of natural hair, NHL will post about events or people that are “winning”; they often include Black women who have started their own businesses or graduated with a slew of different undergraduate and graduate degrees in different fields. These posts also celebrate young Black people who have been accepted into college and received merit and academic scholarships. Additionally, NHL posts women who were pioneers in areas such as aviation and politics. By sharing these artifacts, NHL helps foster a positive online environment which celebrates Black excellence in every way, shape and form. NHL can highlight how Black women are constantly working to change the narrative surrounding them and how they perceive themselves through the achievements they've made. It's imperative to note that NHL pays homage to Black women who have paved the way for Black women today—this notion goes far beyond hair, as NHL's posts will range from Black educators, politicians and engineers. Figure 8 in Appendix B pictures Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to be elected to the U.S. Congress. Figure 7 pictures a young woman who was the only Black female in her class to graduate as a certified surgical technologist. Though these posts differ greatly from one another, they both make rhetorical statements through their subject that Black women can achieve just about anything. Posts such as these are usually captioned with “Black girl magic” or “Queening,” terms that are significant to the natural hair community. However, the woman in Figure 7 is sporting straight hair—despite this fact, the post still received positive

comments, furthering the notion that Black women can support other Black women whether they wear their hair curly or not.

### *Memes*

In the age of social media, memes have become a significant method of communication and expression. For the natural hair community, memes are a rather big thing as they make light of scenarios that Black women could relate to. The current manner in which social media is used has given memes to transform and be remixed to convey specific messages. Natural Hair Loves will post images such as Figure 10 in Appendix B. Over the course of a month, NHL posts memes that relate to Black women and though these posts are often light-hearted and humorous, they often get a lot of comments from NHL's followers, as they share how the posts are relatable to them. Additionally, NHL posts photos with statements written on them that relate directly to Black women on several different levels whether they pertain to their hair, how they dress and how they are perceived by their counterparts. What makes these posts interesting is that they aren't visual in the traditional sense—what users are drawn to initially is the text.

### *Quotes*

Quotes, in some cases, are more substantial than their visual counterparts. At the start of every week, NHL will post a positive quote and many users often respond with a sense of gratitude. There are also instances where quotes will depict certain situations such as trying to be polite and still being told you have an attitude for example (refer to Figure 11 in Appendix B). These posts often get a lot of interaction from NHL's followers and suggests how user discourse can occur in the comments. The example used here included one comment from a White Latina who suggested that “most” Black girls actually do have an attitude—the comment garnered a slew of replies from Black women, most of which were not hostile, but stern in explanation. Like

all of the content that NHL posts, this specific post was fascinating because of the women's responses. Users referred to number of other aspects that add to the idea of Black women being confrontation such as height and even skin tone.

## **Conclusion**

Although the findings collected from this study are attributed to a single Instagram page, the trends found in the comments, captions and posts themselves support the notion of Black female empowerment existing in digital spaces. Colorism and texturism are issues that affect the natural hair community directly as the literature argues. More specifically, King, Tharps, Mitchell, and Blay contend that these concepts have scarred the natural hair community by creating a hair hierarchy that has historically favored Black hair that is “manageable.” Social media has been able to combat this by highlighting Black women with various curl patterns and skin colors while calling out hair biases within its respective discourse community. What stood out regarding the Instagram page used for this thesis is that it didn't solely emphasize long, loosely curled hair; the page reposted photos of women with hair of various lengths and even reposted videos of women completely shaving their heads. NHL posting a variety of content also implies that the bold acts which Black women make can be communicated in more ways than one. For example, rather than explaining her reasons for not straightening her hair, a woman could simply cut all of her hair off and let the action speak for itself. This idea could be applied to the ongoing discussion surrounding current race relations as well—hair is just one of the many topics that dominate conversations amongst Black individuals however thoughts and opinions are often conveyed through short quotes or memes especially if the topic in question is somber.

Compiling data for this study reaffirmed that social media not only creates a space for conversations to take place, but it also allows communities to build online communities. NHL's



admin replies to the first few comments on their posts and will “like” those comments as well. This is not unique of NHL as many other pages interact with their audience in this manner, but it does help facilitate community and a sense of belonging within users who engage with the page’s content. The celebratory air of the “Black and proud” moment expressed by Blay has shifted from the inside of Black women’s homes and has settled in small pockets or pages on a plethora of social media platforms. Women can now bond in similarities in upbringing and natural hair journeys. Before social media, these conversations only existed in hair salons and at home; now, women around the world can engage in a conversation and make a new friend by simply hitting a “follow” or “subscribe” button.

It would be remiss to deny how social media has brought the natural hair community much closer in addition to making sharing information quite efficient. Moreover, Black women’s use of social media has allowed others outside of the natural hair community to be exposed to Black hair and gain information they probably would have never known otherwise. To state that “natural hair is important” would be far too easy. The important question is *why* is natural hair important? Natural hair is so much more than hair. It speaks to the acceptance it begs of Black women. It makes rhetorical statements in the face of social discord and adversity. The natural hair community also represents the shift in Black women’s idea of self-beauty and how they perceive beauty in general. It could be argued that because natural hair was considered the opposite of aesthetically pleasing Black women only had a fixed idea of what beautiful hair is. Nevertheless, they are now aware of the beauty that exists in them as well as those who they do not bear resemblance to.

Natural hair discourse is complicated. Black women had so much to learn about their hair, but the Natural Hair Movement allowed the natural hair community to exist. The rich

history of Black hair has garnered reverence for the act of going natural. Through increased social media use, the historical, metaphorical and rhetorical weight that natural hair holds have prompted legislation regarding hair discrimination as well as securing a space in academic discourse. Natural hair is so much more than hair and the findings this study collected are a clear indication that, although the discussion regarding natural hair is changing, the conversation itself is far from being over.

## Appendix A

### Affirming Diversity Among Black Females



Figure 4: Pictured is a young Black girl wearing her natural hair. All of the comments on this post were positive.

Figure 4 caption: Mood 😊👑 \*please tag source

#naturalhairloves #kinkyhairrocks #kinkynaturalhair #naturallychicwomen #naturalhairdreams  
#voiceofhair #embraceyourcurls

Date posted: October 14, 2019

User 1: “Cute”

User 2: “Princess being cute with her curls 😊”

User 3: “I love your hair baby”

User 4: “😊😊😊”

User 5: “gimme.”

User 6: “So sweet 😊❤️”

User 7: “And who is this little beauty 😊😊😊😊😊😊😊”

User 8: “Wow so sweet”

User9: “I want her 😍 😍”

User 10: “💜💜💜💜💜”

User 11: “😍🔥❤️❤️😍”

User 12: “I love her outfit and her hair to adorable. ❤️👑”

User 13: “❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️”

User 14: “I love seeing small children dressed liked little adults 😍😂”

User 15: “Awww, she is so adorable!!”

User 16: “Adorbs!!!”

User 17: “@user 💜💜”

User 18: “@user”

User 19: “@user”

User 20: “@user I need one ❤️❤️❤️”



Figure 5: Above are three Black girls. All of them are sporting afros. The photo seemed to be taken by a professional.

Figure 5 caption: Future queens 👑👑👑 tag please

#naturalhairloves #kinkycurlyhair #type4hair #naturalhairstylesforwomen

#discoverhairloves #hair2mesmerize #pufflife.

Date posted: February 1, 2020

User 1: “Just stunning 😍”

User 2: “😍😍😍😍”

User 3: “How beautiful ❤️❤️❤️”

User 4: “JUST BEAUTIFUL ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️”

User 5: “👑👑👑”

User 6: “Awe?! They are too cute!!”

User 7: “Love it ❤️🌟”

User 8: “I would frame this 🌟”

User 9: “❤️❤️❤️❤️”

User 10: “Black beauties cuties ❤️❤️”

User 11: “Gorgeous little mamas”

User 12: “Just beautiful 😊😊😊”

User 13: “Yes. Princesses!! Go girls... 😊”

User 14: “Yall are so pretty”

User 15: “Proud of this pic. Maybe just maybe there's a generation who will love their texture more than other races textures. Good parenting is everything”



*Figure 6: Pictured above is a young woman wearing her natural hair. All of the comments on this post were positive.*

Figure 6 caption: True beauty starts with being yourself. Go queen 😊👑.

#naturallhairloves #kinkyhairrocks #kinkynaturalhair #naturallychicwomen #naturallhairdreams  
#voiceofhair #embraceyourcurls

Date posted: October 13, 2019

User 1: “👄👄👄👄👄👄 sunkissed”

User 2: “👄👄👄❤️❤️❤️👄”

User 3: “Fine 👄👄👄”

User 4: “Such an amazingly beautiful woman. 👄”

User 5: “omg same texture as meeee”

User 6: “What 🤪🤪🤪👄👄👄👄👄”

User 7: “💙❤️”

User 8: “Absolutely beautiful”

User 9: “👄Stunning👄”

User 10: “💋”

User 11: “❤️❤️❤️”

User 12: “She's GAWGOUS 💋💋💋💋”

User 13: “She's gorgeous 👄❤️”



Figure 7: Above is a woman wearing a scarf. Normally, scarves are worn to not only protect the hair, but as a form of fashion.

Figure 7 caption: Queenin 👑👑🔥

#naturalhairloves #kinkycurlyhair #type4hair #naturalhairstylesforwomen #discoverhairstyles  
#hair2mesmerize #pufflife.

Date posted: February 4, 2020

User 1: “Who dat”

User 2: “Beautiful”

User 3: “How do I do this?”

User 4: “😏😏”

User 5: “❤️”

User 6: “Gracious Lord!!!”

User 7: “Geez!!! 😂😂😂”

User 8: “Gorgeous”

User 9: “😍😍😍 beautiful”



User 10: “😍❤️”

User 11: “So beautiful”

User 12: “Gorgeous!!”

## Appendix B

### Education via Hair Tutorials



*Figure 8: A screenshot of a hair tutorial posted on NHL's Instagram page. Almost all of the comments on this post were positive.*

Figure 8 caption: 6 easy natural hair styles on stretched hair.

Hair Info: @hergivenhair Kinky Blow Out 20" Glam Set Clip In

Follow @hergivenhair to order the same clip ins! Thank @queenkaay for this tutorial. Use code "Given" to save some \$\$\$

Date posted: October 13, 2019

User 1: "That don't make no sense!!! She made that look so doggone good!!! 🤔🤔🤔🤔  
#teachmesis"

User 2: "Perfect love it !! ❤️👏"

User 3: "I love all of them"

User 4: "It goes so fast how did she do the first one. I love it!"

User 5: “All so cute”

User 6: “She made these styles seem so east and effortless!! 🔥🔥🔥😊😊”

User 7: “Ameiiiiiii 😍👉👉👉👉”

User 8: “❤️”

User 9: “😊 I love these looks”

User 10: “Gorgeous! ❤️”

User 11: “I WANTTTTTTTTT 😍”

User 12: “I love it thank you so much”

User 13: “@user @user she made this look so easy and bomb. Watch I buy these and look like a dead squirrel trying to style 😂😂”

User 14: “@user I love this”

User 15: “I likes dis!! 😍”

User 16: “Thanks for sharing! 😍”

User 17: “Lovely”

User 18: “She sold these clip ins OKAY!! 🙌”

User 19: “Let’s talk about how you slayed all these looks 🔥🔥🔥”

User 20: “🙌 Yes to all except for that last one”

User 21: “cute cute cute”

User 22: “👏👏👏 This is the best clip-in post I’ve ever watched!! I’ve never wanted any until now❤️. Too cute😁”

User 23: “😍I love these looks”

User 24: “@user we need these”

User 25: “Creative and great ideas! They look fabulous Queen! 👑@user”

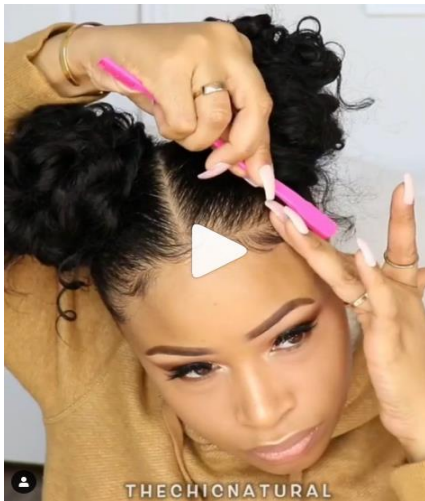


Figure 9: Above is a screenshot of a video posted on NHL's Instagram page. The woman in the video shows viewers how to create space puffs.

Figure 9 caption: results 👑

#naturalhairloves #kinkyhairrocks #kinkynaturalhair #naturallychicwomen #naturalhairdreams  
#voiceofhair #naturallydoingthemost

Date posted: February 4, 2020

User 1: “She is one my favs!!😍”

User 2: “Her natural hair is beautiful 👏”

User 3: “So cute! Her eye makeup is gorgeous too 😊”

User 4: “She’s so bomb”

User 5: “❤️ Too cute”

User 6: “LOVE IT!! 😊😊😊😊😊”

User 7: “@user this girl is your twin”

User 8: “@user 😍”

## Appendix C

### Acknowledging History and Current Events

I'm officially a Certified Surgical Technologist 🎓👩 & the ONLY black Graduate out of my class. First day of surgery tomorrow & I could really use some positive energy #BLACKEXCELLENCE 🙌👑



Figure 10: Pictured is a young surgical technologist graduate. Though she isn't wearing her natural hair, this photo is one of the many examples of Black women achieving their goals.

Figure 10 caption: Queenin 🙌 black girl magic 👑

#naturalhairloves #blackgirlmagic #naturalhair #surgicaltech #surgeryteam

Date posted: October 13, 2019

User 1: “❤️”

User 2: “Go Queen,do what u do best..GOD didn't bring u this far to leave you 🔥”

User 3: “Get it girl!! congrats.May God Bless u and keep you All the best.#blackgirlmagic”

User 4: “You are ready 🙌🙌👍👑”

User 5: “Love seeing positive stuff like this”

User 6: “Congrats 🙌🙌🙌🙌”

User 7: “Alright now...smart and beautiful. Get it \$\$\$\$\$\$”

User 8: “🏆👑👑👑👑”

User 9: “You got this!!!”

User 10: “You got this it’s a piece of cake....whatever flavor u like 🍷🍷🍷”

User 11: “❤️❤️😄😄😄”

User 12: “🔥❤️CONGRATULATIONS”

User 13: “Girl you got this,bless of to flow”

User 14: “YOU GO BABYGIRL! May God bless you in this new journey! this is so inspiring because im applying to nursing school soon ❤️”

User 15: “Yass go head queen 👑”

User 16: “Black Girl Magic 🌟 Queen👑 God Got You ❤️😊.You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.”

User 17: “You are inspiration to everyone who knows you and those who would like to get to know you. Congratulations and have a great day at work tomorrow 👍🔥.”

User 18: “You go girl”

User 19: “Just out here chasing dreams 🙌🔥”


User 20: “Congratulations! You got this! The ancestors are pleased. Keep it up.”

User 21: “May the LORD BLESS you along your journey you rock and you got this  
❤️🙏❤️🙏❤️🙏❤️🙏”

User 22: “You will do this ❤️black sister love”

User 23: “You get this 🏆”

User 24: “You got this baby girl..🙏”

User 25: “Congratulations ”

User 26: “  You got this”



User 27: “Go girl . U are the  God bless u . Black girl rock\*\*\*\*\*”


User 28: “Go you ”

User 29: “Ur Gon kill it!”

User 30: “Congratulations”

User 31: “Congratulations   ”

User 32: “Let’s go Queen!! You got this!  ”

User 33: “Congratulations hun, let me pour some queenergy on you .

User 34: “You got this sweetie  God Bless you ”

User 35: “Congratulations and all the best.”

User 36: “You got this sis!!  ”

User 37: “Congratulations! Go get ‘em!”

User 38: “Get it girl!!!”

User 39: “ Beautiful”

User 40: “Congrats. You are already excelling. Keep your momentum”



November 5, 1968 — Shirley Chisholm became first black woman elected to the United States Congress.



Figure 11: NHL posted this photo of Shirley Chisholm. The page posts several pictures such as this one, highlighting historical moments for Black women.

Figure 11 caption: “Black girl magic 🏰”

#naturalhairloves #blackgirlmagic #shirleychisholm”

Date posted: November 5, 2019

User 1: “RP”

User 2: “Don Cheadle favors her”

User 3: “❤️”

User 4: “This is great but I legit thought this was @thechristishow”

User 5: “❤️”

User 6: “Also first black woman to run for president :)”

User 7: “this is what we like to see 🍌”

User 8: “Yassssssssssssssssssssssss! 🍌🍌”

Inspiration to ALL women of color that with hard word u CAN become ANYthing u want to be!



### 14-Year Old College Student at Spelman Makes the Dean's List During 1st Semester



*Figure 12: NHL often posts stories that don't usually make the mainstream news. In this case, the subject of this story is a 14-year-old college student.*

Figure 12 caption: Black girl magic 👑🍷 . .

#naturalhairloves #blackexcellence #blackwomenarepoppin #blackgirlsrock  
#melaninatedcelebrated

Date posted: January 9, 2020

User 1: "Congratulations to you fr fr that's 🔥❤️"

User 2: "Too bad no one takes that degree serious in white america"

User 3: "I made deans list 3 semester in a row. That's an easy accomplishment if you serious about your studies"

User 4: "Degree her"

User 5: “❤️”

User 6: “You Rock Congratulations”

User 7: “Very good 🙌🙌🙌”

User 8: “da deans list ya heard ! 😊”

User 9: “Awesome”

User 10: “Congratulations”

User 11: “Congratulations young lady 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌”

User 12: “That's Beautiful, So Happy for her”

## Appendix D

### Memes

"I like it when you wear your hair this way better..."

Me:



*Figure 13: Pictured above is an example of a meme that many Black women can relate to. Several comments on this post expressed women's similar experiences.*

Figure 13 Caption: "Ok facts 🤔😂"

#naturalhairloves #kinkyhairrocks #kinkynaturalhair #naturallychicwomen #naturalhairdreams  
#voiceofhair #embraceyourcurls"

Date posted: October 25, 2019

User 1: ""Imma head out""

User 2: "😞😞😞😞"

User 3: "OK Susan! Well I like it better when you keep your opinion to yourself 🙄"

User 4: "Why do they think we care though? That kill me everytime somebody share they lil unsolicited stupidity..."

User 5: "Me at work: I don't recall asking you for your unsolicited opinion about my hair."

User 6: "Today tho"

User 7: "I CAN'T STAND THAT!!"

User 8: "As if I care 🤔 whose head is this anyway"

User 9: "YES.... heard that from the white guys at my old job!! Did I ask YA'LL!? 😏"

User 10: "Chil! My clap back: "The BLESSING about some women, mostly black women we can style our hair, Kinky, Afro, Curly, Straight, Braids, Sew in, or Wigs." "Can You Style your hair in any of these styles except curly or straight?" 😏 Hit them with that! 😏"

User 11: "Alright cool, give her the money to take care of her natural and her protective styling since they got so much opinion"

User 12: "#DidNotAsk"

User 13: "So true 😂😂👊"

User 14: "As soon as I hear that I be like bet. I'm changing it don't get comfortable"

User 15: "😂😂😂.....this is me looking at my husband when I do something other than my twist out!"

User 16: "😂😂😂😂😂😂"

User 17: "All the time 😏"

User 18: "Yep! That's me"

User 19: "Mannnnnnn I will give a "boyyyyy [explicit emoji]" (But the actual words) in a heartbeat!!! 🙊"

User 20: "And yet I'm rude when I say I don't care what you like..."

## Appendix E

### Quotes

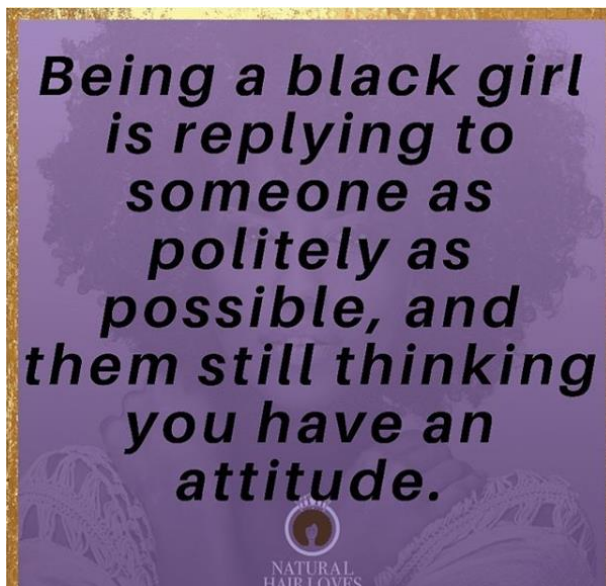


Figure 14: One of the many quotes that NHL posts on their page. It allows for users to interact with text in addition to photos and video.

Figure 14 Caption: This.

#naturalhairloves #kinkyhairrocks #kinkynaturalhair #naturallychicwomen #naturalhairdreams  
#voiceofhair #embraceyourcurls

Date posted: October 24, 2019

User 1: “This is why I just respond, I no longer try to find words that will sound better. If people think I’m rude that’s on them 😞”

User 2: “And then having to actually speak up, and out about something and feeling like you can’t. 🙄😞😞”

User 3: “My entire adult life and parts of my teen life. Don’t be a tall Black girl either.”

User 4: “Amennnnn”

User 5: “👏”

User 6: “I want this on a shirt !!!”

User 7: “Being a Black Woman is not easy, especially a dark skinned one”

User 8: “That’s why i don’t care anymore... #comeAndgetit”

User 9: “More than half of the black girls have an attitude, but we shouldnt judge books by their cover”<sup>2</sup>

User 10: “That’s why I respond how my heart desires. If you’re offended, it was fully intentional. If it wasn’t intentional, take it to God. Your emotions are above me now...🙄🙄🙄😂”

User 11: “It be the worst At work ..”

User 12: “FACTSSSS”

User 13: “Can't agree with this enough 🙄🙄🙄”

User 14: “People act terrified of black women let them tell it because of their history with other black women. God forbid I treat them the way history has always shown them to be.”

User 15: “Let them think 🙄”

User 16: “Exactly”

User 17: “Yess, and anytime you correct someone’s blatant disrespect you’re being hostile and a “typical black woman.””

User 18: “🙄🙄🙄”

User 19: “Then they say “do you have an attitude” and I reply “im just stating a fact!!””

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<sup>2</sup> User 9 in the example above was a White Latina. Her comment had a small chain of replies from Black users explaining why the notion behind Black women “having an attitude” is actually disrespectful.

User 20: “But they don’t have a problem when Latinas have attitudes though they think it’s “sexy””



## **Appendix F**

### **Limitations and Benefits**

This project focused on one page on a single social media platform (Instagram), so although it may reflect a percentage of natural hair discourse, it runs the risk of not looking at how social media is used to talk about and showcase natural hair in holistic manner. Being that Instagram is a photo sharing app, its main use differs drastically from other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or even YouTube. To add, only one page was used for this study. Instagram houses hundreds of natural hair pages, each with numerous reaches or follower counts. Natural Hair Loves, the page used for this study, currently has 704,794 followers and 14,028 posts. There was enough material to categorize different posts however, there is no examination of these posts and their comments in comparison to other natural hair pages on Instagram alone. Despite circulation of popular posts (those usually created by influencers with “bigger” pages), the conversations taking place in the comments are each unique based on the page that reposted.

Additionally, this project risks taking a closer look at the commercial end of natural hair. It was noted that sponsored ads posted by Natural Hair Loves do not receive as much attention from followers—this is evident in the lack of comments and likes even if the ads are posted far apart. It would be helpful to look at how ads play a role in the natural hair community’s relationship with social media, which social media platforms garner more interaction and if the interactions are effective.

### **Benefits**

Despite the risks, the project demonstrates how Black women’s conversations around the dinner table or in hair salons are now being had in digital spaces through photos, videos, memes and comments. The literature suggests that Black women have historically worked to make the

“other” comfortable; that is, the dominate forces which creates norms and standards Black women have succumbed to in terms of beauty and fashion. This study shows how social media is bridging the gap between Black women and granting them agency to engage in discussions surrounding not only their natural hair but their entire existence.

By picking apart specific posts on Instagram, we can look at how social media is highlighting Black youth and women in addition to Black women who have achieved great things. On the other hand, these posts can be used as educational tools which inform users about individuals they otherwise would never know about. For example, a photo of Cathay Williams, who was a born a slave and dressed in drag in order to serve during the Civil War, was posted by NHL on July 2, 2020 (see Figure 15). The post was liked over 17,000 times and has nearly 120 comments.

Cathay Williams: born a slave, she dressed as a man so she could serve in the US Army during the Civil War.

There's your new statue.



*Figure 15: Posted by Natural Hair Loves on July 2, 2020.  
Pictures Cathay Williams, a Civil War veteran.*

Coding a post such as this would show the how Black women interact with new information—or old information if they knew about the person in question previously—in addition to breaking down how the post’s visual rhetoric fits into the larger rhetorical goal NHL is trying to meet.

Black women are constantly sharing their experiences with other Black women, so there are multiple incidents occurring in the comments in addition to what is happening visually through posts.

Through this thesis, the immense diversity of the natural hair community is highlighted. This particular Instagram page has posted women with various curl patterns and skin tones, even showcasing Black women with vitiligo and albinism. Though posts highlighting the latter were not available at the time of data collection, the course taken to save and deconstruct comments could be applied to posts of these kind specifically and not just on Instagram alone.

This project could be used as a starting point for further research concerning natural hair and Black body politics as it analyzes how physical Black bodies are taking control of their digital bodies via social media. The images that are being circulated and forwarded all have agency and in using hashtags such as #blackgirlmagic, #teamnatural and even simply #naturallhair, Black women are engaging in natural hair discourse more openly than ever. Trends in the comments collected above suggest that Black women are have been changing the way in which they address and discuss natural hair, especially when it comes to Black youth with darker skin. However, almost every post that was saved supports the notion that NHL's visual rhetoric is encouraging positivity and inclusion within its micro-community.

On that note, this project is validation that the visual rhetoric of natural hair continues to drive social justice. As mentioned earlier, historical posts can inform users of significant historic figures. Additionally, posts focused on current social events can attract thousands of users, thus ending in heavy discussions. These matters are not always centered around Black hair but rather the Black woman's experience. In the age of COVID-19 and nation-wide protests, Black women are using social media to make poignant statements. Where information regarding hair usually

passes through the comments, users often provide contact information to individuals in specific states or just words of encouragement. Why these conversations matter is because society has not provided Black people a space to engage, so to mitigate the lack of room, we created spaces for ourselves.

Although this study focuses on natural hair, it can be argued that through visual rhetoric and comments, conversations amongst Black women often don't have to stop at just hair. There are many concerns amongst Black women and how they are using social media to make noise and "talk back" in order to engage in an ongoing conversation is where this thesis starts to really construct the visual rhetoric of natural hair and how Black women are using social media to reshape it.

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