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## The Link between Social Media Usage and Natural Hair Discrimination

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## The Link between Social Media Usage and Natural Hair Discrimination

### Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful for my research professor, Dr. Elizabeth Y. Hammer, and student assistant, Tresaundra Roberson, at Xavier University of Louisiana for their cooperation, help, and support throughout the whole research process. Their dedication to assisting me to produce the best work possible is appreciated very much.

## The Link between Social Media Usage and Natural Hair Discrimination

The discrimination of African Americans originates from when Europeans forcibly removed Africans from their homeland to be slaves in the American colonies. Before enslavement in America, Africans could use their hair to communicate certain characteristics about themselves such as their relationship status, age, and more (“Fast History: Black Women and Their Hair”, 2017). However, Africans were forced to cut and/or cover all their hair with head wraps when they arrived in America. It was a way to separate them from their culture and identity. Many White people during that time referred to Black hair as wool to dehumanize Black people (Ivey, 2006). In addition, White people treated Black people with lighter skin and straight hair, which were usually interracial individuals, better than those who did not have those features (Robinson, 2011). After slavery was outlawed, a Black person not wearing their hair straight could show defiance, but their hairstyle choice could determine if a White person allowed them to be educated, employed, and more (Patton, 2006). This is how colorism, natural hair discrimination, and internalized self-hate began.

Since then, degrading all aspects of African American culture has been normalized. This includes music, religious practices, and style of dress. African American culture was and sometimes still is seen as savage and dangerous by the White majority. This can be especially seen in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time period, a movement started that urged African Americans to be Black and proud of it. One way they did this was by wearing afros in opposition to the beauty standards of White America (Garrin & Marcketti, 2018). Garrin and Marcketti’s (2018) participants expressed how wearing their afros out for the world to see made them feel strong and a part of something bigger than themselves. The afro also began as a symbol for the

Black Panther Party, which the The U.S. government deemed a threat to be eliminated (Chinwe, 2017). This could be one of the reasons why African Americans who wore an afro were constantly harassed by White police officers, even if they had no official ties with the Black Panther Party (Chinwe, 2017).

Harrassment of and discrimination by police officers against African Americans simply because of their hairstyle choices by police is one of the factors that led to the assimilation of Black hair in the 80s (Chinwe, 2017). Instead of wearing their hair in an afro, Black people bought products such as perms and flat irons to make sure they looked more acceptable. Many TV channels and magazines constantly put out ads for products that made African Americans' curls looser and straighter (Chinwe, 2017). Many celebrities also adopted these hairstyles, including the Jheri Curl. African Americans have been taught that everything about them is inferior to the White community, and they will not be accepted unless they choose to assimilate. This also includes their beauty.

### Beauty in America

Western beauty standards in America have had a negative impact on minorities because they mostly cater to the White population (Bryant, 2013). Throughout life, people are taught by different sources what beauty should look like. For women in America, the beauty standard is fair or light skin, skinny body, and straight, long hair (Bryant, 2013). And how a person views attractiveness affects how they interact with or view others (Langlois et al., 2000). Employers are more likely to hire someone they view as attractive (Tews et al., 2009). Adults and children are most likely to rate people they view as attractive more positively and associate attractive people

with positive characteristics such as intelligence, popularity, and success (Langlois et al., 2000). Thus, Western beauty standards in America put minorities in a disadvantaged position.

Americans show that they have internalized the beauty standard, which emphasizes Eurocentric characteristics as the most beautiful, by showing implicit bias toward features that are associated with minorities. African American men have rated African American women with lighter skin tones more positively than women with darker skin tones (Hill, 2002). This suggests how Western beauty standards can potentially affect African American women's social lives. African American women might feel hesitant to interact with others because they know most people might prefer someone with lighter skin. These beauty standards also affect work-life (Rosette & Dumas, 2007). Many women of color have expressed their concerns, even in court, about how they feel uncomfortable wearing their hair in its natural state at work because they do not want to risk making their coworkers uncomfortable or stand out too much (Rosette & Dumas, 2007). Lee's 2017 study of college women of different ethnic backgrounds also revealed that people of color who resemble White Americans are seen as the most beautiful (Hunter, 2004 as cited by Robinson, 2011). In the study, women rated a model with loose long curls as the most attractive and the model with dreads, an African American style, as the least attractive (Lee, 2017). Accordingly, one way African American women have been taught to conform to Western beauty standards is through their hair.

### The Importance of Hair in the Black Community

Hair has always played an important role in the life of an African American woman. It is a way for them to connect to their African ancestry (Garrin & Marcketti, 2017). Hair allows them to feel part of a Black collective identity (Garrin & Marcketti, 2017). African American women

also use their hair's ability to change into many different forms to express their personality (Awad et al., 2015). Black women's hair is also greatly connected to confidence when it comes to her beauty and self-worth. An African American woman who wears her hair naturally is more likely to have a high self-esteem than someone who does not (Bankhead & Johnson, 2014). Also, Black women who wear their hair naturally feel less worried about what others think about them (Ellis-Hevery et al., 2016). These are the numerous reasons why Black women sacrifice a great amount of time and money on their hair (Awad et al., 2015). Nevertheless, this sometimes means conforming to Western beauty standards in order to have “good” hair.

#### What is “Good” Hair?

At a very young age, Black women are taught what the difference is between “good” and “bad” hair. The distinction between the two comes from years of discrimination against natural hair by Europeans forcing minorities to assimilate to Western culture (Robinson, 2011). Robinson (2011) found that many African American women know what society deems as “good” hair even if they do not agree with it themselves. In the Black community, certain hair types are more valued than others (Robinson, 2011). Girls with long, loosely coiled, wavy, and/or easily manageable hair are qualities that many people associate with good hair (Robinson, 2011). “Bad” hair is tightly coiled, not easy to take care of, short, and/or needs to be straightened to look good (Robinson, 2011). This goes back to the assumption that women who have features that closely follow Western beauty standards are considered more beautiful and wanted (Bryant, 2013). This happens because of how individuals internalize and learn the norms of their society.

#### How Are Beauty Standards Learned?

Socialization is “the lifelong process of learning the norms, values, behavior, and social skills appropriate to your social position, such as your age, gender, or social class” (Giddens et al., 2018, p. 92). Individuals learn the norms and appropriate behavior of their society through agents of socialization. The five agents of socialization are families, schools, peers, mass media, and work (Giddens et al., 2018, p. 94). African American women's families showing disdain for natural, short, and/or brightly colored hair is an example of that (Tribble et al., 2019). African American women learn to internalize these beauty standards when they receive unfair treatment because of their hair preferences from their family, strangers, and friends (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). The media, which praises celebrities with Eurocentric features and displays adolescent boys preferring girls who have Eurocentric features, also teaches African American women that their features, including their natural hair, is not beautiful. (Awad et al., 2015; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Accordingly, African American women follow the Eurocentric norm, even if it harms them, to avoid punishment like teasing or unfair treatment, and to avoid the consequences of acting the “wrong” way.

#### Social Media: Agent of Socialization

Young adults use social media to compare themselves to their peers and strangers on a daily basis which often leads to feelings of dissatisfaction with their own lives and even their physical appearance. In 2019, Robinson et. al studied 504 undergraduate students all older than 18 and found that individuals who did not like posting group pictures or being tagged in photos in which they believed they looked ugly also suffered from depression.

Facebook users are more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies than people who do not use Facebook (Stronge et al., 2015). Constantly seeing images of women with slim bodies

make skinny women feel more confident about themselves while decreasing the confidence of heavier women (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997). Body type is not the only aspect people think about when it comes to beauty. Women who have a high comparison tendency are more likely to feel insecure about their hair, face, or skin after scrolling through their Facebook (Faroudy et al., 2015).

Social media provides a space for people to constantly compare themselves to people who do fit Western beauty standards. However, there has been a rise of people demanding that all mass media become more diverse when it comes to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and more. Society has come to an understanding that the media not only affects the way they view themselves but also how others view them. People are going against Western beauty standards by following their own, like with the current Natural Hair Movement.

Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the relationship between the amount of time an individual spends on social media and their attitudes towards hairstyles of African American women. The hypothesis is that as the time spent on social media increases for college students, positive ratings for chemically and/or heat altered hairstyles on African American women increases as positive ratings for natural hairstyles decreases.

## Method

### Participants

26 students, 5 males and 21 females, from Xavier University of Louisiana, participated in this study. 21 of the participants identified as African American, 2 as Hispanic, 1 as Asian, 1 as Native American, and 1 as Biracial. Most of the participants have naturally curly hair. All participants were recruited by the Psychology Department subject pool of SONA and



convenience sampling. In regard to classification and age, the students' class year ranged from Freshman to Senior with an age range of 17 to 23.

### Materials

In the first questionnaire, the participants completed a modified Social Media Use scale (Shensa et. al, 2015) to measure how frequently they use social media. The scale is a two-item questionnaire with one open-ended question and a semantic differential format question. For example, one question will ask how frequently participants use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok, and other social media sites. Participants chose a number between 0 and 5 to describe how much they use those certain social media sites. 0 means they do not use the social media site at all and 5 means they use it more than 5 or more times a day. A high score on this questionnaire will mean that the subject frequently uses social media sites every day.

The second questionnaire is the modified Good Hair Survey (Johnson et. al, 2017). The survey measures participants' attitudes towards natural and chemical and/or heat altered hairstyles on African American women. It has pictures of four different hairstyles on the same woman which the participants rate on a scale from 1 to 5. Participants were not given the name of each hairstyle. All pictures are shown in the appendix. For example, participants would rate the afro hairstyle on a 1 to 5 scale on the category of beauty. A high score on this questionnaire will mean they prefer chemical and/or heat altered hairstyles on African American women over natural hairstyles.

### Design and Procedure

This study is a non-experimental correlational study. Participants were given a link that directed them to a website, Qualtrics, to complete the surveys. They read and signed an informed

consent form before being able to complete all three surveys. After completing the surveys, they were debriefed.

## Results

### Social Media Frequency and Ratings

To test the hypothesis, a bivariate correlation was calculated between social media frequency and hairstyle ratings, and time spent on social media every day and hairstyle ratings. The p values between time spent on social media every day and hairstyle ratings were not significant. Table 1 shows the results between social media frequency and hairstyle ratings where none of the p values were significant because none of them were less than .05.

### Difference between Hairstyles

Significance was shown between the different hairstyles based on the different categories, mostly between the natural hairstyles. A general linear model of repeated measures was run, and the 95% confidence intervals provided interesting information. As shown in Table 2, the afro and twist out did not overlap for any of the categories. The afro was always rated more positively than the twist out.

The average ratings (means) for all hairstyles were also found. The results showed that the afro was rated more positively than all the hairstyles on average in the beauty and sexy/attractive category. However, the long curls hairstyle was rated more positively in the classy/formal category while the pixie cut was rated more positively in the professional category. The twist out was rated the least positive in all categories. All results are shown in Table 3.

## Discussion

The data shows that the hypothesis, which is that as the time spent on social media increases for college students, positive ratings for chemically and/or heat altered hairstyles on

African American women increases as positive ratings for natural hairstyles decreases, is not supported. Social media does not seem to be a significant source or have much effect on natural hair discrimination for college students in America.

### Implications

In the present day, social media is an agent of socialization. However, the data shows that the amount of time on social media is not significantly affecting the way participants view the beauty of hair. This could be because of the Natural Hair Movement's influence and minorities demanding diversity to show the beauty and acceptance of all races and cultures on all platforms. There is a push for all beauty to be appreciated and not to have a certain look valued over another. This could be the reason why the correlation between social media usage and ratings on different hairstyles on African American women was not significant.

The results do show that these participants see natural hair in a positive light, since the afro was rated, on average, the most positive for beauty and sexiness/attractiveness out of all the natural and non-natural hairstyles. However, a natural hairstyle, the twist out, had the lowest average of ratings. Also, the afro was always rated significantly higher than the twist out in every category. This ties in with the results from Lee's study in 2017. The natural hairstyle that closely followed Eurocentric beauty standards was rated the most attractive while the natural hairstyle that did not follow Eurocentric beauty standards was rated the least attractive (Lee, 2017). The afro in this study has more of a "tidy" look while the twist out looks "wilder" and "unkempt." This data could be showing that even though natural hair is being more accepted in society, there is a certain look it must have to be accepted.

The average ratings also showed the hairstyle called long curls was rated the most formal hairstyle while the pixie cut was rated the most professional hairstyle. These are both non-natural

hairstyles. The afro came in third and the twist out came in last for both categories. From these results, one can conclude that natural hairstyles are viewed as casual and not a hairstyle to wear during a wedding and/or work interview. This coincides with what participants of Rosette and Dumas (2017) study stated. Multiple women of color discussed their feelings of uncomfortableness and uncertainty of wearing their natural hair in the workplace because they feared being alienated and treated differently (Rosette & Dumas, 2017). Thus, while the current Natural Hair Movement's main focus is to show that natural hair is just as beautiful as non-natural hair, it does not really focus on how natural hair is viewed in all social settings. Eurocentric beauty standards have made their way into the workplace and women of color continue to suffer because of it.

#### Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. All the participants were gathered through convenience sampling or by convenience at a historically Black university (HBCU). HBCUs are known for celebrating everything regarding African American culture and this includes their hair. It is possible that the students at this college view natural hair more positively than the general population of college students in America. Also, since the participants were gathered by convenience, it is possible that the sample is not a good representation of the population at Xavier University of Louisiana.

Another limitation is that while participants were taking the survey, they could have assumed the true nature of the study. This could have caused them to change their answers and rate all the hairstyles on the same level and/or rate natural hairstyles better than non-natural hairstyles. Since all participants attend an HBCU, they could have felt obligated to rate natural hairstyles more positively and not answer truthfully.

The characteristics of the participants was also a limitation. Most of the participants were African American women who have natural hair. This could have inclined them to rate natural hair more positively since that is the type of hair they have. Also, since the sample was mostly African Americans, this means they most likely follow and see other African Americans who receive positive reactions on their social media. This could have affected the results because the purpose of the study was to gain more insight into how different races and genders view natural hair and if social media has an effect on their ratings. It is possible someone who does not follow a majority of African Americans on social media sites, like this sample, would have given different ratings.

#### Future Research

In future research, there should be a focus on how natural hair is viewed in different social settings, like at school, work, prom, and more. Then it should be compared to how non-natural hair is viewed in those same social settings. In addition, there should be more variety in the participants when it comes to race, gender, and age. Anyone can discriminate against a Black woman for her natural hair. It could help if the participants are gathered from HBCUs and predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Since Black culture is celebrated at HBCUs in a way that is not done at PWIs, the results from each could be compared to see if there is any significance. This should also be done because it is possible that a PWI student's social media is more racially diverse or has more of a White majority compared to an HBCU student's social media. Finally, there should be more hairstyles added to future research. Different natural hairstyles of various lengths and textures should be compared to each other to investigate if some hairstyles will receive more positive ratings.

As previously stated, it appears that for some individuals, social media has greatly helped natural hair be viewed in the same positive light as non-natural hair, which has not been the case in the past. Even though progress has been made, there are still more obstacles to get through because Eurocentric features are still being seen as the standard of beauty. Women of color, especially African American women, should be able to feel comfortable enough to wear their natural hair at work. This is a legitimate issue because several states have passed laws to make it illegal to discriminate against an interviewee and employee because of their natural hair (Ellis & Jones, 2019). In order to make more progress, there is a need for future research on natural hair discrimination because Eurocentric beauty standards are harming the minority community.

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Table 1

*Pearson Correlations between Social Media Frequency and Hairstyle Ratings*

Categories	Natural Hairstyles		Non-Natural Hairstyles	
	Afro	Twist out	Long Curls	Pixie Cut
Beautiful	$r(20)=-.342, p=.140$	$r(20)=-.063, p=.793$	$r(20)=-.283, p=.226$	$r(20)=-.133, p=.575$
Sexy/Attractive	$r(20)=-.342, p=.140$	$r(20)=-.063, p=.793$	$r(20)=-.283, p=.226$	$r(20)=-.183, p=.440$
Classy/Formal	$r(20)=-.342, p=.140$	$r(20)=-.063, p=.793$	$r(20)=-.069, p=.771$	$r(20)=-.007, p=.976$
Professional	$r(20)=-.102, p=.669$	$r(20)=-.283, p=.226$	$r(20)=.154, p=.516$	$r(20)=-.201, p=.397$

*Note.* Social media frequency refers to how frequently participants use different social media sites. Hairstyle ratings refer to the ratings participants gave on each hairstyle based on the category. Natural hairstyles are hairstyles that have not been altered by chemical and/or heat. Non-natural hairstyles that have been altered by chemicals and/or heat.

\* $p < .05$

Table 2

*General Linear Model of Repeated Measures*

Categories	Natural Hairstyles		F(3, 75)	<i>p</i>
	Afro	Twist out		
	95% CI	95% CI		
Beautiful	[4.358, 4.873]	[2.836, 3.933]	8.926	.000*
Sexy/Attractive	[3.804, 4.734]	[2.473, 3.604]	7.116	.000*
Classy/Formal	[3.437, 4.332]	[2.245, 3.447]	12.636	.000*
Professional	[3.457, 4.466]	[2.319, 3.527]	13.411	.000*

*Note.* N=26. CI= Confidence Intervals. Natural hairstyles are hairstyles that have not been altered by chemicals and/or heat.

\* $p < .01$

Table 3

*Average Ratings (M) of Each Hairstyle*

Categories	Natural Hairstyles		Non-natural Hairstyles	
	Afro	Twist out	Long Curls	Pixie Cut
Beautiful	4.62	3.38	3.92	3.96
Sexy/Attractive	4.27	3.04	3.92	3.65
Classy/Formal	3.88	2.85	4.31	4.23
Professional	3.96	2.92	4.35	4.54

*Note.* Natural hairstyles are hairstyles that have not been altered by chemicals and/or heat.

Non-natural hairstyles are hairstyles that have been altered by chemicals and/or heat.

(M)=Mean

Appendix



Natural Hairstyle: Afro



Natural hairstyle: Twist Out



Non-natural Hairstyle: Long Curls





Non-natural Hairstyle: Pixie Cut