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## The Impact of Racial Salience on the Perception of Natural Hair

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## The Impact of Racial Salience on the Perception of Natural Hair

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank my former psychology professor of Xavier University of Louisiana, Dr. Elliott D. Hammer. As a student in his Advanced Research course, I conducted the racial salience study, which also was my first ever study I carried out. With this being said, he constantly provided expertise advise on how to perform an experimental study. I also would like to thank Dr. Hammer for his never ending support in my research interests.

Physical beauty is important in many cultures and may influence how people perceive themselves. In the United States, beauty archetypes have been historically derived from Eurocentric beauty paradigms. These paradigms influence women's beauty standards to highly favor those who resemble Eurocentric features. These archetypes are often displayed in various forms of media such as magazines, television shows, and movies, and they are especially prevalent within beauty industries. These paradigms convey to society that women with long straight hair, fair skin, or those who resemble more Eurocentric facial features are deemed more beautiful in society. Moreover, literature that addresses Black racial identity and self-esteem reveals these standards exclude Afrocentric beauty and or physical attraction to Black women (Robinson-Moore, 2008). In opposition to the imposed Eurocentric standards, there is presently an upward social trend in African American women wearing their hair in its natural state instead of chemically straightening their hair or wearing hairstyles to purposely mask their natural hair textures. Although some Black women accept that their Afrocentric phenotypes heavily contrast with these standards, such as preference in hair texture, current paradigms still suggest "kinkier" or coarser hair textures are less desirable to men. In fact, some Black males are more likely to discourage female Afrocentric features such as hair. Banks (as cited in Awad et al., 2015) reports that due to the basis of European aesthetics, the physical beauty of African American women is largely rejected by its reference group or mainstream culture and as a result, Black men are influenced to adopt the same perception. Further research also examines the impact of Eurocentric beauty standards towards Black female identities. Robinson-Moore (2008) explains that young women who have not internalized their race more thoroughly, struggle to avoid dominant culture beauty paradigms. Her research demonstrates that African American women should develop their Black racial identity because their phenotypes such as skin color and hair

texture are distinguished from Eurocentric features. Therefore, it is imperative for Black women to appreciate their distinct phenotypes despite the fact that Eurocentric beauty standards are commonly accepted in society. As a result of beauty standards negatively influencing the image of African American women, I investigated how Black racial identity in male and female college students may affect their liking for Black women's natural hair.

To investigate perception of natural hair, it is first important to consider racial salience and how it predicts one's ability to identify in an ethnic group (Sanders-Thompson, 1999). Racial salience defines the degree to which individuals find race to be pertinent to the theory of self-concept (Scottham, Sellers, and Nguyen, 2008). This theory emphasizes how one should think about themselves, behave, and act in their life roles. In addition to self-concept, the social identification theory suggests significant factors may influence one's racial salience and will impact how the individual may identify him or herself. One significant factor within racial salience is racial socialization. Racial socialization consists of the degree to which parents convey messages about their race significant to their children (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009). African American parents choose to engage in different verbal and nonverbal messages such as how to acknowledge their race and how to approach racism and or inequality. Such socialization behaviors contribute to Black children developing positive or negative racial attitudes (Neblett et al., 2009). Results in empirical research reveal that for African Americans, greater racial centrality correlates with greater self-esteem (Poran, 2002). For example, Neblett et al. (2009) categorize three patterns of racial socialization experiences: high positive, moderate positive, and low frequency. Their results suggest participants in the high positive group were exposed to more positive socialization messages, were positively correlated with greater racial centrality, and were unlikely to conform their Black racial identity to standards of the dominant

culture. In contrast, participants in the low frequency category reflected lower racial centrality and were more likely to assimilate to Eurocentric standards. Overall, these findings illustrate that one's racial salience predicts the extent to which they internalize their racial identity and how they assimilate to dominant cultural standards, which applies to Black men assimilating to Eurocentric standards of beauty when evaluating physical beauty in Black women.

Furthermore, researchers have established various Black racial identity models. Cross (1971), a researcher and leading theorist in ethnic identity development, presented the nigrescence model. The nigrescence model outlines a typical five stage theory for African Americans to assess their racial identity. For example, the *pre-encounter* stage suggests the least affirming racial status that idealizes White-culture values and disparages African American culture (Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006). The second stage, *encounter*, in which one has a conflicting experience with Black and White society, causes African Americans to question their blackness (Mahalik et al., 2006). The third stage is the *Immersion-Emersion* stage where one begins to learn the meaning and value of one's race and distinguished culture but may not incorporate an authentic sense of Blackness within themselves (Mahalik et al., 2006). Then follows the *Internalization* stage which suggests one has developed a positive and personal racial identity (Constantine, Richardson, Benjamin, & Wilson, 1998). Finally, Cross (1971) asserts the *Internalization/Commitment* stage, in which the individual challenges and eliminates oppression against African Americans and other groups. However, subsequent racial identity theorists often combine the last two stages as a fourth stage of *internalization* (Parham & Helms, 2007). In addition, to the nigrescence model Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) have also developed the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) which measures Black racial identity through racial centrality, salience, regard, and ideology.

Furthermore, research on racial-group identification suggests it is significantly related to self-esteem in ethnic minorities. For example, Terrell (2005) examines the impact of ethnic socialization and ethnic identity on African American fathers and how both factors contribute to the fathers' self-esteem and parenting attitudes. His research suggests that racial-group identity and self-esteem are often correlated and predictors of each other throughout time. To support this correlation, Phinney, another researcher who investigates ethnic identity, explains that adolescents who are racial minorities who fail to acknowledge or identify with their race are likely to struggle with self-esteem (as cited in Terrell, 2005). Phinney's statement about self-esteem and ethnic identity illustrates the importance of Black adolescents accepting their identity within society. People who may not accept their racial identity, possibly due to racial stigmas, negative racial attitudes and/or experiences may face negative consequences while interacting in a racially disadvantaged society. For example, Black men with lower racial centrality are more likely to have lower self-esteem (Oney, Cole, & Sellers, 2011). Therefore, African American men with low racial centrality and self-esteem are more likely to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty, which will hinder their acceptance of Afrocentric features such as kinky hair texture in Black women (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011).

Although research addresses Eurocentric standards exclude the beauty of Black women, it is critical to observe how men and women may unknowingly reinforce these stigmas about Black women's hair. Unfortunately, empirical studies on racial identity are mostly correlational and do not test causality between Black racial identity and how Black men and women internalize these beauty standards as they assess their liking for kinky hair textures. As a result, I hypothesize that participants exposed to a Black racial identity stimulus will report greater affinity for natural hair than those exposed to a race neutral stimulus.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study consisted of a total of 33 participants ( $N=33$ ) who are African American male and female college students at Xavier University of Louisiana. The historically Black college and university has a predominant African American student population of 69.7%. The study was conducted twice but on two different occasions. The first study ( $N=17$ ) was conducted in Spring of 2019, and the participants were solicited through SONA. The second collection of data was conducted in Spring of 2020 in which participants included students of an advanced psychology research course.

### **Materials**

To test whether participants exposed to the Black racial identity stimulus report greater affinity for natural hair in contrast to a race neutral stimulus, I first used two standardized questionnaires. The first questionnaire was Sellers' (2013) Multidimensional Inventory of Black Racial Identity (MIBI). This scale measured Black racial identity for each participant. For this study, however, I chose subscales that measure centrality, private and public regard, assimilationist ideology, and nationalist ideology because these areas were more likely to yield a valid measure in my construct of focus- racial salience. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965) served as my second survey (as cited by n/a, n/a). Because literature addresses self-esteem and racial identification as positive correlates and predictors to each other (Terrell, 2005), this instrument was also necessary. After both groups completed both surveys, they engaged in either a Black racial identity or race neutral stimulus. Each group briefly responded to two questions through writing. The experimental group reflected upon questions that emphasized the extent to which being African-American is salient to their identity and if their parents engaged in racial

socialization. In contrast, the control group was asked how “age” is salient to their identity as well as the degree to which their parents expressed messages of age, since the concept of age is race neutral. Next, each participant assessed a series of images of Black women with various hairstyles including natural hair, straightened hair, and braids. The images were presented in a google slides presentation.

### **Procedure**

This experiment utilized an independent group design. Therefore, I randomly assigned participants to the experimental and control groups during each study session. The experimental group encountered a black racial identity stimulus, and the control group encountered an age stimulus. Participants entered the room, and I greeted them. Once everyone was seated, I explained what they would be doing in the study and their rights as a participant, and I reminded them to stay after the study was completed in order for me to explain the background of my research. Next, consent forms were handed out and collected. Both groups began the study by completing the Sellers’s MIBI (2013) and RSES (1965) (as cited in n/a, n/a) questionnaires. After students completed the pretest, the experimental group responded to questions that referred to their race being salient to their identity and the control group responded to questions that referred to their age being salient to their identity. Finally, students assessed a series of nine images that showed Black women with various hairstyles including natural hair. Students rated the images using a 7-point Likert scale based on characteristics of nice-looking hair, friendly, attractive, intelligent, and honest. As the researcher, I focused only on the participants’ ratings of “nice looking hair” for images that depicted women with natural hair to ultimately determine their affinity for natural hair. The reported scores could range from 0-21.



After the study was conducted, the participants filled out a demographics form. Next, I asked students if they had any concerns, questions or particular observations. I then orally debriefed participants of the purpose of the study, explaining my interest in determining whether participants exposed to a black racial identity stimulus would reflect greater affinity for natural hair compared to participants who assessed the images according to a race neutral stimulus. The two surveys measured their Black racial identity and self-esteem, while the two stimuluses were designed to influence how they rated the images of women with natural hair.

### Results

Earlier, I hypothesized that participants exposed to a Black racial identity (BRI) stimulus would report greater liking for natural hair than those in the age stimulus. Due to a dichotomous independent variable, I conducted an independent samples t-test to examine for a significant difference between the two group means. For this statistical test, the independent variable was defined as participants in the BRI stimulus ( $N=17$ ) and those in the age stimulus ( $N=16$ ). The measured dependent variable was defined as each stimulus group average. The compared group averages represented participants' summed rating of three images that displayed Black women with natural hair. After reviewing the chart of Independent Samples t Test to compare the mean values of both groups, I examined the  $p$ -value, designated for equal variances assumed the given for two-tailed significance. No significance in mean difference was observed for the BRI stimulus group ( $M=17.59$ ,  $SD=3.08$ ) and the age stimulus group ( $M=18.25$ ,  $SD=2.49$ ),  $t(31) = -0.676$ ,  $p = .504$ . That is to say, the reported  $p$ -value (.504) was higher than the allowed level of significance of .05. Statistically speaking, although both reported mean values were indeed different, they are not significantly different in comparison to each other. Therefore, the data do

not provide sufficient evidence to argue causality of affinity of natural hair due to Black racial identity.

Although I cannot argue my experimental hypothesis is true, I tested the sample's data for correlations of other quantitative variables measured in this study. For example, in the beginning of my study, students completed the MIBI (Sellers, 2013) and RSES (Rosenberg, 1965) Likert scales to measure their Black identity and self-esteem. As a result, I conducted a Pearson correlation test. I tested all participants' summed totals in MIBI subscales: racial centrality, private-regard, public-regard, assimilation, and nationalist in correlation with summed totals for the RSES. No significant correlations were observed between any subscale of racial identity in association with self-esteem. The correlation's test values are listed in the respective order as listed:  $r(31) = -.020, p = .913$ ;  $r(31) = .128, p = .478$ ;  $r(31) = -0.97, p = .592$ ;  $r(31) = .131, p = .476$ ;  $r(31) = .037, p = .837$ . Furthermore, I tested correlation between participants' summed rating for their liking of natural hair in association to their self-esteem score. No significant correlation was observed,  $r(31) = .056, p = .759$ . In addition, participants' self-esteem was tested with their summed ratings of natural hair. No significant correlation was observed,  $r = .056, p = .759$ . Lastly, all five racial identity subscales were tested for correlation with participants' summed ratings of natural hair. Interestingly, only one significant correlation was observed. This association occurred between participants' private-regard and summed ratings of natural hair. This relationship was positive and moderate in the correlation's strength,  $r = .363, p = .038$ .

### **Discussion**

In contrast to my hypothesis, there was no significant difference between the averages of the BRI stimulus group and age stimulus group. As a result, the sample's data is not sufficient to reject the null hypothesis. Though my research could not argue one's Black racial identity

determines their liking for natural hair, the data illustrated one positively moderate correlation of one's private-regard and rating for natural hair. This finding indicates that the more a Black individual perceived their own racial group in a positive manner, they were more likely to positively perceive natural hair. This implication is rather interesting because some African-American individuals view their natural hair with a sense of self-pride. On the other hand, the data failed to confirm correlations that ethnic identity researchers have found. For example, Poran (2002) and Neblett et al. (2009) explain that one who has greater racial centrality is more likely to have greater self-esteem. Due to both researchers' findings and implications, fellow researchers acknowledge that when ethnic minorities have greater self-esteem, it is commonly associated with a greater sense of racial centrality. In contrast to Poran (2002) and Neblett et al. (2009), this correlation within the present study was insignificant. One possible reason to explain this could be that participants' responses to the self-esteem scale had restriction of range. The conflict with responses with restriction of range suggests most participants answered with the same values; therefore, there was little variation in the data collected from the RSES (Rosenberg 1965). Due to this restriction, as the summed totals of self-esteem were correlated with other variables, they may or may have not thoroughly reflected the sample's self-esteem. This issue should raise awareness to transform the 4-point scale of the RSES (Rosenberg 1965) into a larger point scale to allow individuals to evaluate their self-esteem with more complexity. In return, this could yield greater variation in responses.

Another limitation of my research included the lack of empirical literature that addresses causality between Black racial identity and assimilation to Eurocentric standards, especially beauty standards. Some researchers addressed correlation between the two factors but have not tested for causality. In addition, much of the literature that focuses on ethnic identity and self-

esteem mostly examines association to student academic performance rather than Afrocentric phenotypes.

For future research, I would recommend increasing the sample size. For instance, my sample consisted of 33 students, which is a small sample. Also, I would recruit more African American students that do not attend historically black colleges because these students may find race to be more salient or less salient to them as they are racial minorities on their campus.

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