Contribution of Social Media in Shaping Self-Perceptions:
A Case of Black Women

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to explore how social media representations of Black women's hair shapes their sense of identity, self-concept and hair care practices.

Methodology: A qualitative cross-sectional approach was employed, with a sample size of five Black women in South Africa between the ages of 20 to 29 years old. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online with research participants that were purposively selected from social media platforms Twitter and Instagram. The use of these platforms to select participants also offered convenience to the researcher as these participants were readily available because they are already active in social media. Thematic analysis was used in data analysis while the Social Identity Theory (SIT) was utilised as the theoretical framework to interpret the findings.

Findings: Four themes were used to cluster the findings, namely self-categorization, social identification, perceived positive social identity and self-esteem restoration. The findings highlighted the role of social media in perpetuating the stereotypes which is traced to the slavery; and then highlight how the social media is used to reverse the systematic oppression of the Black women based on their hair. They also revealed that positive representations of Black hair on social media creates an attitude of self-acceptance and empowerment among Black women. Similarly, social media provides a space for Black women to connect, discuss their hair and share hair care tips, fostering a sense of belonging within the community. However, this study identified a gap in representation, as there tends to be an overrepresentation of one specific hair texture, leaving some Black women with limited or no representation, mainly those wearing dreadlocks.

Unique Contribution to the theory, practice, and policy: The research makes a unique contribution by highlighting the importance of diverse representation in South African advertisements and social media marketing for hair products, as Black women's hair textures and journeys are not a monolith. The findings concomitantly highlight the role of social media celebrities and/or social media influencers in the social media regarding the matter under investigation from the perspective of South African women. The study also noted the need for awareness and education about the cultural and historical significance of Black hair to reduce cultural appropriation. The findings further highlight the human rights element regarding the discrimination faced by Black women due to their hair texture, this knowledge may contribute to creating inclusivity in both society and social media spaces.

Keywords: *Social Media, Self-Identification Theory, Black Women, Inclusivity, Self-Concept*

1. INTRODUCTION

Black women have faced discrimination based on their hair texture dating back to the colonial era (Johson & Bankhead, 2014). According to colonial ideology, curly or kinky African hair was deemed as ugly and primitive. The effects of colonialism have been carried through to the modern age, as Black women's hair has continued to be labelled as ugly and unprofessional (Thomas, 2013). For example, up until 2019, a Google images search of "unprofessional hairstyles for work" produced images of Black women with natural hairstyles, however, a search for "professional hairstyles for work" produced images of White women with straight hair (Donohoo & Smith, 2019). This discovery suggests social media perceives that straight hair is more acceptable than natural curly hair which is prevalent among indigenous Black women in South Africa. It further alludes that social media perpetuates the discrimination and stereotypes against indigenous Black women's hair.

As a result of the discrimination and bias faced, Black women have continuously attempted to assimilate to Western beauty standards by straightening their hair (Drumond, 2020). The birth of the "natural hair movement" in the 1960s empowered Black women to embrace their natural hair, however, efforts to straighten natural hair still remained rife as the discrimination of natural hair is a systematic issue (Drumond, 2020). In this new digital age, social media has played a significant role in the modern natural hair movement through the depiction of positive images of Black women with natural hair. Social media has played a pivotal role in promoting inclusivity and redefining beauty standards, yet negative discourses and mentalities about Black women's hair have continued to persist (Moloko, 2020), thus there exists a need to explore the effect that social media has on Black women's perceptions regarding their hair.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The media has social significance because it provides an image of the world and people are affected by these images (Mapokgole, 2019). Social media has played a role in exposing Black women to various discourses regarding their natural hair (Moloko, 2020). Although efforts have been made to promote the acceptance of Black hair, it remains scrutinised (Moloko, 2020). Hair discrimination affects Black woman in different areas of their lives, such as school, work and the media (Henning et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a lack or representation of Black women with natural hair in the media, and a lack of positive imagery (Mbilishaka & Clemons, 2020). Black women are particularly vulnerable as they face oppression based on their gender, class and race (Mapokgole, 2019), therefore efforts to represent them accurately should be prioritised.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Theoretical Review

Black hair remains a crucial topic in the Black community, for many Black women and girls, hair is an important part of their identity (Matjila, 2020). Black hair has always carried symbolism and meaning depending on the particular society and culture the individual is from. In the past, Africans used their hair to symbolise age, religion, social rank, marital status and other status symbols

(Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Furthermore, Johnson and Bankhead (2014) posit that during African enslavement, African people were forcibly removed from their homelands and sold to some Western countries, and this contributed to the imposition of European beauty standards onto African people. Tightly coiled hair was frowned upon by the Western society, and pin straight European hair was considered to be the most attractive and respectable hair type (Drumond, 2020). Furthermore, slaves that were shipped to Europe and America had their hair shaved to completely rid them of their culture and to erase their African identity (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014).

The natural hair of Black people has been subjected to various racist classifications and experiences. A notable example is the work of Peter A. Browne, a scientist who claimed that Africans and White people came from different species due to their distinct skin colour and hair texture (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016). Browne proposed that White people had "real" hair on their heads, while Africans had "wool" on theirs (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016). The claim had profound consequences as slaves had to wear rags on their heads to conceal their "unruly" hair or straightening it with heat to conform to Eurocentric standards of acceptability (Ellis-Hervey et al.,2016). During slavery Sundays were designated as a day off slaves to gather and braid one another's hair. They had to ensure that they keep it intact for the rest of the week so that they would not offend White people. The slaves were required to use bacon grease and butter as hair conditioners and cleansers because their combs and herbal treatments had been left in Africa (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016).

Even after the abolition of slavery, the topic of Black hair remained a highly politicized topic, both within the United States of America and internationally (Jacobs & Kelemi, 2020). In South Africa, Black women were not exempt from the pressures of European beauty standards. During the apartheid era, straight hair was considered to be the epitome of "good hair" while "bad hair" was associated with people of colour; this perpetuated the desire among Black people to use hair relaxers to straighten their hair (Jacobs & Kelemi, 2020).

Furthermore, the Population Registration Act of 1950 introduced the pencil test as a means of racial classification and segregation in South Africa (Alubafi et al, 2018). Alubafi et al (2018) elaborate that this particular test involved pushing a pencil into a person's hair and the ease in which it would slip out would aid in determining whether the person could be classified as White or non-white. Those who failed the pencil test would be deprived of white privileges (Alubafi et al., 2018). In addition to this, people with dreadlocks or other natural hair types, found it difficult to find employment because they were perceived to be associated with resistance movements for Black independence (Thomas, 2013).

In democratic South Africa, rules such as the pencil test no longer apply, however, the ideology that elevates whiteness still persists (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019). Hair practices that promote straight hair still persist and Black women are still subjected to discrimination because of their hair texture (Moloko, 2020). For instance, in 2020 there was a controversial Clicks and TRESemme marketing campaign that depicted Black African natural hair in a racially offensive manner. The advertisement portrayed African natural hair as being 'frizzy and dull' and 'dry and damaged',

while the image of straight Eurocentric hair was labelled as 'normal hair' and described as 'fine and flat' (Moloko, 2020).

Although wearing straight hair comes with social acceptance, there are some drawbacks. The processes used to straighten Black hair may damage hair follicles, burn the skin, and cause hair loss in extreme cases (Donahoo & Smith, 2019). Moreover, even in the absence of adverse physical consequences, attempts to conform to White beauty standards can negatively affect how Black women perceive their hair and their overall self-identity. Hair straightening can be a constant reminder that mainstream society does not appreciate or accept Black women for who they are (Nichols et al., 2015). On the other hand, Black women who embrace their natural hair are often empowered; having the courage to accept the hair growing out of their scalp improves mental or spiritual well-being (Nichols et al., 2015).

The emergence and growth of social networking sites have provided Black women platforms that enable them to join online communities that offer them helpful information about hair care practices. Additionally, they use these platforms to share their experiences and challenge societal norms online (Gill, 2015). In recent years, social media has rapidly become a powerful platform in which individuals express their opinions about the world, occasionally Black women's hair happens to be a topic of discussion on some social media platforms (Moloko, 2020). Warped perceptions on Black hair have an effect on Black women's self-concept, sense of identity and hair care practices, however, as social networking sites continue to expand, they begin to feature more Black hair care online communities for women (Moloko, 2020).

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted within the framework of the Social Identity Theory, which posits that an individual's group membership forms an integral part of their identity (Tajfel, 1979). Being part of a particular group or groups also informs an individual's feelings about themselves (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019), thereby creating a social identity. Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which is derived from knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value or emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1979). In this regard, the social identity under investigation is Black women. According to the Social Identity Theory, individuals engage comparisons between their social group and other groups to establish a sense of superiority or inferiority (Harwood, 2020). An individual may be proud to be a part of their social group, conversely, they may feel ashamed and may attempt to change (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

3.3 Conceptual Framework

3.3.1 Media on shaping perceptions

As a social identity group, Black South African women are affected by social media. Social media refers to internet-based platforms and applications that individuals or groups use to create and share content, of which these platforms enable people to interact with one another online (Bosch, 2020).

This study is specifically focused on social networking sites such as Instagram and TikTok; blog sites such as Twitter; and video sharing sites such as YouTube.

Social media is used for a variety of reasons such as entertainment, leisure, communication, seeking information, expressing opinions, sharing information and knowledge about others (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Its surge in popularity has catalysed the emergence and spread of social media influencers, who influence society in social aspects as well (Cheah, Koay & Lim, 2024). Consequently, it tends to reflect and influence social norms, among other things (Budree et al., 2019). In some ways, it is one of the mechanisms that unwittingly contributes to the entrenchment of the systems of oppression that perpetuate the prejudicial treatment of Black people based on the appearance of their hair (Mbilishaka et al., 2020).

While not established with a malicious intent, the internet has unwittingly contributed to the pervasion of malevolent perceptions in society. Its history could be traced to 1969 when the United States Department of Defense for the purpose internal telephone connectivity with four computers (Rajaraman, 2022). It has since evolved tremendously to become a platform to connect people online, including both formal and social interactions across the globe (Rajaraman, 2022). Thus, it is also used by social media. Social media is multifaceted; it can be in the form of Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as, Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+, blogs sites such as Twitter, collaborative projects, video-sharing communities like YouTube, virtual game worlds and instant messaging (Duffet & Wakeham, 2016). While not designed with a malevolent objective, some users occasionally utilize these platforms as tools of othering Africans due to their hair's texture, length and colour (Mbilishaka et al., 2020).

Social media usage continues to grow in South Africa, positioning it as one of the countries with the most social networking users on the continent of Africa, of which majority its users are between the ages of 20 and 29 (Budree et al., 2019). It is noteworthy that the South African youth utilize social media platforms to promote various activist movements to create awareness and receive support (Mutsvairo, 2016). Matjila (2020) argues that with regards to the natural hair movement in South Africa, the use of social media for activism was demonstrated in August of 2016. This was heightened when a protest broke out at Pretoria Girl's High as a result of the strict dress code policy that discriminated against Black learners' hair, after Black learners were subjected to racist statements about their hair at school (Matjila, 2020).

Literature revealed a link between internalizing social media beauty standards and discontent with one's appearance (Ando et al., 2021, Fardouly et al., 2015), thus this study set out to understand how social media representations of Black women's hair shapes their sense of identity, self-concept and hair care practices. By exploring the dominant perceptions of Black women's hair on social media, as well as the factors that shape the perceptions surrounding Black hair, this study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences that Black women have regarding their hair in relation to social media. In addition, this research intended to inform efforts to increase more positive and diverse representations of Black women's hair on social media and empower Black

women to embrace their hair and challenge the dominant beauty standards. Additionally, this study sought to contribute to South African literature regarding similar topics.

3.3.2   Efforts to counter stereotypes on Black hair

The Natural Hair Movement has played a crucial role in empowering Black women to embrace their natural hair. Its origins can be traced back to the 1960s when the Black Panther Party was established in the United States of America. The Black Panther Party had been established to protect African Americans from police brutality (Street, 2019). Concomitant to this goal, the movement contributed to the proliferation of the resurgence of the love of and pride in African hair (Ellington & Underwood, 2022). During this period, wearing an afro hairstyle gained popularity and became common choice among Black people, lasting until the 1990s. Many notable public figures such as Lauryn Hill, Angela Davis and Erykah Badu wore the afro hairstyle during the natural hair movement. In contemporary time, mainstream celebrities such as Solange Knowles and Lupita Nyong'o also wear their hair in an afro hairstyle. Celebrities who choose to wear their natural hair are choosing to recreate a social norm for Black beauty, and paving a way for people to realise that Black hair is acceptable in the entertainment industry and in other social spheres (Drumond, 2020). The afro hairstyle signified political changes that were not evident before the 1960s. This change caused a significant adjustment in socio-cultural and sociopolitical viewpoints (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016). Hairstyles evolved into a political statement affiliated to the Black community (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014).

In South Africa Steve Biko coined the Black Conscious Movement (BCM) to elevate the heroes of African history and promote African heritage, in turn, tearing down the notion that Africa is a dark continent (Biko, 1971). The BCM played a role in challenging Eurocentric societal norms and focussed on the principles of self-worth and pride in blackness (Rabaka, 2020). According to Biko (2002), colonisation was not only about land seizure, but it also contributed to creating an ideology of inferiority to the colonized, the ideology of inferiority is also applied to Black hair. During the early days of the BCM, many Black women desired to be more like white women, they attempted to achieve the look through the use of skin lightening creams and wearing wigs (Kgatla, 2018). However, the BCM advocated for the embrace of natural African hairstyles and rejecting the belief that Eurocentric beauty standards are superior (Hadfield, 2017). During this time, wearing natural hair was seen as one of the multiple ways to reclaim African identity and resist Eurocentric ideals (Kgatla, 2018).

In addition to the above-mentioned efforts, the Natural Hair Movement emerged among Black women on Social Media platform to encourage them to go natural. "Natural" is a colloquial expression referencing hair that has not been chemically treated to alter the natural curl pattern (Langat, 2022). The rise of social media has also aided in the amplification of the natural hair movement. As a result of growing social media platforms, Black women are able to use social media for reasons other than leisure or enjoyment. They have the opportunity to create and follow natural hair pages. The natural hair community has an evident presence within the realm of social media as it does in real life (Drumond, 2020) There is an increasing number of Black women who have accepted their natural hair, and this has led to creation of more natural hair pages. More Black

women feel encouraged to follow and engage with hashtags such as #teamnatural (Drumond, 2020).

In South Africa, the natural hair movement is rapidly growing amongst the youngest generations (Millennials and Generation z), this is in response to the global trend to stop using chemical hair straighteners altogether and begin embracing and supporting the growth of natural hair (Moloko, 2020) The natural hair movement is not only embraced by the general public in South Africa, but celebrities have also begun to embrace their natural hair (Madlela, 2018). A notable example would be the former Miss South Africa 2019, Zozibini Tunzi, who was applauded and praised in international news for wearing her natural hairstyle. The social media hype surrounding a celebrity or public figure wearing natural hairstyle can encourage a strong message about the social acceptance of natural hair to consumers and hair care companies. It is estimated that about 76,4% of social media users were inspired by Zozibini Tunzi; she had indirectly become a natural hair online influencer (Moloko, 2020).

3.3.3 Influence of social media on consumer awareness

Social media has actively played a role in influencing and increasing consumer awareness, interest and preference towards African natural hair in South Africa, especially for Millennials and Generation Z. Social media vloggers and influencers have played a pivotal role in this as they are followed by 18- to 35-year-old South African consumers (Moloko, 2020). Aided by the invention of mobile electronic devices, social media communication and marketing has become an attractive and prevalent way of creating consumer awareness. Technology and its platforms offer a virtual space where natural hair YouTubers inform women about the right products to use for their particular hair texture; share their hair stories and how they came to accept their natural hair; thus, achieving psychological well-being (Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019).

Motseki and Oyedemi (2017) also state that social media influencers and celebrities play a big role in informing beauty trends. Social media has made interacting with celebrities to become a more personal experience as people no longer see them in mass media only (Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017). In recent years, celebrities have the opportunity to dictate how they present themselves in media, because of social media. Additionally, celebrities' perspectives of beautiful hair seem to appeal to their social media followers (Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017). Celebrity culture has a role in shaping the public's desires and perceptions of ideal beauty because celebrities serve as models in society; in South Africa, beauty ideals are normally conveyed through celebrity culture (Motseki, 2019).

Social media has also created its alternative celebrities in a form of social media celebrities (SMCs) that also influence society virtually. Nouri (2018) expounds that these celebrities emerge from social media through their ability to create social media communities. SMCs attract followers in the social media platforms due to their active efforts to create content, which entails stories, videos and pictures (Wahab et al. 2022). Likewise, due to their huge following their followers tend to perceive them as sincere and trustworthy than the traditional celebrities (Wahab et al. 2022). Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) enlighten that in some instances SCMs or social media influencers include users who create accounts using fake identities to incite hate speech and racism, inclusive of Blacks vs Whites hair. Consequently, social media partly contributes to the

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perpetuation of structural oppression by providing a platform that is abused through such tendencies (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021).

4. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study adhered to an interpretivist paradigm and phenomenology using qualitative methods for data collection, analysis and interpretation. This approach was best suited for this study as it aimed to explore in-depth life experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The interpretivist paradigm advances that understanding and generating knowledge is employed through qualitative methods (Kekeya, 2019). Through the analysis of the data collected, the researcher can explain, express and attempt to view the phenomenon from the participant's perspective in order to reconstruct the text's intended meaning (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

Phenomenology was equally useful in this study as it enabled the study to capture, as closely as possible, the way the phenomenon is experienced by people who participated in it (Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzalez 2020). The qualitative methods used in this study enriched the findings by allowing participants to express themselves in ways that made the research to extract the reasons behind observed patterns (Busetto et al., 2020). In that way the study produced in-depth and illustrative information to help one understands the various perspectives of the problem under analysis (Queirós et al., 2017).

The target population was Black women between the ages of 20 to 29 years old as many social media users in South Africa fall within this age category (Budree et al., 2019). The study used of purposive sampling to select six participants who were active in social media, accessible and able to communicate in English. This sampling method was useful in that it enabled the researcher to gather data from participants that were knowledgeable in the use of social media (Anney, 2014). This sample size was adequate for qualitative research as sample size in interpretive studies is influenced by factors like data saturation which may be reached with as little as five research participants (Creswell, 2014, Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Importantly, Mason (2010) argues that qualitative research is not concerned about frequency of responses or occurrences but the depth of the experience. Consistent with selected qualitative study approach, the study utilised semi-structured interviews to collect data which enabled the participants to use their own words to explain how they experience and interpret the phenomenon under investigation (Knott, Rao, Summers & Teeger, 2022). The interviews were conducted remotely using audio-video platforms to enable a virtual face-to-face interview experience (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

Thematic analysis was applied data analysis and it started immediately during transcription of the first interview as it is common practice in interpretive studies (Azungah, 2018). Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to infer meaning about participants' experiences through the use of a specific theoretical framework (Lochmiller, 2021).

5. FINDINGS

This paper organizes the findings using a hybrid of themes emanating from the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and concepts from literature review. This implies that in its discussion of the findings, the paper presents empirical evidence through the lens of existing theoretical concepts. While social

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identity is the result of the processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Worley, 2021), empirical data predominantly elevated self categorization, social identification, perceived positive identity and self-esteem restoration. Thus, they have been adopted as key themes through which the findings should be organized.

5.1 Self categorization

Social categorisation is the tendency for individuals to categorize themselves and others into various social groups (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). This process helps to organize the social world and provides individuals with a framework of self-reference, enabling them to understand their place in society (Worley, 2021). Sometimes, social categorisation may lead to negative stereotypes against a particular group (Liberman et al., 2017).

In the case of Black women, their hair has been commonly classified as ugly and unruly, and these negative perceptions have persisted even in the era of social media (Donohoo & Smith, 2019). As social media sites begin to grow, more online communities for Black women begin to emerge (Moloko, 2020). These communities help to create a social identity for Black women with regards to their hair. the Social Identity theory posits that when an individual is exposed to their social group in the media, their group becomes more salient to them, in essence, they become more aware of this identity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). As Black women became more salient of their hair types, a self-categorisation process has taken place within the Black hair community. This has resulted in the division of different hair textures into categories such as, relaxed hair, afro textured hair and so on.

The participants in the study highlighted the negative aspects of self-categorisation, within the Black women's community, particularly regarding hair textures. Self-categorization can lead to in-group favouritism, where individuals promote their own group while disregarding out-groups (Hunter et al., 2017). One participant said:

"within your Black community there is also segregation that exists, that usually stipulates your category based on having a certain type of hair...."

As a result of hair segregation, women with finer natural hair may feel a lack of belonging compared to those with thicker 4C hair. The participant further emphasized that hair segregation extends beyond just the natural hair community as she said:

"but like also now even among the wigs and weaves community there is segregation, because like now there isn't those normal wigs that we used to wear back in the 2000s, you know. People want the ones with the frontals. People like the human hair ones, and I think those are the pricey ones, you know. So, it's just everywhere there's just something that comes up that kind of prevents people who want to be like the Black 'elite' people from being...um elite."

The above words illustrate that embedded in the self-categorisation is the status symbol attached to the category of hair that the person chooses to wear. Likewise, every Black hair community establishes certain standards that individuals are expected to adhere to:

"When I was trying to grow my afro, I did feel like there was a certain way in which you had to take care of your afro..."

5.2 Social identification

Another aspect of the SIT is social identification, which occurs when individuals identify with a group. In these groups, individuals adopt aspects of the behaviours and norms of the group, culminating in a sense of solidarity, satisfaction, and in-group homogeneity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Black women who have embarked on their natural hair journey may begin to take part in hair care practices such as "wash day", aligning themselves with the group's norms and behaviours. Abiding to group norms creates a sense of belonging.

According to the SIT, some groups have a higher social status and experience more respect than others (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). This is seen as 4C hair seems to be favoured. One participant stated:

"within your Black community there is also segregation that exists based on certain type of hair, you know".

Another proceeded to say:

"If you are supposed to have an afro, your afro needs to be [exquisite, using a sign language], we all know it, it needs to be big, it needs to be voluminous, it needs to be full. That is the perception we have been led to believe in regard to an afro…".

These responses elucidate the prevalence of self-identification among Black women based on their hair style choices. This self-identification also illustrates that this category is not homogeneous but also have sub-cultures that they promote through social media (Lim, 2022). Similarly, the participants revealed that there is a hierarchy within the Black community. Black women who do not have the "ideal" afro are often sidelined. The participants shared the belief that individuals representing Black hair on social media should be honest about the challenges and imperfections they may encounter:

"I think it definitely needs to take a turn of showcasing it the way it is. If you have very brittle dry hair, if you have long voluptuous hair, if you have thin hair, if you have a hairline that is a little bit back, a little bit forward, represent it as it is".

5.3 Perceived positive social identity

According to social identity theory, individuals strive for a positive social identity, and may take actions to improve the status of their social group or leave it all together if it is not providing a positive self-esteem. Individuals belonging to low status social groups attempt to improve the social standard of their group in different ways. This could be through "collective action", which involves working together as a group to improve the social status of the group (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Black women have often faced discrimination and bias due to their hair, leading them to constantly attempting to conform to Western beauty standards by straightening (Drumond, 2020). This could be seen as a form of collective action. One participant in the interview recalls her mother relaxing her hair to appear more presentable for school, instilling the notion that straight hair is necessary to look good. Negative beliefs about natural hair reflect how Black women dealt with their own children's hair (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019)

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Similarly, another participant shared her experience of taking swimming as an extracurricular activity in school, where she noticed that her relaxed hair would become puffy due to the water. She recalls her mother being strict about maintaining her straight relaxed hair when she said:

"I couldn't maintain that it was always puffy, it was never flat, and my mom would always shout like "I just relaxed your hair! What's going on?"

The perceived positive social identity based on the hair type purports that straight flat hair resembles neatness, contrary to Black hair that is perceived as untidy (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019). Another method that is utilised to obtain a positive social identity includes being "socially creative" and changing the comparison group (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Comparison occurs when a group compares themselves to other groups (Worley, 2021). In the past, Black women lacked representation and positive imagery of natural hair in the media (Mbilishaka & Clemons, 2020), which forced them to compare themselves to other groups. However, with the rise of social media pages dedicated to addressing Black hair issues, Black women have started to shift their focus inward and look within their group. This has allowed them to learn about the beauty and uniqueness of their own hair, leading them to an improved social identity and personal identity. The research participants expressed feeling validated and acknowledged when they encountered individuals representing their hair texture on social media.

5.4 Self-esteem restoration

While the social media has been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes, this study also revealed its contribution to restoring the Black women's self-esteem through platforms created by self-described natural hair community in the twenty-first century (Gill, 2015). Members of the natural hair community help to restore the self-esteem of Black women by among others use social media to deliberately communicate ideas and issues that relate to their goal (Drumond, 2020). This potentially have a contribution in creating a positive social identity, as Scheepers and Ellemers, (2019) argue that having a positive social identity has a positive impact on an individual's self-esteem. This was confirmed by field data collected in this study. The participants reported that as the presence of social media pages about natural hair emerged, they have access to content that make them feel less insecure about their hair and began embracing it. One of the participants had this to say:

"I genuinely have so much pride in being Black because when I see the hair we have, you know, the way we style it because, I don't think people really realise how much intricate details Black people put into their hair, you know. It's the beading, it's the patchwork sometimes we use hairpiece, sometimes we use our own hair, it's the incorporation of so many things and makes me feel so much pride, because that's us That's our creativity, that is us showcasing who we are…"

Finally, the existence of social media pages dedicated to Black hair care has also proven to bring a sense of solidarity. Participants felt helped by receiving guidance from other women through YouTube tutorials. Examples of popular hair YouTubers in South Africa include Sinovuyo Mondliwa and Yolz Channel (Jacobs & Kelemi, 2020). Furthermore, the study also elucidated the importances of individualism by revealing the sub-categories of Black hair. Thus, a singular representation of hair does not resonate with every Black woman; thus, this study recommends that

social media influencers represent Black hair in all its possible forms. Considering that Black women's hair textures and journeys are not uniform, South African advertisements and social media marketing for hair products should not only focus on one specific hair type.

6. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that social media contributes to shaping Black women's perceptions on their hair by raising awareness that leads to self-categorization, social identification, and perceived self-identity. Social media also can reverse negative constructs and restore self-esteem. The qualitative approach in this study helped to gauge the subjective experiences of the participants which provided in-depth understanding of this phenomenon (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Findings from this qualitative study compliments existing findings that are derived from the prevalent quantitative studies of social media (Bosch, 2020). In conclusion, this study contributed to South African literature addressing the representation of Black women's hair on social media. It has shed light on the ways in which social media affects Black women's self-concept, beauty standards and sense of identity.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

For further research, it is recommended that studies regarding Black hair should isolate some hair styles or textures to focus on, such as a study on the perceptions of Black women with dreadlocks. Additionally, there should be an attempt to focus on a particular social media platform and/or social media posts from communities or individuals in South Africa.

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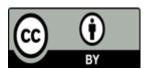
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