

HAIR LOVE: SHOWCASING THE DIVERSITY OF NATURAL HAIR THROUGH
PHOTOGRAPHY AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

A Master's Thesis Project
Presented to

The School of Arts & Sciences

State University of New York
Polytechnic Institute

Utica, NY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the

Master of Science Degree

By

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May 2021

SUNY POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Information Design and Technology.

June 11, 2021

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Abstract

Throughout the years, Natural Hair has been used as a form of expression, self-acceptance, and controversy in the United States of America. The invention of Web 2.0, the rise of social media, blogs, and other web-based platforms has given members of the Natural Hair community a platform to share their personal stories and tips related to natural hair care with others.

This project looked at the effects of Web 2.0 during the second wave of the Natural Hair Movement since the year 2008, showcasing various hairstyles through digital photography and personal narratives of five individuals. Previous studies have shown that men and women with naturally curly hair have faced some form of discrimination based on their hairstyle, causing them to assimilate to societal norms of wearing their hair straight. The goal for this project was to showcase the versatility of natural hair through digital photography and personal narratives as a form of storytelling, and sharing how social media and other outlets across the web have impacted the individual's decision to wear their hair in its natural state or how it has helped them in their natural hair journey.

Photos of five different people of various cultural backgrounds, hair textures, and lifestyles were taken and questions based on their Natural Hair journey were asked. With the collection of photographs and narratives, a Capstone portfolio section of my media website was created for public viewing. This platform can be updated as photos of more individuals with natural hair at local events and expos in the future are taken.

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Project Link

<http://www.joannaemedia.com/portfolio-category/capstone/>

Research Questions

The research questions that individuals were asked to answer in their personal narratives were the following:

- How long have you been natural?
- What made you decide to wear your hair in its natural state?
- What are some challenges you've faced in your personal natural hair journey?
- Have you ever received discrimination based on your hair?
- Where do you get inspiration for different hairstyles?
- Do you see enough representation of Natural Hair in media advertising?
- What do you love about your natural hair? Anything you dislike?
- Is there anything else you would like to add in the subject of the way you use web-based tools in relation to your Natural Hair?

What is Natural Hair?

Natural Hair is defined as hair that is has not been altered by chemicals such as a texturizer or hair relaxer. Batural Black hair usually ranges from wavy to kinky-coily, with a wide range of variation between the two. (Sandeem). Popular natural hairstyles amongst men and women with natural hair include twists, various forms of braids with and without extensions including cornrows and box braids, an afro, and locs.

A Brief History of Black Hair in America

Traditionally in West African culture, afro-textured natural hair was used as a form of identity whether it be wealth or social status in the community. (Byrd & Tharps, 2014, p. 2). Different hairstyles were worn as a form of celebration of life, death, and even war. When the slave trade began in the 16th century, Europeans shaved the heads of the enslaved Africans, mainly for sanitary purposes, but ultimately stripping them of their identity and culture. (Johnson, T.A., and Bankhead, T., 2014, p.87). On plantations, slaves could not groom themselves the way they were used to so instead of using oils, combs, beads, and shells to create various hairstyles, they used animal shears, sheep carding tools to cut and detangle their hair. Men wore their heads shaved with hats while the women wore head rags as protection from the sun and insects in the fields. In-house slaves wore wigs and hairstyles to display a neat and tidy appearance. (Byrd & Tharps, 2014, p. 12 & 13). In the French colony of New Orleans, the Tignon Law was passed which prohibited Black and Creole women whether they were enslaved or not from wearing their hair uncovered.

The Rise of the Black Haircare Industry

With the abolishment of slavery in the United States, Black men and women began wearing hairstyles as a form of assimilation. (Drumond, 2020, p. 13) Oil-based products such as bacon grease, butter, and, other homemade concoctions were used to straighten, curl, and keep hair in place. This resulted in the creation of hair products for Black men and women which led to the Black haircare industry being worth millions (Henderson, 2015). Sarah Breedlove, known to many as Madame CJ Walker became the first Black woman millionaire in America by selling her homemade hair products formulated for Black women with natural hair. Her sales model which involved sales agents selling products to their peers and other prospective customers were also adapted by beauty brands such as Avon and Mary Kay.

Black Hair in Politics and the Workplace

It wasn't until the Black is Beautiful Movement when activists such as Angela Davis and members of the Black Panther Party wore their hair in afros as a form of pride and political protest. (Gabbara, 2017). Even though the political aspect of the Black is Beautiful Movement died down in the mid-'70s, Black men and women continued to wear their natural hair braids, cornrows, twists, and locs. As these hairstyles became popular in the 1980s and '90s amongst celebrities, Black women were stigmatized and penalized for wearing braids or non-straight hairstyles in the workplace, as they were seen as unprofessional and unkempt. (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019). Studies have also shown that Black women with natural hairstyles were perceived to be less professional,

less competent, and less likely to be recommended for a job interview than Black women with straightened hairstyles and White women with either curly or straight hairstyles.

Web 2.0 in the Natural Hair Movement of the 2000s

Tim O'Reilly defines Web 2.0 as “the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an "architecture of participation," and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences.” A term coined by Darcy DiNucci and popularized by Tim O'Reilly, Web 2.0 has allowed platforms such as Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, forums, and blogs to foster communities of users with similar interests through user-generated content and digital storytelling.

The second wave of the Natural Hair Movement that began in 2008 is “...about Black women across social classes making decisions to promote their health and well-being.” (Noorwood, 2018). These online communities have helped men and women learn about their natural hair, products to use, hairstyles to try, and looking for hair salons that cater to natural hair. (Mbunyuza-Memani. 2019). Knowledge of haircare and the creation of these communities on the web has caused the development of events and expos, and pop-up shops such as the World Natural Hair Show in Atlanta Georgia, CurlFest in New York City, The Natural Hair Expo in New Orleans, Louisiana which all celebrate the

diversity of Natural Hair through education, and interactive workshops. Brands like Dove, a Unilever company, and members of the Natural Hair Community have also created initiatives in support of the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) and New York State's Assembly Bill 07797 which are set in place to prohibit discrimination of individuals based on their hair texture.

Incorporating Photography with Storytelling

For the past eight years, I have picked up photography as a hobby during my travels, for various events, and being an influencer on social media. With oral language, images have always been used along with storytelling whether it be sharing information or book illustrations to compliment or shed light on the text. (Schachtner,2020). Similar to the platform Humans of New York which started as a Photoblog and book with street portraits and interviews collected on the streets of New York City (Sathwik) and seeing there was a void in a platform sharing men and women with natural hair sharing their stories outside their personal platforms, I decided to do a project, starting with five individuals of various age groups, backgrounds, hair types, and personal lifestyles to share their experiences as it relates to their natural hair journey.

Uses and Gratifications and Media Dependency Theories

The rise of Social Media and other web-based platforms has played a huge role in individuals learning how to take care of their naturally curly hair as they transitioned from chemical relaxers and continuous hair straightening. During the second wave of the Natural Hair Movement that started in 2008, popular natural hair blogs, YouTube

Channels, and other social media communities from individuals such as CurlyNikki, Naptural85, Mahogany Curls, Afrobella, and BlakIzBeautiful were created to share their personal experiences with Natural Hair. Sites like CurlyNikki, Naturally Curly, and Black Girl Long Hair expanded by encouraging the readers to share their personal stories through blog interviews and social forums. As Social Media platforms like Instagram became more popular, these Natural Hair platforms used this medium to showcase the versatility of natural hairstyles for work, formal occasions, and everyday life by featuring men, women, and children in photos and videos.

The uses and gratifications theory suggests that “people’s needs influence what media they would choose, how they use certain media and what gratifications the media give them.” (Wikibooks). This concept can be applied to Social Media and other web-based platforms as individuals in the Natural Hair Community used these mediums as a means of self-acceptance and identity.

The media dependency theory suggests “The audience learning from the real-life is limited, so they can use media to get more information to fulfill their needs.” (Communication Theory). Due to the lack of information being shared about natural haircare, individuals looked to these web-based platforms. The growth of these platforms helped form communities and friendships beyond the web through events and meetups.

Hypothesis

The main question I was interested in finding was the reason why someone would choose wearing their hair in its natural state. I also was interested in finding out if they have personally received a form of criticism or discrimination based on their curl pattern

or hairstyle and if they feel if they feel there is enough representation of natural hair in mainstream media. Based on the theoretical perspectives related to natural hair the following hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Participants decided to go natural because it is more accepted in the workplace and in society.

Hypothesis 2: Participants believe there isn't much representation of natural hair in mainstream media.

Hypothesis 3: Participants have received some form of discrimination or criticism based on their hairstyle or curl pattern/texture.

Methodology

This study was qualitative in the form of question interviews with five individuals in the Natural Hair Community. Prior research has shown that throughout the years, men and women have received negative feedback and sometimes discrimination from their peers, potential employers, and other forms of social settings based on their natural hair. The purpose of this project was to question these individuals about these claims, share their personal narrative as it relates to their Natural Hair journey, and incorporate it with digital photography.

Initial Research

As I transitioned from a relaxer to wear my hair in its natural state in 2011-2012, I looked to platforms such as YouTube and blogs related to natural hair due to the lack of information being available for proper hair maintenance, using specific products, and hairstyles for work and other occasions. I noticed that popular sites like Black Girl Long Hair, Naturally Curly, and Curly Nikki expanded their platforms through forums and asked women questions related to their natural hair journey in the form of blog interviews to build both awareness and authority to their platforms. Questions ranged from why they chose to wear their hair in its natural state to their personal regimen for healthy hair. As I became a micro-influencer during 2014 and 2018, I've seen the platforms mentioned and others in the natural hair space grow through social media by featuring men, women, and children with various natural hairstyles, but without the personal narratives attached. I searched through Instagram for something similar through hashtags but didn't see a platform centered around sharing stories about natural hair outside of a user's personal platform. This brought the idea of possibly creating a platform using original photography or user-generated content by incorporating it with the individual's personal narratives surrounding the subject of natural hair.

Choosing Participants

The five participants chosen were individuals I have personally interacted with through work, school, or other social settings. To limit social interaction, I sent the interview questions via email and they provided a narrative. I then submitted each narrative to the portfolio section of my media website. I organized a date to meet the individuals for a photo session where I took several headshots and streetstyle photos. Due

to time restraints and the participant's availability, I also used photos I've personally taken on previous occasions and used the narrative responses sent via email along with the photos.

Photo Selections

A combination of street style portrait and headshot photos were taken of the individuals in different environments during each session with my Sony a6000 and various lenses in RAW + JPEG. A total of 2-3 images of each individual were selected based on clarity and composition before editing them in Adobe Lightroom. After editing the RAW images, I uploaded them to the portfolio section of my media website along with their personal narratives.

Choosing a Platform

Prior to starting this project, I already had a domain that I wanted to use to start building my photography portfolio. Instead of creating the website myself, I used WordPress which is a Content Management System mainly used for but not limited to blogs, social forums, online stores, and more. Although there are many free themes available for WordPress, I purchased a theme from Themeforest called Flora which can be used several ways. This theme had a portfolio template that worked well with the photos I had in mind to use for this project and other photos I've taken through my travels, leisure, and working as a digital content creator.

Results

Hypothesis 1:

I predicted that participants decided to go natural because it is more accepted in the workplace and in society now.

As a result I found out that Participants did not consider being accepted as a reason to start or continue wearing their hair in its natural state. Three out of five participants (60%) stated they decided to wear their hair in its natural state because they wanted a change. One participant (20%) went natural to gain more confidence. Two participants (40%) stated their reason for going natural was based on the way their hair reacted to chemical relaxers like breakage and other forms of damage. One participant (20%) looked into the health risks of using chemical relaxers before making the decision to wear their hair in its natural state.

Hypothesis 2:

Participants believe there isn't much representation of natural hair in mainstream media.

All participants mentioned not seeing many people to look up to with natural hair growing up and there not being many choices of hairstyles or products that worked with their hair's porosity or texture. Four out of the five participants (80%) expressed that there is not enough representation of natural hair being shown in mainstream media and wishes there were. If any representation of men, women, or children, is shown, it is someone of a mixed race, with a looser curl pattern and/or lighter skin tone.

Hypothesis 3:

Participants have received some form of discrimination or criticism based on their hairstyle or curl pattern/texture.

Only one participant mentioned receiving a form of criticism based on their curl pattern and this was from a close family member. All other participants stated that they often receive more compliments about their natural hair than criticism or discrimination from strangers and peers.

After conducting interviews, I was surprised that there were more similarities than differences between each individual related to the struggles and dislikes about their hair even though they wore their hair in different styles. All of the participants (100%) said that the time it takes to maintain natural hair is their biggest struggle. All except one participant (80%) used some form of Web 2.0 medium such as search engines across the web or platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube, and Natural Hair blogs to learn about how to take care of their hair and/or get inspiration of wearing hairstyles for work, everyday life, and special occasions.

Conclusion

Based on the readings and interviews, this project presented a number of findings. Unlike previous years, the the Natural Hair movement of today is a personal choice from each individual. Overall, it was found that mediums across the web such as blogs, Instagram, and YouTube played a major role in the decision making process from the

majority of the participants. With the large reception of video on social media, mediums like Instagram and YouTube will continue to grow as users will look for demos of different hairstyles and reviews for different natural hair products.

By looking into the Uses and Gratification Theory and Media Dependency Theory, a connection can be made between the type of information being shared across the Internet, and the growth of the Natural Hair Community. As more individuals share their stories, images, and videos on the web, more sub-communities are built based on hair texture or curl pattern, location, types of hairstyles, and more.

Findings from this project based on interviews also offer insights based on representation in mainstream media. All of the women interviewed felt there is not enough representation of natural hair in mainstream media. This project suggests that decision-makers in advertising and marketing should do more research in recruiting other men, women, and children with natural hair in promotions and advertisements. With the broad variety of hair textures and skin tones, there should be more than a handful of people being showcased in mediums such as magazines, social media, and other forms of commercial advertising.

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