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#TEAMNATURAL: SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS ON FEMALE AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

By

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The purpose of this study is to explore if and why African American females use social media to help them with their transition from relaxed to natural hair and/or to maintain their natural hair. If social media was used the researcher would also like to understand what influences African American females receive from social media pertaining to their hair. A qualitative approach is used in this study with a view to explore uses and gratifications that collegiate African American students both look for and gather from social media use. The findings of this study reveal that natural African American females use social media (YouTube and blogs) to help them on their natural hair journeys.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications, Natural Hair, Social Media
I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty - or lack of it - for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me.

- Paulette Caldwell, "A Hair Piece" (2000)

Introduction

Going natural is a term coined by women of the African American descent. This term refers to “women who decided to stop chemically processing, or relaxing their hair. It is a move than can be fraught with confusion, missteps and sometimes pain, as the 2009 Chris Rock documentary ‘Good Hair’ attested” (Bey, 2011, p. 1). The natural hair “revolution is challenging mainstream perceptions about beauty within the black community. It is encouraging women to stop chemically straightening their hair (Rouege, 2013, p. 1).

“Natural hair has been a movement for several years. What we're seeing is a confirmation that this is a lifestyle that is very important to a lot of women,” says Cyntelia Abrams, marketing coordinator for Design Essentials, an Atlanta-based hair-care company that commissioned a 2010 study on the popularity of natural hair (Healy, 2011, p. 1). The natural hair movement continues to make strides through social media through sites like YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and personal blog sites.
The purpose of this study is to explore if and why African American females use social media to help them with their transition from relaxed to natural hair and/or to maintain their natural hair. If social media was used the researcher would also like to understand what influences African American females receive from social media pertaining to their hair. A qualitative approach is used in this study with a view to explore uses and gratifications that collegiate African American student both look for and gather from social media use.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Hair has always been a big deal for many African America women; it defines them as Black women. For some black women, hair is a struggle and coming to terms with your hair is difficult to say the least. Maintaining your natural curl and “being natural has been described as 'too painful' or 'too nappy to be long'” (Hargo, 2011, p. 2). Some women believe that straight hair is better; hair must be straight to be beautiful and womanly (Hargo, 2011, p. 2). For years, African American women have embraced hair alterations.

Since the early years of the African American culture, when the slaves were emancipated, African American women (and men on a smaller scale) have changed and altered their hair texture to make it more similar to the strands of white American and Europeans (Hargo, 2011, p.3). Thus: “They may attain the status of having “good hair,” which is commonly used to describe hair that has a looser coil pattern, wavy, or straight (Hargo, 2011, p. 3)”

For decades, African American women have been applying chemical relaxers every four to six weeks to “new growth,” a term for the part of the hair strands that
emerge from the scalp which reveal the natural curl pattern. Chemical relaxers or 'perms' can cause painful chemical burns in the scalp. Perms and relaxers are often referred to as ‘creamy crack' because it is a creamy, white substance and obsessively sought by those who use them, despite the negative consequences” (Hargo, 2011, p. 4).

Females are now shying away from chemically altering their hair patterns and going back to their natural roots, literally. Natural hair is being celebrated as being “healthier and empowering” among African American communities. Groups like “Back to Natural Hair” on social media websites such as Facebook are helping natural haired females by sharing styles and serving as a support system. Sites like these are “becoming more popular as women bond over struggles with managing natural hair and facing mainstream perceptions that label kinky curls, afro and dreadlocks as inappropriate or ‘nappy’” (Rouege, 2013, p.2).

Social Media Influence and Online Communities

Social media websites offer a form of virtual community. Through social media, users can gather ideas and connect with individuals who share similar interest. Dunne (2010) define social networking as

"Explicit representation of the relationship between individuals and groups in the community. Elsewhere, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) indicate that social networks provide a virtual platform where people of similar interests may gather to communicate, share and discuss ideas” (p. 49).

Social media has allowed a space where users can create their own communities through similar experiences and ideas. Gruzd (2011) defines this as an “online community”.
What are Internet based communities? “If we rely on the traditional definition of community – as a spatially-compact set of people with a high frequency of interaction, interconnections, and a sense of solidarity” (Gruzd et al., 2011, p. 325) we would not be able to include the communities created via social media. Gruzd et al. (2011) states that the “notion of community has often been caught between concrete social relationships and imagined sets of people perceived to be similar” (p. 325). With the evolution of the Internet people have been enabled to interact with others who are locally surrounded by one another, treating neighborhoods and communities almost synonymous. Now communities can include individuals located around the world as long as they share a common ground online.

Komaromi and Erickson (2011) state that in a general sense, “community represents a group of people who have something in common with one another that differentiates them from other groups. It is the boundaries that ultimately define the community and the boundaries and created symbolically in the minds of the community members” (p. 1). Community exists in the minds of the group members. The community has a shared history, which is malleable and can mean different things to its members. There is a initial relationship between community and identity (Komaromi et al., 2011).

Uses and Gratification Theory

Since the beginning of uses and gratifications theory up until its current applications, the theory is consider a “how and why approach to understanding media use motivations, since gratifications are typically defined as some aspect of satisfaction reported by users, related to the active use of the medium in question” (Stafford, Stafford & Schkade, 2004, p. 260).
Uses and gratifications theory can be considered the most effective paradigm for “identifying motivations underlying media use in mass communication studies” (Lee et al., 2011, p. 360). Uses and gratifications theory is a study of the “gratification or benefits that attract and hold audiences to various types of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological needs” (Dunne et al., 2010, p. 15).

From looking at existing research grounded in uses and gratifications theory it is suggested that people use the media they choose for “content carried by the medium” (Stafford et al., 2004, p. 261) meaning for entertainment and informational purposes or instead to simply experience the media usage process such as browsing and playing with technology. These two different categories are characterized by “content gratifications and process gratifications” (Stafford et al., 2004, p. 261).

For this study content gratifications will be observed. Stafford (2004) states that content gratification concerns the actual messages carried out by the medium. This study seeks to first reveal if social media is a medium of choice for information on natural hair and if so how is it used; are the users gaining knowledge about natural hair from using this media? Users may be motivated to use the media of their choice because they are motivated by “specific site-related informational content, such as product knowledge” (Stafford et al., 2004, p. 263).

**Research Questions/Hypothesis**

This research study will ask the questions: (RQ1) Do African American females going natural use social media to help with their hair care needs? If so, why? (RQ2) If and how does social media influence collegiate African American female student decisions on becoming natural and maintaining natural hair?
METHODOLOGY

Overview

A qualitative approach was used to execute this research. A single method approach of in-depth interviewing was chosen for this study. This method will help the researcher and the readers understand how social media has influenced and/or continues to influence the participants’ hair decisions. Interviewing will also give insight on why the specific media was chosen to help the individual with their hair journey. The Institution Review Board (IRB) approved all aspects of the data collection, (interview questions, abstract and informed consent forms).

Role of the Researcher

In this study I served as the only contributor to data collection. Ragin, Nagel & White (2004) state the “researcher’s position is an aspect of all social research, especially in research settings where the researcher is visible and active and in projects that seek in-depth knowledge.” (p. 14) My interest and position in this topic are equally exhaustive.

I am an African American female who had been natural for two years when starting this study. My story starts the summer of my freshman year when I decided to grow my perm out and go natural. My reasons were not based on trying to find self or a personal journey. Instead I wanted to do this because I was curious. I got my first perm when I was 8 years old. All I remember about my natural hair texture is that it was coarse and gave my older sister and my mother a hard time.

I big chopped the January of my sophomore year out of frustration with the two different hair textures; one sprouting from my roots and the other hanging on to my ends. I remember standing in the mirror thinking to myself, “what’s next?” I turned to the
Internet and social media to help me through this process. Blogs, YouTube and personal support on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have helped me get my hair healthy and happy. I found the magnitude in which social media has help me handle this change interesting and needed to know if others had this same impact.

My identity and who I am helped me relate to the participants. Whether they were newly natural or well into their journeys I knew exactly where they were coming from. I felt the participants were comfortable talking to me about their journeys. Whether they knew me personally or not they all were open as they discussed the highs and lows with their natural hair. My knowledge of the area of study helped gain more data. I was able to ask more in-depth questions about themes to gain more insight.

**Data Collection Procedures**

All participants were recruited by email. The email was forwarded from the researcher through various black student groups across the campus. The emails were only sent out to females of these groups. Of these females only the ones with experience with having natural hair were asked to participate. Twenty female African American students received the forwarded email, ten students replied back with interest (Appendix C).

Once the participants replied back, a meeting time was scheduled between the researcher and the participant. All interviews were held in the library of Rochester Institute of Technology between the dates of April 17-29th. The library acted as a neutral and comfortable location for both the researcher and interviewee. Interviews were at an average of 23-minutes.

DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) describe the semi-structured interview as a means for “the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters. They are
generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee/s.” (p. 8)

All interviews were recorded with permission from the interviewee granted to the researcher by the signed consent form. After which, each interview was transcribed by the researcher.

**Methods for Verification**

The accuracy of the findings was validated by researcher reflexivity. Creswell & Miller (2000) describe researcher reflexivity as a “procedure for the researcher to self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs and biases that may shape their inquiry” (p. 127). This validity procedure is located in the “role of the researcher” section of the study.

**RESULTS**

The comments offered by interview participants were coded using focused coding. Lofland (1995) describes focused coding as combing smaller categories into larger ones after initial coding. After initial coding the researcher than began to describe and place reoccurring themes seen in these categories. As stated before, semi-structured was the type of interviewing used for this research. “A more controlled semi-structured interview uses free listings to explore the meaning of terms and the rules governing them” (DiCicco-Bloom, 2006, p. 8). The following terms and themes that emerged from the interviews are presented for each research question of this study. Direct quotes from the interviews are offered to support the reoccurring themes.

**RQ1:** Do African American females going natural use social media to help with their hair care needs? If so, why?
When the participants were asked questions to ascertain whether social media was used while they were transitioning and/or maintaining with upkeep of their natural hair, all eight participants reported using some form of social media. Two main forms of social media reoccurred in participant answers: (1) YouTube and (2) Blogging (websites/material).

(“Everything is on”) YouTube. The YouTube effect “is the phenomenon whereby video clips, often produced by individuals acting on their own, are rapidly disseminated throughout the world thanks to video-sharing Web sites such as YouTube, Google Video, and others” (Naim, 2007, p.103). Because of YouTube natural hair gurus have been able to share information about the natural hair process visually. Participants reported on heavy YouTube use when transitioning. Multiple participants described YouTube as being “their best friend” during this period of their natural hair journey. One reoccurring use of YouTube that is seen in the answers of the participants is that YouTube vloggers have provided hairstyling ideas for different natural hair textures.

Interview 2: “When transitioning, if I had a special occasion to go to, whether it was a banquet or things of that nature and I needed to figure out what can I do to look presentable I would go look it up on YouTube. A lot of it I taught myself, how to flat twist and cornrow by watching videos... I use it a lot for that.”

Interview 1: I use YouTube mainly like the [hair] tutorials and stuff like that. Like I go to the pages and subscribed to bloggers that I like.

Interview 7: “For the last two year YouTube has been my friend! That’s how I found out about Curlformers. I bought them two months ago and its like um, heatless curls love those and yeah YouTube is your friend. You get different styles and you can tell other
people about different styles. That’s where I kind of like—well two years ago started to get different Afro tips. So social media has played a big part especially with hair types. With natural hair you get so many different hairstyles and textures and even in one head you can get like 4 different textures.”

YouTube has also provided knowledge about different hair products and how to create an everyday hair regimen. One participant replied, “YouTube was my best friend. [I would go there and see] people who have gone natural already and what products they use and what’s good for this texture of hair so that was what helped me.” Some participants mentioned looking up how to execute certain methods of moisturizing and treating their hair such as protein treatments and how water and mineral oils can serve as a moisturizer. Observing what “products [the YouTube vloggers] used, watching some girls making their own wigs for protective styling” were also uses for the social media website.

Looking up different hairstyles, treatments and other natural hair material on YouTube has led to many of the participants’ seeking a second form of social media to help them with their hair care needs, blogging. As one participant stated, “I basically use blogs and YouTube. I mean the blogs that I’ve gotten are from people who are on YouTube essentially.”

*Blogs.* Blogging websites were used as a base for looking up terms and also getting ideas for hairstyling. Many of the participants would frequent the personal blogs of the natural guru’s that they followed on YouTube. One natural hair guru whose blogging identification appeared in numerous answers from participants was “Naptural85.” Participant felt that her material was “valid and credible.” One participant
follows her regimen and has seen growth and feels that her hair is stronger from following Naptural85’s regimen.

Other blogging websites that appeared in the research include: KinkyCurly, CurlyNikki, BlackGirlWithLongHair. Hairlista was also a blogging platform that appeared in the participant answers. One participant describes Hairlista as a “Facebook for girls with curly hair” where she could comment on things and receives feedback from other natural hair females, especially during the transition period. These forums serve as an outlet “to have a better understanding of how to take care of [your] hair.”

From the results it is shown that African American females who are natural use social media during their transition period and/or to maintain the upkeep of their natural hair. To analyze the reasons behind this social media use, further investigation during the interviews was conducted. The following themes were prevalent in numerous responses.

Easily Accessible. One main reason that female students in the natural hair community used YouTube and blogs to search for their hair care needs is because the media was so easy for them to access. One participant compared the use of the library and books and social media saying, “you know what I haven’t gone and like checked out a book like I don’t even know if there are books out for it I mean there probably are in a limited sense but social media is so much easier to access and um yeah simply put.” Other participants would simply state, “It was so easy to get to and understand.”

Information via blogs can be accessed just by “googling how to do a two-strand twist out.” Participants described their experiences as “sometimes just stumbling upon [blogs and YouTube] during a search.”
Relatable Information. Eighty-eight percent of the participants had little to no experience with their natural hair prior to their first perm. Without having “much knowledge to go off of” about their own natural hair texture, the information they receive from both YouTube and blogs was relatable and helpful. Participants described the information they found from social media to help “100 percent. There was a connection with other naturals [there]. I feel like on the website environment- everyone was close even though we didn’t know each other personally we were all going through the same things.”

On average all eight participants used about a total of fourteen hours per week on social media pertaining to natural hair during their transition from relaxed hair to natural. One participant reported “I spent hours on YouTube while I was transitioning. I would probably sit there for like 3 to 5 hours a day. You don’t even realize, like I’ve been sitting here for this long?” This number of hours decreased as the participants learned more about their natural hair. While well into her journeys, one participant compared her YouTube and blogging use then and now stating, “I definitely watched more videos then because I didn’t really know about my hair texture or what to do with my hair.”

RQ2: If and how does social media influence collegiate African American female students’ decisions on becoming natural and maintaining natural hair?

Participants exclaimed that social media encouraging them to start their natural hair journey. In the interviews, participants describe their influences as to why they went natural as being “internal more than external.” Encouragement to go natural and to maintain their healthy natural hair from social media sites did appear in the data as a form of “admiration”.


Admiration. When searching for information about natural hair on social media, participants described the effect as admiration. Participants would view girls who have already gone natural (whose journey consisted of doing the big chop or a longer period of transition from permed hair to natural hair.) Some participants said what they saw made them “curious to know what their hair-type is and how they could get their hair to that length and strength.” A participant described her experience saying, “I would watch the videos and girls would have big afros and I would be like, ‘wow I want to do that or I want my hair to look like that.’ And that helped me feel more comfortable about doing it.”

Blogger, Naptural85 was brought up in this context by some participants describing her content as “completely changing [their] outlook on how to take care of hair.” Participants felt as though if she can grow and maintain healthy looking natural hair then the process may be for them as well. Other participants stated how bloggers, like Naptural85, inspired them to look up how to maintain natural hair so that it doesn’t look “untamed.”

CONCLUSIONS

The results found by the researcher of this study suggest that two forms of social media, YouTube and Blogging, are used in various ways to help African American female students going natural maintain their hair. These females appear to use both forums for knowledge base purposes as well as a means for experimenting with their hair. For instance, respondents said that when they were unsure about what a term meant they would look up how to “two strand twist,” or if they were unsure of what hair texture and type they might be they would look up examples of the various different types.
Research question one asked if natural hair females used social media for their hair care needs and if so why. It is now prevalent that yes, social media is used by females who are going natural and/or want to maintain their natural hair. Participants reported the information that they received from these forms of social media to be both easily accessible and filled with relatable information. Participants stated this use as “easy to get to and easy to understand.” Members of the natural hair community are more likely to turn to and use the information that is on social media like blogs and YouTube because they don’t have to struggle to find information. The information that these females are receiving is coming from individuals who they feel are trustworthy and dependable because they are going through or went through the same natural hair experiences that they did.

As uses and gratification theory states, “gratification or benefits that attract and hold audiences to various types of media and the types of content satisfy their social and psychological needs” (Dunne et al., 2010, p. 15). In the data collection it was observed that participants did not often seek out information about natural hair using different media other than online social media content. Social media provided adequate information about natural hair during their searches. A medium such as television for example offered little to no help. “There is not a lot of information on television to help [us] with natural hair.”

Research question two asked if and how does social media influence African American female students’ decisions on becoming natural. Social media has impacted these young females in the forms of encouragement and admiration. Respondents would view the content of the social media websites, read and listen to natural hair journeys and
admire the blogger’s natural hair experience. This new admiration that the viewer has gained from watching these experiences then encourages the viewers to have the natural hair journey experience for themselves.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study include: the number of the participants, the time of the interviews, and accessibility to the targeted population. The researcher’s goal was to interview ten to fifteen African American females who were natural. The researcher was only able to interview eight African American females. Although the data received from these eight participants helped the researcher answer the research questions presented in the study, more participants would have offered more insight.

The average time of interviews in this study was twenty-three minutes. When going into interviews the researcher anticipated interviewing participants for a half hour to an hour. With more time spent during conversations with participants, the more information and data that could have been gathered. A longer interview could possibly have allotted for more information from the participants to further answer the research questions.

The research was conducted at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). In 2012, it was reported that there are 16,166 students at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT); 32% of the population at RIT is female, and 5% of the population is of African American decent (Noer, 2012). If ratios at RIT are absolute, approximately 1.6% of the population at Rochester Institute of Technology is female African American students. Of this group, the researcher only wanted to study those members who are natural, this would reduce the percentage even lower. Although the data collected was sufficient to the research,
having a larger percentage of the student population to pool from could have added
different perspectives in the research.

Further Research

Another reoccurring theme that was presented in the data collection is how
interpersonal communication and relationships have influenced natural hair females into
embarking on the natural hair journey. Different relationships with friends and family
members have influenced the participants when going natural. One participant said that
her “best friend in high school is the reason [she] went natural.” Because of this strong
friendship, when her best friend decided to go natural she began to go natural as well
claiming, “we did everything together.” Other participants offered anecdotes of their
mothers’ and elder sisters’ influence on their decision and how the communication
between the two parties encouraged them to proceed on the natural hair journey.
Appendices

Appendix A

Natural Hair Jargon

3a|3b|3c: Classification numbers for naturally loose curly hair.

4a|4b|4c: Classification numbers for naturally tight kinky curly hair.

BC: (Big Chop) Cutting relaxed or chemically treated hair completely off to leave only natural textured hair.

Co-wash: A method of washing your hair with conditioner only. This type of wash helps to keep natural black hair soft and manageable.

Cornrow: Type of braiding style where the hair is braided very closely to the scalp in an underhand, upward motion to create a continuous, raised row. The styles are endless that can be achieved with cornrow designs.

Creamy crack: A term created by women who found it hard to stop relaxing their hair while transitioning, used to describe permanent relaxers.

Detangler: Type of hair conditioner that smooths your hair by coating it, so that the hair tightens up and smooths the scales on the outer surface of the hair or cuticle to prevent tangles.

Detangling: Process in which you use a detangler to soften and smooth the hair for manageability.

Natural hair journey: Process in which you make to free your hair of any relaxed and/or damaged hair.

Pre-Poo: Coating the hair, for about 30 minutes or more, with a mixture of natural oils or a deep conditioner before you shampoo.
**Protective Style:** A hairstyle that tucks the ends of your hair away from being exposed to damaging agents such as sun, heat, and constant manipulation. The purpose and benefits of this hairstyle is to grow healthier, longer hair and reduce split ends and damage. Some examples are Buns, Braids, Sew-in Weaves, Wigs, and Drawstring Ponytails.

**Regimen:** Your day to day or weekly hair care and styling guide.

**Transitioning:** Process in which you take steps to stop relaxing the hair to grow out your natural hair texture.

**Twist Out:** A hairstyle achieved by two strand twisting the hair (usually while damp or wet then air drying or use a hair dryer) and then unraveling the twist to reveal a crinkly wavy hair texture.

(Harris, 2011)
Appendix B

Informed Consent for the study of

#TeamNatural: Social Media Effects on Female African American Students

**Information and Purpose:** The interview for which you are being asked to participate in, is a part of a research study that is focused on examining social media’s influence on collegiate African American female's and their choice on going natural. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding on the impact social media has on this decision in the collegiate African American female population.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this study will consist of a videotaped interview lasting from a half hour to an hour. You will be asked a series of questions about your hair experiences and what forms of social media you used during your decision to go natural as well as the social media you currently use. You are not required to answer the questions. You may pass on any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation.

**Benefits and Risk:** The benefit of your participation is to contribute information to the natural hair community in the collegiate African American female population about your journey and the impact social media has or has had on you. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. All of your information and interview responses will be kept confidential. The researcher will not share your individual responses with anyone other than the researcher's supervisor. There are no anticipated risks as a result of participating in this research. Insights gathered by you and the other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research study that will be presented in a senior thesis class.

**Confidentiality:** The interview will be video recorded to help the researcher capture each response accurately. If you feel uncomfortable with the recording at any time, you may ask for it to be turned off. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with the written part of the research. All of your information and interview responses will be kept confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher.

By signing below I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I am aware that I can discontinue my participation in this study at any time.

Print Name ______________________________

Signature _______________________________ Date ____________
Appendix C

Email Sent to Participants

Hello,

My name is Lyndsey Saunders. I am a senior here at RIT. As a final assignment to attain my degree in Advertising and Public Relations, my major requires its students to complete a thesis on their choice of topic. I have chosen to do something that I am interested in which is natural hair. My friend Patience has informed me that you are natural. I wanted to ask if you would be interested in participating in the study. I would need about a half hour of your time to ask about your natural hair. If you are interested in becoming a participant in this study please email me at (my email address), or call/text (my phone number). I am looking to do interviews between April 19-24th.

Thank you for your time.
References


