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"Hair-Esteem Toolkit For Black Girls": The Development Of A Self-Esteem Toolkit For Black Adolescent Girls Centering Hair As A Tool For Empowerment

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Abstract

Background: For Black adolescent girls, hair is a strong staple of gender and ethnic identity, influencing intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions. Gendered racism and Eurocentric beauty standards pathologize Black girls and their hair, leading them to experience high rates of hair harassment and discrimination. These experiences negatively impact the self-esteem of Black girls, which has important implications for a host of health behaviors. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between self-esteem and hair among Black girls and integrate findings into a culturally relevant digital toolkit to promote and develop hair-esteem and self-esteem among Black girls.

Methods: This study is a secondary analysis of a mixed-methods study titled *The Dreamer Girls' Project*. Inclusion criteria included: (1) Self-identifies as Black, (2) Adolescent girl aged 13-18 years old, (3) Must reside within the United States of America. Researchers conducted 12 focus groups (n=62) with 4-8 participants included per group. The youth advisory board (YAB) from the primary study was invited to reconvene for the purposes of this study, which five participants accepted. Two other girls with demonstrated leadership potential and/or involvement with the Substances and Sexual Health Lab were also invited to join, for a total of seven YAB members. The YAB convened twice in March 2023 to co-develop the toolkit.

Results: Findings from the focus groups, YAB meetings, and literature were used to develop the "Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls". The toolkit focused on hair empowerment and integrated supplementary self-esteem development activities and resources. The toolkit is intended to promote self-esteem among Black girls aged 13-18 centering hair as an empowerment tool.

Conclusion: The developed toolkit demonstrates the value of centering Black girls in research using theoretical frameworks that leverage their creative potential and leadership abilities while fostering a co-learning space. Findings may be expanded on using YPAR to contribute to current advocacy efforts on hair discrimination.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Marlene Hussett. Thank you for empowering me to accomplish anything I put my mind to, and for your endless support and love. Rest easy.

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Thirdly, I want to thank the amazing members of the Youth Advisory Board, and all of the young Black girls who contributed to the development of this toolkit. I hope you continue to inspire others with your Black girl magic and make a difference in your communities and the lives of those around you.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for supporting me while at Yale. Your unending support and encouragement was the push I needed to succeed in this degree program.

Table of Contents

Rationale: Why Black Girls Deserve Better

Hairitage: The Historical Importance of Black Hair

The cultural significance of Black hair is reported as early as 1400, with hairstyles in African civilizations signified a variety of social positions including marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within the community (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Among West African civilizations, hair held social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance that was integral to their identity (Sieber & Herreman, 2000). During the onset of the transatlantic slave trade, one of the first acts of colonization and dehumanization committed against enslaved African peoples was to shave their heads (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Indeed, the European colonizers acknowledged the significance placed on hair within these communities and established this as a first step towards severing ties with their African culture (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

As the transatlantic slave trade continued from the 15th to 19th century, enslaved Black people were subjected to inhumane working conditions within the South of America, often laboring for 12-15 hours per day with scarce food and limited rest days (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). During this period, Black women and girls did not have time to care for their appearances unlike their ancestors from Africa, who often spent hours or days grooming their hair (Randle, 2015). In addition, Black girls and women born and raised in enslavement found it difficult to care for and take pride in their hair as they often lacked the appropriate tools, including combs, ointments, and palm oil, which were frequently used for hairdressing in African communities (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

The conceptualization of *good hair* began with the division of field slaves and house slaves (Thompson, 2009; Randle 2015). Field slaves, characterized as having darker skin, were treated very poorly, often forced to wear a headscarf so their owners would not have to look at their "wooly hair" (Patton, 2006). In contrast, house slaves, characterized as having lighter skin, frequently received preferential treatment and were required to look presentable, often imitating the hairstyles of their white masters (Patton, 2006; Randle 2015). This pattern led to the pathologizing of traditionally Black features,

such as dark skin and kinky hair, and gave a social advantage to those with straight hair and lighter skin (Thompson, 2009). A racialized hierarchy began to develop, where skin shades and hair textures that minimized African ancestry and were most closely aligned to European aesthetics were highly valued (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Randle, 2015; Robinson, 2011; Norwood, 2018). A standard of feminine beauty emerged, where *good hair* was defined as long, straight/wavy, smooth-textured hair, and *bad hair* was defined as coarse, tightly coiled, and more likely to be short (Bryd & Tharps, 2001; Essein & Wood, 2021; Randle, 2015; Robinson, 2011; Thompson, 2009). As enslaved Black people began to internalize this messaging, these values and ideals were soon passed down to future generations, ingraining the notion that dark skin and tightly coiled hair were not only less attractive but indicated an inferior position in society (Bryd & Tharp, 2001).

Following the abolishment of slavery, the Jim Crow era brought similar struggles, where Black people were still required to appease the standards outlined by White people (Bryd & Tharp, 2001). This included maintaining hair aesthetics to prevent them from looking "too African". Under these beauty standards, kinky hair was associated with being ignorant, uncivilized, and unruly (Randle, 2015; Thompson, 2009). The ideal look for Black women attempting to maintain or gain social status included straight hair, or perfectly placed soft curls, (Bryd & Tharp, 2001). Achieving this look often required straightening their hair using harsh chemicals (Bryd & Tharp, 2001; Thompson, 2009). However, Black women were willing to use these potentially deadly chemicals to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards (Henderson, 2022; Thompson, 2009).

Throughout the early 20th century, there was an augmentation of companies focused on providing products to care for Black hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Thompson, 2009). While White-owned companies originally dominated this field, Black-owned businesses began to enter the market, positioning themselves as serious competitors (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone were two of the most prominent and successful Black women within the Black hair industries (Gill, 2017; Phipps & Prieto, 2018). They sold hair products that promoted hair growth and made it easier to manage

and style coily hair (Gill, 2017; Phipps & Prieto, 2018). Through their businesses, they achieved an unprecedented wealth status for Black women and provided education and economic opportunities for other Black women interested in selling their products (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Controversially, Black-owned companies such as those owned by Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Turbo Malone, did not challenge Eurocentric beauty standards or condone the chemical processing and straightening of Black hair (Gill, 2017; Patton, 2006; Phipps & Prieto, 2018). Rather, they aimed to develop affordable, less harmful products that would make it easier for Black women to achieve the long and straight-haired ideal (Gill, 2017; Patton, 2006; Phipps & Prieto, 2018).

It was during the civil rights era of 1965-1979 that Black women began to reject the beauty standards outlined by Eurocentric features, using their hair as a symbol of resistance (Henderson, 2022; Randle, 2015; Tate 2007). Celebration of Black pride was expressed through hairstyles that embraced the uniqueness of Black hair, including coils, afros, locs, braids, and twists (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Henderson, 2022; Randle, 2015; Tate, 2007). Embracing these highlighted the beauty of natural Black hair, particularly that it could hold different styles (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Randle, 2015; Robinson, 2011). *Natural hair* references hair that is not treated by chemicals that alter the natural curl/coil composition of one's hair, maintaining the integrity of the coil as it naturally grows out of their head (Norwood, 2018).

The celebration and liberation of Blackness through hair resulted in the politicization of Black hair, particularly the afro which represented Black pride for Black people but was associated with Black terrorism for White people (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Henderson, 2022). White people often retaliated against Black people who rejected the Eurocentric beauty standards, blocking economic and educational opportunities for those who were not aesthetically aligned (Rosado, 2004). Thus, began the use of discriminatory practices based on hair, against women who embraces hairstyles that complimented their natural hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Rosado, 2004).

The late 20th century marked a struggle between resisting and accommodating Eurocentric beauty standards. After the "Black pride" civil rights era, hair straightening became popular again (Byrd &

Tharps, 2001; Henderson, 2022). Black women and girls either used a *chemical straightener*, a semi-permanent straightening solution that is applied every two to three months, or a *heated straightener*, a tool that applies heat to the hair to press out the coils/curls (Henderson, 2022). Other popular styles included adding false hair for weaves, extensions, and braids (Henderson, 2022; Thompson, 2009). While these styles helped Black women achieve long, straight hair, they also damaged natural hair causing tension, heat damage, and mechanical breakage. Negative stereotypes about natural Black hair were still prominent, particularly in professional environments, making it nearly impossible to wear natural hair in the workplace (Bennett-Alexander & Harrison, 2015; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Greene, 2017; Henderson, 2022).

The 21st century brought on the natural hair movement, where Black women again began to resist Eurocentric beauty standards, appreciating their natural hair (Henderson, 2022; Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019; Orey & Zhang, 2019). Modern times revealed an increase in the number of Black women rejecting chemical straighteners, rising from a 26% rejection rate in 2010 to a 36% rejection rate in 2011 (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Additionally, there was an uptake in hair products designed to treat and style natural hair, such as Shea Moisture and Camille Rose (Henderson, 2022). While an increasing number of Black girls and women are embracing their natural hair, Black hair politics and the pressure to align with Eurocentric beauty standards remain a barrier to true acceptance.

More Than "Just Hair": A Marker of Racial Identity Among Black Girls and Women

A deep understanding of the significance of hair for Black women and girls requires the use of an intersectional, Black feminist lens (Robinson, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1996). Black women lie at the intersection of gender and race, meaning their experiences are the result of the oppression and privilege of their interlocking identities as both women and Black (hooks, 1981; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Robinson, 2011). The first dimension of hair relates to gender, as hair is a primary tenet in female/feminine beauty standards acting as a beauty determinant instilled by patriarchal expectations of females (Randle, 2015; Robinson, 2011). These standards are based on Eurocentric features, which

require hair to be long, soft, straight, smooth, and neat (Robinson, 2011). It is here where the second dimension, race, plays an important role. Since *good hair* standards are based on Eurocentric beauty standards, *bad hair* is the antithesis of good hair – tightly coiled, thicker, and short (Essien & Wood, 2021; Norwood, 2018; Robinson, 2011). Due to the distinctive texture of Black hair, it acts as a unique feature most exclusively associated with Black people, leaving Black girls and women at the bottom of the hair texture hierarchy and labeling them unbeautiful and more masculine (Onnie Rogers, Versey, & Cielto, 2021; Robinson, 2011). Thus, for Black girls and women, hair acts as a physical attribute of gendered racism (Henderson, 2022).

In conjunction, the historical context and significance of hair, the importance of hair as a beauty standard to females, and the racially motivated devaluing of African hair textures place a specific burden on Black girls and women that is not experienced by Black men, White women, or other racialized minorities (Henderson, 2022; Robinson, 2011). In addition, Black girls and women are socialized to view hair as an extension of themselves (Banks, 2000; Dove, 2021; Essien & Wood, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Onnie Rogers, Versey & Cielto, 2021; Spellers, 2003; Thompson, 2009). These factors all work to position hair as central to the identity and experiences of Black girls (Banks, 2000; Dove, 2021; Essien & Wood, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Onnie Rogers, Versey & Cielto, 2021; Spellers, 2003; Thompson, 2009).

The literature presents a love-hate relationship between Black girls and their hair, demonstrated through their *resistance* and *accommodation* of European Beauty standards (Henderson, 2022; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Rosario, Minor, & Rogers, 2021). For Black girls, *resistance* involves affirming their identities and rejecting societal stereotypes (Onnie Rogers et al., 2021). This includes affirming the beauty of their hair, particularly the unique ability to style their hair in ways that girls from other racial backgrounds cannot and embracing hair as an essential part of their Blackness and the lineage of Black people collectively (Henderson et al., 2022; Randle, 2015; Robinson, 2011; Rogers et al., 2021). Resistance also requires Black girls to acknowledge that Eurocentric beauty standards are deeply rooted

in gendered racism beginning with the enslavement of Black people, and that these Eurocentric beauty standards are perpetuated intra-racially, inter-racially, and inter-generationally (Henderson, 2022; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021). Once these dimensions of resistance are acknowledged, they can then reject the negative stereotypes and toxic assumptions associated with Black girls and their natural hair and relieve themselves of the pressure to look "presentable" to be accepted by others in society (Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Henderson, 2022; Thompson, 2009).

For these reasons, wearing natural hair in and of itself is often perceived as an act of resistance, challenging the negative messages about the natural Black aesthetic as undesirable, unprofessional, and undesirable (Henderson, 2022; Norwood, 2018; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Spellers, 2003). Specifically, Black girls who transition from chemically relaxed hair to natural hair are the epitome of resistance (Norwood, 2018). Norwood (2018) describes this transition as a transformative process, decolonizing both the body and mind, as hair is an extension of the body. Note that the process of learning to appreciate and love their hair can be a difficult process, requiring Black girls' to "break through the walls of denial which hide the depth of Black self-hatred, inner anguish, and unreconciled pain" (hooks, 1992, p 20). This liberating process carves a path for Black girls to resist negative messages, and affirm their natural selves (Norwood, 2018; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021). While not all girls with natural hair do so out of resistance, due to the high politicization of Black girls' hair, wearing natural hair often sends this message whether intended or unintended (Spellers, 2003).

Contrarily, *accommodation* involves internalizing negative stereotypes and toxic narratives about Black hair that are aligned with anti-Black, texturist values (Onnie Rogers et al., 2021). Accommodation for Black girls involves accepting and perpetuating notions of *good hair* and *bad hair*, perpetuating negative stereotypes about Black girls' hair, and attempting to align with Eurocentric beauty standards by using chemicals or heat to straighten hair or covering their natural hair with straight-haired wigs and weaves (Essien & Wood, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Thompson, 2009). Note that not all Black girls and women who choose to relax their hair or use wigs and weaves do so because of

11

accommodation, many do so because of fashion choices or convenience (Spellers, 2003). In the same way that leaning into Afrocentric beauty standards signifies an appreciation of textured hair, accommodating to Eurocentric beauty standards, lends to the invisibility of Black hair, a form of cultural violence that symbolically destroys Black identity (Oyedemi, 2016). This is especially because achieving Eurocentric beauty standards requires Black girls to engage in harmful practices that result in mechanical breakage from high-tension hairstyles (i.e., Ponytails, wigs, weaves) and chemical relaxers, and/or heat damage from consistently applying heat to hair (Essein & Wood, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021). As they erase their natural self, a significant portion of their Black identity is erased along with it (Oyedemi, 2016).

Hair Valuation

From early in development, Black girls are taught to dislike themselves, learning that the Black aesthetic is unnatural and unattractive, particularly when it comes to hair (Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). This is primarily through messages devaluing natural Black hair, namely that it is unkempt, wild, distracting, and unhygienic (Essien & Wood, 2021; Gadson & Lewis, 2022; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Tate, 2007). These toxic assumptions are frequently linked to other negative stereotypes about Black girls, painting them as unruly, loud, and ghetto (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Opara et al., 2022). In addition, Black girls are subjected to gendered racist microaggressions about their hair that include the exoticization of Black hair, having their hair touched without consent, and questioning the texture and hygiene routine of Black girls' hair (Gadson & Lewis, 2023). Evidently, there is a social cost associated with embracing natural hair for Black girls, placing them at increased risk for gendered racist microaggressions and discrimination (Gadson & Lewis, 2023; Henderson, 2022).

Interestingly, Black girls' first encounter with the devaluation of their natural hair begins at home, through racial socialization. *Racial socialization* is defined as verbal and nonverbal messages passed down to younger generations that detail attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about the significance of race in

personal and group identity (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Dunbar et al., 2016; Lesane-Brown, 2008; Tang, McLoyd & Hallman, 2015). A component of racial socialization includes *hair valuation*, verbal and nonverbal messages from other Black individuals (Robinson, 2011). While Black girls learn about hair valuation early in development from their families, peers, and romantic interests, they first learn from their mothers and mother-figures (i.e., stepmother, grandmother, aunt) (Robinson, 2011; Spellers, 2003, hooks, 1996). These gatekeepers play an essential role in determining how Black girls will negotiate their hair aesthetic in a culture dominated by Eurocentric beauty standards (Spellers, 2003).

Considering that notions of *good hair* have transcended across generations, Black girls learn that the more coily or "kinky" their hair was, the lower their hair grade, especially if it was short (Robinson, 2011). Bankhead and Johnson (2014) found that Black women received the most negative critique about their hair from other family members (43%), followed by strangers (28%), and then friends (25%). Indeed, from early ages, Black girls receive microaggressions devaluing their hair from family members. This results in Black girls engaging in harmful hair practices that may damage hair, such as chemical and heat straighteners to achieve straight hair. Oyedemi (2016) found that almost 90% of Black women in their sample had their hair chemically relaxed before the age of 16 in an attempt to align with Eurocentric beauty standards. While families of Black girls have an opportunity to instill and promote ethnic pride in Black girls, they more often perpetuate microaggressions, stereotypes, and Eurocentric beauty standards (Bankhead & Johnson, 2014; Oyedemi, 2016; Robinson, 2011).

Hair Harassment and Discrimination

Black hair devaluation continues to present as a barrier for Black women and girls, specifically through discriminatory institutional policies and hair harassment (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019). O'Brien-Richardson (2019) defines *hair harassment* as "the direct or indirect unwanted, unwelcomed, and offensive behaviors made either explicitly or implicitly, typically towards women and girls of African descent, based on the texture, look, or subjective assumptions of their hair" (p 523). Hair harassment has two dimensions, social hair harassment, and societal hair harassment. *Social hair harassment* includes

direct verbal, emotional, and physical assaults experienced due to hair (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019).

Societal hair harassment includes indirect harassment mechanisms from society due to hair, such as hearing of hair discrimination in educational spaces, and representations of Black hair in the media that is aligned with Eurocentric beauty standards (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019).

Black girls and women frequently experience hair harassment on the social and societal level, and do so early in life (Dove, 2021; Essein & Wood, 2021; Hobdy, 2020; Klein, 2021;). Black girls frequently hear about institutional policies that permit the discrimination of Black hair in educational and professional spaces in the media. These narratives include Tiana Parker, a 7-year-old who was pushed out of her school in Tulsa, Ohio in 2007 after being told her locs were not allowed (Klein, 2013). The reasoning provided was that her locs were "not presentable" (Klein, 2013, para 2) and could "distract from the respectful and serious atmosphere it strives for" (Klein, 2013, para 4). Tiana's charter school's dress code policy reflects anti-Black rhetoric, telling Black girls that Afrocentric hairstyles such as dreadlocks are unacceptable (Klein, 2013).

Similarly, in 2013 Vanessa VanDyke, a 12-year-old Black girl in Orlando, Florida was threatened with expulsion for her afro (Hobdy, 2020). Vanessa reported being bullied about her hair to her school administration and in response, the administration told Vanessa her hair was in violation of the school dress code, which cites "Hair must be a natural color and must not be a distraction" (Hobdy, 2020, para 4). The administration provided Vanessa with an ultimatum: either cut her hair or she would be expelled from the academy (Hobdy, 2020). These anti-Black policies and sentiments negatively impact the Black girls who experience them, as well as the Black girls who hear about them through the media.

In addition to societal hair harassment, Black girls experience social hair harassment from teachers, parents, and peers. Dove (2021) found that 86% of Black girls in their study who experienced discrimination did so prior to the age of 12, highlighting the high proportion of Black girls who face social hair harassment. Essein and Wood (2021) reported that Black girls were frequently reprimanded for their chosen hairstyles, such as beads in their hair making clacking sounds. Teachers commonly exhibit

bias towards natural hair, perceiving Black hair as non-standard, un-beautiful, and not properly maintained or cared for (Essein & Wood, 2021). Narratives of teachers telling parents how to manage their Black girl's hair highlighted the bias they hold towards Black hair: "The teacher suggested her daughter's hair 'would look nicer' if the parent 'just permed it like the other Blacks'" (Essein & Wood, 2021, p 407). This is particularly concerning considering that these harmful messages can negatively impact the identity development of young Black girls (Essien & Wood, 2021).

Novel legislation is working to ban discrimination of hair styles and textures in K-12 public and charter schools, work environments, and public accommodations (The Crown Act, 2023). This works by including hair in the definition of race in the Fair Employment and Housing Act and state Education Codes (The Crown Act, 2023). This legislation is known as the *Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair* act, or the CROWN act (The Crown Act, 2023). The CROWN act is currently law in 20 states and has been filed or pre-filed in 23 states (The Crown Act, 2023). In attempts to end discrimination nationwide, the CROWN act (HR 2116) was submitted to the U.S. House of Senate, which passed in March 2022 with a vote of 235 to 189 (The Crown Act, 2023). Unfortunately, the CROWN act did not pass the U.S. Senate in December 2023 and will be re-submitted during the 2023 legislative session (The Crown Act, 2023). As the fight for Black girls and women is ongoing, without legislative protection against discrimination, they will continue to experience the damaging effects of social and societal hair harassment.

Self-Esteem and Black Girls: Public Health Implications

Black girls must navigate the pressure the meet impossible, Eurocentric beauty standards while simultaneously rejecting hair harassment, harmful stereotypes, and microaggressions that tell them they are not desired, accepted, or beautiful. Internalization of these negative messages and experiences negatively impacts Black girls' self-esteem (Opara et al., 2022). *Self-esteem* is defined as an individual's assessment of their self-worth and belief in their ability to be capable, significant, and worthy (Hatcher,

2007; Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1979). A more robust definition of self-esteem is offered by Hatcher (2007) who conceptualizes it as:

> A sense of personal self-worth, the intrinsic worth, competence, and approval a person has associated with himself or herself. It includes ethnic identity associated with racial pride and collective experiences and is based in part on societal evaluations and devaluations. It is influenced by both the social comparisons made by the person and the reactions of others and is therefore shaped by experiences of racism and sexism. It is a strong indicator of psychological distress or well-being. (p 225)

This definition acknowledges the ways in which societal evaluations of Black girls and women – including gendered racist microaggressions and stereotypes – can influence their self-esteem. Further, it highlights the inclusion of racial identity and pride as integral components of self-esteem development in Black girls and women.

Self-esteem has important sexual health implications for Black girls. Those who exhibit low self-esteem are more likely to have poor mental well-being and participate in sexual risk behaviors (Chandler, Anster, Ross, & Morrison-Beedy, 2016; Dunston, Wallace, & Osuoha, 2018; Ethier et al., 2006; Opara, Rivera-Rodas, Garcia-Reid, & Reid, 2020; Opara, Abrams, Cross, & Amutah-Onukagha, 2021; Opara et al., 2022;). Sexual risk behaviors include having multiple sexual partners, using alcohol and other illicit substances before sex, lack of condom use during sex, lack of contraceptive use, early sexual debut (before age 13), and low testing rates for STIs and HIV (Baumgartner, Geaery, Tucker & Wedderburn, 2009; Danielson et al., 2014; Pflieger, Cook, Niccolai, & McConnell, 2013; Redfield et, al., 2020). Engaging in sexual risk behaviors places youth at increased risk of HIV infection, STIs, and teen pregnancy (Redfield et al., 2020). Black adolescent girls disproportionately engage in sexual risk behaviors compared to their non-Black counterparts (Auslander et al., 2009; Chung et al., 2017; Redfield et al., 2020; Szucs et al., 2020). Consequentially, Black adolescent girls also report disproportionately higher incidence rates of STI, HIV, and teenage pregnancy compared to their non-White counterparts

(Auslander et al., 2009; Bradley et al., 2019; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021a; Chung et al., 2017; Pflieger et al., 2013; Redfield et al., 2020). Alarmingly, the rate of chlamydia and gonorrhea among Black adolescent girls is 4.5 and 8.8 times the rate of their White counterparts respectively, demonstrating the devastating racial disparities in sexual health outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Although these sexual health disparities are multifaceted and complex, with psychosocial, environmental, and structural determinants, self-esteem undoubtedly plays a role. The literature demonstrates a significant association between self-esteem and sexual risk behaviors (Belgrave, Van Oss Marin, & Chambers, 2000; Ethier et al., 2006; Paxton et al., 2013; Pittigilo, Jackson, & Florio, 2012; Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman, 2008; Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004). Indeed, high self-esteem predicts future sexual risk behavior, with low-esteem individuals more likely to initiate sex at younger ages, have sex with riskier partners, and have unprotected sex (Belgrave et al., 2000; Ethier et al., 2006; Paxton et al., 2013; Pittigilo et al., 2012; Rostosky et al., 2008; Wild et al., 2004). Salazar et al. (2005) highlight potential theoretical mechanisms by which self-esteem reduces sexual risk behaviors. Self-esteem is significantly positively associated with important mediators that determine sexual risk behaviors (Salazar et al., 2005). Those with high self-esteem were more likely to have positive condom attitudes, demonstrate sexual assertiveness, and effectively negotiate condom use with their partner, and were more likely to negotiate condom use (Lewis-Keith, 2018; Salazar et al., 2005). Another potential mechanism posits that when self-esteem is present, Black adolescent girls are comfortable prioritizing their self-interests, safety, and health, rather than compromising their sexual health to please their sexual partners (Connell, 1987; Opara et al., 2021). Considering the state of the sexual health of Black girls and the association between sexual health outcomes and self-esteem, promoting self-esteem among Black girls may be an effective preventive mechanism against participating in sexual risk behaviors and poor sexual health outcomes.

Making the Case for Hair as a Tool for Self-Esteem

As previously mentioned, hair is an important marker of racial identity for Black adolescent girls. Thus, hair has the power to affect how Black girls perceive and feel about themselves, impacting their self-esteem, body image, and sexual identity (Abrams, Belgrave, Williams & Maxwell, 2020; Dove, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Thompson & Keith, 2001). Indeed, Bankhead and Johnson (2014) found that self-esteem is significantly positively associated with *hair-esteem*, an indicator of self-worth and acceptance regarding an individual's hair. Black girls who are aware of racial and gender power dynamics, embrace their Blackness, and resist Eurocentric beauty standards by rejection of *texturism*, discrimination based on how close or far an individual's natural hair resembles European hair (Shepherd, 2018), are more likely to report higher levels of self-esteem (Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997; Helms, 1996; Ossana, Helms & Leonard, 1992; Rosario, Minor, & Rogers, 2021). Further, those with high self-esteem are better adapted to buffer stereotypical beliefs about their racial groups (Buckly & Carter, 2005). This is particularly useful for Black girls who constantly receive negative microaggressions and stereotypes from society.

Contrarily, Black girls who internalize anti-Black attitudes (colorism, texturism) and determine their self-worth based on their ability to conform Eurocentric beauty standards are more likely to report low levels of self-esteem (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Goodstein & Ponterotto, 1997; Helms, 1996; Ossana et al., 1992). This may be the result of a lack of awareness regarding how gender and race shape the experiences of Black girls, leading to the internalization of negative attitudes about Black people (Helms, 1996; Ossana et al., 1992). In these instances, Eurocentric values and standards are the reference group used for approval (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Helms, 1996; Ossana et al., 1992). Since Eurocentric beauty standards are impossible for Black girls to fully attain, this leaves them feeling dissatisfied with their appearance and with negative attitudes toward their Blackness (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Helms, 1996; Ossana et al., 1992; Robinson, 2011). Considering the connection between hair and self-esteem, leveraging hair as a tool to develop self-esteem among Black girls may promote protective sexual health

behaviors by decreasing engagement in sexual risk behaviors. The purpose of this research is to: 1) Further explore the relationship between Black girls, their hair, and self-esteem, 2) Integrate findings into a culturally relevant digital toolkit to promote and develop hair-esteem and self-esteem among young Black girls.

Toolkits: A Knowledge Translation Tool

While no definitive definition of a *toolkit* exists, the term is widely used to describe a package of educational materials, often containing templates, instructional materials, worksheets/workbooks, and media (videos, posters), in multiple formats (hard copy, digital, web) (Barac, Stein, Bruce & Barwick, 2014; Yamanda et al., 2015). Toolkits are a notorious knowledge translation strategy used to disseminate information, facilitate the use of evidence-based practices, inform policy and decision-making, and illicit behavior change (Barac et al., 2014; Torrey et al., 2001; Wirtschafter et al., 2011). Further, this knowledge translation strategy can be easily implemented in digital formats, reaching a wide audience (Barac et al., 2014). Research indicates that effective toolkits should be strategically designed with a clear rationale, integrate quality evidence, and provide users with guidance on their use or implementation (Yamada et al., 2015). A scoping review by Barac et al. (2014) found that ~78% (n=21) of evaluated toolkits (N=27) were reported to be satisfactory, useful, or resulted in an intention to change behavior.

Toolkits are regularly created to guide researchers and practitioners on best practices to engage with youth (Kanji, Rogers, & Gligorijevic, 2022; Knowledge Translation Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions, 2016; Tamarack Institute, 2020). However, researchers now recognize the value of youth-led and -engaged research, providing space for youth to inform, lead, and develop toolkits that serve other youth (Duran-Becerra, 2022; Positive Change Toronto Initiative, 2022). Digital toolkits are commonly positioned as an innovative method to engage and empower youth (World Health Organization, 2020). Creating a digital toolkit that caters to the needs of youth, in partnership with youth involves: 1) Conducting a needs assessment, 2) Developing and using a theory-driven approach, 3) Developing content and an appropriate delivery channel, 4) Creating a prototype of the intervention, 5)

Launching the product with an effective promotion campaign, and 6) Evaluating the progress and performance of the toolkit (World Health Organization, 2020). The development of the proposed toolkit will follow this framework using youth participatory action research principles to ensure the creation of a high-quality, effective, and impactful product.

Theoretical Framework

Black Girlhood

Black girlhood theory is the unique representations, memories, and lived experiences of existing and developing in a young, Black, female body (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013). Black girls are uniquely vulnerable due to the combined oppression of race, sex, and age (Nunn, 2018). As a result, Black girls are often trapped in environments that are disempowering and not supportive of their personal development (Nunn, 2018). Black girlhood confronts this by leveraging the collective potential of Black girls to empower them through activating creativity and questioning the organization of social systems and power structures. Brown (2013) describes the creative potential of Black girlhood as a framework to:

(1) Articulate visionary Black girlhood as a meaningful practice, (2) Showcase Black girl inventiveness of form and content, (3) Expand our vision of Black girlhood beyond identity, (4) Sense radical courage and interdependence, and (5) Honor praxis and the analytical insight gained through consistent action and reflection. (p 3).

Creativity is a central tenant of Black girlhood theory, necessary to highlight the voices of Black girls who are habitually rendered invisible and silent and are commonly underrepresented in the spaces they occupy (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013).

By granting Black girls the opportunity to express themselves using Black girlhood they are able to envision a safe space where they can work toward deconstructing stereotypes and narratives that promote gendered racism (Brown, 2009; Brown 2013). Once awareness has been cultivated, it is imperative to replace negative narratives and stereotypes with positive, empowering images of the self

(Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013). Other key strategies for implementing Black girlhood in prevention and intervention programming include (1) Engaging girls in activities that cultivate self-awareness, including how they see themselves, how they want to see themselves, and analyzing the extent to which their identity is derived from internal versus external forces, (2) Teaching critical consumption of media and popular culture, (3) Offering positive role models to expose girls to academic and professional opportunities, (4) Teaching girls how intersectionality impacts their lives and providing strategies to address their oppression, and (5) Providing a strong sense of support through bonding and sisterhood activities (Nunn, 2018, pp 254-255). The proposed toolkit will be developed in line with Black girlhood theory, integrating its principles – creativity, liberation, and self-acceptance – to empower and uplift Black girls.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is a process where individuals gain mastery over their lives, perceiving themselves as capable of achieving their goals and occupying and influencing a decision-making space (Rappaport, 1984; Rowlands, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000, p. 43). There are two dimensions of empowerment, empowering processes, and empowered outcomes. *Empowering processes* refer to "the ability to gain resources, develop a sense of control over their lives, and cultivate a critical understanding of their sociopolitical environment" (Zimmerman, 2000, p 46), while *empowered outcomes* refer to "the effects of an intervention created to empower its users" (Zimmerman, 2000, p 46).

As a framework, empowerment uses a strengths-based approach focused on enhancing the positive aspects of an individual or community rather than highlighting the negative aspects or challenges of the situation (Zimmerman, 2000). An empowerment framework challenges researchers to reframe their role in the research process by collaborating with the target audience and working with the, rather than advocating on their behalf (Zimmerman, 2000). In this process, researchers learn about the experiences, cultural values, and challenges experienced by the target audience, while offering their skills as a resource for the community (Zimmerman, 2000, pp 44).

Empowerment has three different dimensions, psychological, organizational, and community (Zimmerman, 2000). The purpose of this research will focus on *psychological empowerment*, which occurs at the individual level and may defined as "beliefs about one's competence, efforts to exert control, and an understanding of the sociopolitical environment" (Zimmerman, 2000, pp 46). Promoting empowerment as a behavior change strategy among Black girls has been supported by existing literature (Aston et al., 2017; Ellison & Qiu, 2023; Goodkind, Brinkman, & Elliott, 2020; McCabe et al., 2022; Nunn 2018; Thomas, Davidson, McAdoo, 2008). The proposed toolkit will integrate a psychological empowerment framework by enhancing the target audience's competence, sense of control, and understanding of their sociopolitical environment in regard to their hair and self-esteem (Zimmerman, 2000).

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

This study will employ elements of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to integrate youth perspectives and voices into the proposed toolkit. YPAR is conceptualized as a methodology that is (1) Based on inquiry, with research topics grounded in the lived experiences and concerns of youth, (2) Participatory, with youth acting as collaborators throughout the research process, and (3) Transformative, with interventions that change the knowledge and behavior of youth to improve their lives and communities (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR is an empowerment framework is used to strengthen youth by positioning and respecting them as leaders with the agency to address concerns and needs in their communities that they deem important (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, & Dechants, 2018; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). During YPAR, it is essential for adult partners to acknowledge youth as experts of their communities by engaging in power-sharing practices throughout the research process (Anyon et al., 2018; Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). These practices include co-developing a research and action strategy, training youth in research and advocacy practices, and building alliances with relevant stakeholders (Anyon et al., 2018; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Ozer & Douglas, 2015).

The literature demonstrates that using YPAR has enhanced leadership skills, interpersonal skills, a sense of agency, and positive educational outcomes for the youth involved (Anyon et al., 2018; Bertrand, 2018; Duke & Fripp, 2022). The greatest feature of YPAR is its power to teach youth lessons in identity, power, and oppression, and challenge stereotypes and bias (Cammarota, 2017; Duke & Fripp, 2022). This is particularly useful for Black girls who experience gendered racism and are vulnerable to internalizing the stereotypes and biases inflicted upon them (Duke & Fripp, 2022). Duke and Fripp (2022) found that Black adolescent girls who engaged in YPAR became more positive toward working with other Black girls, learned to acknowledge and appreciate the diversity of Black girls, were exposed to counter-narratives about being Black girls, and challenged internalized biases.

For the purposes of this study, a YPAR will be employed to co-develop the proposed toolkit, ensuring that the opinions and voices of youth are integrated into the final product and that the toolkit is culturally competent for Black girls. To accomplish this, a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) was developed consisting of seven Black girls from across the United States. Using this method will ensure that a broad range of voices representing Black girls will be accounted for, each providing a unique perspective about how to empower Black girls through their hair. Furthermore, YAB members will embark on an empowering process themselves, as they visualize themselves as leaders, change-makers, and researchers themselves.

Methods

Study Design

The present study is a secondary analysis of a mixed-methods study titled *The Dreamer Girls' Project*, a pilot study led by Dr. Ijeoma Opara in the Substances and Sexual Health Lab at Yale and funded by the National Institute on Mental Health through an HIV education grant housed at the Yale School of Public Health. The purpose of the Dreamer Girls' Project was three-fold: 1) Understand what environmental and socio-cultural factors Black adolescent girls prefer in a successful HIV and substance

use prevention program, 2) Adapt an existing HIV intervention created for Black women into an acceptable intervention for Black adolescent girls, and 3) Implement, pilot, and assess feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary changes in outcomes for the proposed intervention. This study was approved by the Yale Institutional Review Board, which determined that written informed consent could be waived for this study, pending the investigator provides participants with a written statement/information sheet regarding the research being conducted.

Data Collection

For the purposes of this secondary analysis, qualitative data from both focus groups and meetings with the Youth Advisory Board will be used.

Focus Groups: All participants were screened and required to meet the following inclusion criteria: 1) Self-identify as Black, 2) Adolescent girl aged 13-18 years old, and 3) Reside within the United States of America. Researchers conducted 12 focus groups (N=62) with 4-8 participants included per group from September 2021 to April 2022. Participants were recruited from partner institutions in New Jersey, including high schools and community centers in Paterson, East Orange, and West Orange. This was due to existing relationships from previous community-based participatory research conducted by the Substances and Sexual Health Lab that were grounded in these communities. For this reason, the majority of participants resided in New Jersey (n=59, 95.2%). The average age of focus group participants was 15.6 years of age ($\pm$1.50 years). Four focus groups were conducted in person at partner institutions in New Jersey, and 8 focus groups were conducted online using Zoom. All groups were facilitated by at least one member of the research team.

Focus groups inquired about participants' ethnic identity, their experiences with racism, sexism, and gendered racism, substance use behaviors, sexual risk behaviors, HIV/STI knowledge, decision-making influences, empowerment, ethnic identity, and recommendations for an HIV and substance use prevention intervention for Black adolescent girls. Participants were compensated with a $30.00 gift card for participating in the focus group. Focus groups were transcribed by a member of the research team or

by an external transcription service and then analyzed using inductive, thematic coding by a member of the research team using NVivo 12 (v.12.7.0). Table 1 provides an overview of the focus group sample.

Age			
Mean ± Standard Deviation	15.6 years ± 1.50 years		
13 years (n (%))	3 (4.8)	**16 years (n (%))**	10 (16.1)
14 years (n (%))	15 (24.2)	**17 years (n (%))**	13 (21.0)
15 years (n (%))	14 (22.6)	**18 years (n (%))**	7 (11.3)
Racial Identity (n (%))			
Black/African American	62		
Location (n (%))			
New Jersey	59 (95.2)		
New York	2 (3.2)		
Texas	1 (1.6)		

Table 1: Focus Groups Descriptive Statistics (N=62)

Youth Advisory Board (YAB): The primary study created a YAB consisting of seven Black girls aged 13-17. Six of the YAB members completed a focus group for the Dreamer Girls' Project and were invited due to their exemplary participation, interest, and leadership values demonstrated during their focus groups. One member did not participate in a focus group but had a personal connection with the primary researcher and notified them of her interest in joining the project in the capacity of a YAB member. This YAB was led by the author of this study, Sydney Hussett-Richardson, under the guidance of the primary investigator, Dr. Ijeoma Opara. Sydney facilitated the YAB meetings from March to July 2022 to develop deliverables for the primary project. The YAB was compensated $30.00 for each hour-long meeting they attended.

This secondary analysis attempted to continue with the original YAB members, however, only five of the original members accepted the invitation to reconvene. Additionally, two participants who contacted the research team with a demonstrated interest and/or connections with the Substances and

Sexual Health Lab were invited to join. In total, the second YAB consisted of seven Black adolescent girls aged 13-19 from across the United States. Table 2 offers a description of the YAB members, using pseudonyms to protect their identities and confidentiality. Each member received a written information sheet, outlining the purpose of the research project, their responsibilities as a member of the YAB, and payment details. The second YAB then convened twice in March 2023 to develop the toolkit for the proposed study and were compensated $30.00 per session. During the first session, members provided in-depth feedback on the proposed activities and outline of the toolkit, while contributing ideas on how to strengthen the product. Once a final draft of the toolkit was complete, the YAB provided feedback on the finished product. The completed outline for the YAB meetings can be found in Appendix A.

Name	Age	Educational Level
Rya	16	High School
Amina	15	High School
Shay	18	University
Hilary	13	High School
Kamryn	18	University
Oria	17	University
Mikayla	16	High School

Table 2: Summary of the Youth Advisory Board

Researcher Positionality Statement

The researcher leading this study is a graduate student in her mid-twenties pursuing her Master of Public Health at the Yale School of Public Health. As a cis-gendered Black woman, the lead researcher has personally experienced the challenges and triumphs that occur during the development of Black girls. As an international student from Canada, they have been privy to the rampant discrimination and negative stereotypes perpetuated about Black girls – including negative sentiments about their conduct, character, bodies, and hair. Coming from a middle-class family, the researcher has been privileged to attend post-secondary institutions, where she developed her understanding of intersectionality, power, and

oppression, which leave Black girls marginalized in the outlines. It is through these experiences that the researcher's passion for empowering Black girls is realized.

Working with the YAB, the researcher acknowledges that due to her many privileges and identities, she may not fully comprehend the unique experiences of the members of the YAB. Particularly as an international student who is knowledgeable but inexperienced regarding racial tensions and politics in the United States. Being positioned as the primary facilitator of the YAB with an age gap between herself and members requires careful monitoring of power dynamics. In attempting to authentically highlight the voices of the YAB members, the researcher facilitated using community-based participatory research principles, and practiced reflexivity prior to, during, and after each session with the YAB. This involved reviewing the YAB meeting outline with the principal investigator, Dr. Ijeoma Opara, to check for biases and power imbalances that may be present. During this research project, the researcher treated the YAB members with respect, honoring them as experts of their community.

Results

The main themes from the focus groups centered on hair competency and knowledge, pressure from others to align with Eurocentric beauty standards, developing authentic self-esteem based on intrinsic values, and using hair as a tool to resist Eurocentric beauty standards.

Pressure from Others to Align with Eurocentric Beauty Standards

The focus groups detailed several experiences of hair discrimination from peers, family members, educational institutions, and society at large. These experiences left girls feeling insecure, unconfident, and unbeautiful and led them to alter their appearances as a result. One participant describes how a negative interaction with a peer, led her to straightening her hair:

> *"For me, like I'm seventh grade and I went to a private school and it was predominantly white. And like, I wore my hair once like natural to school and then this boy was like "Oh like your hair is like ugly" and I was like "What do you mean?" He was like "Well It just looks so messy" so*

that made me insecure about my hair for a really long time and I just started to straighten it a lot. That was until I moved to public schools in seventh grade and that's when I started to like appreciate my hair a lot more so yeah it was just like something that just kind of caught me off guard and I was so young, so I took what he said to heart."

Black girls who wear their natural hair are consistently questioned about why their hair is not aligned with standard hair practices of their non-White peers. Similar experiences occurred among participants and family members, particularly in the form of hair texturism. The hair valuation received from many Black girls suggests that deciding to wear their coily or curly hair is unacceptable, and they must "*do something with their hair*" or "*look presentable*" by altering it from their naturally coily/curly state.

One participant noted that hair is a method used to shame Black women into feeling inferior to their non-Black counterparts:

"And the fact that there's a lot of things that black women are shamed for… Like we're called bald-headed as an insult. But at the same time, our natural hair is seen as rough and inappropriate and unacceptable"

Hair discrimination leaves no room for Black girls to feel confident in their natural state, often ridiculed for their hair irrespective of how they style it. Black girls are in dire need of messages affirming their natural hair, and other protective styles they may choose to wear. Further, Black girls need better protection from hair harassment, particularly at educational institutions.

Perpetuating Gendered Racist Stereotypes

When asked about how they thought others perceived Black girls, the girls responded with a plethora of gendered racist stereotypes against Black girls - *loud*, *ghetto*, *ratchet*, *aggressive*, and *angry*. These commonly align with portraying Black girls as hyper-masculine and hyper-sexualized. Participants had several narratives about how their hair choices were used by others to perpetuate these negative stereotypes further. One participant discussed how their hair impacted their ability to feel feminine:

28

"One thing I struggle with a lot is, I don't like always want my hair to be in braids because then I'm just like I, like my natural hair but it's a lot of work. And I definitely don't feel feminine and I always talked to my mom about this that. I feel like I look like a guy when I have my hair and Afro [...] I was complaining about it [hair] on Sunday night I was crying about it, like I didn't want to go to like, I knew I was going to go to school, but I didn't feel good. Then my teacher was like "Oh you don't even look like yourself anymore like you look like a different person who looks so much like a boy" and I just could not deal with it, because that I've dealt with for a long time, because I like wearing my hair and I like it as much as how it is. But I still feel like there's an aspect like there's a lot of ... Sometimes, like people treat me, I think I'm more masculine."

This participant exemplifies how hair acts as a staple of gender and femininity and was used to render her as masculine when it was not aligned with Eurocentric beauty standards. They also mentioned that even in braids, which aligns more closely with Eurocentric beauty standards, they still experience hair harassment. This was a common sentiment among participants, with another Black girl mentioning:

"I think a lot of people assume when they see Black girls wearing braids or dreads or any other protective hairstyle, they see it as ghetto. As well as like wearing bonnets. Like I have a plethora of bonnets but like if I wear it in public in a predominately White neighborhood, people will look at me sideways"

Thus, not aligning with Eurocentric beauty standards does not just mean Black girls are not beautiful, but also that they are inferior as a result of their character. When Black girls are in a world where they are not accepted in any hair styles that embrace their natural hair, they are left in a world that does not affirm their identity as Black girls. These stereotypes place an immense amount of mental stress on Black girls, making it difficult to negotiate who they are and how they prefer to present during this critical developmental period. One participant described how stereotypes impact her self-esteem and development journey:

"I feel like it also, like with the stereotypes, like those negative stereotypes that are on us

29

all the time, I feel like it can give you like this kind of stress of like feeling like you have

to live up to those impossible standards and like trying to defy those stereotypes is

like it, it can be like very exhausting and then, like also trying to do your own thing and

figure out who you are, as a person as well, it can become very conflicting because do

you want to do what you want to do, or like conform to other peoples like stereotypes,

just because, like that's, I don't know."

Overall, these findings present a consistent pattern where Black girls do not satisfy the Eurocentric beauty

standards irrespective of how they present, and in turn, feel pressured to conform to the impossible

expectations or are ridiculed and stereotyped in response.

Representations of Black Girls in the Media

The girls discussed the influence that social media has in their lives and how they feel about

themselves.

"A lot of us are really addicted to social media, like I'm addicted to TikTok! Instagram I

could do without that, but I feel like social media gives you the wrong idea on certain

things... Or makes things that you really should not be doing."

Here, the participant notes that she feels a lot of her peers are addicted to social media, and it has the

power to shift your perspective on things, leading you to engage in behaviors that are against your best

self-interests. In response to this statement, other participants elaborated on this idea:

Participant 1, 15 years old: *"I can actually add on to what she's saying because when we're*

scrolling through social media and we look on how much likes that person got and we're like,

'Wow, I want to be them.' We should learn how to really love ourselves."

This participant articulated the way in which social media alters the self-perception of Black girls. She

describes how seeing other girls on social media leads to thoughts about altering themselves for approval

from others, or even thoughts about being a different person. Another participant responded to her and

described how experiences with social media reaffirmed that social media perpetuates negative stereotypes about Black girls and the double standards that exist for Black and non-Black girls online:

> **Participant 2, 14 years old***: So when it's a different race or different... Yeah, when it's a different race, trying to be like a Black girl, that's what they like, but when it's a Black girl being a Black girl, it's like something's wrong. They act like something's wrong with that, or it's looked at as bad or ghetto or all those... ratchet. All those types of words that were made specifically to go against Black girls.*

Indeed, these girls provide an important nuance regarding the way social media simultaneously accepts and rejects Black girls. They acknowledge the way that Black girls have certain aesthetic characteristics and stylistic choices, which a participant described as "*We got our own style, everything about us is different.*" They perceived that non-Black girls often try to adopt this aesthetic, hence they are "*trying to be like a Black girl.*" They also discuss a double standard where Black girls are stereotyped for this aesthetic, while non-Black girls are praised for it.

Overall, Black girls felt that social media continues to push the narrative that only a certain representation of Black girls is acceptable, those that fit Eurocentric beauty standards, reinforced through the number of likes and comments received. Sentiments such as "*The only time you really see your icon being idolized is if it's a trend*" suggests that Black girls are only acceptable when their aesthetic is "trendy", otherwise Black girls inherently are not accepted, subjected to gendered racist stereotypes.

Developing Authentic Self-Esteem Based on Intrinsic Values

The girls clearly identified a need for Black girls to develop authentic self-esteem despite the negative messages they frequently hear about themselves. One participant described how negative comments impacted her self-esteem:

> *"In the case of when you start hearing, oh, she's this or she's ugly, or just hearing that negative comments about yourself, you start, again, your self-esteem goes low and then you start to care less about yourself and you start to lose yourself, and do things that*

aren't right for your body."

These findings confirm that self-esteem plays a critical role in the behaviors of Black girls and when self-esteem is low, girls engage in behaviors that do not reflect who they are or what they represent. Further, Black girls receive a plethora of negative comments about their appearance and are commonly subject to hyper-sexualization and objectification, leading them to place a lot of value on their physical appearance. Multiple participants made this connection stating:

> "*Because many black girls may feel as though they're only want for their body, which is most likely the truth. So, and that's the only time they're wanted for their body*"

> "*Black women are viewed as like a sex object instead of like an actual human being or woman. Like just a statistic*"

The frequent objectification and hyper-sexualization of Black girls tell Black girls that the only valuable thing they have to offer is their physical appearance and features. They also learn that these features are more valuable when possessed by a non-Black girl compared to a Black girl. As a consequence, Black girls base their self-esteem on their appearance and also have low self-esteem. Participants also discussed how self-esteem and confidence is central to being a Black girl, and identified a desire to see more representation of confident Black girls and women:

> "*Walking around with a lot of confidence, because based on our skin complexion, we already looked at differently and we can't do certain things, so I just think we have to like wake up and have a certain confidence. Like okay, I'm going to do this today because I'm being looked at different. I'm going to keep pushing through.*"

> "*I would like to see a lot of Black girls have self-confidence [...] because people make it seem that White people are the prettiest thing in the world so self-confidence to go against that.*"

Thus, promoting self-esteem among Black girls that is based on their intrinsic worth rather than their external appearance may be a key leverage point for self-esteem development.

Hair as a Tool for Resistance

Participants affirmed that hair is central to their identity as Black girls. When asked about what being a Black girl meant to them, several participants referred to their hair, responding with "*4c hair, very coarse hair*" or "*Afro*". Black girls also appreciated the ability to style their hair in ways that highlighted their texture. This was especially apparent in styles that non-Black girls with straighter hair would be unable or difficult to achieve. Participants made comments such as "*I like all the styles we can do with our hair*" and "*A lot of us have different things that we believe in different ways we dress, different hairstyles*." Thus, empowering girls to experiment with their hair and attempt hairstyles that highlight the beauty of textured hair may be a useful strategy. Black girls also mentioned a desire for self-care and empowerment as a part of an effective behavior change strategy (preventing substance use and sexual risk behaviors). Thus, positioning hair care as an act of self-care can be an important component of the proposed toolkit.

The main themes from the YAB circulated around the development of the toolkit, and deciding on elements that should be included. Based on the discussion, sections focused on empowerment through hair competency and styling, hair care as self-care, addressing the negative representation of Black girls on social media, and providing opportunities for toolkit users to reflect and develop their self-esteem.

Hair as a Source of Empowerment

The YAB members discussed the different ways that hair acts as a source of empowerment for Black girls. The YAB felt that improving *hair competency*, the ability to care for, style, and manage one's hair, would be an effective method to empower Black girls. This included knowledge about how to take care of their care and how to style their hair. The importance of being knowledgeable about how to properly care for their hair and the challenge of doing so was a primary discussion point. Since they were unsure of what their hair needed, they were unable to find a regimen that worked for them. Further, they

felt that because different hair types needed different care regimens, they needed resources (i.e., styling regimens, product recommendations) that would be effective for their specific needs. For this reason, they felt the tool kit should include a breakdown of different hair types, noting that they cannot all be treated the same.

The facilitator inquired about how a lack of hair competency impacted their self-esteem, and the YAB members had varying responses. Shay mentioned that when she did not know how to style or care for her hair, she did not often wear her natural hair opting for a protective style like braids or wigs. She also noted that while she did not hate her hair, she was indifferent to it. However, after learning how to style and care for their hair, she felt more confident and empowered. Several other girls noted that they were still in the process of learning about their hair. Rya had low hair competency until recently and found it frustrating when experimenting with new styles that did not achieve the desired look. Another member recently stopped using a chemical relaxer and learned how to care for her natural hair, which facilitated her appreciation for her natural hair and boosted her self-esteem. Indeed, low hair competency acts as a barrier to self-esteem and girls feel more confident and empowered when they are able to style their hair. Shay responded that "*Being able to do your hair and do it well*" made her feel empowered about her hair. Additionally, the YAB members voiced interest in maximizing their creative potential with hairstyles and felt that being able to change their hairstyle frequently and achieve styles that highlighted their textured hair and were more commonly seen among Black girls, such as afro puffs, corn rows, and braids, were a source of empowerment.

Finally, YAB members described their hair routine as "*therapeutic*", and "*a self-care activity that makes you feel beautiful*". This was particularly in regard to "*wash day*", a term frequently used by Black girls and women to represent the lengthy process of washing their hair, typically lasting several hours. The girls felt that hair care should be positioned as a self-care ritual where they can connect with themselves and reflect.

Addressing Representations of Black Girls on Social Media

Messaging on social media about Black girls' hair was identified as a determinant of self-esteem:

"Just because your hair doesn't look like xyz doesn't mean you're not beautiful."

"When you look at more White beauty standards, you're going to lose"

The YAB discussed two different sides of social media. The first side included Black girls who embraced their natural hair and influenced others by posting themselves wearing their natural hair. Girls felt that seeing representation of Black girls with natural, textured hair on social made them feel good, particularly if these girls were accomplished in their respective fields. The second side of social media included girls who promoted toxic beauty practices and standards. To combat this, the girls discussed staying away from influencers that promote brands or products that don't cater to Black people and being intentional with following and interacting with others on social media, particularly those that look similar to you.

Developing Self-Esteem

Navigating self-esteem amidst gendered racist stereotypes about Black girls and their hair was viewed as an essential topic among the YAB.

"It's important for them [Black girls] to understand that how people view your hair and look isn't objective. Go with what you like, use your own creative mind. You can't base your self-esteem on what other people think. Your own perception of you is more important than others' perception of you"

In this excerpt, Oria described the importance of basing your self-esteem on how you intrinsically view and value yourself rather than what others think of you. The YAB noted that self-esteem activities should incorporate space for Black girls to focus on the positive aspects of themselves, while also reconciling insecurities they may have about themselves.

Discussion

Findings from the literature, the focus groups, and the YAB meetings were used to develop an outline for the proposed toolkit, "The Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls". This toolkit focuses on

centering hair as a tool for self-esteem development among Black girls under the age of 18 while integrating supplementary self-esteem-building activities and resources. The toolkit consists of two primary sections, hair empowerment, and self-esteem development. The toolkit was co-developed with the YAB members who provided guidance on activities, information, and design characteristics that would be valuable for Black girls.

Each section integrated principles from empowerment theory and Black girlhood theory to ensure cultural relevance and enhance the efficacy of the toolkit. This was accomplished by documenting the experiences of Black girls and envisioning a product that addresses the self-care, haircare, and self-esteem needs of Black girls. This process embodied Black girlhood theory which requires the activation of collective creativity and questioning of power structures and social norms that oppress Black girls (Brown, 2009; Nunn, 2018). The "Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls" acts as a creative outlet centered on the unique experiences of Black girls and their hair and incorporated these experiences into a meaningful product that honors and acknowledges them. Throughout the toolkit, users will gain knowledge and develop skills that will provide a sense of control, enabling them to feel capable of achieving their hair goals and strengthen their self-esteem. Further, in-line with key strategies for empowering Black girls using Black girlhood theory, users of the toolkit will cultivate self-awareness, learn to intentionally consume social media content, become aware of positive youth role models, and learn and address gendered racist stereotypes about Black girls (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013; Nunn, 2018).

Hair Empowerment

The findings from the focus groups and YAB meetings are consistent with the literature, grounding hair as central to the identity of Black girls (Dove, 2021; Essien & Wood, 2021; Henderson, 2022; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Spellers, 2003; Thompson, 2009). The focus groups discussed experiences of hair harassment from others, where their hair was used to perpetuate gendered racist stereotypes about Black girls, deeming them *ghetto*, *ratchet*, and *masculine*. Similar to the literature, they discussed the ways in which these stereotypes impacted their self-esteem and created

pressure to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Randle, 2015). Overall, the participants described a need for messages affirming and embracing Black girls and their natural hair.

The purpose of the hair empowerment section is to improve self-esteem and empower Black girls by 1) Providing information to enhance hair competency, 2) Hair styling techniques for Black girls, and 3) Addressing negative and gendered racist stereotypes about Black girls and their hair.

- Hair competency: Curly and coily hair require significant attention to maintain hair health, due to the nature of this hair type - voluminous, frizzy, and easily tangled - there are many challenges associated with it (Franbourg et al., 2003; Henderson, 2022). Thus, the hair empowerment section integrated information that addressed common challenges with Black hair, including detangling, moisture balance, and breakage (Henderson, 2022). The YAB suggested breaking down the hair care and maintenance sections by hair type/texture to acknowledge the different challenges and characteristics of Black girls' hair. Additionally, the YAB believed the toolkit should position the process of doing hair as a therapeutic, self-care activity. This lens was used in the development of several features in the toolkit, including a "wash day road map", where Black girls can maneuver through the various steps and enjoy it as a self-care practice. Neil and Mbilishaka (2019) found that modeling self-styling techniques and self-care strategies for hair contributed to validating Black women and girls with tightly coiled hair. Further, digital resources, such as this toolkit, serve as safe spaces for Black girls to receive advice and address their self-care needs (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). Indeed, due to the intimate relationship between hair- and self-esteem among Black girls, ensuring that Black girls feel positive about their hair is a mechanism to enhance self-esteem (Bankhead & Johnson, 2014).

- Hair Styling Techniques: All members of the YAB identified hair styling practices as a necessary element of the toolkit. Specifically, the YAB was interested in unlocking the creative potential of their hair. Thus, advice on styling hair was needed, as well as a diverse representation of hairstyles that accentuate Black girls' unique hair texture. In agreement with previous literature,

the versatility of Black hair was identified as one of its biggest assets according to the YAB, particularly the ability to style hair in ways that embraced its unique texture and properties (Robinson, 2011; Henderson, 2022). Robinson (2011) notes that "*Unstraightened, the shorter, kinky textures can be difficult to comb, style, and manage. Yet, it is the kinkiness that allows the creative diversity of popular Black hairstyles that, paradoxically, makes bad hair particularly good for unstraightened styles.*" (p 372). In this excerpt, she acknowledges that often the biggest complaint that Black girls have with their hair, its texture, is the very thing that makes it so versatile (Henderson, 2022; Randle, 2015; Robinson, 2011). Indeed, Black people have a creative advantage when it comes to hair styling but appreciation for its strength is lacking. Thus, this toolkit works to reject Eurocentric beauty standards by celebrating the versatility of Black hair and leveraging it as a source of empowerment.

For Black girls, embracing and wearing natural hair is seen as an act of resistance, in which negative stereotypes about Black girls and Eurocentric beauty standards are challenged and rejected (Henderson, 2022; Norwood, 2018; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021; Spellers, 2003). Thus, the hair styling resources and the hair mood board incorporated in the toolkit facilitated resistance among Black girls. Working in tandem, the styling techniques provided empowered Black girls by giving them the resources needed to feel able to achieve their hair styling goals, while the hair mood board inspired Black girls to use their creative potential by portraying a diverse representation of hairstyles on Black girls and women.

Self-Esteem Development

Throughout the focus groups, the participants described the mechanism by which negative messaging about Black girls and their hair impacted their ability to develop authentic self-esteem. Specifically, the girls touched on the ways in which gendered racist stereotypes negatively impacted their self-perception and self-esteem, heavily basing their self-worth on external features rather than their intrinsic values. Existing studies support the connection between negative messages towards Black girls

(hair harassment, gendered racist stereotypes), self-perception, and self-esteem, among Black girls

(Gadson & Lewis, 2023; Henderson, 2022; Norwood, 2018; Opara et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2021).

For these reasons, the toolkit includes supplementary activities that facilitate the development of

skills that will enhance self-esteem. Activities in this section engage users as they 1) Self-reflect on their

internal characteristics and aspects of their character that they love, 2) Identify improvement areas by

setting self-esteem goals and noting action steps to achieve their goals, 3) Facilitate positive self-talk by

reframing and regulating negative thoughts, and affirming themselves and Black girls, and 4) Conduct a

social media cleanse to improve critical thinking and consumption of media.

Cultivating self-awareness by identifying personal characters that they possess and reconciling

their current state with how they want to see themselves is a key strategic method to empower Black girls

(Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013; Norwood, 2018; Nunn, 2018). Further, *self-talk,* referring to the

intrapersonal narrative or speech within an individual, works to reinforce self-beliefs about ourselves and

has the power to influence actions and behaviors since the way we talk to ourselves shapes the

expectations we have for our actions and behaviors (Brown, 1973, Phelps-Ward, 2016). While positive

self-talk is linked to positive self-esteem, negative self-talk can be extremely detrimental to self-esteem,

particularly when self-talk reflects unrealistic expectations, such as Eurocentric beauty standards. Thus,

by increasing self-awareness about texturist attitudes, Eurocentric beauty standards, and gendered racist

stereotypes, Black girls can reframe their thinking and decrease thoughts of perfection and judgment

(Chohan, 2010; Nunn, 2018; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016).

Similarly to self-talk, *affirmations*, positive statements that describe strengths and assets, were

positioned as another method to combat their inner critic. Affirmations are a method used to facilitate

positive self-esteem by targeting your subconscious mind and persuading it to develop a more positive

self-portrait of oneself (McKay & Fanning, 2016; p 237). Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia (2017)

conducted an analysis of the use of #BlackGirlMagic, a notorious affirmation for Black girls, on social

media (Twitter). They found that the #BlackGirlMagic affirmation was an effective positive affirmation

that left Black girls feeling acknowledged and celebrated, despite typically being rendered invisible by others (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). In addition, the affirmation facilitated self-love and the development of self-worth (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). Creating positive affirmation statements is a proactive method to foster self-love for Black girls, and an effective counter-narrative against pervasive negative messages about Black girls and their hair (Essein & Wood, 2021; Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017).

Both the focus group and YAB meetings revealed that social media acted as both a safe space to affirm Black girls, and a source of negative messaging about Black girls and their hair that promoted texturist and Eurocentric hair values. This toolkit attempted to reconcile these two distinct sides of social media by providing a framework that allowed girls to critically analyze their consumption of social media content. This included guidelines for content that works to enhance self-esteem, and content that may negatively impact self-esteem. Additionally, users will have the opportunity to assess influential people or pages on social, reflecting on why they are valued and the personal goals or aspirations they are aligned with. Finally, resources are provided to connect toolkit users with positive representations of Black girls on social media and podcasts who embrace their full selves, including their hair, and accomplish aspirational things. Offering positive and relatable role models empowers Black girls by exposing them to opportunities, sparking their passion for learning, and providing validation to other Black girls who look like them and have similar hair textures (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019; Nunn, 2018). Further, positive role models are found to be a source of self-esteem among Black girls and women (Byrd & Shavers, 2013).

YAB as an Empowering Process

While the toolkit was developed to produce empowered outcomes among its users, the inclusion of the YAB provided an additional opportunity to create an empowered process for its members. The YAB meetings acted as a collaborative space for Black girls to discuss and address how gendered racism and Eurocentric beauty standards act as oppressive forces in their experiences as Black girls. Through this action, they were able to cultivate a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical positioning of their hair as

Black girls, to then reject and resist these narratives. Havlicek and Samuels (2018) reported similar experiences with their YAB, noting that developing this critical awareness allowed youth to challenge and confront their experiences in a manner that "normalized, protected enhanced positive aspects of their identities. Similarly, Luluquisen, Trinidad, & Ghosh (2006) reported that youth in their youth council became empowered to take action and strengthened their ethnic identity. As part of an empowerment process, membership in a YAB can assist in identity development for vulnerable and marginalized youth (Cammarota, 2017; Duke & Fripp, 2022; Havelicek & Samulels, 2018; Luluquisen et al., 2006). This is incredibly useful for Black girls, who must negotiate external expectations of what it means to be a Black girl with their intrapersonal identity.

Co-developing the toolkit provided leadership experience among members, developing their leadership skills and positioning them as problem solvers. This is in line with previous research findings, demonstrating the youth engaging in YAB structures developed leadership skills, healthier decision-making, and confidence (Haddad, Jacquez, & Vaughn, 2022; Hohenemser & Marshall, 2020; Rich at al., 2014). Additionally, the YAB members learned valuable information about how to care and style for hair which improved their hair competency throughout the process. During the meetings, several members commented on the educational value of the toolkit and mentioned that they were learning new concepts throughout the process. The literature confirms skill acquisition and leadership development as great benefits to YAB membership (Anucha, Srikanthan, & Houwer, 2020; Haddad, Jacquez, & Vaughn, 2022; Heffernan et al., 2017; Hohenemser & Marshall, 2020; Rich at al., 2014) Future involvement with the YAB under the Dreamer Girls Project should include additional opportunities to use the acquired data and findings to advocate and lead for policy changes and program development. An evaluation of the benefits, barriers/challenges, and facilitators of YAB membership will also support future research within the YPAR field.

Evaluation

To determine the efficacy of the "Title" toolkit, the toolkit should be tested with a small group of 10-20 Black girls aged 13-18 years old across the United States. A pre-post, mixed-methods approach will be used, combining results from validated surveys and semi-structured interviews with toolkit users. Prior to using the toolkit, participants will complete a brief series of surveys to evaluate self-esteem, racial identity, hair-esteem, and sexual risk behavior (See Appendix B). Follow-up surveys will be conducted 2 weeks and 6-months post-intervention to determine the short- and long-term impact of the toolkit. In order to improve the validity of the quantitative results, a comparison group consisting of 10-20 Black girls aged 13-18 years old who have not utilized the toolkit will also complete the survey.

Interviews will be conducted with 12-16 participants, as literature shows this is when *thematic saturation* is achieved, meaning no new or relevant data emerges and the category of interest is developed and well-established (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017). Interviews will inquire about the overall efficacy of the toolkit including its ability to empower Black girls using their hair, improve hair competency, and enhance hair- and self-esteem. The interviews will be analyzed using qualitative analysis software and thematic codes developed will highlight strengths, facilitators, challenges, and barriers of the toolkit. Both the qualitative and quantitative results will be used to determine the efficacy of the toolkit and provide recommendations for improvement. Post-evaluation, the toolkit can be further developed in collaboration with the YAB to improve its effectiveness.

Future Implications

Similar to existing interventions created to support Black girls, the "Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls" demonstrates the benefit of integrating an intersectional lens using Black girlhood theory into both research and practice (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2013; Nunn, 2018; Opara et al., 2022b). Providing safe spaces for Black girls in research and interventions is critical to its success and requires researchers to center the unique experiences of Black girls. This includes using strengths-based frameworks that empower Black girls, and addressing the oppression faced by gendered racism that is unique to Black

girls. Considering that hair is an important component of racial identity for Black girls, future research and interventions can include hair empowerment as a way to promote self-esteem. Opara et al. (2022b) notes that "While many interventions are not catered specifically for Black adolescent girls, it is essential that interventions provided to Black adolescent girls incorporate the various intersections that Black girls belong to" (p 16). While many calls to action have been made to create interventions that are culturally tailored for Black girls, it has yet to become a standard practice (Nunn, 2018; Opara et al., 2022b; Onnie Rogers et al., 2021). Onnie Rogers et al. (2021) notes the value of studying hair in Black girls as a means of empowerment:

> "Taking hair seriously may offer a tangible way to support Black girls' identity development and thus are valuable for practitioners working with Black girls—parents, educators, counselors—and to Black girls themselves. Black girls recognize that their hair is a unique feature of who they are, and they are telling us that hair is an everyday tool they use for 'doing' identity" (p 16).

Moreover, using participatory research methods, such as YPAR, is incredibly valuable when it comes to Black girls. YPAR is an empowerment process for youth involved, enhancing their ability to lead, advocate, and visualize a world where their needs are being met. Using youth participatory action research recognized the valuable knowledge of Black girls while providing a safe space for their experiences and concerns to be vocalized and integrated into the toolkit.

Qualitative findings confirmed that Black girls experience hair harassment from peers, family members, and importantly within educational institutions. While hair politics may seem irrelevant to the field of education, as previously described, Black girls' hair is often criminalized for being "distracting" or not in line with dress code policies (Hobdy, 2020; Klein, 2013). These experiences disrupt their learning, humiliate, and send messaging to Black girls that their hair is not accepted. Thus, hair harassment and discrimination should be a concern for those who are teaching, guiding, and supporting the development of Black girls (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). These findings can support current legislation in work, such as the CROWN Act (Dove, 2021), by contributing to the literature on

developmental and behavioral implications of hair discrimination and harassment. Further, using YPAR, Black girls can use data from the project to advocate against anti-Black policies in educational institutions that permit discrimination based on hair.

Limitations

Firstly, considering the "Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls" was developed using YPAR, it is not generalizable to all youth. While the toolkit acts as a first step to empower girls through their hair, the highly distinct properties of Black girls' hair means that this toolkit is not generalizable to non-Black girls or youth, as it was developed and tailored specifically for this population. However, given the lack of information and resources available for Black girls on self- and hair-esteem, the pressure for them to achieve unrealistic Eurocentric beauty standards, and the unique experiences of gendered racist stereotypes, and microaggressions received by Black girls, it was necessary to focus on this specific population.

Secondly, while YPAR was used throughout the primary and secondary study, this project did not leave room for advocacy efforts but focused on intervention development. Equipping youth with the ability to visualize themselves creating change is a component of YPAR and requires both the identification of a relevant advocacy issue and the capacity building of advocacy skills to accomplish the desired outcome. While this specific project did not include a "call to action", the YAB will continue to work on projects under the larger Dreamer Girls Project and will be provided the opportunity to accomplish related advocacy work if desired.

Conclusion

Black girls' unique experiences are brought to the forefront through this study, demonstrating how gendered racism, hair harassment, and pressure to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards negatively impact the self-esteem and racial identity development of Black girls. Liberating Black girls requires addressing their unique positionality as young, female, and Black. Using theoretical

frameworks of Black girlhood theory, empowerment theory, and youth participatory action research allowed for the development of the "Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls" that makes Black girls feel seen, empowered to challenge negative stereotypes and assumptions about them and their hair, and capable of caring for and loving their hair. The development of this toolkit is a step towards liberating Black girls and affirming them that they are accepted as they are. Researchers should continue to use develop strengths-based interventions that offer empowerment processes and empowered outcomes for Black girls. Enhancing empowerment among Black girls is associated with a host of benefits including a reduction in sexual risk behaviors and substance use, and an increase in self-esteem, confidence, and ethnic/racial identity. The implementation of this toolkit will contribute to the literature that advocates for the radical acceptance and affirmation of Black girls, starting with their hair.

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Appendix A: Youth Advisory Board Meeting Outline

1) **Introduction**

- Introductions: Both the facilitator and the YAB members introduced themselves, their interests, and their hobbies using an icebreakers

- Familiarization with the Dreamer Girls' Project: A brief overview of the Dreamer Girls' Project was provided to orient the YAB members with the purpose of the research being conducted

- Goal setting: The rationale, purpose, and goals of the current project were revealed

- Logistics: Logistics regarding YAB membership were covered including participation expectations, meeting times, information sheets, and payment methods.

2) **Hair Empowerment**

- The girls were asked the following questions:

    o What makes you feel empowered about your hair?

    o What do you love about your hair?

    o What is a challenge you experience with your hair?

    o Is there anything you would like to know more about regarding your hair?

3) **Self-Esteem**

- The girls were asked the following questions:

    o How does hair impact your self-esteem?

    o What messages do Black girls need to hear to facilitate their self-esteem development?

    o Does social media play a role in self-esteem for Black girls? What about their hair choices?

    o What resources do Black girls need to promote self-esteem development?

- In addition to providing responses to questions, YAB members provided insight on proposed activities and suggested alternative activities and methods to improve proposed activities.

4) **User Experience**

- How can the toolkit be designed to attract Black girls to use it?

- What kind of representation do you want to see among the included characters?

- Is the toolkit easy to follow and understand?

5) Conclusion

- A call for final thoughts, comments, and suggestions was made, including areas that were not touched upon that the YAB members were interested in including.

- Next steps and a final logistic overview were provided, and the meeting was closed out.

Appendix B: Scales for the Evaluation of the Toolkit

Measure	Scales
Self-Esteem	**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965):** A 10-item scale measuring self-worth by evaluating positive and negative feelings about oneself.
Racial Identity	**Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-teen (Scotthan, Sellers & Nguyên, 2008):** A 21-item scale designed to assess three dimensions of racial identity in adolescents. This scale is based on the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), which proposes four dimensions of racial identity: 1) *Salience:* the relevancy of race to self-concept, 2) *Centrality*: The extent an individual emphasizes racial group membership as a component of their identity, 3) *Regard:* One's feelings towards racial group membership as an African American, and 4) *Ideology:* How one believes African Americans should act (Sellers et al., 1998).
Hair-Esteem	**Bankhead-Johnson Hair-Esteem (Bankhead & Johnson, 2014):** Adapted using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, the Bankhead-Johnson Hair-Esteem scale is a 10-item scale measuring hair-esteem by evaluating positive and negative feelings about one's hair.
Sexual Risk Behavior	**Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021):** The CDC conduct an annual survey assessing youth risk behavior, including sexual risk behaviors such as condom use and substance use. A sub-scale of questions from this survey will be used to evaluate sexual risk behaviors among participants.

Table 3: Measures and Scales/Evaluation Methods for Toolkit Evaluation
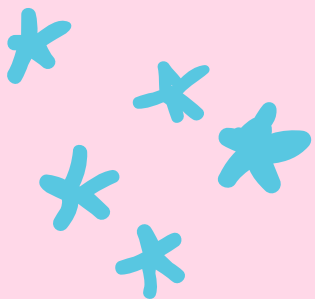
Appendix C: Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls

Please see a sample of the, *Hair-Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls* attached below.

The Dreamer Girls Project

The Hair Esteem Toolkit for Black Girls

A toolkit designed to empower and build the self-esteem of Black girls and teens

Developed by Sydney Hussett-Richardson under the guidance of Dr. Ijeoma Opara.

Hey girl!

Welcome to the **Black Girl Magic toolkit**! This was developed for Black girls, by Black girls and women, who understand the unique self-esteem and confidence journey that all Black girls go on. The Black Girl Magic tool kit uses hair as a tool to uplift and empower Black girls to make them feel good about themselves.

This toolkit is for you if you:

- Are a Black girl or teen looking to build your self-esteem and confidence

- You want to learn more about how your hair can be an outlet for self-expression, creativity, and self-love/acceptance

- Want to build a healthier relationship with yourself

Why was this toolkit created?

Sometimes, the most difficult relationship we have is the one with ourselves. We want Black girls to feel good about themselves from the inside-out! This toolkit was developed to help Black girls fall in love with themselves, using hair as a tool for empowerment.

When we build up our self-esteem and confidence we can:
- Improve our communication skills

- Become aware of our needs and desires

- Make better decisions, especially when it comes to substance use and sexual health

- Look and feel amazing!

This toolkit contains activities, tips, and resources to assist you in your self-esteem journey. As you work through the different sections, pause and reflect on how you can incorporate the teachings into your own life.

Sis to Sis

Don't worry, we won't ask you to take this important journey on your own! Dee, Shayla, and Ashley will help you navigate through this journey. You can learn more about them below.

Dee

Dee (she/her) is an aspiring producer and musical artist. She knows how to play the piano, guitar, and violin, and is currently learning the cello. As an Afro-Latina she had to learn to love her hair and skin in spite of critique from her family.

Feel-good song: Feelin' Myself - Nicki Minaj + Beyonce

Shayla

Shayla (she/they) is an all-around athlete, and currently the co-captain of the varsity soccer team. She helps make the soccer team feel like a family and hopes to one day play for team U.S.A. at the Olympics. She often wears protective styling for easy hair maintenance during the season.

Feel-good song: Work - Rihanna + Drake

Ashley

Ashley (she/her) is known for being the smartest girl at her school, where she takes mostly STEM classes. She recently got accepted into Yale University as is excited to begin her journey there as an engineering student. Ashley always expresses herself through her amazing style, believing herself to be a fashionista at heart.

Feel-good song: Pretty Girl Rock - Keri Hilson

Hair-powerment

Black girls' hair is unique in the best way, but that doesn't mean it can't be challenging to learn how to care and style for it. This section of the toolkit will teach you all the hair care fundamentals for Black girls. We want hair care to be part of a self-care ritual that helps you feel confident and good about yourself. Plus, your hair can also act as a creative outlet, using different styles and colors to express yourself! Remember, this is a guide that can be used to support you you may have to experiment and tweak some things to get it to work for you!

Hair Typing

Hair typing is **not** meant to be a hierarchy or a scale of how "good" your hair is! It's simply a tool that can help facilitate how you care for your hair. For example, those with 4c hair typically have to be extra careful with moisturizing their hair. Lots of girls find that their hair can be a combination of two hair types.

Check out the chart below for some general worries and care tips based on your hair type:

Hair Type	Description	Potential Worries	Care Tips
3	Loose curls to corkscrew curls	• Frizziness • Flat (no volume) • Breakage	• Lightweight styling creams • "Plop" curls to dry • Consistent moisture routine
4	Tight "S" shaped coils to very tight "Z" shaped coils	• Dryness • Dullness • Breakage	• Consistent moisture routine • Low manipulation styles • Work in sections

Hair porosity measures how well your hair can absorb and hold moisture. Knowing your hair porosity is key to hair care for Black girls, because it will guide your moisture routine. The chart below will help you figure out your porosity level and how to care for your hair based on your level.

Porosity Test: Place a strand of hair in a cup of water. Your porosity levels will be determined based on how your strand acts.

Hair Porosity	Low Porosity	Normal Porosity	High Porosity
Porosity Test Results	Floats for a while before sinking	Gradually sinks	Sinks to the bottom immediately
Description	• Your hair does not like water and takes longer to be fully saturated • Products are more likely to build up and sit on your hair	• Your hair doesn't have many gaps in the cuticle • Just enough moisture enters without having to leave again	• Your hair is porous, making it easy for moisture to enter and leave • Moisture retention is the biggest challenge
Solutions	• Gently mist your hair with a combination of water-based conditioner + water every 1-2 days (seal with oil) • Use a clarifying shampoo for build-up • Deep condition every 2 weeks (min)	• The good news is that you need the least amount of maintenance • Your goal is to maintain a balance with your hair	• Add a protein treatment into your routine to strengthen hair • Use a hydrating shampoo • Cream- or oil-based styling products

Self Esteem

Now that you have the skills and knowledge to properly care for and style your hair, let's talk about how hair plays a greater role in the self-esteem and confidence of Black girls.

Black girls face a lot of pressure to be "perfect" at all times, especially when it comes to their appearances (hair!!!), and how they act. This pressure makes Black girls more self-conscious about their hair, feeling it has to be perfect at all times.

We asked Black girls how they think other people viewed them, and here is what they had to say:

aggressive melanin different

loud monolith less

threat argumentative

ratchet objectificaition reason

disrespectful courageous hot-headed

opinionated fighting angry

intimidating ghetto

fast dehumanizing

jealous glowing

When others spread negative stereotypes of Black girls, it can be difficult to have high self-esteem or feel loved and accepted.

This section of the toolkit will help to unpack these feelings by exploring how self-esteem and confidence go beyond our physical appearances, and how we can use hair as a tool to enhance confidence.

Social Media

Between Instagram, Snap Chat, Tik Tok, Twitter, and all of the other platforms, social media has a huge presence in our daily lives. While it can be a source of entertainment, inspiration, and a way to communicate with family and friends, it can also be bad for our mental health.

Constantly seeing negative portrayals of Black girls and women can negatively impact our self-esteem and what we think about ourselves. When it comes to our hair, there are two different sides of social media:
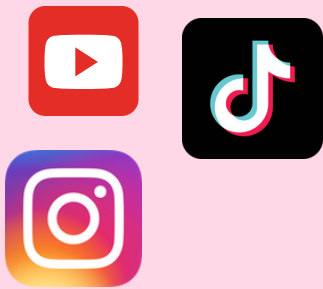
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Black girls rocking their hair in many different styles, including natural, locs, and other protective styles, making you feel empowered.

TOXIC COMMUNITY

Toxic and unrealistic beauty standards, the pressure to be perfect, and hateful, derogatory comments about Black women and girls

As a young girl, it's important to critically think about what and who we see on social media. We came up with some tips to help you filter out your social media feed.

Content to Dive Into	Content to Leave Behind
Promotes inclusivity, showcasing all shapes, sizes, skin tones, and hair types	Beauty influencers that don't cater to Black people
People who look like you and are working towards or have achieved similar goals	Upholding European beauty standards, promoting colorism and/or texturism
Friends and family who support you online and offline	Bullies or frenemies who negatively interact with your content (#blocked)