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DIGITAL SISTER CIRCLES: SITES OF RESISTANCE AGAINST HEGEMONIC
IDEOLOGIES ABOUT BLACK NATURAL HAIR

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Digital Sister Circles: Sites of Resistance Against Hegemonic Ideologies

About Black Natural Hair

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This dissertation explores the rise of the Digital Black Natural Hair Movement (DBNHM), a movement championed by Black women who employ social media groups to establish communities and engage around their shared identities as Black women who wear their hair in its natural state (naturalistas). The study focuses on how the DBNHM materializes in three social media natural hair groups (SMNHG). To understand why and to what end do naturalistas create and participate in these communities, a digital textual analysis of the media texts found in these SMNHG and fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. Two key findings emerged. First, members of SMNHG displayed behavioral practices that mirror those inherent to traditional sister circles: the fictive family structures Black women have historically erected to engage in collective acts of solidarity and resistance. Second, the communities are laced with a culture of resistance evident by the prominence of pro-Black language and imagery that resonate messages that resist hegemonic beauty standards, while simultaneously celebrating Black natural hair as beautiful, healthy and sophisticated. Collectively, these findings suggest that the development of the DBNHM is a 21st-century turn on the group liberation practices Black women have historically undertaken. This argument allows this work to sit in conversation with Black digital humanities research that explores how Black women are fusing their personal politics with technology to forge discursive and rhetorical virtual spaces, geared towards the production of anti-hegemonic and resistance content.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, my anchors, the “C Unit.” First, to my dad, Clifton, who is my forever hero, warrior, strong tower, and friend. There are no words to express how thankful I am for your sacrifices, spiritual, and emotional support. Thank you for your wisdom, words of caution, and for tirelessly warring on my behalf. To my mom, Claudina, you have proofread every paper, application, CV, and article I have ever written since I entered college. You know each word of this dissertation, as well as I do. You taught me to have a passion for knowledge and a love for sharing that knowledge. I love you both for giving me the greatest tools that kept me through this process: faith, internal joy, and the understanding of the importance of having a personal relationship with our God.

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The Lord, my God, is sovereign. Eph. 3:20

Selah

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: At the Root

It was the August of the year I was to enter secondary school, at eleven years old, I sat anxious and excited in the salon chair, gazing across at the box of Just For Me relaxer on the counter. As the hairdresser stood mixing the activator liquid and relaxer cream creating the right concoction that would untangle the kinks of my tightly curled hair, the pungent chemical odor assaulted my nasal cavity bringing me out of my momentary trance. There I sat in a crowded hair salon, filled with women and girls, talking, laughing, and beautifying themselves, and my thoughts were a million miles away. I reflected on the previous trips to the salon with my mother, where I would sit quietly in the waiting area, feeling like an outsider. Now, however, at the age of eleven, it was finally my turn to participate in the beautification ritual. So, with relaxer in hand, my hairdresser lathered the compound onto my head and indoctrinated me into the sister circle.

For the first time, I felt at home in the salon. No longer regulated to the waiting area, but now a part of this community of Black and Brown women who came to relax their curls and their minds over jokes, gossip, music, and advice. I felt elated. To get my first relaxer was a rite of passage into young adulthood. It meant that I no longer had to endure painful weekend cornrowing sessions that ensured my unruly curls were “tamed” before entering public spaces. A feeling of joy overcame me knowing that I would now enjoy the ease and beauty of having straight hair and secretly, I hoped that with relaxed hair, I too would be able to saunter through the world with confidence, the same way the women in my life I most admired, did. As I sat awaiting the chemicals to penetrate and elongate my kinks, I focused on the pictures of the pretty Black girls on the relaxer box. I

sat silently imagining, hoping, wishing that when the process was over, my hair would look like theirs: beautiful, straight, thick, and flowing down to my back.

Back then, I would not have been able to articulate how this conception of beauty emerged within my psyche. Now, looking back, maybe it was the steady diet of monolithic media images that I feasted upon that influenced my then notion of beauty. My repeated exposure to media narratives that rendered short and kinked, Black natural hair invisible or undesirable had at surely entered my subconscious. Furthermore, in conjunction with the messages that simultaneously aggrandized and rewarded the blonde hair of the All-American girl or the loose curls of the racially ambiguous Black girl subtly normalized a hierarchal beauty structure. It also proclaimed that aesthetic beauty is a form of capital that young girls needed to obtain and that those who are more closely resembling whitewashed standards of beauty, held a significant advantage in beauty's zero-sum game. For a young Black girl coming of age, these notions pierced at my consciousness.

Throughout my teenage years, these dubious beauty ideals collided with my family's reinforcement of positive body image. These beauty ideals would contribute to the dissonance that complicated how I evaluated my body and the bodies of other girls. These beauty standards also influenced my peers, evident by the schoolyard fights in which my schoolmates weaponized these problematic beauty ideologies. In their heated verbal arguments, these classmates would, with upturned faces, jeer and demean girls whose hair they deemed to be too short, too kinky and thus, ugly. Therefore, for many of us, the images of Black girls with relaxed hair that could blow in the wind became the desired standard. So, there I sat as the first burning sensation from the chemicals scorched

my scalp. I winced. Beauty takes pain, I thought to myself, before resolving to withstand the burning for as long as I could, to ensure that my curled hair follicles released themselves to become straight, to become beautiful.

In the decade following my first relaxer, I returned to the hair salon every six weeks to have my hair "done": relaxed, washed, and curled. Years later, I found myself with a head full of severely damaged hair caused by more than a decade of chemical treatments, excessive heat, and too many styling experiments. I decided, or rather, my hair demanded a change. After much self-deliberation, I finally did the big chop, feeling ready to embrace my natural hair. My excitement from no longer needing to be dependent on chemical relaxers quickly shifted to panic and confusion, as I came to realize that I had no idea how to care for my natural hair. After all, throughout my life, my mother, and later, my hairdresser, served as the primary caretakers of my hair. I swiftly recognized that caring for my natural hair would require me to establish an intricate haircare regiment. Creating one, however, was a scary and often lonely journey as I could not rely on my immediate community of family and friends for advice, as they too had minimal experience caring for natural hair.

After countless failed twists outs, and the failure to identify an affordable local hair salon with a stylist who catered to natural hair, I sought out new resources. I took to the Internet, and soon discovered a thriving community of natural hair vloggers. These women became my teachers and their hair blogs and YouTube channels, my essential reference points as I embarked on the journey of learning and loving my hair. As an avid Facebook user, I eventually stumbled upon groups dedicated to Black natural hair. Ultimately, these Facebook groups became my primary sites in which I gained

information about, and to discuss hair related topics. Unlike the vlogs, these Black natural groups were interactive; I could interact and engage with other women who were on a similar hair embracement journey. During my first few months, visiting these Social Media Natural Hair Groups (SMNHG), I gained some valuable insight into these groups.

Not only did I come to learn that these groups serve as knowledge repositories informing the haircare and styling practices of their members, but I discovered that product review videos play a critical part in shaping members' purchasing behaviors (Chapter 7). During my time engaging in these communities, I also realized that the use of in-group language and the adherence to the groups' behavioral norms not only signify one's membership to the SMNHG, but it serves as a bonding conduit (Chapter 5). This recognition developed as I experienced a significant increase in the intensity of the bond I shared with members of these communities as I became more versed in using in-group phrases. The knowledge of these terms shifted the level of comfort I felt and intensified my desire to participate in in-group behavior. The most vital lesson I gained from these groups would, however, significantly redefine my initial perception of the role these groups play in the lives of their users.

Within the first few months of using these groups, I recognized that members frequently engaged in discussing and negotiating around matters relating to Black body politics (Chapter 6). Many of the members, perhaps at ease being amongst women who share many similar identity markers, were freely discussing their lived experiences. These experiences often centered on the political nature of their natural hair. I observed members seeking and giving advice about how to navigate restrictive corporate dress code policies, the dating arena, and a gamut of social situations with their hair textures

marked as unwelcome, unrefined, or unprofessional. The dominant behavioral norms existing within the SMNHG, thus revolve around the provision of practical, emotional, and social support that has the potential to play a dynamic role in the lives of their members. It is this revelation, and the other lessons learned during my time spent using these SMNHG that inspired this dissertation. Collectively they inform my theorizing as I transitioned from SMNHG user to researcher.

Upon deciding to make these SMNHG as the research sites for this dissertation, I promptly focused my attention on ascertaining why and to what end were members of these communities, making use of these spaces. To complete this goal, I began classifying the images, videos, and captions I witnessed in these groups as digital media texts and the participating members of these communities as digital media producers. Making such distinctions was a critical step that shifted this project from one that merely explored the popularity the social media sites to one that aligns itself with the body of scholarship that questions the impact of media production in the hands of marginalized communities. In the following chapters, I attend to this goal by focusing on the use of these digital media producing platforms to create mediated messages about their hair, lives, and matters of collective concern.

To determine the tone and the effect of these messages, I embedded myself into two Facebook communities and one Instagram profile as a non-participant observer for ten months. I documented the group norms and rituals by making field notes that described the pattern of behavior occurring amongst the members. Then I proceeded to conduct a digital interpretative content analysis of the emerging data. In addition to this data collecting method, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen

respondents (thirteen members and two administrators). The preeminent findings borne from these two methodological strategies prompts me to argue that counter-hegemonic ideologies resonate within the digital text shared in these communities. These alternative declarations consist of a rejection of hegemonic beauty norms and affirmations about the elegance and desirability of Black natural hair. These SMNHG are, therefore, not merely social media spaces, but they are production houses for the formulation and distribution of texts about Black hair politics that stand in contrast to messages most often found in mainstream media offerings.

To best contextualize the digital labor that produces these texts and to understand the messages themselves, I found it beneficial to evaluate this phenomenon through the lens of resistance. The type of resistance I suggest here is ideological in nature: a tool used to conjure liberation dogma, inspire collective thoughts, and catalyze paradigm shifts. Members of marginalized communities practice this type of resistance when they gain access to, and they have the necessary skills to make use of media producing platforms. Throughout this dissertation, I suggest that there is a presence of a culture of resistance in these groups. First, I argue that SMNHG afford their members the privilege to create content that repudiates hegemonic framing of Black natural hair by allowing these Black women to redefine the language used to describe their bodies. By logging in, sharing, liking, and commenting, these members engage in an everyday form of ideological resistance that challenges beauty norms and rejects its constraining standards.

This resistance reverberates in the messages embedded within the images, videos, and symbols created and shared in these communities. The wealth of pro-Black body discourse found within these communities, gift their followers with the chance to escape

within them and find solace from the overcritical policing they face as owners of bodies labeled as less than. After all, because much of Black natural hair care practices remain shrouded in mystery and misunderstanding, by many none Black people. Black [people] women often find themselves having to explain or defend their hairstyle choices in social and professional settings. These moments reinforce the "otherness" of Black natural hair by positioning these women as the owners of weird, strange, and abnormal bodies. These SMNHG may then serve as a site of escape, where these women can find comfort in interacting with other women who also understand the emotional, psychological, and economic costs associated with attempting to wear our "radical" hair as they desired (RQ3). Participants in the semi-structured interviews confirm this notion when they repeatedly declared that they found support and understanding from their fellow members (Chapter 5). These feelings emerge as members commiserate around their shared experiences of attempting to successfully navigate their bodies in spaces governed by mainstream notions of beauty, etiquette, and professionalism that often frowns upon their stylistic hair choices.

A second reason that I argue that within these SMNHG, there exists a culture resistance relates to the prevalence of members engaging in pro-social justice topics (RQ2). Although these groups mostly consist of hair relate discourse, the women frequently discuss issues facing Black communities. The continued presence of these topics reconfirmed that these groups are not isolated digital communes, but they are, in fact, a part of a subsection of the broader digital landscape established and occupied by Black men and women. A landscape filled with Black dominated Internet spaces dedicated to providing a locale for fellowshipping, organizing, community building, and

negotiating around the broader issues of concern about the health, safety, and progress of Black American communities. Therefore, these SMNHG are yet another digital third space (Oldenburg 1991) occupied by Black constituents: online communes separate from their home and work life where, as a distinguishable public, they meet, socialize, and strategize for a collective betterment.

Within these third spaces, these Black women foster a community around their shared concern about matters of social justice. Posts about police brutality, immigration laws, #metoo, and the gender pay gap, all appear alongside images of bantu knots and shampoo product review videos. Within the comments, these women engage each other in discussing and debating political issues that directly impact their lives as Black women. Although not forged with the express purpose of organizing around social justice concerns, the seepage of social justice imagery and lexicon into these groups further quicken me towards recognizing that tropes of resistance resound within the digital walls of these groups. Next, it is necessary to note that in framing the type of resistance occurring in these communities, I also recognize that the very act of establishing these flourishing digital sisterhoods with each other is in itself an act of resistance. After all, by creating a space for themselves to build relationships with each other, these women are rejecting a popular media trope that Black women are incapable of maintaining healthy relationships with each other.

Furthermore, as I argue in Chapter 6, by sharing their stories and vocalizing through their posts the negative experiences they have endured because of their natural hair textures, these women also reject the strong Black woman ethos (SBWE). A philosophy that serves to silence Black women from voicing pain and seeking help

because it suggests that the hallmark of the inner fortitude of a Black woman is her ability to endure oppression silently, even unto her demise. Using these groups to give voice to the oppressive nature of anti-Black natural hair ideologies is an essential way in which members of SMNHG making the personal political. A means by which they share their stories and find communality across the community, and in doing so, they resist and reject the emotional trauma associated with internalizing racist acts as punishment for one's individual failure. Last, argued in Chapter 5, one of the most explicit signals that there is a presence of a culture of resistance within these groups is the fact that these women have established themselves into fictive kinship structures.

Black fictive kinship structures are for scholars like Chatters et al. (1994); Dill et al. (1998); and Stewart (2007) are critical community survival tools that consist of members biological or otherwise related who through voluntary acts of mutual respect and love engage in practices that bring about collective benefits. Sister Circles are one type of Black fictive kinship structure that has had a significant impact on the lives of generations of Black women. By sharing their personal struggles, engaging in joint problem solving, and supporting acts of challenging the status quo and resisting oppression, the members of the SMNHG demonstrate that they have created the type of atmosphere necessary for the formation of Sister Circles (RQ1). For instance, the members make use of these groups to mounting themselves into a space of mutual support. In these spaces of support, they freely flout established hair beauty norms by cheering each other as they celebrate Black natural hair textures and share tips and strategies for styling hair that stands in stark contradiction to what some corporate dress codes and beauty industry critiques may deem attractive, professional or stylish.

These groups are then meeting grounds or digital beauty salons; a collective Black woman and girl only shared space, where strangers forge virtually together by their shared experiences navigating the social stigmas attached to Black natural hair. For example, quite frequently, members post "selfies" to request styling tips. They call upon each other to comment on whether their hairstyle is "work appropriate," "cute for a wedding," or "pretty enough to wear for a date." It would be easy to dismiss this in-group behavioral practice of soliciting reviews as merely an exercise in vanity. Instead, I hold that seeking reviews from each other, is an attempt by these women to gain feedback from other Black natural hair "experts," who have also established intragroup hair beauty norms, separate and apart from the restrictive hegemonic standards.

Members thus see each other as the most capable sources from which to gain hair presentation advice. Advice that may aid them in reducing the adverse reactions to their hair they may encounter when venturing into social settings. For Black women, with bodies often labeled as disruptive, this practice of policing one's hair and requesting that women do so as well is a self-survival tactic. The practice is hence a response to the explicit or implicit pressures they often feel to adhere to restrictive socially constructed rules about how they should present their bodies or behave if they desire to gain basic levels of respect. The act of calling on others to scrutinize and assess the appropriateness of their hair mirrored the pressure I often felt. The pressure brought about by the concern whether my curls are adequately "tamed" or sufficiently "presentable" whenever I am venturing into professional and social spaces. Given the discourse I witnessed within these groups, it is apparent that some members of these communities experienced a similar burden.

I assert that it is this shared burden that acts as the kindle that ignites the comradery that exists amongst these women. This comradery is born from a shared encounter with what Africana Studies scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) calls, the rigors of social conformity and respectability politics. As they, with every post, compliment or advise each other, they also simultaneously mold a shared, new standard of hair beauty, that demands the inclusion of their hair texture and challenges the rigid nature of hegemonic beauty benchmarks. Throughout Chapter 5, I further highlight how many of the behavioral patterns of SMNHG users to argue that in building their SMNHG, the women draw heavily on the building blocks that erect traditional Sister Circles. Thus, within these groups, there are latent traces of many of the resistance behaviors and language typical to Sister Circles.

These are the four primary ways by which I contextualize resistance in this dissertation, echoing in the pro-Black body discourse, found within the pro-Black social justice language, evoked as these women free themselves of the burden of the SBWE, and evident by the mirroring of tenets of traditional Sister Circles. Given the SMNHG potential to provide such spaces of comfort and comradery, it would be a mistake to scorn or trivialize the DBNHM. Dismissing SMNHG usage as frivolous signals a failure to recognize how digital organizing and digital media production have become two of the twenty-first-century strategies adopted by Black women to engage in resistance and liberation practices. The findings of this dissertation challenge the tendency of some to dismiss all social media use as unimportant and trivial. It does so by providing empirical evidence of how some women are employing social media to establish communities

unencumbered by geographic limits in the name of corporate enhancement and edification.

By focusing on the digital labor of Black women, this dissertation also adds to the growing Black digital studies canon poised to fill the gap in research that focuses on why and how Black men and women make use of Internet technology. I add to this canon by demonstrating how some Black women are making use of social media spaces to not only socialize and fill moments of boredom. Instead, I highlight how by fostering digitalized communities, these women establish a space to share digital artifacts. Artifacts that amplify their often-silenced voices, and pluralizes the narratives about the value and proficiency of Black feminized bodies. Furthermore, academics and cultural critics alike have increasingly raised their concern about the growing apolitical behavior amongst western youth, which has led many of these thinkers to heavily scrutinize social media usage and digital forms of counter-hegemonic expression.

These scholars, doubtful about the copious time citizens spend engaging in digital activity, label social media usage focused on raising questions about social injustice, inequality, and politics as slacktivism. A term that has come to represent social justice leaning digital activities considered ineffective in bringing about and or sustaining "real" political or social change. Although I contend that the goal of any movement poised to establish change is to shift political and social structures to meet the needs of the marginalized, I find that this shift does not only occur in the realm of material winnings. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the participants of the Digital Black Natural Hair Movement (DBNHM), the movement that encases the SMNHG, provides an opportunity to witness how a movement's winnings can also materialize as ideological, emotional,

and psychological benefits. Though it may not be easy to monetize these non-economic benefits gained by members of SMNHG, they are invaluable to the women who earn them.

It would be foolhardy to complete this dissertation without even a brief exploration of the financial impact of the movement. In Chapter 7, I explore the economic impact of the movement vis-à-vis unpacking how the decline in sales of chemical hair relaxers propelled the visibility of the DBNHM. I argue that there was an increase in interest in the movement, primarily due to the negative impact it was having on the profit margins of beauty supply corporations. As executives took notice of the movement, they found themselves having to swiftly develop strategies to mitigate the losses they were facing, given the decline in sales in what was once a significant earner in the Black hair care segment. Many of the major hair care brands responded by launching “for Black natural hair textures” specific product lines. Interestingly, as this segment of the market so long ignored by the beauty industry, was stretching its muscle, and flexing its immense spending power, companies began engaging in intense competition to earn their brand loyalty.

As the interest in the DBNHM grew, and as executives wrestled with adjusting to the shifting hair norms amongst some Black women, it was not at all shocking that these executives also became interested in SMNHG. For shrewd executives seeking to gain insight into this target market, SMNHG symbolizes a promised land of possibilities. Not only are these groups the prominent spaces Black women with natural hair gather either physically or virtually, but as they interact with each other, they significantly impact each other's purchasing behaviors. For these reasons, I believe these groups have become the

targets of infiltration strategies for companies keen on penetrating and influencing the discourse within these groups to their benefit. In Chapter 7, I explore this infiltration not to simply ascertain the market's response to the movement but to raises concerns that as a beauty industry executives become some of the most important coders of the most popularized images of naturalistas available for mainstream consumption, the continued potency of the movement's resistance may be in jeopardy.

Throughout the chapter, I argue that two of the marketing tactics undertaken by some beauty brands to sell these products consist of strategies that stand in opposition to the pro-self-love ideologies inherent to the DBNHM. First, I note the companies capitalize on the bulk buying practices known as the product junkie culture to increase their sales. I suggest that corporations draw upon scientific research that indicates that the curvature of a Black hair follicle renders it less capable of retaining moisture to justify their creation of extensive hair product systems. By suggesting that Black hair requires extensive work to achieve healthiness and beauty, these companies sell product systems often consists of upwards of six products with a price point significantly above pharmacy brands. Embolden by this scientific "truth," the advertising campaigns for these products consist of messages that rehash old myths that have long problematized Black natural hair as difficult, inherently dry, coarse, in need of treatment, and thus inferior.

These messages, therefore, collides with the pro-Black natural hair messages found in the SMNHG, and it runs counter to the goal of the DBNHM to destabilize the constraints dominant beauty standards hold over Black natural hair textures. The second beauty industry strategy that stands in opposition to the self-love dogma of the movement is the practice of using influencers to infiltrate SMNHG. I note that one of the ways

companies have gained a foothold in these virtual communities and gain insight into the needs and views of Black women with natural hair is to sponsor hair and beauty influencers to create and post product review videos in these communities. The unscrupulous aspect of this practice arises when these influencers do not explicitly declare their relationship with the brand, allowing their reviews to appear as if authentic and unbiased. This nefarious practice fractures the potential for resistance practices to occur in these groups because it shatters the trustworthiness of the content found within them.

The breaking of this trust I note impacts the comradery within which has a negative bearing on the potential for the emergence of a culture of fictive sisterhood. Without the presence of this culture within these groups, there may be a diminished likelihood that members will be willing to share personal stories and discuss their lived experiences. The reduction of such discourses will significantly impact the potential for the emergence of ideological resistance content because it is in these conversations that images, videos, and memes that reject dominant beauty standards most often materialize. Therefore, I argue that growing feelings of mistrust some respondents in this study hold over the legitimacy of product review content they encounter in these communities can have rippling effects on the practices of these members and the messages they produce.

Before proceeding with this current chapter, it is vital that I address my positionality given my history as a member of several SMNHG. In conducting this research, as a naturalista and user of these groups, I recognize my dual position as researcher and subject of study. Though I undertook this work chiefly through an academic lens, I consistently participated in self-reflectivity so that my posteriori

relationship with the topic at hand did not limit or contaminate my gaze. It would be impossible, however, to ignore the implications of my positionality to this work.

Therefore, as I conducted this dissertation, it is the works of Black feminist scholars like Audre Lorde, 1977; Alice Walker, 1983; and Joan Morgan, 2000, that inspired me. They served as templates for scholars like myself, seeking to draw upon our personal experiences while engaging in academic theorizing. These notable thinkers demonstrate that Black women's experiences and narratives are credible and significantly rich sources from which to create theory.

As I connect my personal experiences with the expertise of members of these groups, I engage in politicizing the personal. A liberating practice that Carol Hanisch's (1969) deems to be a crucial step necessary for uncovering and addressing the institutional and systemic structures that, though they affect life on the individual level, they require collective action to destabilize. In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce the structural makeup of this study by first presented a working definition and description of the Digital Black Natural Hair Movement (DBNHM). Second, I briefly lay out the theoretical framework for this study before introducing and contextualizing the three research questions that shaped this study. Next, I presented the dissertation's methodology. Forth, I highlight some relevant terms before ending the chapter by outlying a brief overview of the chapters that lie ahead.

Digital Black Natural Hair Movement

Within the last eight years, there has been a noticeable shift in popular haircare trends among Black women in the United States. Although not universally adopted, a cursory glance while out at a shopping center, or even viewing your favorite television

program, may reveal that the numbers of Black women wearing their hair in its natural state, i.e., not chemically treated, has seemingly increased. The apparent sustained shift in haircare choices among Black women has prompted some culture critics, scholars, and executives within the beauty supply industry to declare with varying levels of pleasure that we are amid a contemporary Black natural hair movement. As with many new movements, academia has been slow to name, articulate, and characterize it. With this dissertation, I attempted to do some of that necessary work by researching a significant aspect of the movement, that is, its manifestation on the Internet, i.e., the Digital Black Natural Hair Movement (DBNHM). With no universally accepted academic definition of the DBNHM, I put forth the following working description.

The DBNHM is the digital incarnation of the growing contemporary Black natural hair movement championed by Black women within the last eight years, who are employing virtual vicinities to establish communities with each other and engage around their shared identities as Black women who wear their hair in its natural state. The DBNHM is also an influential school of thought and way of being that, as argued throughout this dissertation, confronts hegemonic beauty standards and provides a platform for acts of resistance through counterhegemonic digital media production. The DBNHM has also influenced some contemporary stylistic hair norms among members of the African diaspora. These changing norms have tremendously impacted the beauty supply buying practices of these women, which has resulted in a significant economic impact on the marketplace.

The DBNHM is, therefore, a cultural and economic phenomenon that has emerged as the Black women who supported the contemporary Black natural hair

movement began employing virtual vicinities to establish communities with each other. Unimpeded by geographic distance, these women negotiate and engage with each other using blogging sites, social media networking groups, podcasts, and YouTube channels. Although the DBNHM occurs in these multiple digital locations across the Internet, this dissertation will focus specifically on how it materializes in three SMNHG; two Facebook groups and one Instagram profile. These internet locales serve as knowledge compartments, and within them, Black women virtually connect. Spaces in which to share information and discuss the best hair regimen for their naturally kinked and curled hair, as well as produce media text content that dares to celebrate Black natural hair. Throughout this dissertation, I will use the term *naturalista* to describe the proponents of the movement, as it is an umbrella term often widely used in the blogosphere and among some academics to describe Black women who wear their hair in its natural form.

There may be several underlying arguments that can help to explain the exponential growth in the number of *naturalistas* creating and using these digital spaces. One potential argument may lie in the fact that, like me, some of these Black women recognizing that they were unaware of how to care and style their natural hair, sought out Internet-based resources to do so. Quite possibly, they too may not have had to care for their hair in its unadulterated state since their childhood, having also chemically treated their hair at an early age. This need for knowledge may stimulate these women to seek out these digital spaces, spaces in which they could forge a support system with the bloggers, vloggers, and other members of communities. These easily accessible spaces provide this needed information not available to them in the mainstream media or from their familial circles. The popularity of the DBNHM serves as a testament to the critical

place hair holds in the lives of Black women. Therefore, to understand the movement's impact on those who sustain it through their digital labor and digital consumption, one must first attend to the reality that these Black women's bodies routinely face rejection from inclusion in hegemonic narrowly defined standards of beauty.

Coming to terms with that reality then demands that you recognize the DBNHM as a politically charged movement undertaken by women who face a high emotional and social cost for daring to navigate the world as naturalistas. Hence, it would be impossible to understand why naturalistas extend their labor to sustain the DBNHM without embedding that analysis within a more extensive discussion of the sociopolitical implication of race, gender on the distribution of aesthetic, economic and social capital. I begin this work in Chapter 2, by presenting a brief historical glance at the relationship Black natural hair has shared with mainstream US norms. I later continued this work in Chapter 3, where I introduce a literature review of some of the interdisciplinary theories that anchor this study. As I earlier alluded, engagement in the SMNHG makes a significant economic impact on the beauty supply industry. Changes in purchasing behavior by followers of the movement have contributed to the movement's rising economic power, which impacts both the followers and the profit margin of the beauty product corporations.

As more women opt-out of using chemical relaxers and other chemical treatments, the beauty supply industry has had to make substantial changes to recoup their losses. Mintel Group Limited, the leading beauty marketing intelligence agency, revealed that a reduction in the sale of chemical relaxers had triggered a significant negative shift in the profit margins of many corporations. In 2013 report by the Mintel

Group highlighted that the once-thriving relaxer segment of the Black haircare sector had suffered a 26% decline between 2008 and 2013, earning \$50 million less in sales from its 2008 numbers (Mintel Group Limited, 2013). Furthermore, the agency noted that the relaxer segment was the only category in the Black haircare sector not to have an increase in sales during this period. The firm's 2018 report continued to document the segment's continued shrinkage, noting that sales of relaxers had further plummeted 36.6% between 2012- 2017. (Mintel Group Limited, 2017). These numbers tell a significant story. Not only do they demonstrate the economic strength of the movement, but given the estimated \$2.54 billion-dollar consumer expenditure on Black haircare in 2017 (Mintel Group Limited, 2017), they foreshadow the emergence of an orchestrated response by beauty industry executives. As I previously mentioned, in Chapter 7, I explore one of the ways the response has impacted the DBNHM.

Theoretical Framework

From Facebook to YouTube, Black women are carving out spaces to make themselves at home in the digital neighborhoods of the Internet. Rejecting the identity as the casualty of the digital divide, these Black women with the means and skill to navigate the Internet are establishing active digital enclaves where they can meet, organize and create strong bonds around issues that collectively impact their intersectional lives. The digital divide continues to exist, and it disenfranchises those unable to afford access to the Internet, alienating them from participating in digital media production: an activity that has become critical to 21st-century citizens' ability to advocate for themselves. Yet still, recent statistics have revealed that Black women are making strides towards closing this gap. The 2014 Pew Research Center Internet usage report states that, as of 2014,

Black women became the second-highest users of all social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2014). Despite this emerging evidence that Black women are using the Internet and are becoming an undeniable voice framing the discourses within it, there remains a limited number of studies (e.g., Wright, 2005; Brock, Kvasny & Hales, 2010; and Curtis, 2015) focused on the use of Internet technology by Black women.

Within the last five years, however, some Black feminist theorists and media scholars have begun to advance scholarship that examines the role of the Internet in the political, emotional, and social lives of Black women (e.g., Brock, 2012 & Williams, 2015). This dissertation sits in conversation with this burgeoning scholarship, by investigating the digital labor of Black women that propel the DBNHM. I argue that these social media communities are not solely spaces in which Black women discuss and celebrate their natural hair. Instead, the data emerging throughout this study suggest that these SMNHG are also conducive to acts of everyday resistance. Actions made possible by making use of Internet technology and technological tools already native to daily habits. Although these practices appear mundane, they can result in collective engagement around the production of counter-hegemonic discourse and media text. To complete this dissertation, I employed an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing from several schools of thought to identify theories, case studies, and methodologies that informed the study's process.

First, I drew from the work of political scientist James C Scott. His theory of everyday acts of resistance promised to be a theoretical frame for defining the digital media text production by the women in these SMNHG. For Scott (1989), everyday resistance is those

quiet and disguised acts that undermine power. They are the everyday actions in the lives of members of ostracized groups that threaten the power structures that constrain their lives. What is most important to note is that everyday resistance acts often go unnoticed by dominant classes because they are often skillfully hidden, or if visible, at first glance, these actions do not appear to grant the actor enhanced political power. As I explored the question of resistance, I also introduced the works of scholars (e.g., Bayat, 2000; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016) who critiqued and built upon Scott's theory of everyday resistance,

Next, throughout this dissertation, I argue that although creating pro-Black natural hair media text may appear apolitical, it carries with it significant political affect. These media texts challenge the hegemonic body politics scripts which drench the media landscape. Therefore, the digital media texts created within these SMNHG have the potential to confront ideological hegemony. By making videos that discuss the health and beauty of kinked and curly hair textures, and by building a fictive kinship with each other, these women are making available, easily shareable digital content. This viral content valorizes the social capital attached to Black natural hair in a culture that fails to do so. Although there is an established body of scholarship focused on questions of resistance, domination, and change, work that centers Black women in this discourse has gone far less examined by mainstream academic scholarship.

Additionally, when there is an examination of Black women's experiences by scholars who do not engage with Black feminist theory or Africana studies traditions, there is a tendency for these academics focus only on the annihilation of Black women's social power and their alienation from positions of power in social institutions. While

these topics are critical and necessary to unpack (done in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), there is also a need to explore Black women's lives as resistance actors that bring about self and community liberation. A failure to do so positions marginalized communities like Black women as powerless and agentless while silencing the traditional and contemporary means by which Black women have challenged, upended, and shifted social structures. Therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to exploring questions of resistance and how Black women with natural Black hair are neither completely subjugated by hegemonic messages about their bodies nor completely liberated by their efforts to celebrate themselves through digital media text creation.

Although hegemonic beauty standards continue to shape the everyday lives of these women, these women have been able to interweave resistance actions into their daily lives. That is, by making use of social media, a seemingly mundane application, they gain a platform to challenge the dominant narrative about what "beautiful," "healthy," "clean," or "professional " hair should look and feel. With much of this dissertation focusing on questions of collective action, it was necessary to identify theories that would anchor my understanding of collective online behaviors and digital community formation. To accomplish this, I turned to the scholarship of communication scholars like Howard Rheingold (1993) and sociologist Alberto Melucci (1995). Their work provided the necessary support for identifying the practices of the members of the SMNHG that contribute to the forging of digital communities.

Then, the work of Critical Race and Black feminist thinkers allowed for an interdisciplinary lens to this work. For instance, by using sociologist Paul Gilroy's work on the political and social impact of Black fictional family structures, I was able to

include a race and gender-focused analysis to the conventional understanding of online communities. Gilroy's work was most helpful in grounding my arguments that these SMNHG are not merely online communities, but they are digital Sister Circles. So, determined because the members' behavior mirror the community building practices traditionally found in Sister Circles, which are Black fictive kinship groups that have been an essential part of the liberation and supportive politics undertaken by Black women for generations. To highlight the critical tenets of Sister Circles replicated in these digital spaces, and to highlight how they benefit the members of these communities, I explored several studies by scholars who question the implication of Sister Circles in the lives of Black women.

Along with various other scholars, preeminent Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins (1998), and Communications scholar Marnel Niles-Goins (2011) provided me with a structure for identifying and examining what I argue are four essential tenets of Sister Circles found to be present in the SMNHG under study. By defining these SMNHG as digital Sister Circles, I am also arguing that members of these communities engage in behaviors that are counter-hegemonic by nature. Not only do Sister Circles provide a location for Black women to support each other emotionally and socially, but they also serve as organizing spaces to launch movements that name and defy structural forms of inequality and oppression in their lives. The primary way by which these women resist the constraining element of hegemonic beauty standards is by engaging in the counter-hegemonic behavior of producing alternative media text. Behavior that psychologist Joshua Atkinson (2006) and American studies scholar, Lisa Nakamura (2013) argue can impact their offline lives.

By creating alternative texts which celebrate Black natural hair as a site of beauty and professionalism, they are producing texts distinctly different from the long-standing images and messages about Black hair most often encountered on mainstream media platforms. I then introduce the works of Black feminist scholars, such as bell hooks (1990), Rooks (2000), and Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps (2001), these scholars allowed for an exploration of the tenuous relationship Black hair has shared with popular media production outlets and mainstream US culture at large. By using these works to explore the political implications of Black hair in America. I was able to illustrate the backdrop against which the DBNHM emerged, which was necessary to capture a holistic understanding of the sociocultural consequence of the movement's existence and the impact on not only its followers but also the wider society. Last, in Chapter 7, where I focus on the relationship between the DBNHM and the beauty supply industry, I briefly introduce the works of sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) to explore what occurs when a movement moves into mainstream visibility. His work allowed me to argue that now in its institutionalized stage of its life cycle, the DBNHM has become a target of interest by corporations seeking to capitalize on the message of the movement in financial ways.

As the followers of the DBNHM declare pro-Black natural hair messages, beauty supply companies are mirroring the language, images, and symbols in their marketing materials. These practices, I argue, is in keeping with the tradition of corporations adopt commodification strategies by leaning upon anthropomorphism to frame their companies as a partner and friend equally invested in social issues. American studies scholar Laura Hymson's work on the Coca Cola company's social conscious framing provided a context for these arguments. Hymson's work and the work of feminist scholars like Susan

Bordo and Meeta Jha were also beneficial as I contextualized how these corporations conflate the message of the DBNHM from one that focuses on loving one's Black natural hair textures to one that drives consumerism. These scholars substantial work on the interlocking relationship between body politics, notions of beauty, and capitalism allows for an understanding of how beauty corporations sell the idea that it is through consumption, women can gain access to femininity. Then they simultaneously contribute to the upholding of a very narrowly defined notion of femininity that serves to keep women in an ever-continuous consumption pursuit of the economic and social capital attached to having a hegemonic feminized and beautiful body. Collectively, this interdisciplinary body of works anchored my research protocol and allowed me to answer the research questions set out by the dissertation.

Research Questions

RQ 1. Do the SMNHG serve as sites in which there is an emergence of a sense of community/fictive sisterhood, as demonstrated by members of these communities engaging in collective behavioral acts and practices?

RQ 2. Do users/followers of these SMNHG incorporate the use of a pro-Black lexicon, phrases, symbols, and terms when discussing their hair and the hair of other Black women? Additionally, is there a similarity between this lexicon and the one used by followers of other pro-Black digital activism movements of the day?

RQ 3. Do users/followers of these SMNHG use these spaces to create alternative media text about Black female bodies that counter mainstream notions of beauty?

This dissertation is chiefly concerned with the affective and immaterial digital labor of the Black women who are proponents of the DBNHM. At the core of this concern is investigating the resistance nature of SMNHG. To streamline what could potentially be an impossible undertaking, I drew upon my experiences in these

communities and recent mainstream media reports on the movement to focus my research analysis during the project's conceptualization phase. This process yielded the emergence of three interconnected threads of thoughts that eventually materialize into the dissertation's research questions. First, a crucial component of resistance spaces is that they comprise of members who share a collective identity/share purpose/commonality who engage in shared practices. Therefore, to frame these groups as sites for everyday forms of resistance practices, an essential first step is to identify the presence of a sense of community/fictive sisterhood amongst the members. (RQ1).

Second, I investigated whether these women make use of a shared pro-Black lexicon consisting of phrases, symbols, and terms. The presence of a shared lexicon would not only reiterate that there is the presence of a sisterhood/collective among the users. Additionally, the presence of pro-Black language will identify these SMNHG as locations in which Black women's bodies are not only centered but discussed in counter-hegemonic terms. Evidence of pro-Black language provides the opportunity to strengthen the argument that these groups serve as sites of everyday resistance practices.

Additionally, I was interested in identifying whether these groups imported pro-social justice lexicon from other digital spaces in which followers of digital movements like #BlackLivesMatter and the #SayHerName campaign reside. Detecting the presence of this language would further provide leverage to suggest that, buried within the DBNHHM is a culture of resistance. A culture that allows it to be akin to other movements that center the lives and bodies of Black [women] people (RQ2).

Last, throughout this dissertation, I will identify the complex and often combative relationship Black natural hair often shares with hegemonic beauty norms and corporate

professional policies in the United States. Given this historical tension and the negative hegemonic narratives about the beauty, cleanliness, and professionalism of Black natural hair most often transmitted in the mainstream media, it would be significant if I can identify the presence of digital text, the text-based posts, videos, images, and symbols that celebrate Black women's hair. Doing so will first suggest that SMNHG are production sites for alternative discourse, and second, that these social media groups allow members to collectively produce media content that challenges and resists against hegemonic narratives (RQ3). Accomplishing this study will allow me to add to contribute to scholarship dedicated to investigating the role Internet usage plays in the lives of Black women.

Although some scholars have engaged in questioning the relationship women share with digital technology, many of these studies, outside of the Africana Studies and Black digital studies tradition fail to employ an intersectional lens or to focus specifically on Black women. This failure is in keeping with the tendency of some digital humanities scholarship to not attend to how race or class differences among users can significantly impact the types of interaction, experiences or benefits users gain from Internet usage. Interestingly, when those academics do engage in segmenting their sample, there is a tendency to quickly curtail their investigation of Black women and their relationship with new media and technology by merely identifying them as unfortunate victims of the digital divide. With this dissertation, however, I push beyond the questions of access to focus on how Black women who have integrated Internet use into their daily experiences are making use of this tool to write themselves into media narratives that long ignored or othered their existence.

The dearth in research in this area is particularly glaring, given the fact that the Pew Research Center's 2014 African Americans and Technology Use report identified African American women as one of the most likely users of social networking sites. Interestingly, the PEW study revealed that although Black women are less likely (80%), to have access to the Internet in comparison to Black men (81%), White men (87%) or White women (86%), Black women rank as the second-highest user of social networking sites (74%) overall. Thus, despite the persistence of the digital divide along the lines of race, class, and in many cases gender, Black women with Internet access are using the opportunity to socialize and connect with others via spaces like Twitter and Facebook. Black women have also consistently been the most frequent user of the micro-blogging site, Twitter, since its inception (Pew Research Center, 2014). Finally, I wanted to be sure that as one of the first academic works attempting to contextualize an aspect of the DBNHM, that the study was not limiting its focus by focusing only on the SMNHG as popular sites of engagement for Black women with natural hair.

Instead, I created research questions that would allow for an examination of the DBNHM vis-à-vis the lens of everyday acts of resistance. Doing so allows this dissertation to sit alongside studies (e.g., Neil & Mbilishaka, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016) that explore the impact and value of digital movements and those that question the value dominant US society places on Black bodies.

Methodological Structure

To acquire the data for this research, I used two primary methodological tools, digital textual analysis of the posts found in three SMNHG and semi-structured interviews with several SMNHG users. First, throughout ten months, I visited and

journalled about the interaction and engagements witnessed in three communities; two SMNHG located on Facebook and the third an Instagram account of a popular naturalista and vlogger. I selected these three communities for several reasons. First, they were open, non-private groups and thus freely accessible. These groups did not require membership to gain access to the content. Second, I hoped their significant membership size, and their high level of engagement would yield rich data. Last, these were groups that I had not previously interacted with, which eliminated the possibility of preconceived bias.

During the ten months as a non-participant observer, I immersed myself in these communities, visiting them daily to observe the interactions taking place. The data collection process consisted of detailed journaling, describing the interactions and engagements taking place between users. I would later thematically code and critically analyze the data collected during these visits, to capture an understanding of the types of discourses, images, videos, and behaviors most frequently occurring in these communities. To triangular the findings of the textual analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with several users of these SMNHG. These free-flowing interviews allowed me to gain a more lucid elucidation of the communities by capturing the personal narratives of fifteen users. I conducted the interviews via telephone and Skype calls, and when granted the permission, I recorded the conversations via a digital recording software.

Although at times, throughout the interview, I would prompt the respondents using predetermine questions, I mostly allowed these interviewees to lead the conversation by inviting them to reflect on their experiences using these groups and the role they play in their everyday lives. Conducting the interviews provide an opportunity

for further illumination and clarification of the data emerging from the cyber-ethnographic research. Additionally, including interviews in this data collection process also allowed me to sidestep the problematic practice of some academics to silence the communities they study, by failing to provide them with the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. Hearing their narratives enriched this study and pushed me to understand the movement beyond my own experiences. In Chapter 4, I attended to the often messiness attached to digital research, by addressing how the issues of access and privacy and the question of lurking informed and shaped my research. One of the most critical issues facing my methodology was the ethical concerns attached to conducting non-participant research in a social media group.

I employed several strategies to attend to this concern. The most important of them was to limit my exploration to public or open SMNHG, where there are high levels of peripheral lurkers; users who observe and view content but do not contribute content themselves or engage in discussion. I did so because, unlike private groups where members may hold a high expectation of privacy, the users of these open and public groups are more likely aware that their actions are publicly observable to an unrestricted audience. Thus, they may tailor their behaviors accordingly. Therefore, by selecting these groups that are freely assessable to any user of these social media platforms, requiring no membership application, I hoped that my presence as a non-participant observer would be less intrusive.

Furthermore, I also decided to forgo the use of website archival software or the practice of screenshots when collecting data. I made these decisions despite the ease of storage and retrieval of information that both these collection process could have offered.

These choices, however, ensured no collection of users' names, pictures, or other identifiable information occurred. Instead, by limiting the data collection to journaling, I was taking a necessary step to guarantee the maintenance of the privacy and anonymity of users within these communities. Throughout Chapter 3, I further discuss the implications of these methodological choices.

Key Terms

Throughout this dissertation, I use the Appendix to define terms. In this section, however, I found it necessary to identify the following terms and concepts.

SMNHG = Social Media Natural Hair Groups are open or closed group profiles created on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. SMNHG allow members/users/followers to join, interact, and engage with each other around topics focused on discussing and celebrating Black natural hair.

Naturalista = There is yet to be a universally accepted, academic definition of the term naturalista. I argue that its core, a naturalista is an African diasporic woman who wears and celebrates the hair that grows naturally from her scalp. Additionally, the learning or relearning of how to care for that hair is critically important to her. Thus, she engages in the construction of hair care regiment. The term naturalista can also be used exclusively by women who reject the use of mass-produced haircare products, opting instead to create their mixtures of essential oils, fruits, or vegetables.

Sister Circles or *S.C* = Sister Circles are support groups that emerge among fictive kinship networks. They thrive upon the sense of community imagined to exist among Black women. Sister Circles can be formalized groups or informal structures, which provide the members with the opportunity to draw upon the strength, knowledge of each other while engaging in collective acts of liberation, pleasure, and healing. Within the medical field, the term Sister Circles also describes the group therapy sessions exclusively available to women.

Big Chop = I define Big Chop as the process of cutting off the relaxed or permed ends of one's hair when one begins the process of transitioning from chemically processed hair to natural hair. The Big Chop is the first step in the natural hair "journey."

Use of the gendered pronouns = I use gendered pronouns throughout this dissertation. This decision is intentional. Although the use of these communities is not exclusive to cis-gendered women, and the term naturalista can potentially define Black men, this dissertation focuses on Black, self-identified female usage of these spaces. This gendered

focus emerges because I am specifically interested in Black female naturalistas and their experiences with these spaces.

Although Black men may often experience micro-aggression targeted at how they present their bodies, I focus on Black women. Not only does hair play a critical role in the lives of all women, as a site of beauty, pleasure, and the male gaze, but because of the long sometimes-traumatic historical relationship between Black women and mainstream American beauty norms.

How This Study Will Proceed

No research attempting to frame discourse about Black natural hair as an act of resistance can successfully do so without addressing the complicated historical relationship Black women hair has had within mainstream United States society. Chapter II of this dissertation does the vital work of providing a survey of some significant moments within Black hair's history in North America before proceeding to identify some of the contemporary struggles facing women with Black natural hair. The chapter serves as a foundation for understanding why hair is neither trivial or inconsequential, and the wearing of one's hair in its natural state has significant real-world implications for some Black women in the United States. In Chapter III, I lay out the theoretical framework for this study. I do so by introducing an interdisciplinary framework that draws from Black feminist theory, media studies, sociology, and digital humanities. The scholarship presented in this chapter serves as the prelude to the discussion and arguments raised in the succeeding chapters.

Next, in Chapter IV, I introduce digital textual analysis and semi-structured interviews as the principal methodological approaches. I highlight the procedural practices employed, and the steps I took in designing and conducting the research, and the procedures used for thematically coding and analyzing the data. I also identify and

describe each research site before concluding the chapter by discussing the methods employed to maintain the privacy and anonymity of the research subjects and respondents. The next three chapters are the discussion chapters of this dissertation. Using the study's raw data, quotes from interview respondents, emerging thematic categories arising from my textual analysis, I was able to not only answer the overarching research questions but contextualize the interaction and engagement taking place in these groups. Chapters V and VI, provides evidence that SMNHG can locales of ideological resistance created through an everyday form of resistance. In Chapter V, I make the argument that SMNHG are digital Sister Circles. In doing so, I argue that these groups serve as sites for community building, culturally rich discourse, collective acts of solidarity and resistance, bonding over shared lived experiences, and support for individual and collective body positivity behaviors (RQ1).

This chapter frames members of these groups as a community of women who informed their digital engagement with the culture drawn from Black women's tradition of forging sisterhoods. The members of these SMNHG borrow heavily from the culture of Black Sister Circles, and by doing so, they politicized their digital actions drenching it in the Black Sister Circles' culture of resistance and collective behavioral practices. Chapter VI is an examination of the alternative media production practices undertaken by members of these groups. This chapter further highlights these groups as laced with a culture of resistance by highlighting the presence of pro-Black lexicon, phrases, symbols, and terms (RQ2). The chapter also provided an opportunity to relate the DBNHM to the other pro-Black digital movements. It does so by identifying, not only how these women discuss these movements in their SMNHG, but how the symbols and discourses

embedded in those movements seep into the DBNHM, positioning it as a movement invested in providing a platform for Black women to write their narratives about their bodies. These narratives, I argue in this chapter, are alternative media text that challenges hegemonic standards (RQ3).

Chapter VII is the last of the discussion sections. Having laid out in Chapters 5 and 6 support for the argument that there is a presence of ideological resistance amongst these digital Sister Circles, Chapter 7 argues that growing corporate interest in the SMNHG has had a far-reaching impact on the DBNHM. The most significant effect I suggest is that the strategies and marketing tactics company executives have established to build brand loyalty amongst users of these spaces harms the culture of resistance within these groups. As the movement becomes commodified, these groups, although they continue to propagate pro-Black natural hair content and anti-hegemonic messages, they are now doing so while bombarded by advertisement campaigns that subtly reinforce the notion that Black hair textures are inherently in need of repair. Through the upholding of the product junkie culture and the use of hair influencers, these corporations are impacting the DBNHM in ways that can deflate the movement's message of self-love and the rejection of hegemonic beauty standards. This chapter, therefore, examines what can happen to the core ideology of a movement, like the DBNHM, when corporate mitigation pushes it away from the fringes into a more mainstream light.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter VIII, I offer up my conclusions. I situate my research in context to the growing Black digital humanities scholarship, before highlighting the limitations of the study. I end the chapter by identifying a possible research trajectory for this work.

CHAPTER II

Black Natural Hair in the United States

History of Black Natural Hair as a Site of Oppression

For many, hair is a matter of the trivial and mundane. The question of why one would focus academic attention on issues of hair may not be evident to some. Hair, however, plays a central part in the lives of many Black women affecting their social, economic, and emotional well-being. Hair exists as an entity that is both self and society, providing its owner with the opportunity, through styling, to potentially make critical statements about identity, while existing as a potential site of critique. There exists an extensive body of scholarship (e.g., Leach, 1958; Hallpike, 1969; Cooper, 1971), focused on hair as a site of cultural production and identity politics. Much of the work within that cannon, focuses on the symbolic meaning of hair to women, and the intimate relationship between hair and socially constructed notions of gendered identity. These scholars suggest that head hair within many cultures serves as a locality for assessing the attractiveness of women's bodies.

Furthermore, many of the scholars who raise questions about hair and gendered practices, engage with the works of Bordo (1993); Butler (1999) and Goffman (1959), to explore how hair as a physical trait, is inscribed with symbolic cultural meanings. Bordo, Butler, and Goffman's research on identity performance is an ideal basis for the exploration into how the performance of femininity occurs through daily hair care rituals and presentation practices. For Black women, however, attempting this performance in the pursuit of the privileges afforded feminized bodies, the journey can be fraught with

struggle, as they attempt to align to a beauty ideal that explicitly alienates them. Black studies scholar, Ingrid Banks, notes that Black women are constantly being measured against a White standard of beauty. This standard, she notes, includes long, straight, and usually blonde hair, that is not kinky or nappy (2000, p.2). Therefore, natural Black hair falls outside of what mainstream society deems beautiful or desirable.

Thus, for scholars (e.g., Giddings, 1984; Hill Collins, 1990; Davis 1994; Rooks, 1996), who explore beauty culture through the lens of Black women, there is a cost associated with the choice to wear one's Black hair in its natural state. Those Black women who make that choice may find themselves struggling to attain the social and cultural capital that society attaches to bodies marked as holding significant levels of femininity and beauty. In Maya Angelou's renowned text, *I know why the caged bird sings*, she demonstrates the importance of hair texture and length for Black women, by exploring the inextricable link between Black hair and notions of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. For Angelou (1997, because hair holds an essential and often-contradictory cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic significance in the lives of Black women, prejudicial acts against their hair can cause extensive trauma in their lives. Similarly, other researchers (Ebong 2001; hooks 1996; Jones 1994; Prince 2009; and Walker 2007), also note that Black women's hair is a site of cultural production and identity negotiation.

Therefore, head hair for Black women is a marker of race as it is gender. Watson (2010) furthers this argument noting that,

occupying a remarkable position, Black women's hair is at once extraordinarily pliable in comparison to other physical markers of race and gender, and yet in its semiotic fashioning, it is difficult to parse from these associations (p. 2).

Black head-hair is thus tightly bound to issues of power, a fact that also resonates within the work of Davis 1982; Rooks 2000 and Byrd and Tharps 2001. For these scholars, Black women's hair can serve as an essential site for intersectional research because it has an inextricable link to issues of domination and oppression. These researchers enriched my understanding of the significance of hair in the lives of Black women. It is their research that enabled the foregrounding of head hair by centering it as the site of contestation that informs this dissertation's research.

In this investigation of the use of digital media spaces by Black women to discuss and celebrate their natural hair, the understanding of the role hair plays in these women's lives, allows for a more complex reading of their online interactions. Given the crippling hegemonic narratives about Black natural hair, the research put forth by the researchers suggests that the decisions Black women make to create social media spaces to discuss their hair politics are not born out of frivolity. Instead, these virtual groups forge as Black women make use of new technology, to collect around issues of Black hair politics in a way traditional media has never afforded them. Therefore, the creation of SMNHG allows for acts of solidarity and practices of resistance against harmful ideologies about the beauty and professionalism of Black natural hair textures.

This chapter provides a short survey of some of the significant struggles Black natural hair has undergone both historically and contemporarily in the United States. By highlighting some of the acts of policing of Black natural hair by institutions of power and dominance, the chapter begins the critical work of situating Black natural hair as a site of contestation. It also demonstrates that the harmful ideologies about Black natural hair continue to inform social norms, corporate policies, and laws. This cycle of social

reproduction results in the creation of restrictive barriers that Black women [people] must continue to attempt to overcome if they choose to wear their hair as it naturally grows from their scalps. Though these intense levels of opposition, Black men and women are not passively accepting these oppressive systems. Instead, throughout history, they have found ways to resist them with varying degrees of success.

The creation of SMNHG is just one new way in which twenty-first-century women are continuing to push back against attempts to render them invisible. Therefore, in creating these social media groups, these Black women are drawing upon their shared Black womanhood tradition of forming Sister Circles. This tradition provides them with a template for collective actions, as explained in Chapter 3, which affords them a means by which to engage in the radical behaviors of self-love and Black natural hair celebration. This chapter provides some justification for this dissertation, exploring this digital movement through the lens of everyday forms of resistance. In the subsequent sections, I first examine how ideologies about Black bodies established before, during, and after the Antebellum era, has informed social ideas about Black [bodies] hair.

Additionally, this section also addresses how the emergence of the afro as a symbol of the Civil Rights era has also contributed to the politicizing of Black natural hair that continues to impact the dominant readings of natural hair and thus the choices Black women make about their hair. Most specifically, I examine the relationship between Black social class mobility and Black natural hair. This history provides a space to argue that beyond the aesthetic capital dominant society attaches to Black hair, the choice to wear one's hair in its natural state can have socioeconomic implications. The second section of this chapter extends upon the exploration into the ideological and

economic implications attached to Black natural hair. In this section, the gatekeepers of social institutions take center stage, as I examine how the longstanding problematic ideologies about the inferiority of Black hair, has informed corporate dress code policies.

Introduced to this section, are two short case studies that serve as launching points to discuss the politicized nature of Black hair. It also allows for the consideration of the socioeconomic costs ascribed to being a naturalista in a culture in which the aesthetic capital, attached to Black natural hair, can and has impacted the employment possibilities. The final section of this chapter considers how the mainstream media, as one of the most dominant institution in society and a critical site for socialization, serves as a tool for the maintenance of hegemony. I introduce two examples of media moments in which the hair of Black celebrity women became the topic of ridicule. In these two examples, are significant contemporary cultural moments in which the beauty of Black women's natural hair, became a topic of large-scale public discourse within social media sites. The examples demonstrate how longstanding ideologies about Black natural hair continues to exist. Moreover, they highlight the fact that social media sites now serve as digital public spheres, in which debates on social norms occur, and Black women meet, engage, and discuss Black body politics.

Black Natural Hair Politics

Marches, placards, dine-ins, and ever-expanding afros, powered the 1960s Civil Rights activism. During that era of political and social change, there existed an explicit radical consciousness embodied through the embracing and celebration of the natural, unaltered Black self. The mantra of "Black is beautiful" provided the rhythm against which James Brown said it loud, I'm Black, and I'm proud, electrifying dance floors and

feeding into a growing trend towards redefining the ways some African Americans related to their social, economic and political status as well as their bodies and more specifically, their hair. It was clear that by the late 1960s, the afro and the image of Black men and women with natural non-chemically treated hair had become synonymous with the Civil Rights movement and of the struggle for equality. Scholars Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps, who authored the heavily cited book, *Hair Story, Untangling the roots of Black hair in America*, raise this point when they write,

in the mid-sixties, Black hair underwent its biggest change since Africans arrived in America. The very perception of hair shifted from one of style to statement. And right and wrong, Blacks and Whites came to believe that the way Black people wore their hair said something about their politics (p. 51)

Although for countless social, religious, aesthetic, and cultural reasons, not all African Americans chose to wear their hair in its natural state during this period. The fact remains that by the 1970s, the signification had taken place, and the afro had emerged as a semiotic sign to a decade of Civil Rights struggle and social justice movement. So much so today, there is a tendency to automatically equate wearing of Black natural hair as a signal of radicalism. Given this fact, there is a tendency for some scholars to begin the discourse about Black hair in America within the Civil Rights era. It is, however, critical to note that, even before the wind of Civil Rights activism began to sweep across a resistant American hierarchal playing field, Black hair has played a pivotal role in the lives of African Americans. Hair for Black Americans has always been intrinsically political and deeply connected to issues of class mobility, beauty, and respectability (Morrow 1973; Rooks 2000; Chapman 2007; Byrd and Tharps 2001).

Therefore, in the undertaking of this dissertation, focused on questioning why Black women create digital spaces dedicated to the discourse of their hair, it was

imperative to reflect on the significance of hair in the lives of Black people. Black Feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2002) and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1995) inspire this exploration. These scholars have argued that understanding contemporary Black body politics requires in-depth consideration of the historical, social, political, and economic structures that create and maintain the dominant standards in society. It is by understanding these factors that these influential thinkers suggest that we can comprehend the impact of the system of scrutiny, critique, and erasure that occurs against bodies situated at the margins of hierarchal social configurations. To successfully examine the history of Black hair in America, one must trace Black hair's journey from continental Africa into the Americas. Although this dissertation does not attempt to present that vast voyage, it does reflect on some of that past by drawing from the scholarship of several scholars and on Willie Lee Morrow's (1973) widely cited text, *400 years without a comb*. This information provides clarity to the significance of the digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM) by highlighting the historic Black hair politics that continues to impact Black Americans.

Long before the enslavement of the first men and women, and their subsequent traumatic arrival to the "new world," Africans had an intimate relationship with their hair. As a symbol of social class, tribal identity, spiritual and cultural affiliations, hair in the African society such as the Yoruba, Mende, and Mandingo had more than an aesthetic significance (Patton 2006; Morrow 1973; Rooks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2001). Styling and the presentation of hair throughout history in many Africa nations, symbolized social class position, marital status, and wartime accomplishment. Moreover, the practices of sculpting, braiding and shaping of Black hair into unique forms, and the etching of scalps

with words and images were traditional practices that Byrd and Thraps (2001) and Morrow (1973) suggest transmitted coded messages and symbols. Upon arrival to Africa, Europeans became aware of the importance of Black hair, Morrow (1973) argues.

Morrow further states that slave-owners adapted practices that dehumanized and broke the will of their captives, by isolating the enslaved men and women from their African culture. One such practice and normalized tool of oppression were to shave the head as an explicit attempt to remove markers of tribal identities. He then proceeds to highlight the fact that left without the traditional oils and tools for caring for their hair; Black enslaved men and women endured their hair becoming a point of ridicule for their captors who denounced it as woolly, tough, and unattractive (Mercer 2013, p.101). Enslaved men and women would eventually adopt new methods for grooming their hair. Those assigned to work in close proximity to their masters, frequently wore wigs to cover their hair, or they made use of lard, margarine or butter to aid in their hair grooming practices, while those working in the field would use axle grease in the attempt to minimize the “rebelliousness” of their curls and kinks (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

What further exacerbated the dismissive action against Black hair textures, was the fact that in addition to skin tone, hair texture became a signifier of the position an enslaved man or woman held within the field, versus house slave dichotomy (Patton 2006). House slaves were often, though not always, the offspring of the sexual violence entrusted against enslaved women at the hands of their White male master. With straighter hair and fairer skin, these enslaved men and women typically occupied a higher-class position to their counterparts, a factor that scholars such as Byrd and Thraps 2001 and Rooks 2000 argue laid the foundation for issues of colorism which still plagues

Black communities today. Colorism is a system of hierarchy, relegating Black men and women with hair textures and skin tones closer to Europeans as being more beautiful and more desirable (Patton 2006, p.38).

Additionally, colorism also has economic implications. Morrow (1973) raised this point when he argued that enslaved Africans began to believe that lighter skin and straighter hair would assist them in attaining social and economic mobility. An explicit example of this phenomenon is the practice of racial passing, where bi-racial men and women attempted to gain social class mobility by gaining access into White only spaces, jobs, schools, or even marital beds. In defining passing, Elaine Ginsberg (1996) emphasized passing's relationship with social status. She writes that successful passing occurs when,

an individual crossed or passes through a racial line or boundary (trespassed) to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other (p. 3)

Additionally, for Ginsberg (1996) the motivation for passing is the desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain the social and economic opportunities of a dominant group (p. 5)

Other scholars who study the legacy of racial passing (see Sollors & Henry 1997; Kennedy 2001) suggest that men and women whose features allow them to "mute their Blackness" or as Ginsberg states, emphasize their white features (1996, p.11), could successfully engage in racial passing. Therefore, successful passing and infiltrating into White only spaces occur because these men and women had physical features that do not appear to mirror the traits stereotypically associated with African diasporic bodies. For runaway enslaved people, the ability to racially pass could mean the difference between

re-enslavement or freedom. Black Feminist critical culture scholar Michelle Wallace (1979) notes that some men and women with straighter hair textures and lighter skin capitalized on these features hoping that their resemblance to European features would be enough to convince bounty hunters that they belonged to that privileged class (p.17).

In Chapter 7 I pick up this discussion about colorism when I argue that beauty corporations inform their marketing messages with colorism infused though. I suggest that by doing so these companies uphold the tradition of ranking Black bodies. They do so by establishing a Black natural hierarchy that benefits them economically by driving naturalistas to engage in bulk buying practices in pursuit of the miracle products that allow their hair textures to mirror those that the beauty industry has erected as the new Black hair standard. In this way the legacy of colorism continues its problematic impact of suggest that owning some Black phenotypical traits can be a liability in one's ability to progress socially and economically. Of course, the contemporary presence of this legacy is not shocking given the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century, as formerly enslaved men and women shifted from commodities to purchasers of consumer goods, a Black consumer market emerged. With it, Byrd and Tharps (2001) notes a Black hair care boom occurred, as Blacks now had disposable income, some of which they used to purchase bleaching creams and hair-straightening products.

The purpose of purchasing and using these products, the scholars argue, was to engage in “self-improvement” by aiding their bodies towards achieving the "respectable" look of the "New Negro" (p.31). Noliwe Rooks (2000), like Byrd and Tharps (2001), also suggest that in that era, beauty supply companies began to market goods directly to Black men and women. Rooks (2000) notes that what was most poignant about those marketing

campaigns was the framing of their products not merely as beauty aids, but rather as remedies or treatment for the disadvantages of "Blackness." The advertisements for skin lighteners and hair straighteners marketed by white companies to Black men and women, Rooks argues, suggested that it was only through changing their physical features could persons of African descent be afforded social class mobility within the African American communities and social acceptance by dominant culture (p.26). Chapter 7 I suggest that beauty supply companies continue to frame their products as the treatment for the disadvantages of "Blackness."

I suggest that although some companies have seemingly shifted their attitudes to Black natural hair textures evident by the pro-Black natural hair messages found in their marketing campaigns, these companies have not entirely freed Black women from the constraints of dominant beauty standards. They continue to reiterate to these women that their Black hair textures are complex, and to earn social capital, they must engage in a continuous process of labor-intensive beauty work. These dominant beauty messages levied at Black women has remained consistent throughout much of the 20th and 21st centuries, even when during the Civil Rights movement hair norms shifted amongst some younger African Americans. In that era there was a prevailing notion that in order to be "real Black," one had to adorn natural hairstyles. Johnson & Bankhead (2014) argue during the Civil Rights era a significant shift occurred where natural hair once considered "bad" or a detriment to one's social status was considered "good" because by freeing it from chemicals or heat process, it was representative of the social rebellion and civil revolution (p. 89).

Inspired by the feelings of racial pride, political and social change, some African American men and women began to use their bodies as symbols of their pride. As a testament to the importance of hair, it became an essential site for their resistance. The afro, a style chiefly achieved by combing one's non-chemically altered Black hair upwards and outwards, became a visual presentation of some of the changes occurring. So, entrenched would the symbolic semiotic connection between the afro and activism become, that even today decades after, some continue to view Black natural hair as a militant political symbol (Chapman 2007; Thompson, 2009 and Jere-Malanda, 2008). As the seventies waged on, there was a growth and expansion of hair straightening methods and products marketed to Black men and women, which allowed for countless stylistic possibilities (Byrd and Tharps 2001, p.70). By the beginning of the eighties, the scholars note that America was changing as liberalism faded into the background replaced by conservatism. With this change, maybe in an attempt to escape the radicalism that had become linked to afros, some African Americans began to lay their afros down by returning to the practice of using perms and relaxers.

This laying down of the pick comb as it were and the returning to using the hot comb and relaxers to achieve less kinked coifs, signified the end of what some scholars call the first Black natural hair movement. In discussing this shifting norm of that decade Byrd and Tharps (2001) states,

While the afro and natural hair may have forced a broadening of the idea of what was considered beautiful and product, in many ways, victories were declared too soon. The United States was two hundred years old, and for the duration of its history, Blacks and their features were deemed ugly. It would take more than a few years and a few afros to turn things around (p.71)

These authors' sentiments are essential reminders that the negative political implication attached to Black natural hair did not dissipate at the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Instead, for Black women and girls, then, as it is today, hair is an emotive, symbolic, and an inseparable part of their identities (Johnson and Bankhead, 2014, 89).

Furthermore, Communications scholar Tracey Owens Patton (2006) notes that the shifting hair presentation trends among some Black women during much of the eighties and nineties were not merely a matter of stylistic changes. Instead, For Patton, some Black women opted to undergo hair strengthening processes because they found by doing so, it was easier to successfully navigate professional spaces (p. 27). Therefore, Patton's arguments reconfirm the problematic relationship that exists between the hair presentation skills of Black women and the potential for upwards social class mobility.

Notably, throughout this chapter thus far, when discussing the hair practices of Black men and women, those statements were continuously qualified by making use of the term "some." Qualifying those statements was an intentional choice to sidestep presenting the inaccurate perception that there was or is homogenous Black hair practices to which all Black men and women subscribed. Therefore, choices that some Black women made with how to present their hair after the post-enslavement era continues to be highly-contested, with some people fiercely advocating against the practice of straightening one's hair. For some of these detractors of relaxers, heat treatments, or other straightening mechanisms, hair straightening is a pitiful attempt to emulate Whites (Paton, 2006, p.29). This point of view held favor among some influential Black male figures of the past, such as W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, who were extremely vocal in their denouncement of the practice.

Wallace (1979) notes that Marcus Garvey's stance on hair straightening would become famously remembered by his declaration: don't remove the kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain (p.38). At the heart of this statement was the notion that the act of straightening one's hair was a demonstration of self-hatred and shame and disavowal of one's Black identity. Wallace 1979; Orbe and Harris 2001 and Patton 2006 rejects this notion that hair straightening practices are acts of assimilation. Patton (2006) situates her disagreement by suggesting that for some Black women, hair straightening practices are required, self-presentation labor to ensure their professional mobility. She notes that for some Black women, these practices are steps to improve their employment chances, and thus, they should not be seen as assimilationist—subscribing to dominant cultural standards of beauty (1979, 27). Orbe and Harris echo this belief when they note that organizational members who come from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group, may often have to balance their identities with organizational standards. As they do so, some members may feel their racial/ethnic identities become less important as they climb the ladder of success (2001, p.192).

Orbe and Harris further argue that when Black women chose to alter their hair textures, it does not mean that she will

automatically assimilate or substitute her cultural, racial, and ethnic identity for that of the majority culture. Rather, women can take creative measures in surviving the organization and being true to one's self. One way is with appearance (2001, p.192).

Therefore, for these researchers, some Black women must make the costly decision to alter their bodies to fit standards that do not consider their needs, in the pursuit of professional progress and economic success. Later in this chapter, there is a further exploration of how hair presentation choices affect the professional lives of Black

women. Exploring this vital issue is necessary as it supplies the theoretical framework for understanding the weightiness of the discourse that addresses the micro and macro aggressions that Black women encounter in professional spaces as it relates to their hair presentation choices. In addition to the external influences that shape the choices Black women make with their bodies, the internalization of negative notions of Black hair's beauty and professionalism has also served to inform hair care practices among Black women.

In her study of the hair presentation norms among Black women, Yolanda Chapman discusses how the prevalent practices of self-policing and intergenerational surveillance of the bodies of young Black women, severely inform how these women and girls relate to their bodies. Chapman (2000) notes that many of her informants reflect on the messages they first encountered in girlhood, where the older women in their families had instilled the notion that they were to never venture into public spaces without their hair being "done" (p.77). The importance placed on having one's hair done, Chapman argues, is a very familiar aspect of the Black beauty culture (p. 77). For many Black women, she suggests, the concept of having one's hair done is synonymous with their hair undergoing a chemical or extension process. Chapman's (2007) findings confirm that the messages many Black girls learn at an early age is, that one's natural Black hair is "undone," and that in its natural state, it requires treatment.

Given the potential negative professional and social costs Black women may face if they choose to wear their Black natural hair as it freely grows, there is a possibility that these surveillance practices may be defensive and preventive measures born out a place of love. They may be reactionary acts of survival, enacted by older Black women, to limit

the extent of the discrimination levied against their loved one who must navigate professional and educational social fields, while owning bodies that fall outside the limits of acceptability. None the less, when mothers, aunts, and grandmothers chasten young women to make sure that their hair is always laid¹, they do so to ensure that they remain afloat of respectability politics. The politics of respectability, a term popularized by African American studies scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993, p.187), is a surveillance mechanism undertaken by and deployed on Black men and women to police each other's behaviors. By policing these men and women, seek to ensure that each other's public actions are in line with the promotion of temperance, cleanliness, politeness, and sexual purity.

These policing behaviors are strategies believed to boost individual and community upward social mobilization. In discussing Higginbotham's use of the politics of respectability, Harris (2003) notes that

the politics of respectability entailed "reform of individual behavior as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform." Respectability was part of "uplift politics" and had two audiences: African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable (p. 213).

The use of the terms respectable and respectability here is laden with centuries of racist notions about the inferiority of Black bodies, and Black mental capacities. These notions suggest that Black men and women lack the potential to engage in the level of civilized interactions or to present their bodies in ways deemed appropriate by dominant society's standards. Thus, the choices, the purveyors of the DBNHM make with their hair, and

¹ Laid is a term used to denote hair that is neatly comb. Most often used to delineate hair that is tightly slicked back so there is no strand out of place.

their use of these digital groups to discuss their hair in positive and self-affirming ways is an affirmation of the value of Black natural hair.

By affirming Black natural hair, they are also rejecting the external and sometimes internal ideologies that have problematized it as unruly, distracting, dirty, and thus inferior. By presenting some of the work of scholars above who investigate the history of Black hair in America, this Chapter has thus far provided a brief overlook at some of the critical aspects of the calamitous relationship Black natural hair can share with mainstream American society. Their work highlights how some prevailing and dominating Eurocentric standards of beauty have long silenced Black women's bodies in disheartening ways. It is, however, to not oversimplify the issue of why some Black women chose to wear their hair in its natural state, and others do not. These reasons are multifaceted, ranging from the hegemonic and internalized ideology suggested here, to the individual stylistic desires not discussed thus far.

Regardless of the motivations, however, the critical issue at hand for this dissertation is, that there exist social standards that divide hair texture into good versus bad categories, based on their similarity to Caucasian norms and Western beauty standards. According to Rooks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2001 and Chapman 2007, these standards disproportionally affect the social and professional lives of Black women. They suggest that longstanding societal norms promote a beauty standard that excludes some Black women who are unable or unwilling to undertake the labor required to conform to them. These scholars also demonstrate how the replication of these norms within some Black communities, renders far-reaching economic implications that extend beyond hair's aesthetic impact. These economic implications are part of an enduring legacy that has

served to increase or decrease one's potential for Black social class mobility before and during the Antebellum period into the twenty-first century. In the following sections of this chapter, there is a further exploration of these issues. The next section highlights what can potentially be at stake when some Black women make the "radical" decision to wear their hair in its non-altered state.

The Gatekeepers of the Aesthetic Capital Attached to Black Natural Hair

Army Regulation 670-1

In the Spring of 2014, a petition signed by more than 10,000 servicemen and women made its way to United States Army headquarters in Washington DC and the desk of several White House officials. The petition championed by Marica Fudge, the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, was in response to the new set of grooming rules the United States Army established in March 2014. The rules known as Army Regulation 670-1, laid out in a document entitled, *Wear and Appearance of Army Uniform Insignia (2014)*, addressed new hair presentation standards to which all soldiers were required to conform. Although, military officials argued that these new standards were in keeping with the military's thrust to maintain uniformity among the ranks (Rhodan 2014), the disproportionate impact these rules would have made in the lives of some Black men and women, was a stark reminder that institutional policies often emerge at the expense of Black bodies.

Regulation 670-1's explicit denouncement of dreadlocks, afros, two-strand twists, and other hairstyles frequently worn by naturalistas was a bitter pill to swallow for these women. Women who have dedicated their lives and bodies to service, yet, aspects of their bodies were considered unacceptable, untidy, and unwanted. Angered by what they

deemed a racially incentive regulation, members of the Congressional Black Caucus wrote to the Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel. In the April 10th, 2014 letter, the members argued for a reversal of the rules because the guidelines were discriminatory and posited stereotypical ideologies about the bodies of Black men and women. In the letter, the Caucus members argued that African American women have often been required to meet unreasonable norms as it relates to accepted standards of grooming in the workplace. (America's Congressional Black Caucus 2014).

Additionally, the members highlighted that the use of words like "unkempt" and "mattered" which both appeared in the regulations (U.S. Department of the Army 2014, p.3) when referencing the hairstyles traditionally worn by women of color was, offensive and

biased. They noted that,

The assumption that individuals wearing their hairstyles cannot maintain them in a way that meets the professionalism of Army standards indicates a lack of the cultural sensitivity conducive to creating a tolerant environment for minorities (America's Congressional Black Caucus 2014).

In response to the strongly worded letter, Defense Secretary Charles Hagel wrote to the members of the Caucus on April 29th, 2014, announcing that he had instructed the Service Secretaries and Military Chiefs to review their policies and to address the issues identified by the Caucus members. (Secretary of Defense Hagel, 2014). Also, Secretary Hagel (2014) further argued that revisiting the rules was a reflection of the Army's dedication to continuing efforts to ensure that its policies are fair and respectful of the diversity within the force.

In a press release, Congresswoman Fudge thanked Secretary Hagel for his prompt response to the matter. She further stated that the necessary changes to the new policy

would,

recognize that traditional hairstyles worn by women of color are often necessary to meet our unique needs and acknowledge that these hairstyles do not result in or reflect less professionalism or commitment to the high standards required to serve within our Armed forces (Fudge, 2014).

Emanating from Congresswoman Fudge's response and buried within Secretary Hagel's decision to order a review, was an acknowledgment that the original regulation was indicative of diversity-void approaches many institutions take when creating dress code policies. The incident garnered significant media interest and sparked broad debates, which is an explicit example of the underlying sociopolitical implication of having Black natural hair. By problematizing many of the popular hairstyles naturalistas wear, Regulation 670-1, positioned Black natural hair as distracting and unwanted and thus would have forced many Black servicewomen to make difficult decisions about their hair, to ensure that they maintained their jobs.

The idea that one needs to alter their hair texture or practices to appear more professional, many Black women have battled against for decades. Scholars like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, and other Black Feminist thinkers have explored these issues by considering how Black women's body politics and respectability politics play a crucial role in shaping the everyday lives of Black women. For instance, sociologist and Black feminist scholar Shirley Anne Tate (2007) argues that because hair is a significant marker of femininity, gender, and identity, by 'othering' Black women's hair, society has, in fact, dehumanized Black women in ways that disproportionately negatively affect their ability to claim femininity and beauty. It is critically important not to dismiss the importance of possessing a body deemed physically appealing or beautiful, as a matter of vanity.

Beauty is a form of human capital that Sylvia Holla and Giseline Kuipers (2015) argue is an essential part of the individual package of skills and competencies that is tradeable in the economic marketplace and in everyday life (p.291). These scholars further note that studies by Hamermesh and Abrevaya, 2013; Kwan and Trautner, 2009; van Leeuwen and Maccrae, 2004) reveal that people deemed attractive by hegemonic standards are more successful socially and economically (p.291). In the same stead, Chapman (2007) argues that women can access social capital through their hair and certain women are socially rewarded for having straight hair, as it is connected with the dominant culture which translates into power and resources (pp. 32-33). Therefore, for citizens in a capitalist society, Black women are often forced to balance their body presentation preferences with the looming economic and social costs associated with rejecting the conventional beauty norms.

Given the fact that beauty can function as a transfer point for relations of power (Nuttall 2000, p.342), the possession of "beauty" is thus a currency with value in social and economic markets, and those with the power to determine what is beautiful or professional or respectable, hold a substantial control in shaping significant aspects of social order. Then, for Black women navigating life within such a society, there can be a significant imbalance in their ability to attain this valuable currency. This imbalance places them at a notable disadvantage to their White counterparts. Chapman (2007) explains this point when she writes;

Beauty has been socially constructed to favor White features such as straight hair; thus, this social preference for White hair has given power to those with straight hair. Those with straight hair or "White" hair are given access to certain valuable societies and social groups that deem this type of hair as a symbol of upper-class status (p.31).

Head hair then, as argued at the beginning of this chapter, is neither a trivial nor mundane aspect in the lives of Black women.

In her study of sixty-two African Americans and their perceptions of beauty, Cultural Anthropologist Sybil Rosado notes the importance of hair texture among her participants. She flags their use of the terms "good" versus "bad" hair when discussing texture, length, and curl pattern. She revealed that her participants would refer to hair that is long, straight, and silky as "good" hair, and inversely, "bad" hair was short, curly, and woolly. Rosado then states that

these designations were explicitly linked to the women's assessment of individuals' genotypes and implicitly linked to their perception of access to what Bourdieu calls "social capital." Good hair was a code word for Caucasian, or straight, hair, and having good hair meant that you hold an increased level of social capital. On the opposite end of the continuum, bad hair served as a code for African or kinky hair and having bad hair meant that you had less social capital (pp.61 – 62).

Echoed throughout Rosado's argument is the declaring that hair texture is a resource, a form of aesthetic capital that can render or deny social or economic privileges to its possessors. Aesthetic capital is an embodied form of capital (Bourdieu 1984, p.118) unevenly divided across people providing some with advantages inside and outside the direct field of appearance and sexuality (Holla and Kuipers 2015, p. 290).

Similarly, Anderson et al. note that aesthetic capital

refers to traits of beauty that are perceived as assets capable of yielding privilege, opportunity, and wealth. What are these personal beauty assets? At a minimum, they are located in face and hair (e.g., the symmetry of the face and other facial features and hair colour, texture, and style), body or physique (waist-to-hip ratios, body mass indices, height, and weight, etc.) (2000, p.566).

In this definition, Anderson et al. (2010) explicitly define physical appearance as a form of capital that can convert into social resources. Therefore, there are social implications

of possessing a body that aligns with the standards of beauty. Holla and Kuipers (2015) note that people are inclined to associate “good looks” with other positive qualities, from moral goodness to economic success (p.290). The assumption that those considered beautiful are also morally or economically superior is what some social psychologists (e.g., Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Kaplan, 1978) deem the halo effect; the assumption that those who exhibit desirable physical traits are also possessors of other inherent positive qualities nothing to do with physical appearance (Holla and Kuipers 2015, p.290).

It is important to note that to understand the holistic impact of aesthetic capital in social life, one must move beyond understanding the term capital merely in its rawest Marxian financial terms. Instead, Anderson et al. (2010) suggest that to understand aesthetic capital, one must consider Bourdieu's (1984, p.53) use of cultural capital. They argue that aesthetic capital can be located within cultural capital because, cultural capital is mostly symbolic, which distinguished it from other types of capital (e.g., economic and social). Moreover, they note that when cultural capital functions like symbolic capital, it often makes it seem like something ‘natural’ about those who possess it. Thus, for Anderson et al. (2010), aesthetic capital would be a type of symbolic cultural capital since beauty is perceived to have intrinsic worth (p. 565). Hollywood is one marketplace in which the trading of aesthetic capital can yield exceptional returns.

Dean (2005) notes that actors and models gain financial rewards for their beauty, and they also use their perceived aesthetic capital to negotiate and secure their employment. Not only celebrities practice this trading, so too do many people living in technologically saturated societies who participate in the daily immaterial digital labor of capturing and sharing images on social media spaces. These digital labor practices grant

the opportunity for everyday citizens to trade their time and privacy for the opportunity to capitalize either socially, and in some cases financially, on the value assessed to their bodies. One group of online users who benefit from these acts of bodily assessment are Black hair models or social media hair influencers. In Chapter 7, there is an exploration into the ways and means by which these women exchange their aesthetic capital for financial currency. In that chapter, we consider how naturalistas gain financial benefits from beauty supply corporations, who pay them to use their high levels of social capital within SMNHG, to promote their brands.

What is most interesting about this phenomenon is that, unlike the tendency of the mainstream standards of beauty to reject Black natural hair as a site of beauty, the DBNHM has re-defined and established a more inclusive beauty norm. It is by doing, so these women gain the ability to participate in trading the aesthetic capital given to their hair and valorized by the DBHNM. Many Feminist theory scholars explore aesthetic beauty. These researchers often investigate two areas. First, some question how beauty practices oppress women (e.g., Forbes et al. 2007; Craig 2006; Felski 2006), while others center their work on how marginalized minorities are affected by the social arrangements defined by hierarchal beauty structures (e.g., Craig 2006; Weekes 1997; Hobson 2003). Those scholars who attest to the oppressive nature of beauty in the lives of women, do so by arguing that indoctrinated into a social structure that consistently evaluates their bodies, girls undergo socialization that incentivizes the pursuit of a very narrowly defined version of beauty.

This pursuit occurs because there is a normalization of beauty as a feminine attribute and its pursuit as a feminine responsibility (Rodin et al. 1984). The unending

pursuit of beauty serves to instill self-policing practices among girls and women, who engage in aesthetic labor to fix perceived imperfections to improve their position within the beauty ranks (Bordo 1993). For researchers like Hollander and Allen 2006 and Stein et al. 2006, this pursuit of an elusive perfected aesthetic capital contributes to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia among women. The second area of aesthetic capital research, some Feminist explore, considers how westernized notions of beauty reflect Eurocentric standards, which make the pursuit of aesthetic capital even more treacherous for racial minorities. As highlighted by the example of AR 6701-1, Black women must often engage in aesthetic labor practices, not merely for personal satisfaction, but in the quest to mirror their bodies to the requirements deemed acceptable and necessary, to engage within professional spaces.

Henceforth, for some Black women in America, the access to the resources available for exchange with aesthetic capital can be far out of reach, and with it the form of power associated with accumulating cultural capital. Those who define and determine aesthetic body norms such as media producers, fashion critics, Human Resource departments, or even military officials are immensely powerful, as they can create the rules and policies of inclusion and exclusion. These practices, in turn, shape the choices men and women make with their bodies. For example, Regulation 670-1, did not only have the potential to limit the hairstyling possibilities of Black naturalistas, but it could have impacted the employment and, thus, the economic standing of these women. Inspired by the works of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle' Crenshaw, and Shirley Anne Tate, this dissertation addresses Black body politics by

exploring how Black hair politics concerns questions of racism, as well as the interconnection issues of sexism and classism.

These scholars provided a vital framework for tracing the historical relationship that Black hair has with mainstream American institutions. They highlight how seemingly mundane rules and policies can be weaponized to dismiss Black women's bodies. For instance, Kimberle' Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory, although now widely used across many disciplines, to attend to many issues, the scholar first used the theory to answer the question of how Black women's overlapping or intersecting social identities, relate to systems and structures of oppression, domination, and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Patricia Hill Collins' work also explores intersectionality by positioning it as critical to academic research that focuses on Black women, their bodies, and their agency. In both *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2002) and *Black sexual politics* (2004), Hill-Collins demonstrates that, to critically attend to the realities of contemporary life for Black women, we must consider the unique histories of Black women. Additionally, she notes that we must also consider how the policies and norms that govern contemporary, social, and corporate structures continue to contribute to the existence of systems of oppression.

At its most simplistic form, Hill-Collins' work suggests that critical research into the lives of Black women is incomplete, unless one moves beyond the interpersonal, towards examining the political and economic structures that historically and contemporarily order these women's lives. One such structure that impacts Black women's lives in significant ways is the judicial system.

Black Hair a Legal Quagmire

In September 2016, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Alabama dismissed a lawsuit brought by Chastity Jones against Catastrophe Management Solutions (CMS), a company located in Mobile Alabama. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed a lawsuit on behalf of Ms. Jones, alleging that the company had exercised racial discrimination in their hiring practices when they rescinded a job offer made to her. Ms. Jones claimed that the HR manager/ Ms. Wilson offered her the job after an in-person interview. However, as the interview session concluded, according to the court documents state, the HR manager asked whether Ms. Jones had her hair in dreadlocks,

Ms. Jones said yes, and Ms. Wilson replied that CMS could not hire her "with the dreadlocks." When Ms. Jones asked what the problem was, Ms. Wilson said: "they tend to get messy, although I'm not saying yours are, but you know what I'm talking about." Ms. Wilson told Ms. Jones about a male applicant who was asked to cut off his dreadlocks in order to obtain a job with CMS (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v Catastrophe Management Solutions, 2016, p.5).

When Ms. Jones refused to agree to cut her hair, the HR manager withdrew the offer. The company contested the lawsuit citing that the HR manager's decision was in keeping with the organization's related grooming policy which according to the court documents states,

All personnel are expected to be dressed and groomed in a manner that projects a professional and businesslike image while adhering to company and industry standards and/or guidelines... [H]airstyle should reflect a business/professional image. No excessive hairstyles or unusual colors are acceptable. (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v Catastrophe Management Solutions, 2016, p.5).

The EEOC, however, argued that by refusing to hire Ms. Jones because of her hairstyle, the company was engaging in discriminatory practices. Much of the EEOC's case depended on their ability to prove that although written, using race-neutral language, like Regulation 670-1, CMS' grooming policy significantly disenfranchises Black men and

women by problematizing hairstyles trends popular among members of African diasporic communities.

To make this point, EEOC first noted that,

Race is a social construct and has no biological definition. Second, they emphasized that the concept of race is not limited to or defined by immutable physical characteristics. Next, they suggested that the concept of race encompasses cultural characteristics related to race or ethnicity, including "grooming practices." Fourth, they argued that although some non-Black persons "have a hair texture that would allow the hair to lock," dreadlocks are nonetheless a racial characteristic, just as skin color is a racial characteristic. (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v Catastrophe Management Solutions, 2016, p.6).

Despite a convincing and detailed argument, on June 2nd, 2014, an Alabama district court judge dismissed the case. The presiding Judge, US District Charles R. Butler Jr, moved to reject the EEOC case, arguing that a company grooming policy based on a mutable characteristic, such as hairstyle, is not racially discriminatory (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v Catastrophe Management Solutions, 2014, p.1).

Judge Butler further noted that,

Title VII prohibits discrimination on the basis of immutable characteristics, such as race, sex, color, or national origin. A hairstyle, even one more closely associated with a particular ethnic group, is a mutable characteristic (p.8).

This ruling erroneously suggested several problematic ideas. First, although it alluded to the cultural significance of dreadlocks within some African diasporic spaces, it proceeded to discount that significance by dismissing dreadlocks as mere hairstyle, pliable and mutable and inevitably easily cast aside. Second, it ignored the significant historical discrimination Black natural hair has faced, even though this problematic history echoed through the words of the HR manager who labeled dreadlocks as messy. The messy trope, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is one Black hair has endured for centuries. The

ruling was a reinforcement of the hegemonic notions that limits the possibilities of some Black bodies.

After the dismissal, the EEOC escalated the case to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, where a judicial panel of three judges dismissed the case. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund then petitioned the Supreme Court on Jones' behalf. Unfortunately, in April 2018, the Supreme Court denied hearing the case, which meant that Judge Butler's ruling stood. This example is a vivid illustration of how capitalism and politics continuously complicate twenty-first-century Black body politics. Those who render hiring decisions based on the idea that Black natural hair is inherently untidy or that it lacks the professional acumen, to fit into professional spaces, can camouflage and bury their prejudicial beliefs safely within the legal parameters of seemingly innocuous dress code policies. These gatekeepers, such as CMS executives, for example, can use criteria such as hairstyles, to judge potential employees as incapable, and "unacceptable" for employment.

As such, Ms. Jones' hair, not her qualifications nor her skills, rendered her unfit. Thus, her opportunity for employment diminished because aesthetically, she appeared in their estimation to lack the image of someone with professional competency. Ms. Jones' further inability to find a legal resolution in this case, also demonstrates that it is critically important to focus not merely on individual acts of discrimination, but on the systematic legal structures that allow problematic policies to continue. With this legal precedent set, dismissive standards of professionalism much like standards of beauty can continue to exclude Black natural hair, and in doing so, naturalistas who are already playing a tentative game within professionalism spaces may have to comply and adhere to the

standards to gain a foothold in some professional spaces. With social structures continuing to place high levels of importance on hair as a marker of beauty and femininity, hair continues to be a focal point by which some evaluate the social and cultural competency of African Americans.

Therefore, as Chapman (2007) argues, generations of Black women are hyper-aware of their hair presentation practices. This hyper-awareness materializes not only in emotional and social ways, but it contributes to exorbitant purchasing behaviors by Black women who seek out products to aid in their aesthetic labor practices. In Chapter 7, I further explore the economic relationship between Black head hair and capitalism. Having examined the role corporations and the legal system play in shaping the everyday lives of naturalistas, it is now time to shortly explore the mainstream media's role in upholding problematic beauty hierarchal structures as it relates to hair.

The Media, the Message, and Millions of Tweets

Throughout much of Chapter 3, I will explore the role the media has played in the process of othering Black natural hair. Although I do not repeat that literature here, I provide two examples of controversial moments in which Black natural hair took mainstream media center stage. I outline the discourse and reactions these moments sparked amongst social media users. These instances are noteworthy because they are contemporary examples of dominant mediated narratives that called upon old oppressive tropes to continue the long historical trajectory of problematizing Black natural hair.

When the Wig Came Off: Black Hair on the Prime-Time Screen

Millions of transfixed fans gazed on as Annalise, the strong-willed, Black, criminal attorney, who confidently traverses white-dominated spaces, while appropriately dressed in the uniform of respectability, sits alone in tears. Having just learned of her husband's infidelity, she strips herself of the physical and emotional masks which protectively layers her intersectional identity. The character that perfectly embodies the Strong Black woman's ethos begins to unravel, and a spellbound audience watches as her carefully constructed public wall crumbles, and for a minute, she becomes less mythical and more human, vulnerable and in need of support. As Annalise angrily smudges her makeup, the camera pans into her and centers her visually distraught face. She swiftly removes the straight, shoulder-length wig from her head. Unveiling her tightly cropped, kinked, un-groomed, natural hair, sending Twitter ablaze as the constituents of Shondaland were electrified and polarized, and the politics of Black women's hair, the politics of respectability and representation, all came to play before millions of racially diverse viewers, during primetime on a major network station.

When this now infamous scene featuring Annalise the protagonists of *How to get away with murder*, first premiered in October 2014, it became an instant reference point. The episode of the hit primetime ABC show by Executive Producer Shonda Rhimes earned more than 9.9 million viewers. Live-tweeting the Shonda Rhimes show was, and to some degree continues to be, a significant element of its media consumption. Fans used the hashtag #HowToGetAwayWithMurder fans while engaging in a virtual watching party, which allowed them to discuss each episode with friends and strangers. Therefore, when Viola Davis, the actress who plays Annalise, removed her wig, Twitter became alive, with some fans, celebrated the presentation of a Black woman in her most

vulnerable and natural state. There were, however, some fans who chastised Rhimes for daring to air out in-group hair secrets in such a public forum.

The positive and negative response to the scene solidified one crucial fact, that for Black women, hair matters, and public or media presentation of it, even when on the bodies of other Black women, still felt personal. Interestingly, despite the hundreds of thousands of Tweets discussing the scene that evening, a Tweet posted by the official account of People magazine would eventually garner a large percentage of attention that night. The Tweet read, Waiting for Viola to break into "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." #HowToGetAwayWithMurder (@peplemag, 2014). The Tweet referenced words said by Viola Davis' character in the movie *The Help* in which she played a servant in a struggling and racially tenuous 1960s America. Within seconds of the Tweet going live, fans of the show mounted a backlash, criticizing the magazine. Although the @peplemag account swiftly deleted the Tweet, bloggers took to sites like The Huffington Post, Bet.com, and MadamNoire to both celebrate the scene as powerful, epic, and brave while criticizing the popular magazine.

By referencing the movie, *The Help*, it appeared that having encountered the image of a Black woman in her most natural state; without makeup and displaying her tight kinky hair, the user of the People Magazine Twitter account that evening, immediately drew upon a schema-informed by decades of monolithic mediate images. Images in which short kinky Black hair appears in the media only when fixed to a body engaging in servitude. Though the company attempted to dismiss the Tweet as a joke, the culturally incentive statement reflected that Black natural hair continues to be a signifier of a Black woman's impoverished, fiery or matriarchal, or mammy like persona. In an

October 2014 interview with Huffington Post', Caroline Frost Viola Davis was asked about the "de-wigging" scene. She noted that she was instrumental in the scene coming into being. Frost quotes Davis saying,

I said, she's not going to bed with her wig on. It could be powerful and liberating, but she's got to take her wig off. Because who Annalise is in public is a big fat lie, and we have to see her taking off the armor, which is so thick, it becomes all the more dramatic when she removes it, and you see all the pain. (Davis 2014).

Interestingly, Davis' explanation of the scene suggests that she envisioned the scene to be a moment of vulnerability. A trait rarely associated with popular media images of Black womanhood, allowing space for Black women to be vulnerable, to appear in less predictable ways is the hallmark of Rhimes' work. Davis suggests this very point later in the interview when she praises Rhimes for providing a platform for multilayered representations of Black women. Davis states,

She redefined us as something bold and strong [...] We're no longer supporting; we're not necessarily nurturing; we're not asexual. We're none of it. And Shondra doesn't apologize or make a big deal of it. So, the viewer simply forgets, and we can all get on with the story (Davis 2014).

This description of Rhimes' work is interesting; it suggests that given the level of power afforded to Shondra Rhimes' as executive producers of this prime-time ABC show, she, as a Black woman, has taken the opportunity to allow for plural images of Black womanhood to seep through. It may then appear that the "de-wigging" scene was a moment that Rhimes and Davis expected to be a moment of liberation. If this indeed was their intent, the People Magazine's Twitter account user erroneously decoded the moment as yet another image of Black women's bodies steeped in longstanding stereotypes.

In a similar act of inaccurate decoding of the media text, those fans who accused Rhimes of exposing in-group secrets to out-group members neglected to read the text

how Rhimes may have coded it. Regardless of Rhimes' intention, the moment sparked widespread discussion about the presentation of Black women's hair in public spaces. It would, however, not be the only time Viola Davis would push the limits of Hollywood's acceptance of Black women's bodies. In her off-screen life, Davis regularly appears on red carpet events with her natural hair trimmed low. Davis' choice to present her body in ways that deviate from Hollywood's expected standards, has earned her some criticisms. In a September 2014 article, New York Times writer Alessandra Stanley described Davis as older, darker-skinned, and less classically beautiful than Ms. [Kerry] Washington (Stanley 2014). Washington, the star of another of Shonda Rhimes' ABC show, entitled *Scandal*, is younger, lighter-skinned, and most often wears her hair straight on and off-camera. It appears then that in Stanley's opinion, Washington possesses more of the ever-important currency of beauty.

Stanley's use of the term "less classically beautiful" demonstrates that dominant notions of beauty informed her aesthetic evaluation of these women. Stanley's comments are thus in keeping with Wallace's argument that hegemonic standards of beauty, when stretched to allow Black women, will often only do so if the Black woman's hair was straight and her skin light, (1979, p.157–8). Therefore, while Stanley affirmed Kerry Washington's beauty, she only did so by situating her along Davis (whose beauty capital was slight). Stanley's article not only earned an immediate backlash online, but it sparked the use of the hashtag #notclassicallybeautiful, in which Black and white women alike shared photographs of themselves across Twitter in a defiance act of self-love and rejection of restrictive notions of beauty. This example demonstrates that social media

platforms have become a space in which the contesting of diminishing ideas about Black women's bodies and their hair frequently occurs.

In less than a year after the #notclassicallybeautiful hashtag rose to prominence, another social media site would hold center stage when the hair of another Black actress underwent severe criticism on an episode of Entertainment Television's *Fashion Police*. *Fashion Police* was a program that featured a weekly panel of fashion and entertainment industry notables, analyzing and reviewing celebrities as they walked industry red carpet events. On the September 23rd, 2015 episode, television personality Giuliana Rancic commenting on the faux dreadlocks worn by actress and singer Zendaya Coleman on the red carpet of Oscars Awards. Rancic first suggested that Coleman's hair choice made her look less high-fashion before stating, I feel like she smells like patchouli oil or weed (Rancic 2015). In response to Rancic comment's Zendaya took to Instagram. She first situated her disappointment within a cultural and historical context, writing,

There is a fine line between what is funny and disrespectful," and *Fashion Police* clearly hasn't learned what that is. Comments like these are not only offensive to a large group of people but borderline racist and largely wrong generalizations that only helped in further reinforcing a stereotype that has a deeply rooted negative history (@zendaya 2015)

Here Zendaya articulates that the statement though directly targeted towards her was indicative of the broader conceptions surrounding Black hair. As a result, Zendaya's response emphasized that she recognized that other Black women would also feel the implications of the statement. In concluding her response, she wrote,

There is already harsh criticism of African-American hair in society without the help of ignorant people who choose to judge others based on the curl of their hair. My wearing my hair in locs on an Oscar red carpet was to showcase them in a positive light, to remind people of color that our hair is good enough (@zendaya 2015).

Zendaya's statement suggested that her decision to style her hair for the event was an intentional act meant to be a statement for the inclusion of Black hair in its many forms into Hollywood's beauty standard. Regardless of whether Zendaya intentionally intended to make a statement with her hair choice, the comments by Rancic provided an opportunity for Black hair representation to become a topic of extensive social media discourse once again.

Both Rancic and Stanley, as White women occupying positions of power as gatekeepers within the media and fashion industry, exhibited restrictive behaviors as they appeared to dismiss attempts by celebrity Black women to force hegemonic beauty standards to expand. Their comments validate Gender and Race studies scholar Cheryl Thompson's argument that it is not enough for Black women to simply wear their hair any way they please without their styling choice being called into question. After centuries of condemnation, Black hair is inextricably laden with social, class, sexual, and cultural implications (2009, p. 851). This chapter highlights that for Black women living in a dominant culture which has explicit history of abusing, policing and undervaluing the Black, female body, Black natural hair continues to be a site of struggle as some continue to reject its inclusion into the fiercely guarded mainstream standards of beauty and professionalism.

The cost of media representation is high for Black women, presented as a monolithic collective while undergoing acts of othering and stereotyping. As the examples above suggest, however, some Black women are actively rejecting these notions in explicit ways. Social media platforms serve as one such space for these acts of dissent. Ultimately, the scholarship presented in this chapter grounds this dissertation's

arguments that, because hegemonic beauty standards disallow Black women with natural hair from benefitting from the potential capital rewards attached to beauty, Black hair can have a significant impact on the daily experiences of Black women. For these women who choose to wear their hair in ways deemed distracting, dirty, or unprofessional, what should be routine interactions with social institutions such as the mass media, corporate spaces, and the judicial system, can be moments of trauma. As the gatekeepers, these institutions uphold hegemonic notions about Black natural hair, they do so at the expense of the women who refuse to alter their bodies.

The chapter was thus an exploration into the potential impetus for the creation and use of SMNHG. Furthermore, given the historical and contemporary economic, social, and emotional costs attached to Black women choosing to wear their hair in its natural state, the act of creating and sharing pro-natural hair content in those digital spaces are, therefore, acts of everyday resistance. Resistance and ideological warfare acts of defiance embodied by the production of counter-hegemonic media artifacts that emerges as these women collect on and make use of social media sites. Before making assumptions about the resistant nature of the online communities these Black women are creating online, it was necessary to consider how the gatekeepers of these institutions of power affect the attainment of aesthetic capital for naturalistas. By doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic labor practices undertaken by these users of SMNHG emerged.

CHAPTER III

Literature Review

Carving Out Spaces of Resistance

Black women have always invested their labor into building themselves spaces of resistance (hooks, 1990). For the preeminent scholar, bell hooks, these are essential spaces, where Black women affirm their minds and hearts despite the hardship and deprivation they face; spaces in which to restore dignity denied them on the outside public world (p.42). These enclaves allow Black women to collectively engage in countering the racial and gender oppression they endure in their lives. Black feminist scholars (e.g., Wallace 1978; hooks 1993; Hill-Collins 2000 and Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009) have also emphasized the importance of safe spaces in providing a venue in which Black women can engage in resistance practices. These resistance practices, however, are not those actions solely aligned with explicit political activism.

While Black women have and do engage in revolts, marches, and other embodied forms of activism, for those who employ Black Feminists Thought within their academic and everyday praxis, there is a recognition of the ideological and non-physical forms of resistance that are also native to Black women's liberation practices. Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) describes these non-physical practices as everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1989) undertaken by Black women to overcome the matrix of domination, that attempts to limit the possibilities of their lives. Black women's resistance practices, for Collins, can take different forms because these practices are as sophisticated as the oppression they face. She writes,

Because the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of

power work together to produce particular patterns of domination, Black women's activism demonstrates a comparable complexity (2000, p.203).

Collin's argument makes allowances for resistant acts outside the realm of actions understood as traditional anti-hegemonic behaviors. It is this comprehensive understanding of resistance that allows for the argument that media text production in these SMNHG constitutes a form of resistance.

Throughout this chapter, the scholarship introduced undergirds an exploration of the argument that creating digital media text is not always an exercise in frivolity. Instead, these SMNHG provide an opportunity for members of a marginalized community, to produce content that allows them to gain a seat at the table where they can add their voice to the narratives shaping mediated messages about their lives and bodies. Like other social media spaces, using these SMNHG is not a monumental event. Instead, it is merely a ritualistic chore embedded within the daily routine of many twenty-first century western citizens. From the comfort of their couches, these women post narratives, images, symbols, and videos as they participate in the celebration of Black natural hair with their geographically dispersed cohorts. Although this may seem too casual an act to warrant critical analysis, because these women make use of these posts to denounce the constricting and ubiquitous hegemonic beauty ideals that attempt to subjugate and "other" their hair, their digital labor rises to the standard of everyday ideological resistance practices.

A significant tenet of social media content is that it can become viral. This high potential that a message produced in one space can transfer to other spaces means that these SMNHG resemble the type of social spaces Patricia Hill Collins describes as spheres of influence that stands within the existing social structure (2000, p.204). Social

media platforms are, thus, not alienated from the broader social world. These two spheres, the virtual and the physical, simultaneously influence and inform each other. Therefore, these SMNHG can function as sites of contestation, where these Black women can collectively negotiate around shared issues of body politics. They can also engage in the production of self-reflective narratives and participate in an explicit form of self-love; one that is radical and similar in tone to the type of resistance Audre Lorde may have imagined when she stated that, it is not self-indulgence to love and care for oneself, but it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare (1988, p.131).

The sections below introduce scholarship that will serve to support framing the labor undertaken by members of SMNHG as acts of warfare and everyday defiance. In formulating these arguments, it was first necessary to define and then situate the theory of everyday resistance within this study. Next, this chapter introduces Sister Circles and highlights the critical role they play in Black women's everyday resistance practices. Introducing Sister Circles is necessary because argued throughout the dissertation is the belief that these SMNHG are digital sister circles; virtual incarnations of the enclaves that Black women have for generations created to retreat, fellowship, and engage in strategic liberating practices. Next, before exploring how new technology contributes to the plurality of narratives about Black women, the third section does the necessary job of situating the media industry as a critical purveyor of negative stereotypes about Black women's hair. The works of Stuart Hall, Patricia Hill Collins, James Lull, and Joseph Turow provide a lens from which explore the tenuous relationship, Black women's bodies have shared with the United States' mainstream media machine.

The arguments raised by these scholars demonstrate how Black women's lack of ownership of the means of media production coupled with narrowly defined, stereotypical, repetitive media messages have collectively served to "other" the bodies of Black women in mediated platforms. This section of this chapter, therefore, answers the question, "what are these women using SMNHG to resistant against?" Although there is a recognition that the Internet has lowered the barriers of participation in media production, which has afforded Black women new modes for challenging hegemony, it was necessary to ensure that this study does not appear to render an exceptionalism view of new technology. The arguments raised in the fourth section accomplished this by highlighting that digital anti-hegemonic movements among Black women are a modern take on an already well-established history of Black women engaging in alternative media production. Additionally, in keeping with the dissertation's focus on liberation and resistance, this section contests any perception that the users of SMNHG are agentless victims of negative mediated messages.

Instead, by offering examples of how Black women have historically and contemporarily resisted through both traditional and digital media text creation, the section allows for the argument that many of the SMNHG members have assumed the role of resistance actors and in so doing they are upholding the politicized tradition of challenging oppression. In defining them as resistance actors, in this section, it is suggested that their resistance is an ideological one. A resistance that consists of the production of digital media text embedded with a message of self-love and pro-Black natural hair that stands counter to the narrative of the mainstream media. Next, by introducing arguments by scholars like Sociologist Alberto Melucci, Howard Rheingold,

and Michele Willson, the chapter also situates theories of virtual communities and shared oppression alongside the theory of resistance to highlight how shared identities can serve as a conduit for collective acts of resistance. Throughout the section, there is a consideration of how Internet users draw upon their shared offline experiences to build solidarity and forge a sense of community among themselves.

Everyday Form of Resistance

Webster's dictionary defines resistance as; acts that exert force to withstand the effects of an opposition. It also describes it as; an act of exerting oneself to counteract defeat. Both of these definitions immediately trigger images of explicit physical contention and disputes between oppositional forces. When we consider how resistance traditionally materializes in our social world, we can imagine riots, marches, and strikes. These overt forms of resistance are some of the tools marginalized members of society employ to counteract and resist the despotic laws, norms, or corporate policies. By engaging in these acts of resistance, classed, gendered, and raced communities unable to create and execute legal and judicial power, hope to garner some power to shift social structures towards their ends. Riots, marches, and strikes are, therefore, undoubtedly understood as being fraught with political implications. These explicit acts, however, are by far not the only means by which marginalized communities engage in counter-hegemonic turns. Disfranchised groups also participate in more subtle, covert, and daily acts. These less visible acts can potentially go under-recognized if one equates political action only with grandiose, organized public displays of antagonism.

A failure to recognize subtle acts of resistance, however, is a failure to capture a holistic understanding of the multilayered methods by which the struggles between the

privileged classes and the disfranchised occur. Some of these less overt acts fall into the category of everyday resistance. For political scientist James C Scott (1989), the scholar credited with coining the term, everyday acts of resistance are the quiet and disguised acts that undermine power. Articulating his understanding of this type of resistance through the lens of class struggle, Scott offered several examples of everyday resistance including, foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander or sabotage (1989, p.34). These practices, he notes, have historically been techniques of first resort when open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger (p.34). Although for Scott (1989), everyday resistance requires little or no formal coordination (p.35), he notes that there is still some level of cooperation, which is evident by the emergence of patterns in behavior (p.36).

Additionally, Scott (1989) suggests that what is most potent about everyday resistance is that through repetition and consistency, what seems as insignificant acts can have aggregated consequences. He writes that each of these small events may be beneath notice, and, from the perpetrator's point of view, they are often designed to be beneath notice (p. 35). Scott, however, notes that when these small singular acts are weighed as a collective, they may add up almost surreptitiously to a more significant event (p. 35). Thus, according to Scott, we must acknowledge the importance of everyday resistance because much of the politics undertaken by subordinate groups fall into this category. Therefore, ignoring these practices results in discounting the most vital means by which lower classes manifest their political interests (p.33). These less dramatic forms of resistance allow these publics to contest power with reduced risk. Through the

participation in acts not traditionally labeled as political, social actors can quietly challenge or infiltrate structures with a reduced potential for detection.

Everyday resistance is then an integral part of the small arsenal available to relatively powerless groups (Scott, 1989, p.34). Although throughout this dissertation, there are challenges to the notion that Black women are perpetual powerless victims, this chapter also highlights that Black women's bodies endure a history of continuous othering in mainstream media presentations. This longstanding practice, coupled with the absence of Black women seated around decision making tables within the entertainment industry, continues to perch Black women at a precarious position. Scott's everyday resistance can, therefore, provide a fruitful ground for contextualizing the nature of the digital media text Black women produced when using SMNHG. During their casual use of social media, these women create images, videos, and discourse that challenges hegemonic beauty standards and celebrate the worthiness of Black natural hair. These subtle acts may mainly go undetected by broader society, who may be unaware of the existence of such social media groups. Nevertheless, these acts can potentially coalesce and positively impact not only how Black women with natural hair understand their bodies, but they may contribute to the strides towards expanding social norms, practices, and laws that regulate beauty standards.

In analyzing SMNHG through the lens of everyday resistance, it is critical to note that Scott's understanding of everyday resistance is not without detractors. Some scholars (see, e.g., Johansson & Vinthagen 2016; Bayat 2000; Gutmann 1993; de Certeau 1984) have challenged various aspects of the theory. Two challenges of Scott's everyday resistance are particularly salient to this dissertation. First, sociologists Asef Bayat, Anna

Johansson, and Stellan Vinthagen call for a reassessing of what they saw as Scott's tendency to frame everyday resistance in oppositional binary to public resistance. For Bayat (2000), Scott's resistance literature equates everyday forms of resistance with hidden acts and quiet encroachment, evident in Scott's definition of everyday resistance as techniques that are invariably quiet, disguised, and anonymous (Scott 1989, p.37). Like Bayat, Johansson & Vinthagen (2016) addressed this conceptualization of everyday resistance, arguing that one should avoid framing everyday resistance as ever-hidden acts because, in relation to other more sustained, organized and conventional political forms of resistance, everyday resistance can constitute both an initial, off- stage, or later stage activity (p.8).

In other words, these scholars are suggesting that because these forms of resistance may usher in, support, or upkeep dramatic resistance events, there is a potential for everyday forms of resistance to step out from behind the shadows. Therefore, they are not always hidden or silent, and their actors are not always anonymous or disguised. For Johansson & Vinthagen (2016), what defines everyday resistance is not its persistent invisibility, but it is its mundaneness and non-dramatic nature that allows these acts to potentially occur as a continuum between hidden subversion and public confrontations (p.3). Understanding everyday resistance beyond the notion of silence allows for the inclusion of ordinary resistance acts that, although visually detectable, they are yet overlooked or undervalued by the mainstream. For instance, as previously argued, social media content often becomes viral, spilling across the digital landscape, becoming topics of discussion.

Despite this potential for public notice, or rather, it may be because of this potential for public notice, counterhegemonic social media content succeeds in becoming messages of resistance. By making allowance for acts that are not always hidden, these scholars make possible the reading of SMNHG members as women doing the subtle work of chipping away at the constraining social arrangements. The members of the SMNHG may successfully undertake this picking apart because some may dismiss their actions as paltry idleness, because they are unaware of the political nature of Black hair, or they may discredit social media sites as holding the potential for producing content capable of shifting ideologies and inspiring real-world counter-hegemonic action. The second aspect of Scott's everyday resistance addressed by some scholars is the emphasis Scott places on intent in framing the practices of the marginalized. Scott argues that resistance is any act by a subordinate that "intended" to mitigate or deny claims.

For Johansson & Vinthagen (2016) and Bayat (2000), Scott confused an awareness about oppression with acts of resistance against it (p.543). In doing so, Scott foregrounds intention and consciousness as required states of being for actor's actions to be weighed as resistant. Johansson & Vinthagen (2016) argue, however, that there is no particular intention or consciousness of the actor or recognition by targets of resistance that is necessary in order to detect everyday resistance (p.18). Instead, these scholars, like philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984), place focus on the act of resistance itself, the actors' agency, and the outcomes, instead of on its intent. They argue,

Resistance is a particular kind of act, not an intent, even if it will always have some kind of intent. Instead of any particular consciousness (recognition or intent), we suggest that discourse and context matter. It is through particular power discourses situated in certain contexts that resistance and power are framed and understood in which actors understand themselves and their identities. To us,

that means consciousness will vary immensely (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016, p.18).

Unhinging the question of intent from the concept of everyday resistance is a liberating and necessary step if we are to continue to celebrate this form of resistance as a tool available to all members of marginalized communities. Johansson & Vinthagen (2016) argue this point by noting that, making resistance into a category for the politically educated excludes lower classes (p.21). Therefore, by severing resistance from being tethered to intent, we can explore messages and images coded with ideas of defiance, even when produced by actors who may not be politically aware or interested. For instance, this dissertation can proceed without the need to prove that the women who created these SMNHG or those who produce content within them intend for them to operate as spaces of resistance. Instead, the study focuses on identifying the presence of ideological and counterhegemonic messages within the content produced in these groups. When determining whether these groups produced resistance tropes, we can include content by members who unknowingly contribute to the challenging, dismantling, or naming of oppression.

De-privileging the importance of intent in this way does not mean that it is of no consequence. Intent still carries weight because conscious actors bring an increased level of effectiveness to social justice movements. An aware actor can strategize and streamline their actions, which may result in the production of fruitful outcomes. Though the previous scholars raised some concern with aspects of Scott's everyday resistance, there is a consensus amongst these thinkers that Scott's resistance denotes defiant acts embedded within the routines of daily life. In this way, what is most salient about the

theory of everyday forms of resistance to this dissertation, is that it allows for the examination of the ordinary lived experiences of members of groups negatively situated along social power spectrums. Additionally, framing disenfranchised members as resistant actors highlight their agency, dispels their consent to hegemony, resigns the notion that they are compliant victims, and positions them as active agents in their emancipation.

Although these virtual ideological and material battlegrounds gift Black women with exceptional opportunities, it is paramount to note that the culture within these SMNHG does not emerge within a vacuum, nor is it the fruit solely born out of modern advancement. Instead, these groups are modern turns on a historical community-focused tradition of Black women carving out safe havens in which to meet, forge alliances with each other to engage in emotional, social, and even physical acts of resistance.

Building Sister Circles: A Vital Tool in Black Women's Liberation Praxis

Beginning in girlhood, Black women learn the sacred power of Sister Circles (S.C). Within them, Black mothers, neighbors, and church aunties share advice, full of humor and sarcasm, and rich in ancestral and cultural wisdom. S.C are sites in which they support each other, laughing through pain and creating a community that organizes, resists and fights for collective emotional and spiritual freedom. These allegorical villages of Black women also provide essential child rearing-support, as they can be depended upon to step in to offer comfort or disciplinary retort in a parent's stead. These aunties are the sisters of Black mothers, her secret keepers, advice-givers, and those who share in a sacred sisterhood bond. These cherished systems of support also serve as sites of collective negotiation and knowledge sharing, where there is a transmission of

individual gains, wisdom, and success into a corporate currency, thereby enhancing the emotional, social, and, in some cases, the economic capital of all members.

It is important to note, however, that familial ties are not a prerequisite for joining these sisterhoods. Instead, S.C are a type of fictive family structure. Human behaviorist Marvin Sussman (1976, p.219) defines fictive families as; persons who are unrelated by either blood or marriage, but who regard one another in kinship terms. Thus, although the aunts within S.C are not always biologically related, their informal and familial configuration emerges through their voluntary acts of mutual respect, love, and shared experiences, which drive them to interconnect their lives (Sussman, 1976). In addition to informal embodiments of S.C, throughout history, in African American communities, Black women have also established formalized S.C. Scholars like Africana Studies theorist Paula Giddings (1985); Psychologist Angela Neal-Barnett (2003); and Sociologist Katrina Bell McDonald (2006), have argued that these formal manifestations of S.C emerged within organizations like the Black church, Black sororities, and the Black women's club movement.

Like the informal sisterhoods forged between friends, these ratified S.C also draw upon the strength and courage found in African American friendship networks (Neal-Barnett et al. 2011, p.2) serving as critically essential survival tools for many Black women. Within these sisterhoods, Black women often find the highly sought after, but rarely found safe space, where commonality and a spirit of collectivity emerge from their shared lived experience of navigating through the world, facing a collective form of domination and injustice at the intersection of racism and sexism. Establishing fictive sister networks with other Black women is then not merely an act of establishing

companionship; instead, it is a commitment towards actions of resistance that can potentially and positively affect each other's quality of life (Phillips and Fischer 1981; Chatters et al. 1994; Dill et al., 1998; and Stewart, 2007). Interestingly, despite its benefit in the lives of generations of Black women, Black women fictive kinship networks are severely under-researched, a fact that is increasingly glaring given the expansive body of literature that focuses on the interpersonal relationships of women in general.

For example, while scholars like Becker 1987; Wright 1982; and Rind 2002 have explored the importance and value of women's bonding relationships, much of this work has failed to center Black women relationship with each other or to consider how race, class, and sexuality of women can influence the impact of the sisterhoods that they formulate. Notably, many of the studies within the small cannon that have examined Black women's interpersonal relationships, foci the role of S.C as an intervention tool. These scholars suggest that Black women create S.C as a means of counteracting the daily social and emotional traumas they experienced. For example, Neal et al. (2011) claim that S.C can play an essential intervention role in the lives of Black women experiencing anxiety and mental health concerns. Similarly, in their study of the use of formal S.C by health care providers when treating African American women, Thomas et al., (2016) find that by maintaining these support groups as Black women-only spaces, the culturally relevant discourses that emerge positively impact the lives of African American women suffering from chronic illnesses.

Additionally, several researchers (e.g., Denton 1990; Scales & Kirkland, 2017) who have explored how Black women survive race-based trauma in professional spaces, have also framed Black S.C as necessary support and intervention mechanisms. For

instance, in her study of friendships between Black professional women, Psychologist Toni Denton's (1990), highlights the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication in peer to peer support groups for Black women who occupy White dominated spaces. Denton (1990) is not alone in privileging the role of communication in establishing and sustaining Black S.C. Communications scholar Marnel Niles-Goins (2011), suggests that continued opportunities for discourse and communication between Black women serve to build intimacy within Black women's friendships (BWF). She further argues that BWF is a homeplace, a safe space of refuge (p.531), in which open discussion about personal aspects of one's life; racism, sexism, finances, family, religion, and sex, can contribute to the tightening of friendship bonds.

Collectively, those scholars who examine the supportive nature of Black women's interpersonal relationships have created a body of work that indicates that S.C are not luxuries. Instead, the findings of their studies demonstrate that S.C are essential healing, liberating, and nurturing spaces, where Black women retrieve to find rest, compassion, validation, and comradery to navigate their lives and challenge the injustices in a world that often refuses to recognize their humanity. In addition to considering how S.C function as intervention locales, other scholars consider the role S.C plays in community mobilization. For instance, in her principle text: *Embracing Sisterhood: Class, identity, and contemporary Black women*, Katrina Bell McDonald (2006) explores the Black women's club movement, which emerged roughly around the 1800s. McDonald suggests that these Black women's clubs were formalized manifestations of S.C. These clubs grew popular among middle-class Black women who established these physical meeting spaces, having experienced racial exclusion from White female social spaces and

gendered exclusion from Black male social spaces. Hence, for McDonald (2006), the Black women's club movement benefited from the existence of Black women's gender-ethnic solidarity, which emerged as a result of their collective experiences as Black women in America (p.35).

Black women's clubs were not merely socialization communes; instead, as Historian and Black Race Studies scholar Deborah Gray White argues, Black women's clubs allowed for activities that uplifted Black women and, by extension, the Black race (p.101). Black club women, thus capitalized on their shared identity politics, to work together in a variety of activities for self-improvement and racial advancement for themselves and their families (McDonald 2006, p. 49). These women used these clubs to organize charity work, community development, social, and welfare reform. McDonald (2006) notes that these early Black women's clubs would prove vital to Black women's liberation movements. Closely related to the work focused on how S.C serve as sites for intervention, and community mobilization is the scholarship that explores the liberating nature of S.C. This body of work considers how Black women employ S.C to engage in counter-hegemonic acts.

To support their arguments, many of those who explore this area of research suggests that hegemonic resistance is at the very core of kinship structures from which S.C germinated. Well, before Black women established the Black women's club movement in North America, S.C existed. As historian Herbert George Gutman (1976, p.217) notes, that the phenomenon of Black fictive kin relationships is not twenty-first-century innovations. Instead, fictive kinship structures emerged within West African cultural and behavioral traditions that predate chattel slavery. Gutman's work is a part of

an extensive body of research (e.g., Aschenbrenner, 1973; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1980; Stack, 1974; Taylor and Chatters, 1991; Stack, 1974; Anderson, 1978; & Kennedy, 1980;) interested in contextualizing the historical underpinnings of fictive Black relationships. Emerging from that scholarship is the research of African Studies scholars who explore the use of women's collectives by West African women as a means for exercising political control. For example, Obioma Nnaemeka (1996) argues that contemporary American incarnations of S.C can trace their genesis to eighteenth-century West Africa.

She notes that, in the face of patriarchal strongholds, early colonial West African women forged solidarity with each other to negotiate their social positions and protect their economic interests (p.123). By identifying these West African women's collectives as precursors of contemporary S.C, these scholars provide a precedent for understanding the counter-hegemonic nature of S.C, and the potential for Black women to harness their joint power towards their collective preservation and elevation (McDonald, 2006, p.47). In addition to the formal manifestations of S.C forged within Black church, Black sororities, and the Black women's club movement, the Black beauty salons exist as one of the most iconic physical S.C and safe havens, populated by Black women. These hair salons are not only highly feminized spaces, but they are significantly steep in Black cultural norms as Black women created and maintained these spaces to serve the needs of Black women. Black beauty salons are a culturally rich and essential institution within Black communities.

These salons serve more than a utilitarian purpose in these women's lives. These places of business are also “bays of safety” in which Black women, even those formerly

strangers meet, discuss their lives, and build community with each other. Sociologist Adia Harvey Wingfield argues that Black beauty salons are places where Black women feel welcomed and secure, a haven in which they can escape the tribulations of everyday life and the pressures and stresses of systemic gendered racism (2008, p.81). Similarly, Rooks (1996) also concludes that beauty salons are culturally infused conclaves and places of retreat and solidarity that afford Black women with a temporality solace from the intersecting pressures of identity politics. Media scholar Catherine Knight Steel echoes these arguments by framing Black beauty shops as safe locales for communal sharing, empathic engagement, and hidden spaces to escape the pressures associated with being labeled as different. Steel writes,

Outside the gaze of the dominant group, African Americans can openly discuss things personal to the community with no need to hide their opinions and ideas for fear of reprisal. The shop provides a place where no one is confused by African American hair and no explanation needed for one's hair care needs. The need to explain or justify Black hair or identity is absent (2016, p.3).

Steel, Wingfield, and Rooks are thus suggesting that beauty salons provide Black women with a location to forge an alternate public where they can engage in the practices of critique the dominant culture, foster resistance, and strengthen African American institutions. (Steel, 2016, p.1). Framing Black beauty salons not only as sites of influence but as places of escape and strategizing, is particularly relevant to this dissertation because repeatedly, the moderators and users of the SMNHG describe their communities as digital hair salons. Many of the study's interviewees who made this correlation suggest that SMNHG mirror beauty salons by providing a meeting place not only centered on Black hair care practices but a gathering place for Black women to metaphorically let their hair down exposing similar wounds brought about by social exclusion. By defining

SMNHG as digital beauty salons, these interviewees signal their recognition of the similarities between their virtual space of escape, and these formalized S.C that have long served their physical communities. Like Black beauty salon, these SMNHG operate like a third-place, a public spaced used for informal social interaction that stands outside of the home and the workplace (Oldenburg, 1999).

Third place, the term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg can extend to virtual places, where users create and make use of a neutral ground that is accessible, playful, and rippling with conversations. What is most interesting about Oldenburg's third place is that it provides a meeting place for informal social interaction that can provide opportunities for civic engagement (Soukup, 2006, p.432). Therefore, as digital beauty salons and virtual third places, these SMNHG make possible the potential for Black women to create safe havens. Safe havens likened to those in S.C where Black women can form and sustain counter publics. Having framed SMNHG as locations that house counter-hegemonic behavior, it is crucial to now identify the structures and messages that members deem necessary to resist. Examination of the oppositional hegemonic power structures at play will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the resistance undertaken by members of SMNHG. Johansson & Vinthagen (2016) encourages scholars to take the time to question power. They note that, because resistance exists in relation to power, understanding acts of resistance cannot be determined without a power analysis (p.27).

Furthermore, they advise that this examination

is not only necessary to detect what is resistance but to understand how resistance operates, how it is connected to power, and, in what sense, it is partly autonomous or intertwined with power. An analysis of a particular configuration of power will

reveal the kind of norms, rules, or ideals that are maintained and how, with what discourse, institutions, and techniques (p.27).

These scholars are thus advocating for research, that simultaneously examines power and resistance. Most importantly, these scholars are arguing for positioning institutions and their politics at the center of this examination, to identify their strategies for establishing the norms, rules, and ideas that inevitably shape social order. Although there are many sites of power that shape and influence the readings of Black natural hair in society, mainstream media executives are some of the most critical influencers, and the media landscape, one of the most important cultural institutions in which the continuous contesting and renegotiation of Black body politics occur.

Therefore, it is imperative before continuing to explore the question of resistance, that there is an examination of the relationship Black women's bodies have shared with dominant media structures. Although some of this work began in Chapter 2, in the section below, there is a closer examination of the media's role in influencing the tensions between Black natural hair and dominant US cultural norms.

Othering Black Bodies in the Mainstream Media

From the inception of the printing press, the world came to understand the socio-cultural and economic power that lies with those who own the means to create and distribute knowledge and ideas. Historically, those who share intimate relationships with the means of media production hold significant levels of influence over the images and concepts that populate our media landscapes. In a lecture on representation and media, preeminent scholar and cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues this fact, by stating that the,

[Media] is a powerful way of circulating in the world a very limited range of definitions of who people can be, what they can do, what are the possibilities in

life, what are the nature of the constraints on them...The images [produce]...knowledge. What we know about the world is how we see it represented (1997).

What Hall argues here, is not only that the power of the media is in its ability to circulate content about people's lives, but additionally, media producers can attach fixed meanings to these transmitted images. These fixed meanings can contribute to the manifestation of stereotypes about members of society, which can severely impact how media consumers view and understand people and groups that are different from themselves.

Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Hammonds, Hazel Carby, and Michele Wallace have examined the lack of media production power held by Black women. These scholars also draw a relationship between the lack of media platform ownership and the narrowly defined images of Black women's bodies in mainstream media. Collectively the body of work emerging from these scholars suggests that in her absence or her overly stereotypical presence, the image of the Black woman in mainstream media is shrouded with sexual, raced, and gendered stereotypes and limited in dimension. It is also worth noting that when Black women do appear on our television screens, there is too little diversity in their physical bodies. When Black women appear in movies and television, these scripts often include plotlines that reward or chastise these women based on their bodies' proximity to whitewashed standards of beauty.

That is, those Black women characters most often celebrated, framed as desirable or positioned as articulate or respectable, are those whose hair texture, body type, and skin tones do not place them too far away from the hegemonic norms (Byrd & Tharps 2014; Hammonds 1997; Chapman 2007).

Byrd & Tharps (2014) argue that Black women in the entertainment industry are expected to approximate a White standard of beauty (p.156). It may be quite possibly because Black natural hair carries with it, unique history and its connection with the 1960s Civil Rights activism that it continues to appear as an embodiment of political radicalism (Tate 2012; Rooks 1996; Chapman 2007). This hefty attachment often results in actors donning Black natural hair only when they portray radicalized characters or when it is needed to signal a character's low social class position or mammy-like persona. Black natural hair in the media at times appears to be less a physical trait that belongs to millions of men and women, and more a costume prop coated in historical narratives of difference and deviance. Except for these moments in which Black women's natural hair serves as a caricature, it appears that straight hair is compulsory for women of color in the media. A fact supported by Byrd and Tharps' (2014) statement that it is impossible to ignore the fact that pop culture paradigms of beautiful Black women are coiffed with long, straight hair (p.155).

Black women must, therefore, contend with measuring up to a hegemonic beauty standard that excludes natural hair. Therefore, may it be explicit or implicit pressures, Black actresses, news anchors, and musicians, especially hair textures that are coarse, tightly kinked, and short, often opt to undergo hair straightening processes to ensure their continued success in the media arena. Byrd & Tharps (2014) highlight this point by arguing that in this country [United States], it is impossible to ignore the fact that popular culture paradigms of beautiful Black women are coiffed with long, straight hair (p.155). Black women, they continued, often feel compelled to undergo chemical, extension, and heat treatment processes to achieve straight hair. This desire, they suggest, stems from a

need to raise their social capital within romantic, professional, and social marketplaces (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). The social pressure to conform to a standard that problematizes their bodies can be emotionally taxing, especially given the fact that historically social norms set by the beauty, healthcare, legal and media industries have at different points positioned Black women's bodies as the diametrical contrast to the bodies of White women.

American Studies scholar Beverly Johnson (2003) notes that placing these bodies into binary opposite positions serves to distinguish African features from European features, which becomes ordered within a value system that distinguishes, kinky and straight, long and short, dark and light, good and bad (Johnson, 2003, p.65). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues that Black and White women's bodies are diametrically situated in the hegemonic beauty spectrum. Collins suggests that this uncomfortable relationship is so intertwined that,

the blue-eyed, blonde, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without being compared to the Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair (p.79).

The theory of orientalism and the notion of "otherness" may be helpful here, as these theories may provide a framework for understanding how Black natural hair is rendered inferior through its positioning as the opposite to the hair beauty straight, long standard. The theory of the "other" helps to elucidate how the construction of dominant collective identities is made possible by first defining and vilifying the oppositional identities of the marginalized.

Renowned philosopher Edward Said's (1979) work is an essential source for understanding this theory. Said explains how a crucial aspect of Western society's

colonial domination was made possible by the West's ability to normalize East as inferior. Western conquerors did so by manufacturing inaccurate cultural representations, transmitted via Western cultural imperialism. Whether these cultural representations occurred in books, paintings, or later radio and television, the West's ability to create and share mediated "knowledge" allowed them to cast the East as different and strange. For instance, Said argues European intellectuals invented the idea of the exotic East and the inscrutable Orient (p. 222), ideas that continue to serve as cultural representations of people, places, and things considered diametrically inferior to their European counterpart (p.72). Furthermore, Said describes how the notion of the oriental body emerged as the opposite of the European body. He states, the Oriental body was framed as irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different; thus, in opposition, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal." (p.40). Although Black American women do not occupy the geographical location of the "Orient," theoretically, their lives and experiences have undergone some similar acts of colonization both physically and culturally.

In thinking about how the media presents Black natural hair, one must recognize that this analysis requires a focus on the questions of power and domination. As Hall (1997) stated, the power to create media text is the power to fix meaning, ideas, and narratives to bodies. Similarly, in discussing the discursive practices of media producers, Reba Chaisson (2000) argues that media messages produce knowledge that serves to foster cultural beliefs and sustain existing social arrangements (p.2). These scholars are suggesting that mainstream media producers use their content as tools for maintaining Gramscian hegemony because mainstream media messages can contribute to normalizing the uneven hierarchal structures within society. In this way, media messages do not

remain trapped on our television screens. These messages also contribute to what Media scholar, James Lull, calls an interlocking system that results in cultural hegemony; the continuous reinforcement of media messages within other social institutions. Therefore, media messages are a part of a problematic cyclical relationship that influences different spheres of social life.

The racialized aggression that normalizes Black hair as different and unrefined in media spaces is then not separate or apart from the corporate and school dress code policies and beauty supply industry standards that continue to render antagonistic ideas about Black natural hair. The question of media's role in sustaining hegemonic control resonates throughout the research of Media Studies scholars (e.g., Turow 1997; McChesney & Schiller 2003; Wasko 2004), who are concerned with the political economy of media production. These researchers examine how advertisers, creative directors, casting agents, and producers exercise their significant ideological power by continuing to propagate stereotypical narratives in the media. These works explore the impact of the lack of media ownership by racialized, classed, and gendered groups. For instance, in her text, *The political economy of communications* (2004), Janet Wasko (2004) suggests that the lack of diversity in ownership leads to a media landscape saturated with one-sided narratives that disenfranchise marginalized bodies since they wield little or no power within the matrix of the marketplace and the media. Statistics from both in front and behind the camera continue to decry a lack of diversity in US media. Most recently, these critiques have been embodied by the #OscarsSoWhite movement that challenges the lack of non-White winners of the prestigious award.

The UCLA Hollywood Diversity report for 2019 revealed that during the 2016-2017 year, only 19.8 percent of lead actors in films were people of color, while only 12.6 percent of film directors and 7.8 percent of writers were non-White. Similar numbers existed with broadcast scripted television, with only 21.5 percent lead actors and 9.4 percent creators being persons of color. In addition to Hollywood's diversity deficit, it is critically important to note that because media production is an economically profitable business, therefore as Communication scholar Joseph Turow (1995) suggests that stereotypical narratives contribute to saving billions of dollars in script development and costuming and casting costs. By consistently repeating previously successful stereotypical narratives, media executives reassure potential sponsors that they have perfected a working formula proven to yield a return on investment. Therefore, there is a significant financial incentive for media executives to create highly predictable, highly patterned mass media content (Turow, 1995 p. 214).

For instance, casting talent for media production, according to Turow, depend upon developed shared beliefs about the types of people the audience will find credible in what roles (p. 228). This practice may explain why there is little deviation or difference in race, gender, and body types of the actors cast in the archetype roles of hero, villain, and sexy love interest. For instance, the love interest to the protagonist is often a woman who is skinny, White, with long shiny, blonde flowing hair. Notably, even when the love interest is Black, the actress cast into role often has features that share proximity to acceptable standards. It is intriguing that in a culture seemingly obsessed with televised images of heterosexual romantic encounters that only a minuscule percentage of these images feature Black women, and even a smaller percentage include Black women with

natural hair. The underlying message sent by the absence of Black natural hair in media images is that not only is beauty and desirability very narrowly defined, but laced within that definition are racial biases and preferences for particular hair types, skin tones, and body size.

Byrd and Tharps (2014) attest to this fact by arguing that American beauty standards have not changed significantly since the late 1800s. Black women (people) who then wish to fit into Hollywood's visual ideal must content with these archaic and restrictive standards. Furthermore, if indeed as Thompson (2009) writes, we are socially constructed through the language of texts and through mediated images to believe that hair is what makes a female (sex) a woman (gender), and a beautiful woman is defined by hair that is long, silky, and flowing (p.849), then these mediate images contribute to denying Black women access to the privileges afforded women's bodies marked as feminine, unquestionably heterosexual and thus beautiful both on and off the movie screen. This systematic and deeply pervasive norm is defined by cultural studies scholars Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel Solórzano as visual racial microaggressions (2015).

Visual racial microaggressions are

systemic, everyday visual assaults that are layered, cumulative, and based on race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname and function to keep those at the racial margins (People of Color) in their place (p.225)

Pérez Huber & Solorzano (2015) suggest that these visual assaults appear across mediums such as textbooks, children's books, advertisements, film and television, dance and theater performance, and public signage and statuary (p. 225). Most importantly, these scholars argue that these images play a nefarious role in upholding hegemonic ideals because they reinforce institutional racism and perpetuate the ideologies of white

supremacy that justify the subordination of people of color over white (p.225). These verbal and non-verbal hostilities often materialize in subtle forms that have a lasting emotional, physiological, economic, and political effect on Black and brown communities. Examining these types assaults has been the work of countless media studies and race studies scholars who examine negative representations of people of color across all platforms within the entertainment industry (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins, 1990; Angela Y Davis, 1989; Cornel West, 1993; Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Ramírez Berg, 2002). Pérez Huber & Solorzano (2015) suggests that these scholars who conduct this research are most interested in exploring how racist visual representations function to discursively subordinate people of color while maintaining a white power structure inclusive of constructed practices, policies, and identities (p.224).

Thus, although all women suffer under the brutal arm of patriarchal body policing, unlike Black women, White women can often find affirming popular culture images. Byrd and Tharps (2014) note this fact, arguing that, While White women have lots of issues about their hair, they also have lots of affirmation for their hair. [Black people] don't have the overall cultural affirmation that counters the negative obsession (p.154). Black women, these scholars note, are left with precious few places to find an image of beauty that showcases un-straightened tresses and natural styles (p.154). The lasting thread that weaves throughout out the work of Black feminist scholars like Michele Wallace 1978; Hazel Carby, 1987; Kimberle Crenshaw, 1993; bell hooks, 1989; Evelyn Hammonds, 1997; and Patricia Hill Collins, 2002, is a focus on the ideological power that lies in the hands of media producers. Their work displaces any perception that media images are autonomous. Instead, they present these images as the result of a

production process that involves creatives, producers, and distributors who can commodify these images at the expense of those disparaged by them. In doing so, these scholars emphasize the significant power associated with media production. Additionally, their work also illuminates the significance of the emergence of spaces like SMNHG, where naturalistas can produce digital media that defines and celebrates their hair [bodies] on their own terms.

Alternative Media Production

Mainstream media producers hold critical levels of power over the aesthetic capital trading market because the stereotypical images transmitted by the media reflect limiting notions of beauty, serving to impact the lives of some consumers negatively. Having explored the works of scholars who highlighted these arguments, it is now necessary to turn the conversation towards considering how members of these ostracized communities react to these negative mediated messages. Black women have, in the past, created content that contests and rejects the negative narratives they encounter, about the value and acceptability of their hair in social and professional spaces. Some media studies scholars (e.g., Coleman & Ross 2010 and Renninger 2014) suggest that it is because of, or rather in response to, the rejection members of othered communities encounter in mainstream platforms, that some members of these groups merge themselves into counter-hegemonic collectives and behave in anti-hegemonic behaviors.

As Coleman & Ross (2010) suggest, the collectives emerge among members who understand the power of the media and the potential that lies in using it to infiltrate, influence, and reconfigure dominant discourse (p.73). Similarly, Fraser (1990) finds that marginalized groups occasionally use their spaces of alienation to organize and negotiate

around issues of power and identity, which can lead to them mounting themselves into collectives with the potential to move against the power structures which oppress them. One of the ways by which these groups respond to attempts to subjugate them is to create alternative media text. Alternative media, as defined by Joshua Atkinson's (2006), is any media that is produced by non-commercial sources that attempt to transform existing social roles and routines, by critiquing and challenging power structures (pp. 251-252). For Atkinson, then, the alternative media opposes capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, and corporate culture, all of which are characteristics we have come to associate with the mainstream media.

Therefore, by serving as an opportunity to legitimize other voices as sources of information and knowledge, alternative media production practices, upend the barriers of participation in media dissemination, that ensure that corporate mainstream media voices dominated the information sharing landscape. By disabling the barriers to access alternative media content also privileges the point of view of those voices that often go unheard. Therefore, by being able to create content themselves, othered members of society have the potential to move from the object of the media's gaze to the subject; a point Atkinson argues in saying, proponents of alternative media content endeavor to bring "ordinary people" into the media frame as subjects through giving them voice (2006, p.73). Alternative media's contribution to the emergence of dissenting ideas is one of the reasons that it shares a close relationship with social movements and their ideology shifting strategies. When considering the actions of the SMNHG, I suggest that they are engaging in political action, one that is ideological and one that does as Coleman & Ross suggest can contribute to the pluralism of the public sphere (2010, p.91).

Engaging in means to establish themselves in the public sphere is not, however, a modern-day quest for Black men and women. Communication studies scholar Catherine Squires' work on the Black public sphere, highlights that Black men and women have long engaged in nonconforming media production. For Squires (2002), many Black men and women recognize the importance, power, and strength of the media, however, without the opportunity to freely express themselves within the mainstream, Black publics have fostered organizations that allow them the opportunity to innovate and draw on their traditions, without interferences. Black-owned and controlled media spaces fulfill this function by providing a space for Black collectives that the mainstream public arena, institutions, and media have not (Squires, 2002, p. 459). While social movements, marches, and boycotts are effective methods available to raced, or gendered communities to highlight their frustration with problematic depictions of them as a collective, the media airwaves, however, remain a crucial and essential space as a dominant position within society's socialization mechanism.

Therefore, the media landscape is a site of constant struggle, where groups of citizens like naturalistas may seek out opportunities to demonstrate their dissonance through the production of alternative media text. Identifying how Black women have challenged the controlling images of Black womanhood using media platforms has been the work of many Black feminist scholars. Black women have recognized the importance of engaging in counter-hegemonic acts in responding to media images because they are aware of the mainstream media's role of normalizing erroneous ideas about their lives and bodies. Patricia Hill-Collins notes this fact by stating that, Black women understand that these images have the potential to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of

social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life (2002, p.69). Therefore, she continues, despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, African-American women, as a group, have resisted these ideological justifications for our oppression (Hill-Collins 2002, p.93).

In Hill-Collins's writings, as in the scholarship of Black racial thinkers like Wallace 1978; hooks 1990 and Squires 2002, there is an emphasis on the liberation practices of Black women. These Black feminist scholars pay close attention to outlying and identifying the practices that Black women have generationally engaged in as a means of counteracting the systematic physical, mental, and emotional acts of oppression levied against them. Not only do these practices give some agency to Black women, but it signifies that naturalistas' engagement in alternative media production, as a means of resistance, is in keeping with a tradition of defiance birthed by and passed down generationally by Black foremothers. This defiance has taken many different physical and metaphysical forms, with media production being but one. One of the ways Black women have manifested this resistance is by writing, and the publishing of fictive and non-fictive text. Books like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Shirley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* (1986), Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time* (1983), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) are all widely read examples of novels in which Black, female authors gave voice to Black women's narratives.

By doing so, the authors enter into the public discourse, non-hegemonic narratives of Black body politics, and the internalized oppression that Black women face. Their work is especially crucial because within their stories are discourses of resistance and

tales that reflect on Black women's ability to persevere, overcome, and survive. In the same stead, Black women musicians, have also used their platform to share their stories, and stories of other Black women. Some of the notable artists who, in the past, contributed to the creation of less one-dimensional Black female tropes, have been singers like Billie Holliday, Eartha Kitt, and Nina Simone. These women provided a Black woman's perspective on political and social issues of the day. Where Nina Simone left off, some contemporary artists have taken up the mantle to discuss the Black women's lives as well.

Female Hip Hop artists like Lauryn Hill, Queen Latifah, and Janelle Monae have vocalized Black feminist thought over drum beats. While Beyonce's unapologetic ownership of her sexuality and raced identity places her in as the contested owner of the third-wave Black feminism crown. Her position so assigned given her lyrics which weave songs of heartbreak, romance, and anthems that worships Black women's bodies as sites of beauty and desire. In different ways and different levels of success, authors, singers, and filmmakers add to media discourses about Black women. Although these women create this content using traditional media platforms, the content of their books, films, or lyrics, tell alternative narratives from those that dominate the media landscape. Furthermore, by using their fame as a platform for drawing attention to issues uniquely relevant to Black women, these famous women demonstrate that they recognize the importance, power, and strength of the media, and having done so, they have invested their time, skills and labor in creating new mediate scripts. Although traditional media platforms continue to be the spaces where these women attempt to do this work, in contemporary times, they have also digitalized their labor.

Digital Media Production as a Form of Resistance

The Internet has emerged as the preeminent alternative media production space in which Black women, famous and non-famous, are engaging in collecting, organizing, and creating easily shareable and potentially liberating media content. As our offline and online lives increasingly become merged, digital media content enters our homes, our schools, and our workplaces with seamless ease. Those who can access, and skillfully use this platform, can make use of its tools to engage in virtual acts of liberation and community building with those with whom they share close and loose ties. Media scholars, Smith & Kollock (1999), Wenger (1999), Heer, & boyd (2005) and Gonzales & Hancock (2008) focus on the ways by which communities emerge and are sustained in digital spaces. These scholars point to the fact that digital media allows for geographically dispersed networks to congregate and formulate in digital meeting rooms and engage in interactive forms of communication that are entirely different from the one-way forms of communication that traditional media platforms offer.

For these researchers, employing the use of the Internet, those rarely heard in the dominant media spaces can mobilize diverse networks into engaging in social action. Envisioning the Internet as a liberating space should come as no surprise given the earliest discourse surrounding the Internet. Much of the scholarship during its infancy imagined it as a location devoid of the socially constructed hierarchal structures that exist in the physical world. Contemporarily, however, there is a well-established recognition that the Internet is far from the utopic space, as users of the Internet bring along with them their notions about social hierarchies when they enter the virtual world. Despite its failings as a utopian paradise, those with the access and skills to use the Internet but lack

the financial and social power to shape mainstream media narratives can recoup a level of power by participating in creating content online.

Gaining access to the tools that provide the opportunity to engage is still one of the significant hurdles facing some communities. Although some scholars have pointed to the diminishing of the gap in access, the digital divide, and the second-level digital divide, continue to hamper the potential for all to benefit from the Internet's dissenting possibilities. Hoffman & Novak 1998; Brock 2009 and Nakamura 2013 have suggested that issues of access and skill mainly existed along racial, gendered, and class lines. This gap means that those groups standing on the negative end of the break are often minorities, women, and the working class. Black women have been making strides in increasing their online use; however, according to the Pew Research Center's statistics, shared in the last chapter. One such group of Black women who are using online spaces frequently are naturalistas who use their SMNHG to celebrate their natural hair, while benefitting from the ease and speed of sharing content digitally.

In addition to these groups, there is a larger microcosm of digital spaces, carved out by Black women for Black women online. From issues of sexuality to politics, Black women content creators make use of sites like Crunkfeministcollective.com, madamenoire.com, ForHarriet.com, and blackgirlnerd.com, to speak about the issues that affect their lives. This power to produce text, share information, and re-present narrative is a critical characteristic of alternative media. It can provide naturalistas the opportunity to speak their voices to issues, which the mainstream public often discount as not being valid, or newsworthy. One definitive example of the use of Internet technology to create

an alternative discourse about Black women's hair is Mad Free Life, an online content space curated by image activist Michaela Angela Davis.

Davis is an actor, fashion expert, and content creator who focuses on questions of racism, sexism, and Black women's bodies politics. Davis established Mad Free as an online space that features videos and images that address Black women's lives via discourses about race, fashion, culture, beauty, & identity. One of the projects Davis established on the site is an online video series entitled *The Hair Tales: An Appropriation Conversation*. The series featured Black female celebrities who discuss their hair and their lives. The series description reads,

The Hair Tales is created to affirm Black Women, inform non-Black people about Black Women and inspire the world through Black women's beautiful *curly, kinky and coily journey* (About Hair Tales, date unknown)

What is most interesting about this description is that not only do Davis and the women who help create this content envision that Black women will consume it, but they have accepted the role of educators and informers, who intend for non-Black women also to explore this content.

Davis' dedication to engaging in content creation that demands the attention of the dominant culture is evident in her own words, which she stated when being honored during 2013 during the BET Honors award ceremony. She noted,

I work to celebrate and expand the narrow narrative around women and what is [considered] beautiful. It takes courage to be truly natural to expose to the world who you really are. This is a wonderful time for women because get to be who you say you are; our hair is a repository of our history of our hopes our dreams of all-out creativity. This is how I wear my hair, and this is how I walk through the world I can be different (Davis, 2013)

Davis and her Mad free life website is an example of one Black woman who has made use of digital landscapes to create and quickly and extensively disseminate Black body

politics narratives in an inexpensive, non-hegemonic manner. As one of the most vocal voices on Black women's body politics today, Davis demonstrates, through her widely shared digital projects, that the digital landscapes are spaces where Black women can discuss, share and engage around questions about their bodies, in ways the mainstream media has failed to allow them to. Despite Davis' work and the growth of other spaces online that center Black lives, the use of online spaces by Black women continues to be under-researched; a gap this dissertation will contribute towards closing.

Ideological Digital Text as Resistance

Argued throughout this dissertation is that the SMNHG are sites drenched in a culture of resistance. A culture of resistance is a coherent set of values, beliefs, and practices which mitigates the effects of oppression and reaffirms that which is distinct from the majority culture (Mitchell and Feagin 1995, p.68). Hence, in making this argument, I am reasoning that the content created and shared within these groups and the discourse found within are informed by counter-hegemonic ideologies that resist against mainstream ideas about the beauty and professionalism of Black natural hair. Therefore, the types of resistance discussed throughout this dissertation are best housed within the ideological, messages, and images that buttress the value of Black natural hair at the expense of dominant narratives. One can locate ideological forms of resistance alongside the tactics undertaken by purveyors of new social movements.

Sociologists M. Bahati Kuumba and Femi Ajanaku argue this fact when they stated that,

New social movement theory places greater emphasis on the significance of culture, symbolism, collective identity, and ideology in the process of collective resistance efforts

[...] Whereas early social movement research proposed and debated the relative importance of dichotomous factors in stimulating and sustaining social movement activity, more recent work in the field encourages a synthesis between these major discussions on structure and ideology (1998, p. 228).

This study aligns with those works by focusing on how the ideological messages embedded within digital media text can serve counterhegemonic turns. Throughout Chapter 6, I argue that SMNHG members make use of the technological tools at their disposal to create cultural artifacts that can serve as tools for resistance and liberation. In doing so, these women participate in what some scholars (e.g., hooks 1990; Toure 1969; Wamba 1991) claim are practices that serve as powerful tools of defiance for marginalized populations.

The digital labor of these naturalistas produces media text informed by beliefs that stand in opposition to the message found in the limited and often stereotypical presentations of Black natural hair in mainstream media offerings. The products emerging from within these groups are thus challenging the ideological messages that have contributed to the diminished social capital dominant society has attached to naturalistas. Through their labor, these women become alternative media producers, no longer only consumers of images, they are now producers of new narratives. This promising new position can positively contribute to the multigenerational pursuit by Black women to upend some of the problematic ideas and signified concepts that overtime has become attached to Black natural hair.

It would be impossible to understand attempts to bring about shifts in mediated ideologies, without considering the role of hegemony. Afterall, germane to the notion of ideology are the theories of hegemony and the interconnected theory consent. The repeated use of anti-Black natural hair images in dominant television and movie products

allows for the hegemonic notion that Black natural hair is unrefined, messy, and unkempt. Additionally, it suggests that Black women with natural hair textures, especially those most different to the long, blonde hair beauty standard, are unworthy of the privileges given to women framed as beautiful and desirable in a society that values women according to their sexual appeal. Given these dominant framing of Black natural hair, it is a phenotypical site that is froth with political implications. Hence, media creatives and executives who continue to use Black natural hair as a costume or those who routinely cast naturalista actresses into subservient roles, are contributing to the maintenance of hegemonic readings of these hair textures.

Disrupting and resisting hegemonic images is no easy feat because prevailing ideology and social control are maintained through conditioning and not physical force. A fact cultural studies scholar Robin DiAngelo and Gender studies scholar Özlem Sensoy argue in their text *Is everyone really equal? they write,*

The critical element of hegemony is that it enables domination to occur with the consent

of the minoritized group rather than by force. If people believe that they deserve their unequal positions that these positions are fair and natural, no force is necessary. In other words, the minoritized group accepts their lower position in society because they come to accept the rationalizations for it. Hegemony, then, includes the ability to define and impose self-discipline on others in ways that serve dominant group interests (2017, p.73).

Ideological resistance practices are, therefore, not an easy undertaking. They entail a process of re-conditioning, which requires marginalized communities to engage in a simultaneous process of rescinding their consent to dominant depictions, establishing counter ideologies, and broadcasting these alternative messages from a safe platform outside the mainstream media machine.

Though labor-intensive, when successfully achieved, the ideological power that is attached to participating in re-signification campaigns can afford disenfranchised publics the benefit from the ability to code new media text with oppositional messages. This form of ideological labor can be understood as a system for generating messages (Verón, 1971). One cannot, as previously stated, engage in this work of ideological resistance without a platform for creating messages. The importance of having a location from which to launch a counter ideological campaign has resulted in social media sites becoming an attractive platform for contemporary ostracized groups. Facebook, for instance, which is the platform used by two of the communities in this study, has continued to be a popular meeting space for disenfranchised groups seeking to launch counter strikes.

The Facebook Group feature of the website provides free, widely accessible spaces for meeting, strategizing, creating, and distributing messages. The features of Facebook is thus vital to the ideological resistance undertaken by members of the SMNHG. Facebook's structure allows members of these SMNHG to populate a singular news feed with text, images, and video content informed by their shared interest. Additionally, users can demonstrate their approval or disapproval using features, such as emojis and reactions. These features provide constituents with this opportunity to engage in the shared process of generating content that stands counter to dominant forms of representation. This content also pluralizes the mainstream narratives about Black women's bodies. The content created in these groups, thus to paraphrase Gerlis (2008, p.126), turns media messages from a lecture into a conversation.

Although SMNHG may not directly allow naturalistas to impact the images found in the mainstream media, these groups allow for the materialization of content that disrupts the some-to-many structure of the traditional media by toppling the top-down structure that allowed for the othering of Black natural hair textures. With the potential for "going viral," the digital content shared within SMNHG can, through the use of site tools like sharing buttons, circulate across the entire Internet digital landscape, reaching members and non-members of these communities alike. Hence, these SMNHG allow real experts: naturalistas, to create images and videos that are self-reflective and celebratory. These alternative media production factories give new levels of power to naturalistas as they become a part of media text encoding process, a privilege they have largely failed to enjoy in the past due to the continued lackadaisical dedication by media executives to address the lack of diversity particularly in the creative side of the media industry.

For the naturalistas in this dissertation, taking selfies, posting hair blogs, and sharing positive reinforcement messages one to another all results in the emergence of content infused with the ideological message that Black natural hair is a thing to be celebrated. Examples of this celebratory Black natural hair content appear in Chapter 6, where there is a presentation of several media text artifacts that resonates with a message of resistance and self-love. Messages such as Black is beautiful; Black hair is healthy, Black hair is professional, Black hair textures are desirable. This pro-Black natural hair content is coated in the ideology that stands counter to those mainstream messages that continue to reflect beauty standards and body presentation norms that refuse to become pliable enough to incorporate all Black natural hair textures into it.

The content observed throughout this study suggests that the members of these SMNHG are using their shared experiences as naturalistas, in-group lexicons, cultural and behavioral norms to participate in the very ancient social drive of using communicative forms of expression to challenge the mainstream mass media (Pajnik and Downing, 2008, p.7). Identifying SMNHG as platforms for creating images, narratives, and videos that counteract hegemony suggests that the actors within those platforms are engaged in the politics of resistance. A form of resistance they can participate in as they engage in activities that a part of their everyday lives allowing them to be akin to Scott's (1989) everyday form of resistance. An ideological type of resistance that has proven crucial to the survival of those of social groupings under the conditions of colonialism, enslavement, and racial/ethnic oppression (Kuumba & Ajanaku, 1998, p.228).

The ideological resistance practices found within SMNHG are the result of collective actions undertaken by women who share a collective identity as naturalistas. Organizing around a collective identity has long served members of traditional S.C, and therefore it may well be serving the interest of the members of these digital S.C. Before concluding this chapter, it is necessary to consider how collective identity serves as a point of departure from which digital platform users build communities. Notably, the scholarship on S.C presented earlier exclusively focused on communities of women who routinely share close physical proximity. That is, the researchers focused on the informal and formal S.C created among women who live in the same community. Women who share a city, or those who worship in the same church, visit the same hair salon or those who work in the same offices. What is then missing from that narrative, however, is the scholarship that considers how modern technology, specifically the Internet has not only

shifted how we communicate, but it has reconceptualized the notion of proximity and closeness and how we establish and enhance fictive relationships.

Collective Identity and Resistance

Human beings have long formed themselves into collectives, having understood the benefit of interdependence and collective action. These collectives emerge as individuals establish and assume shared identity traits inspired by their shared interests, norms, or values. Sociologist Alberto Melucci (1995) notes that collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals. Collective identity formation requires shared cognitive definitions such as language, rituals, networks of active relationships between actors, and a degree of emotional investment, which enables people to feel part of a common unity (p.70). Additionally, Melucci (1995) argues that the existence of this shared definition of reality helps to link an individual's personal beliefs to the shared beliefs of a group. The shared culture among members of a collective is, therefore, critical to their bonding process.

I then suggest that is the shared experiences as naturalistas significantly influence these women's decision to join these groups, their desire to participate in activities, and their impetus for forging a community/digital sisterhood with each other. This suggestion germinates from the fact that, as naturalistas, these women not only practice similar beauty rituals, but they share in a collective experience of wearing their Black natural hair in a society driven by beauty standards that often exclude them. Hence, this shared identity, practices, and experiences may contribute to their decision to seek out SMNHG where they can interact with each other, and in so doing, evoke feelings of solidarity and sisterhood. The study of social movements, nationhood, and group dynamics, has

provided a substantial body of research focused on the idea of how shared identity can be the incentive for collective resistance behavioral acts (e.g., Hopper 1950; Blumer 1969; Bender 1978). Much of this work focuses on how individuals create and maintain community and engage collective counter-hegemonic behaviors in the physical world.

This dissertation, however, focuses on how counter-hegemonic action occurs on a virtual platform. Scholars like Postmes & Brunsting, 2002; Ackland & O'Neil, 2011 and DeLuca et al., 2012, have explored this area of research by centering on the role of Internet technology in contemporary social movements. From the Occupied Movement to the Arab Spring, to #MeToo, there has been a significant academic investigation into how former strangers, like-minded, purpose-driven group members employ the Internet to engage in political discourse about issues of personal and collective importance. Although the debates among scholars (e.g., Jones 2011; McCaughey & Ayers 2013) rages on, questioning the tangible impact of such virtual movements, it is essential to note that, because media is a powerful tool in the creation and transmission of ideology, media producers hold positions of power through their ability to distribute symbolic imagery and text.

Therefore, when online users engage in the creation of digital text that counters, challenges, and resists hegemonic ideals, it would be reckless to dismiss these images as insignificant. Newer hashtags led movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #WhileBlack, and #MeToo; some digital movements have transcended their virtual confinement to influence changing laws, institutional policies, and cultural norms. For example, the #MeToo movement, founded by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, but made popularized on Twitter by actress Alyssa Milano in 2017, provided an opportunity for women and men

to challenge existing rape culture and the pervasive nature of sexual abuse. Some credit the online movement for being the catalyst that would inspire many corporations and institutions to revisit their policies on sexual assault. The United States Congress is one such institution. In the wake of the movement, members of Congress, championed by U.S. Senator for New York Kirsten Gillibrand called for the revisiting of the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995. In December 2018, a Bill, H.R.4396, also referred to as the Me Too Act was passed before the House of Representatives with the hopes that it would change how the legislative branch of the U.S. federal government treats sexual harassment complaints (Me too Congressional Act, H.R.4396, 2017).

#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter should be a call for celebration, because they demonstrate that social networking sites can provide a platform for members of marginalized communities with the access to and skill of using it, to share their concerns and collaborate while sidestepping the restrictions and mitigation practices native to traditional media platforms. It is this understanding of the political potential of social networking sites that inform how the Black digital natural hair movement is defined and conceptualized throughout this dissertation. As this dissertation explores how technology has shifted how Black women communicate and advocate for issues of concern, it also considers how the identity performance practices and community building behaviors that these women undertake in the physical world, inspire how they forge communities digitally. To understand how these women, transmit their offline solidarity behaviors into the virtual world, one must first re-imagine the traditional conception of the term "community." Once predicated on the idea of geographic closeness (Hillery,1955), some scholars have come to reconceptualize a community, by drawing upon the importance of

the existence of shared culture and interpersonal relationships rather than physical location (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Baxter, 2002; Anderson, 2006; Song, 2009).

By detaching the requirement of physical proximity from the concept of community, the idea of a digital community can emerge. In his now canonized text, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Howard Rheingold (1993) writes that online communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (p.6). Rheingold's description supports the idea that Internet technology has shifted our understanding not only of time, space, and proximity but also how we interact, build, and sustain emotional connections with each other. Digital Humanities scholar Michele Willson (2006) shares Rheingold's understanding of digital communities. She understands virtual communities to be social groups that display the psychological and cultural qualities of strong communities without physical proximity. Furthermore, Willson (2006) argues that using communications technologies extends the capacity to connect with people through space and time, therefore enabling the continuation and extension of relations of community (p.3).

Thus, for members of Western technologically driven societies, the Internet has provided new possibilities for socialization and organization, which has given way to the possibility of new collective behavior practices and unique and innovative means of demonstrating “closeness” and solidarity. Using case studies, some researchers have provided empirical evidence of how users of online communities navigate around their shared identities to engender a sense of community with each other, which serves to

impact the collective behavioral practices. These researchers often examine explicitly raced, gendered, or classed websites. That is, they focus their work on online spaces specifically created and tailored towards propagating discourse and attending to issues linked to communities that share identifiable socially constructed identities. For example, in Dana Byrne's study of the website Blackplanet.com focused on members of a raced space. Byrne's (2007) work explored the formulation of collective racial identity, by focusing on how the site's tools, primarily the discussion boards: to determine how users perform their racial identities online, how they build a community based on their perceptions of similarity and how they channel that collectivity into civic engagement.

The findings of this work indicate that users demonstrate their shared identities by interacting with each other using culturally relevant language, codes, and symbols. Additionally, although wary of the ability of social media groups to inspire offline civic engagement, Byrne (2007) argues that shared concerns for political issues that affect Black communities, serve to inspire a deep commitment to participation in daily discussions about these issues (p.336). Byrne's work demonstrates how race can be a launching point from which deep ties can emerge among members working towards common causes. This research is especially significant because it was one of the earliest studies which raised questions about how "Blackness," i.e., cultural practices typically associated with Black men and women, are "performed" in a digital platform. This work is a significant early forerunner to the growing Black Digital Studies canon to which this dissertation seeks to contribute. This ever-increasing body of Black Digital Studies scholarship, undertaken by scholars like Wright 2005; Brock 2012; William 2015,

situates race at the center of research that questions identity performance and community building online.

This body of scholarship allowed for an exploration into the pervasive nature of the Internet in the contemporary lives of Black men and women. For instance, in *From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a cultural conversation*, Information Studies scholar and one of the foremost thinkers within the Black Digital Studies tradition, Andre Brock (2012), engages in a Critical Race and techno-culture theory analysis of the Twitter use by Black men and women. This research explores Twitter as a Black cultural outlet that provides a space for collectivity and civil activism. While cultural studies scholar Michelle Wright's (2005) work in *Finding a place in cyberspace: Black women, technology, and identity* is a vital exploration of how Black women negotiate around their intersectional identities while navigating Internet landscapes. This overarching question Wright raises in this paper is whether Black women can find "rooms of their own" in cyberspace (p.48). She concludes by suggesting that, the connectivity, fluidity, and accessibility of the Internet indicates that Black women can find a "space" online (p.57), and when they do, they can make use of it to engage in the form of Black nationalist politics that is free from the constraints of patriarchal control (p.57).

Sheri Williams (2015) paper, *Digital Defense: Black Feminists Resist Violence With Hashtag Activism*, also appears to answer Wright's question of whether Black women can find "rooms of their own" in cyberspace. William's paper demonstrates how Black women have made use of Twitter to share information, garner support effectively, and bring attention to issues that focus on the concerns of Black women. Twitter's technological capabilities allow these women to make use of hashtags to connect their

tweets and create digital threads of narratives typically not included in mainstream media broadcasts. This dissertation thus follows in the footsteps of Black digital studies scholars. It concerns itself with highlighting how Black people (women) draw upon their collective identities to inspire culturally infused behavioral practices, that in turn serve to foster a sense of community, feelings of solidarity or sisterhood, and in so doing they create “rooms of their own” (Wright, 2005, p.48).

CHAPTER IV

Methodology and Sites of Research

Key terms: Social media natural hair groups (SMNHG), Digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM), Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT).

The Internet is a place where race happens, Media Studies scholar Lisa Nakamura (2013) declares in her text, *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet*. This declaration disrupts the notion that the Internet is a utopic galaxy, unfettered by the dominating forces of identity politics. Nakamura's scholarship falls into the tradition of media studies scholarship that takes what sociologist, Christena Nippert-Eng (1996) calls an integrationalist view of the digital world. As the antithesis of the segmentalist view, which views online spaces as self-contained and autonomous, scholars within the integrationalist tradition (e.g., Ayers, 2003; Byrne, 2007; Royal, 2008 and Caren et al. 2012) recognize the potential for offline social structures and identities to spill into online spaces and vice versa. The implications of such spillage lie at the root of the focus of this dissertation.

Not only do the real-world historical and contemporary hair politics of these Black women influence the discourse and behaviors they engage in while online, but the interactions within these digital borders also have the potential to impact their everyday lives. Therefore, when establishing the methodology for this study, it was essential to select methodological tools that would allow, not only for the exploration of the communities but would also include direct conversations with some of the members. I explain the following sections I identify and explain these chosen methodological practices. I begin this process by first reflecting on the intricacies of engaging in insider

research. Second, there is an introduction to the study's research methods, beginning with an overview of the digital interpretative content analysis method.

Third, I identify the study's three sites of research. Next, there is an outline of the data collection process, followed by a section that addresses the study's privacy and anonymity concerns. After this, there is an introduction to semi-structured interviews as the other methodological tool. Finally, the chapter ends with an outline of the six steps undertaken to complete these interviews successfully.

I am a Naturalista: Insider Research

As revealed in Chapter 1, my experience with these natural hair communities predates this academic interest in them. As a naturalista, these spaces have, for several years, served as knowledge resources in which I gained practical hair care advice that has informed and enlightened my natural hair journey. Thus, in establishing the methodological framework for this dissertation, the question about researcher reflexivity weighed heavily. Hence, it is vital to consider how my posteriori knowledge of these spaces would potentially complicate or enrich the research process. As I proceeded to engage in insider research, by studying a movement to which I belong (Naples, 2003), the work benefited from my intimate understanding of the culture of these communities (Aguiler, 1981).

My knowledge of the undergirding lexicon, symbols, and ideological framework that grounds communication within the movement, allowed for the sidestepping of some of the difficulties a lack of cultural competency may bring to a researcher when he or she attempts to investigate cultures distinct from their own. Despite this benefit, steps were taken to ensure that personal experiences did not lead to diminished objectivity (Aguiler

(1981 and Wolfinger, 2002). So, to balance the subjectivity, brought to this work, the use of semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences of other users proved invaluable. This decision ensured that the analysis of the phenomenon was not solely dependent on personal interpretation of the data.

Although I took these cautionary steps, it is essential to note that I did not attempt to write myself entirely out of the text. Instead, I allowed my experiences to shape this work, inspired by influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1988) argument that by recognizing the similarities of one's own experiences to that of the subjects', a researcher's inquiry into the topic can become more nuanced and enriched. The familiarity with the SMNHG enhanced all aspects of the research process because the knowledge aided in the development of the research questions and interview questions. My experiences also informed the selection of the research methods and the analysis of the data. The insight afforded by past usage of SMNHG ensured that the focus of the study was not too narrow.

Research Methods

This dissertation's methodology consists of two primary research methods. During the first stage of this research, I spent ten months visiting the three social media natural hair groups (SMNHG). During the conceptualizing phase of this dissertation, it was quickly determined that there was a need for a methodology that would allow for the capturing, interpreting, and analyzing of the wide variety of digital media text created in these groups; text, images, videos, symbols, and emojis. To capture the observable interactions and content in these groups, I immersed myself in the communities as a non-participant observer. While within the SMNHG, I paid close attention to documenting the

daily engagements in these spaces, by noting the lexicon used and the images and symbols and narratives shared. The goal of this process was to identify rituals and group behaviors that would allow for a deeper understanding of the normative practices within these groups.

This knowledge would prove critical to the future theorizing about why users choose to engage with these communities, and what are the outcomes of this engagement. As this observation, documenting, and theorizing process progressed, I began conducting semi-structured interviews with members of these communities. These interviews provided an opportunity to capture personal narratives directly from fifteen of the women who create and sustain these groups. The data that emerged from this second methodological process allowed for triangulation of the findings from the digital interpretive content analysis process. Additionally, by simultaneously capturing, reading, and analyzing the two streams of data, further understanding of the SMNHG was illuminated, as the process forced me to move beyond personal interpretations, allowing for an intricate comprehension of these groups to come forth.

Ultimately, the data emerging from these two methods would reveal that these SMNHG are more than mere digital meeting rooms for naturalistas. Instead, the data suggested that these groups are counter-hegemonic media production sites, in which the culture of resistance, native to traditional sister circles, was informing the behavioral practices, the content, and the relationships within. Collectively, this robust research methodological protocol allowed for the capture of data that provided a holistic review of the movement.

Digital Interpretative Content Analysis

In selecting a methodology, a researcher must consider whether to engage in a participant or non-participant research. For this dissertation, I determined that because it was essential to capture the naturally occurring behavior within these groups, conducting non-participant observation would best allow for the capturing of data without disrupting or influencing the practices of the group members. This decision meant there was a need to select an extant method for data collection. According to Salmons (2016), extant methods allow digital researchers to collect text, images, media, and other user-generated content created independent of any intervention, influence, or prompts by the researcher (p.5). Furthermore, extant research methods do not require the researcher to have direct contact with those under study, which allows for the gathering of data unobtrusively.

After considering several methods, I eventually formulated a digital interpretative content analysis. This analysis is a mixed-method approach that draws from ethnography, anthropology, and discourse analysis traditions. The protocol of this dissertation, therefore, reflects traces of these scholarships. The methodological progression of this dissertation consists of four steps; step one is the formulation of the problem, step two is data collection, followed by thematic coding and categorizing, with the last step being data analysis. During the formulation stage, my previous knowledge of SMNHG aided in creating exploratory questions.

During the second stage of the process, it was necessary to adopt a method that would allow for the efficient processing of a large quantity of data given the fact that these SMNHG are densely populated with images and text. Although this dissertation is not cyber-ethnographic, the systematic nature of digital ethnography informs this data

collection process. That is, the emphasis digital ethnographers and cultural anthropologists place on documentation and following procedural steps influenced the thematic coding and analysis stages of this research study. Ethnographers have, for decades, entered communities to understand their cultural norms, contextualize a phenomenon or event, or to gain a deeper understanding of the values that shape and order life within. This ten-month study of three social media natural hair groups allowed for the studying of members in their own time and space and in the context of their everyday [digital] lives (Burawoy et al. 1991).

One of the most critical aspects I borrowed from scholars who conduct digital ethnographies is my understanding of online and offline life as extensions of each other. Media studies scholar Laura Robinson and sociologist Jeremy Schulz raised this argument in their highly cited paper, *New field sites, new methods: new ethnographic opportunities*. As the ability to untangle our everyday realities from our online experiences become increasingly more complicated, the relationship between the digital and the physical becomes ever blurry. This erasure of the differences between these two worlds is forcing society to not only rethink the notion of time and space continuum, and it is calling upon digital humanities scholars to adopt a research praxis that considers how offline identity politics can influence online experiences.

To that end, as a scholar interested in counter-hegemonic digital media production as a form of resistance, adopting an integrationist approach to understanding the interaction within these online communities, was critical to the success of this study. That is, it would be foolhardy to attempt to contextualize the behaviors and content within these groups without simultaneous consideration of how historically and contemporarily

institutions of power have shaped how dominant US society reads and evaluates Black natural hair. Continuously reflecting upon the relationship Black natural hair shares with hegemonic standards of beauty throughout the coding and analysis stages of this interpretative content analysis proved vital as it illuminated my understanding of discourses and content found within these SMNHG.

Sites of Research. Three natural hair groups/profiles served as the sites of research for this dissertation. Two of these communities are open/non-private Facebook natural hair groups, with the third being a public/non-private Instagram page maintained by a popular naturalista and haircare blogger. Selecting multiple sites of research was a deliberate act undertaken to improve the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, in seeking to identify the normative behavioral practices that are indicative of the culture of DBNHM, it was necessary to research more than one community. By researching three different online communities, there was the opportunity to differentiate between group-specific normative behavior, which was less relevant to the purposes of this study, and the overall cultural norms shared across the social media groups within DBNHM.

Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT). An online community is a group of people brought together by a shared interest, using a virtual platform to interact and create user-generated content that is accessible to all community members. A key feature of online communities is that through interaction and adherence to specific behavioral norms, members cultivate a communal culture (Rotman and Preece, 2010). Both CCL and KT are open Facebook communities, dedicated to discourse that celebrates and provides information about Black natural hair. These Facebook Groups provide the tools

for users to discuss and negotiate around shared issues of concerns and interests. The groups' walls allow members to participate in discussions by posting comments, images or hyperlinks, or by liking or reacting to statuses. The interactions that take place in these communities are subject to Facebook's terms and conditions, and the restrictions and rules set by the groups' administrators.

The group's walls serve as the hub of communication, where members post content such as; questions about hair care, narratives about micro-aggressions, and product review videos. In August 2017, at the beginning of the 10-month study, CCL boasted over 74,000 users. The group had roughly twenty daily posts, which each earned on the average of two hundred reactions (smiley emojis, thumbs up/like, heart, angry face, or crying emoji) and roughly sixty to seventy comments, while KT, an even larger community, boasted 93,000 plus users in August 2017. This community typically created well over twenty-five daily posts, with an average of two hundred and fifty reactions and ninety comments each. Although there is an ever-growing number of Facebook pages dedicated to Black natural hair, I selected Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT) as research sites because of their large group size and the high level of daily engagement and participation that take place within them.

Notably, both communities have a large percentage of peripheral lurkers² and novice³ engagers; however, these communities were still rich research field sites, proving Rashid et al. (2006) to be true when they argue that every member does not need to contribute content to an online community for it to flourish. The Insiders, members that

²Peripheral lurkers are none active observers who consume group information but do not create content.

³ Novice engagers are those users who may have only recently begin actively participating in a group.

most regularly visit and engage with these communities, and the Leaders, those who consistently engaged to the point of recognition, provided significant content to analyze. By inspiring many of the topics discussed within these groups, these users distinguished themselves as highly influential, significantly shaping the group's behavioral norms. Thus, observing their posts, provided significant insight into the culture of these communities, and by extension, the DBNHM at large. In addition to these opinion leaders, the administrators (admin) of both communities play a significant role in shaping group behavioral norms. CCL's five admins and KT's four, are active participants and frequent content producers. In addition to creating content, they police the communities, interjecting themselves into comment sections to not only flag infractions to the community's rules but to remove unwelcome content or members.

Not only do the administrators serve an essential role in maintaining the order within their communities, but given their power to determine what interactions are acceptable and who can participate, administrators also serve as the purveyors of the DBNHM as they are the gatekeepers of the SMNHG.

@NaturalHairJourney. @Naturalhairjourney is an Instagram profile owned by a popular You-Tube natural hair tutorial vlogger, hair care entrepreneur, and naturalista. As of February 2018, the profile had a substantial following of more than 439,000 followers. On average, "Angel," the owner of the profile, makes roughly six posts each day, garnering an average of two thousand likes each. The images and videos that populate this profile is an eclectic collection of Angel's hairstyles of the day selfie, the naturalista of the week featured picture, a group of images and videos that reflect Angel's political, religious and entrepreneurial ideologies, and weekly one min trailer highlighting new

content from her weekly YouTube haircare vlog.

Like many naturalistas, Angel's Instagram profile serves as a secondary online space: used to drive traffic to her other online domains. Angel's substantial following and multi-digital platform presence position her alongside the ever-growing community of digital influencers, those men and women who have been able to capitalize on their social media popularity by parlaying it into financial gains. In addition to her all-natural oils digital storefront, which offers a wide array of products, Angel is also a brand ambassador for several mainstream hair and beauty products brands. These companies pay her to review and showcase their products across her digital platforms. In Chapter 7, I explore how brand ambassadors like Angel, make use of their platform, and the implications of their relationship with mainstream beauty supply corporations.

Research Protocol.

Formulating the Problem. For some scholars, the research site is a space for exploration. Although messy at times, some of these scholars believe that prior knowledge would obstruct their meaning-making process because of preconceptions about the data, which may lead to inaccurate analysis. Psychologists Robert Elliott and Ladislav Timulak argue, however, that interpretative analysis scholars need not deprive themselves of prior knowledge of a phenomenon before beginning the research process. They suggest that knowledge is impossible without some kind of previous conceptual structure (2005, p.148). Although these scholars encourage researchers to monitor reflectivity during the research process carefully, they suggest that a lack of knowledge of previous research on a phenomenon ensures that one's work will be guided by uninformed rather than informed expectations (2005, p.148).

Therefore, during this initial stage of formulating this research project, drawing upon an understanding of the cultural norms and practices that occurred in these communities would prove invaluable. This knowledge shaped all aspects of the research design, including the formulation of the research questions. Still, these questions were not so rigid that they exempt the emerging of new data. Instead, they were as Elliott and Timulak (2005) suggested, open-ended and exploratory in nature (p.149). By doing so, I made allowances for the capturing of alternative narratives and unexpected findings. Therefore, the research questions of this study are inspired by my known knowledge of SMNHG.

Research Questions.

RQ 1. Do the SMNHG serve as sites in which there is an emergence of a sense of community/fictive sisterhood, as demonstrated by members of these communities engaging in collective behavioral acts and practices?

RQ 2. Do users/followers of these SMNHG incorporate the use of a pro-Black lexicon, phrases, symbols, and terms when discussing their hair and the hair of other Black women? Additionally, is there a similarity between this lexicon and the one used by followers of other pro-Black digital activism movements of the day?

RQ 3. Do users/followers of these SMNHG use these spaces to create alternative media text about Black female bodies that counter mainstream notions of beauty?

Data Collection. A broad cross-section of academic scholars employ digital analysis methods within their research praxis. As an interdisciplinary methodological tool used in the process of answering an innumerable number of research questions, there exists no single, widely adhered to research protocol to which all scholars subscribe. In developing this project, the work of researchers who introduce some traditional ethnographic frameworks into their procedural practices proved to be most illuminating. Media studies scholars like Robinson and Schulz (2011) and Hine (2000), argue that a

Goffmanian ethnographic legacy should inform the work of social scientists who conduct digital research. For these scholars, a well-structured digital project focuses on uncovering the kinds of interpersonal engagements and encounters that make up the micro-interactional order of the [digital] space (Goffman, 1959).

To this end, this study included a Goffmanian analysis of these communities; that is, I focused attention on documenting the interactions taking place between the members, paying attention to uncovering what Goffman (1959) calls, interactional patterns. This meant placing a keen emphasis on the interactions that are repetitive and thus foundational to understanding the defining norms and practices of these communities. Faced with the task of capturing engagements in these data-rich communities, I developed a research protocol that provided a systematic structure for capturing and coding that aided in avoiding data overload. Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) emerged as the ideal tool for this task. Coined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory (GT) provided a set of guidelines that emphasized process, action, and meaning-making.

GT is a helpful tool for qualitative scholars interested in describing, explaining, and understanding the lived experiences of a group of people (Denzin, 1989). Three tenets of GT proved most beneficial to this study. First, GT provided a template for the illuminating practice of engaging in the simultaneous process of data collecting and analyzing. Second, it supported note-taking as a productive means for data collection. Last, GT provided a structure for transferring raw data into theory through the process of coding and categorizing. In the sections below, I expand upon these tenets and introduce the research protocol of this project.

Procedural Practices. During the first month of exploring the textual discussions and interactions among the users, the focus was on identifying the cultural entrée (Kozinets, 1998) of the communities. This process entailed distinguishing the popularly occurring discussion topics, noting the frequently used images and symbols, and making a note of the types of interactions that shape the communities. Doing so provided a distinct understanding of the normative behaviors that transpire within these groups. Each visit to these digital spaces began by identifying and exploring the newly added posts. As the first month progressed, the journaling process began. Notably, not every visit to these groups yielded useable data, as some days there was not enough new content to warrant journaling.

Throughout the ten-month immersion, I visited the online communities three times a week, spending on average of one hour in each of the Facebook groups, and approximately twenty-minutes visiting the Instagram page. The difference in time spent across the platforms is directly related to the fact that the Facebook groups yielded vastly more robust data than that of the Instagram page. Unlike Instagram users who are limited to a text-based form of communication, Facebook users can post images, live hyperlinks, and videos. Thus, the journaling process in Facebook was intense and time-consuming, as it required that I not only focus on the text-based forms of communication, but also accurately describe the non-textual content; emojis, gifs, images, and videos, as well. In describing this content, I drew upon context clues, my experiences in, and understanding of, the prevailing culture of these groups to decrease the likelihood of inflating or misconstruing the intent of the poster.

In describing actions, I answered the following three questions; what is the intent

of this action, what reactions does it spark, and how does this singular act relate to other interactions occurring within the community. As the second month began, shared behavioral trends among users emerged, and by grouping these similar acts to form thematic categories, a streamlined journaling process developed.

Journaling. Users of digital spaces contribute content as a means of interacting with others, expressing their opinions, seeking validation, and fostering community. It is this content that serves as data for digital ethnographers. One of the first decisions to be made was how best to document this data. Many researchers choose to capture screenshots, or to download website files, while other researchers like, Robinson and Schulz (2011) preferred to create static copies of the website, by using webpage archival computer software like BlueCrab or WebCopier. Although these practices have proven to be beneficial to researchers, as they provide an opportunity for the revisiting of conversation threads in its most authentic state, I chose not to use these methods, because of the number of ethical and privacy concerns these practices evoke.

Instead, I decided that engaging in detail note-taking/journaling would be the most beneficial and least intrusive means by which to capture and document the activities within these SMNHG. Influenced by the work of Communication theorist Harold Lasswell's, I made a note of who said what, to whom, with what effect (Lasswell, 1948). In other words, the research journal consisted not only of descriptions of a post but it also included whether the community positively or negatively reacted to said post. Capturing a thick description of the interaction taking place follows in the tradition of Clifford Geertz's (1973) practice of capturing a dense account of the everyday engagements that drive a given community.

While journaling, I identified discussion topics that frequently occurred, noted patterns of behavior, and described the system of shared symbols and lexicon used to sustain communication. It would have been impossible and unproductive, however, to attempt to document everything within these highly active communities. Thus, establishing a systematic process for parsing through the content was valuable. It was here that Grounded theory (GT) proved most beneficial to the process. GT methods which explicitly unite the research process with theoretical development (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2007), allows researchers to actively engage in a simultaneous process of data collection and systematic data coding and organizing.

Therefore, instead of amassing a bulk of data and attempting to make meaning of it at the end of the research process, I continuously coded the emerging data and allowed those findings to train my ethnographic gaze each time I reentered the spaces. This practice allowed for the collection of focused and refined data. Doing so contributed to streamlining the theory-building process, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the communities.

The Elements of a Post. Each Facebook post required several levels of exploration. First, I focused on the content of a new post: the text, the images, or the video. After extrapolating the meaning of the post and inferring the user's purpose for posting it, I then perused the comment section. I focused on the conversations that populated the comment thread, with the attempt to identify how community members reacted to the post. Last, to further understand how the community received the message or ideology embedded within the post, I paid attention to the number of "likes" a message received. I contextualized the act of "liking" a status, as the demonstration of one's

agreement with the content.

Interestingly, Facebook allows for garnering an even more detailed understanding of the community's reaction to a post. I was able to do so because users of Facebook are not only limited to the thumbs up/traditional "like" symbol. Instead, because they have the option to choose from five other expressions; a heart, a laughing face, a shocked expression, a crying face, or an angry face, there was the opportunity to capture a more advanced understanding of their emotional reaction to the content. Instagram posts, however, are less complicated. Followers of Instagram profiles can only offer text-based comments or make use of the traditional "like" symbol. Therefore, when observing Angel's profile, I focused on describing the images or videos she posted, and the comments made by her followers.

Thematic Coding and Categorizing. By paying attention to the dramaturgical, ritualistic, and ludic aspects of the interactions (Robinson and Schulz, 2011) taking place in these online environments, the norms, trends, and daily practices that ground these digital fields emerged. As the first month progressed, I began to code the interactions, asking, what is the intent of this engagement, what reaction does it spark, and how does this individual action relate to other interactions occurring within the community. Categories began to emerge from the coded interactions, as regularities and similarities (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) within the data became apparent. Throughout the second half of the study, while continuously exploring the communities, the data was used to further define and expand upon the categories. There was a noticeable shift occurring during the second half of the digital data gathering process. Enriched by simultaneously engaging in semi-structured interviews, the exploration into these communities became significantly

focused.

As interview respondents shared their personal experiences of using these spaces, their narratives elevated my understanding of what was occurring within these spaces. At times the interviews would inspire a revisit to posts and themes that had earlier been dismissed as insignificant or secondary. At that juncture, the research was no longer exploratory. The journaling process thus shifted from purely descriptive to narrative-based, whereby I engaged not only in describing a post, but I was drawing connections and creating linkages between and among posts. By the eighth month of research, the digital analysis was at its saturation point, so I no longer visited three times a week. I would, however, return to the groups occasionally to engage in a process known as theoretical sampling (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2007), which is collecting more data to clarify ideas, refine the depth of analysis, and strengthen the emerging theory.

Interpretative Analysis Procedure. To make sense of the data collected, I developed a systematic interpretative and meaning-making procedure. First, before commencing the process, I adhered to Elliott and Timulak (2005) encouragement to scholars to thoroughly read the whole data set. A thorough reading of the interview transcripts and the observation journals documented throughout the digital research provided an opportunity for greater insight, and a holistic understanding of the phenomenon emerged. Second, I proceeded to revisit the thematic categories to identify whether there were redundancies, duplications, or inclusion of groupings not relevant to the study's goals. At the end of this process, I omitted several categories and merged others.

During this revisiting phase, I was careful not to cast aside any data, but instead, I identified similarities between categories and collapsed those categories into a single grouping. After the completion of this reassessment phase, which included the merging and streamlining of categories, five thematic categories remained. These categories include; body politics/body positivity, social justice discourses, advice and support for professional and personal relationships, product and brand reviews, and Black hair in the mainstream media. During the third step of the process, I proceeded to analyze each category to identify the 'latent content' (Hand, 2016). That is, I revisited the notes to determine the primarily symbolic, and at times more covert underlying meanings attached to each category. The step required that I depend on my experience as a naturalista to assist in contextualizing the images, videos, behavioral practices, and actions. As earlier noted, as a scholar conducting interpretative research, one's identity is influential because, as Bhattacharjee (2012) argues, interpretative researchers are part of the social phenomenon (p.104).

Additionally, Klein et al. (1999) also reiterate the significance of the researcher in interpretative research, they argue, in interpretive research, it is accepted that the story is told from the researcher's perspective through a process of construction of meaning with participants (p.74). The emphasis that these scholars place on the influential nature of a researcher may be concerning for those who subscribe to the belief that scholars must attain complete objectivity to capture the truth of a phenomenon. I believe, however, that our knowledge and experiences as researchers can enhance scholarship if we carefully engage in this process by making allowances for the emerging data when necessary to

challenge our preconceived ideas. In addition to my experiences, I continuously reflected on the culture of these groups while dissecting the content within.

In her text, *Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices*, communications scholar Anol Bhattacharjee notes that,

Social phenomena must be studied within their natural setting. Because interpretive research assumes that social phenomena are situated within and cannot be isolated from their social context, interpretations of such phenomena must be grounded within their socio-historical context (2012, p.106).

As I engaged in naturalistic inquiry (Bhattacharjee, 2012), I ensured that I did not fail to consider the context within which the phenomenon emerges. Additionally, I was ever cognizant that the culture, norms, and history of those who contribute to and inspire the emergence of the phenomenon was also a strong influence in shaping what I was observing. Thus, throughout this interpretative process, the history of Black hair culture and intricacies of Black women's body politics were ever-present influences over how I made meaning of the phenomenon under study.

By undertaking this process of attaching meaning to the emerging data, I allowed the messy mass of notes describing digital actions to transition into a formulated and coherent narrative that situates the digital actions in relation to the dissertation's research goals. The result of this process serves to inform the data chapters; chapter 5, chapter 6, and chapter 7. These chapters reflect an understanding of these SMNHG as enclaves in which Black women engage in daily digital labor practices that evoke resistance tropes through the production media text ripe with counter-hegemonic ideologies.

Privacy Concerns. Researchers who embed themselves within groups must continuously consider the implication of their presence in a community. Chief amongst

the concerns is the question of how to ensure that one's research continues to abide by the credo: first, to do no harm (Smith, 2005). Abiding by this credo requires that a researcher train their methodological practices to ensure that they do not inflict undue physical or mental distress to the people or places they study. For this dissertation, this meant that I ensured that the methods I adopted did not jeopardize the privacy and anonymity of respondents and subjects. For digital research scholars, the explosion in social media use over the last decade has presented a wealth of research opportunities; however, it has also presented scholars with the new challenge of grappling with the unique privacy issues inherent to social media engagement.

One of the most pressing issues related to privacy that needed answering was the question of self-disclosure. After some consideration, I decided to establish a research protocol that did not include me disclosing my identity to the members of the groups I explored. I came to this decision because these social media groups are fast-paced and free-flowing locations, where new messages are continually superseding older ones. The quick-changing timelines may have made it even impossible to reach all users. Therefore, if I attempted to self-identify as a researcher in these communities, this disclosure would have entailed a repetitive posting schedule which would have disrupted the natural flow of these communities. Hence, because the purpose of this study was to capture the naturally occurring, ritualistic interactions, and behavioral practices within these spaces, this type of disruption would have been counterproductive to the goal of the study.

Thus, I determined that undertaking this research as a non-participant observation would be the praxis best suited to this cause. As a non-participant observer, I did not introduce content and/or initiate conversations. Not doing so, ensured that I did not

influence the naturally occurring behaviors within the communities. I am keenly aware that my decision to not self-disclose may awaken concerns about lurking. So, I spent a significant amount of time considering the extensive body of scholarship dedicated to discussing the ethical implications of none self-disclosure. Scholars who take up this concern hold contesting viewpoints. Some of these scholars (e.g., King, 1996; Sanders, 2005; Garcia et al., 2009; and Coleman, 2010) encourage researchers first to determine if a community is private or public before deciding if they should or shouldn't self-identify. Making this determination can be a lofty undertaking, because, unlike physical spaces, drawing the line of demarcation between private and public in digital areas can be a bit cumbersome.

Still, engaging in the process is valuable, given the different levels of expectation of privacy users of private versus public spaces hold. The requirement that one must undergo an approval process to enter and the exclusivity of access that defines private membership may contribute to some members of private spaces possessing a high expectation of privacy. Users of public areas, however, can observe and be observed by a broader, less exclusive population. Therefore, by selecting public groups for this study, I engaged with communities that were aware that their actions are freely observable and accessible to an almost unlimited digital audience. Thus, as I observed these communities, I was mindful that these users might have tailored their behaviors based on the knowledge that they are using a public forum (boyd, 2004; Gershon, 2010 and Trottier, 2011). Although this may imply that they might have been engaging in self-policing practices as they interacted in these digital meeting rooms, it also meant that I

felt reassured that this exploration was not observing actions intended for private consumption.

In addition to questioning whether a community is private or public, scholars like, Acquisti & Gross, 2006 and Moreno et al., 2013, advise researchers to take into consideration, the explicit terms and conditions that govern a space when assessing whether they should self-identify to the population within. Notably, I found that in both Facebook and its subsidiary Instagram's privacy policies, there are explicit statements concerning the expectation of privacy. In both cases, these statements address the open nature of public Facebook Groups and non-private Instagram pages. On Facebook's security site page, there is a section entitled, what are the privacy settings for groups? (n.d), here it states that for public Facebook groups, such as KT and CCL, anyone with access to the Internet and any Facebook user can watch and contribute content on the group's wall, access the group's description, and its list of members and administrators. Similarly, on Instagram's Privacy and Safety Center page, the tab entitled Controlling your visibility (n.d), addresses the visibility of public profiles.

The tab states, by default, anyone can view your profile and posts on Instagram. You can make your posts private so that only followers you approve can see them. In both cases, public/open communities on these platforms, not only hold little barriers to participation, but they may even lend themselves to non-participant practices. It is entirely possible that these public/open communities may be the types of spaces Scaramuzzino (2012), envisioned when she argues that, many websites are created so visitors can lurk (p.49). After all, all three groups boast a considerably large percentage of peripheral lurkers and novice engagers, who benefit from the communities without

contributing to them. Also, their lack of participation does not result in their dismissal or banishment from the group. So, by limiting my data collection to observing these three publically accessible communities, i.e., they required no registration, they possess no barriers to entry or requirements for participation, I felt further reassured that I was not subverting the norms of these communities by my presence within them.

Preserving Anonymity. It was not at all lost on me throughout this research that the women I was observing are members of communities who, for various racial, gendered, classed reasons, may undergo forms of oppression in their lives. Hence, as I prepared to collect and share the findings of this work, I felt a heightened sense of purpose to ensure taking the necessary precautionary steps to preserve the anonymity of all users. One of the first steps taken was to protect the identity of the interview respondents and the ethnographic sample. To do so, I assigned pseudonyms to the interview respondents, which I used throughout the journaling and reporting process. During the data collecting stage, however, I included no names nor assigned any pseudonyms.

The next step taken to uphold the anonymity of the sample was to ensure that potential readers of the dissertations were not able to identify a subject's identity by just running an online search of the included quotation. Thus, before adding a quote into this dissertation, I ran a search test to determine its accessibility. Additionally, while carefully ensuring not to shift or conflate the meaning of a quote, the use of ellipses and paraphrasing tactics further served to protect the privacy of all subjects under study (Robinson and Schulz, 2011). The third step implemented was not to engage in any form of archiving but to limit documentation of activities to journaling instead. Hence there

was no downloading or screen capturing of any page or image from the Facebook groups or the Instagram profile.

When it became necessary to revisit a post, I returned to the communities and made use of the search feature to identify and reanalyze them. The final step undertaken to protect the identities of the users of these communities was to save journals, notes, and all documentation in a password-protected Microsoft Word and Excel documents in a password-protected file on an external hard drive.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In the early stages of conceptualizing this study, it became apparent that the methodological protocol should also include interviews. As one of the most commonly used data collection methodologies, interviews provided an opportunity to triangulate the finds emerging from the digital research process. Two of the driving questions that steered this research are, first, why do women choose to participate in these natural hair communities? Second, what is the affect of the content they create on the ways they and the broader US society read and understand their natural Black hair? To increase the potential for capturing data that would lend to answering these questions, only interviewees who identified themselves as active members, posting, liking, and commenting more than once a week were included. By setting this prerequisite for participation, I believe I significantly improved the quality of my interviews as I was able to capture stories from active members of the groups.

Additionally, by focusing only on women who are active participants and thus essential shapers of the SMNHG and the digital movement to which they are a part of, their stories provided crucial empirical evidence that contributed to the conceptualization

of the DBMNH as a movement steep in resistance culture. As mentioned earlier, the first interview session took place during the sixth month of the digital research process. This delay proved beneficial for several reasons. First, the knowledge captured during the ethnographic study enriched the dialogue with the interview respondents. Second, the thematic categories that emerged during the exploration of the SMNHG informed the analysis of the interview transcripts and the establishment of the thematic data grouping. After the fifth or sixth interview, there were noticeable similarities between respondents' narratives, and in keeping with the procedure undertaken during the ethnographic coding process, these similarities aided in the creating of thematic categories.

These categories allowed for the systematic ordering of the interviews' large quantity of information. Upon analyzing the interview data, the responses of the interviewees could be ordered into five frequently occurring and recognizable themes; cathartic safe spaces, support system, navigating across differences, influence on purchasing behavior, and mainstreaming Black hair. Throughout the findings and discussion chapters of this dissertation, I amplified the voices and narratives of these users, by including the first-hand accounts of how they make meaning of their involvement and experiences. A large body of work (e.g., Wilson, 2013; Swenson et al., 1992; Robinson and Schulz, 2011; Silverman, 1993) influenced the interview protocol (see Appendix 1). The interview research design set forth by socio-behaviorist and pharmacy scholar Silvia Rabionet (2011) proved to be one of the most succinct and adaptable, and thus, it served to inform this study. In the sections below, I introduce the interview design, which is acclimatization of Rabionet's (2011) six stages for conducting qualitative research interviews.

Stage One: Selecting the Type of Interview. Rabionet (2011) notes that a researcher must determine which type of interview style would best serve in allowing them to attend to the goals of their research project. Given the fact that I have placed a high value on the personal narratives of respondents, I recognized that I would need to select a style that would allow the respondents the freedom to share their stories while ensuring a level of uniformity across interviews. I determined that although unstructured interviews can capture rich data, it would have required the relinquishing of control over the direction of the interview, which may have resulted in problems and chaos. Furthermore, unstructured interviews would have increased the risk of amassing a large quantity of information that did not relate to the study's goals.

So, to ensure that these interviews were fruitful, I opted to conduct semi-structured interviews. This in-depth interview style consisting of open and direct questions is a powerful tool that allowed for the capturing of the voices of respondents while ensuring that the researcher maintains significant levels of control over the process. Although the conversational manner of semi-structured interviews offered the respondents the opportunity to introduce and explore issues they felt to be necessary, the use of preset questions and follow-up prompts ensured that the interviews did not deviate from the study's focus. As a combination of the predefined questions found in structured interviews and open-ended exploratory nature of unstructured interviews (Wilson, 2013), semi-structured interviews allowed me the freedom to explore and add questions as the interview progressed.

Stage Two: Recruiting Respondents. To recruit potential respondents for this study, I engaged in what Swenson et al. (1992, p.462) call purposeful sampling; that is, I intentionally sought out Black women who were users of natural hair communities. Thus, beginning in September 2017, the fourth month of the ethnographic study, I started posting interview recruitment flyers (see Appendix 2) in both KT and CCL. I tailored the recruitment effort to adhere to the strict solicitation rules set by administrators of both communities. Notably, although members of these communities faced no restrictions on how frequently they could post general content, the administrators are explicit in their community rules about the days and times that any post directly selling a product or a service is permissible. Recruitment efforts such as my own fell into this category, and thus I posted the flyer only on "Make Money Mondays" in Coily Curl Love (CCL), and "Business Fridays" in Kinky Twists (KT) which were the two days set aside for such activities.

With the desire to capture as much attention as possible, I decided to establish a weekly schedule for posting. I determined that doing so during the high traffic time between the hours of 8 pm and 10 pm to be the most optimal choice. Although, in theory, this systematic scheduling promised to improve the chances that users would notice these posts, in actuality, capturing the attention of users in social media platforms like Facebook is especially tricky. Facebook posts do not populate chronologically: with the newest seated on the top of a user's feed, but rather the site's algorithms set posts that generate the most activity to the top. Therefore, in these content-rich communities, posts that garner less attention faced the threat of remaining significantly deep within the user's timeline and thus going unnoticed.

I quickly recognized that posting the flyer only once a week in each Facebook community was proving to be an inefficient recruitment strategy. As the months progressed, however, I slowly began to earn some participants, and eventually, it was snowball sampling that proved to be the driving force in helping to identify interviewees, as respondents would routinely introduce me to other women with whom they shared loose and strong ties. The flyer directed potential participants to visit the dissertation's Google form. As suggested by Robinson and Schulz (2011), I used this dissertation website to provide information to potential participants. The page stated my professional contact information. It also listed the purpose of the study, the requirements for participation, and the benefits and rights of participation.

Furthermore, those interested in partaking could complete the pre-interview screening survey. The survey included questions that requested several bio-demographical information. I used this information to determine the eligibility of potential participants. Those found to be eligible were those who self-identified as Black women, naturalistas who were at least eighteen years old who were active participants (who posted, commented, or like content) of a natural hair community at least once a week. I contacted, via email, all those found to be eligible, and invited them to use the provided Doodle scheduling link to select, one of the forty-five-minute interview time slots available. A total of thirty-two (32) potential respondents completed the pre-interview survey. However, eight were ineligible to continue in the study.

Three (3) were younger than eighteen, and five (5) were infrequent users of the spaces. Eventually, I eliminated another seven (7) of the candidates for various reasons. Four (4) failed to reply to the invitation emails, one (1) noted her discomfort with the

process and withdrew, while another failed to call at the scheduled interview time. Finally, two (2) were unable to agree to a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview. Therefore, the study included a total of fifteen (15) respondents (2 administrators and 13 users). Fifteen respondents prove to be an ideal number for this study. In fact, in keeping with Guest et al. (2006), arguments that saturation occurs around twelve participants in a homogeneous group, I found that by interview number ten, the narratives began to mirror each other.

Stage Three: Conducting and Recording the Interviews. Although offered the opportunity to Skype, Facetime, or make use of Google Hangouts, all fifteen respondents chose to call via telephone. The interviewees used the provided contact number to initiate the call. By placing the power in their hands to begin the interaction, I hoped to decimate any feeling of uneasiness they may have had given the assumed power dynamic associated with interviewer and interviewee relationships. To record the dialogue, I placed my cellphone on speaker mode and used a software application on an iPad to record the interviews. The length of each interview session varied considerably; however, the average time spent was roughly forty minutes to an hour.

Each interview session began with a re-introduction to the interviewee and a short period of casual discussion, which served to build the rapport with the respondent. Next, I reiterated the purpose of the study and rehashed the privacy and confidentiality statements, which laid out their rights to withdraw at any point in the interview.

Stage Four: Crafting an Interview Protocol. The role of an interviewer was to create an opportunity for respondents to describe the culture, identify artifacts, and speak

to the significance of the communities they inhabit. Thus, as Wilson (2013) notes, I took care in preparing the initial question to ensure that it was non-threatening, relevant, and low stakes enough to allow participants to immediately feel safe, free, and willing to share these narratives. Thus, each interview session began with the question, "tell me when did you go natural, and what led to this decision?" By starting with this exploratory question, instead of one that is more opinion-driven, I immediately set a conversational and relaxed tone for the interview and, in doing so, I detached from the role of the inquisitor, adopted the role of the listener while positioning the interviewees as the experts.

This initial question also allowed for the capturing of background information about the interviewees. This background information later proved to be beneficial when analyzing the arguments and statements they raised throughout their interviews. As each interview progressed, I allowed the interviewee to express her views and direct the conversation. At times, I interjected, using the pre-prepared interview questions. I did so when there was a need to refocus the dialogue, to ensure that as the respondents shared their narratives, that the interview did not veer too far off course and failed to yield any valuable data.

Notably, throughout many of the interviews, I rarely needed to ask many of the pre-prepared questions, because the respondents naturally introduced these topics on their own. Additionally, although these interview questions appear in numerical order in the Appendix, it is essential to note that I did not always maintain this order. Instead, I chose to introduce questions as they became relevant. This practice ensured against the disruption of the natural progression of the conversations. Just as crucial as the pre-prepared interview

questions were the follow-up questions. The follow-up questions allowed for a deeper probing, eliciting more details, and yielding clarification about statements. It was necessary, however, that I ensured that the prompts were neutral and that I adhered to Wilson (2013) encouragement to researchers to ensure that their interview prompts are non-leading and non-directive, that is, I ensured that I provided minimal vocal encouragement not to appear as if I was in favor or objecting to their statements.

Instead, the follow-up questions consisted of phrases such as, "please tell me more," "what did you mean by...", or "can you describe how it made you feel." Additionally, because the respondents were aware that I was also a naturalista, on many occasions when voicing their opinions or making statements, they would appeal to me for affirmation, using phrases like, "you know what I mean right...", "you get it?" or "I know you understand." On those occasions, I found that by saying, "I understand what you are saying," I struck a gentle balance between not appearing to denounce or discredit their statements and not shifting the dialogue by offering too much of my own opinion.

Stage Five: Establishing Ethical Guidelines. The question of how to maintain the respondents' privacy and anonymity lingered heavy on the mind as I prepared the interview protocol. As I invited these women to share their narratives, I knew it would be essential to ensure that by participating in the study, they were not undertaking any risks. To ensure that this did not occur, I instituted several measures. First, in all interactions and correspondence with a participant, I addressed her using the pseudonym she submitted via the pre-interview form. Additionally, no other demographical or identifiable information appears in this dissertation.

Second, I saved the raw recordings of the interviews and the transcripts in a password-protected file on an external hard drive. I will permanently delete these files within three years of this dissertation's completion, in keeping requirements set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Third, in addition to listing the IRB approved confidentiality statement (see Appendix 3) on the pre-interview survey, I further obtained each interviewee's informed consent at the beginning of each session by reminding them of their rights.

Stage Six: Analyzing and Theorizing Findings. Semi-structured interviews tend to yield an enormous quantity of notes. Although I maintained control over the direction of the interviews, by allowing the respondents freedom to express themselves, there were moments when the interviewees offered narratives that fell outside the interest of this dissertation. Thus, in analyzing presenting the findings from these interviews, I did not attempt to provide a thorough description of each session. Instead, I focus attention on sections of the interviews where respondents directly spoke to why, how, and to what end they participate. Silverman (1993) argues that although the steps to achieve validity in quantitative research does not translate to ethnographic work, qualitative researchers can rely on triangulation as a means of ensuring that their findings are reliable.

Thus, in the finding and discussion chapters of this dissertation, I continuously set the emerging themes from the ethnographic work alongside the emerging topics from the interviews, to allow the similarities and contentions to lead towards building arguments. The first step in this process required that I coded the interview transcripts. This necessary step was to ensure accurate and succinct meaning-making of the enormous quantity of narrative/data I had collected. Notably, Cope (2010) argues that despite

attempts by Strauss (1987) and later, Strauss and Corbin (1990) to formalize the coding process, there still exists no defined coding standard. The works of scholars like Strauss (1987), Charmaz and Belgrave (2007), and Cope (2010), however, provided me with some insight and allowed me to create a rigorous coding framework. I opted to engage in what Strauss (1987) terms selective coding, which follows these steps: first, I read through each transcript without making notes. This initial step allowed me to begin to mentally identify the key arguments and similarities between and among the interview sessions.

Second, I proceeded to code each transcript line by line, taking note of the analytical codes that frequently appeared. It is important to note that I engaged in constant transcription as each interview occurred, rather than waiting to do all of them at the end. This use grounded theory significantly shaped the interviews' data collection and analysis process. I was able to make use of emerging codes from each interview session, to form the forthcoming interview session, because the simultaneous process of data collection and analysis allowed for the constant revisiting and altering of the interview questions. This practice of informing new interviews with the data emerging from earlier interviews, Charmaz and Belgrave (2007) argue, benefits the work of qualitative scholars.

CHAPTER V

Digital Sister Circles: Black Virtual Spaces of Resistance

Key terms: Sister Circles (S.C), Social media natural hair groups (SMNHG), Digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM), Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT).

Black women have a history of creating safe spaces for themselves. A "homeplace" constructed by Black [people] women for restoring, affirming, and uplifting each other. A haven, a community of resistance where Black [people] women could affirm one another and, by so doing, heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination (hooks, 1990, p.42). Sister Circles (S.C) resemble these homeplaces as described by hooks because, as noted in Chapter 3, S.C are fictive kinship structures that provide Black girls and women a space to support each other; laugh through the pain, organize, resist and fight for collective emotional and spiritual freedom. In this chapter, I highlight how four critical tenets of S.C (infused by the trope of kinship, formation of culturally relevant spaces, discuss and bond over shared lived experiences and engagement in collective action) materialize among the members of Social media natural hair groups (SMNHG). Given the counter-hegemonic nature of traditional S.C, I believe that identifying these groups as virtual S.C is a necessary step for framing SMNHG as locations conducive to collective forms of resistance behaviors.

Additionally, by highlighting the critical traits exemplified by members of SMNHG, this chapter also contributes to the body of scholarship dedicated to questioning how the Internet has shifted the way we conceptualize the notions of proximity and closeness. This work adds explicitly to the void in research that examines how technology has re-imagine the ways Black women are establishing and enhancing fictive

relationships with each other. Therefore, before describing in Chapter 6, the resistance practices that occur in these online communities, this chapter suggests that by mirroring these four tenets, these digital Sister Circles and virtual homeplaces allow their members to establish solidarity through creating and sharing digital content that allows for bonding over shared life experiences and the resisting harmful ideologies about their hair. As sites in which Black women can center their bodies, their lives, and their collective concerns, these S.C allow for virtual communication and the employment of community building practices. Practices that Black women learned from the blueprint of sisterhood passed down to them by their foremothers. These social media platforms, therefore, did not invent the idea of community, but they are merely affording these women, even those geographically distant, to participate in a digitalized form of transformative and emotional labor practices.

In the sections below, I identify the presence of these types of labor practices and suggest that coupled with the presence of a shared lexicon, the adherence to shared cultural codes and normative practices signal that these digital S.C hold within them the potential to function as meeting ground for resistance actors. Before presenting examples from the findings of this study to support this understanding of SMNHG, in the proceeding section, I briefly highlight the three thematic data categories from which the findings that informed this chapter emerge.

Contextualizing the Emerging Thematic Categories

Thematically categorizing the data emerging in this study, was an essential step towards understanding the nature and impact of these SMNHG. Ten themes emerged during the analysis phase of the study: five from the digital interpretative analysis process

and five emerging from the responses of the interviewees. The data within three of these thematic categories are critically important to this chapter. The first of these categories became evident during interview sessions when repeatedly the interviewees described the groups are cathartic "safe spaces." Interviewees, using anecdotal examples, described occasions when the social media natural hair groups provided them a place to show vulnerability as they commiserate about, as interviewee *Denise* stated, all the hate Black women get for just being themselves (Denise, personal communication, February, 23rd 2018). It became apparent that as Black women facing the emotional, social and even financial cost for wearing their hair in its natural state, these communities provide these women a platform outside the gaze of others to discuss, find resolutions, and organize around the micro and macro aggressions they encounter in their lives.

The second category of data that inspires the theorizing in this chapter is closely related to the notion of safe spaces. This thematic category consists of findings that define SMNHG as sites of support. The data coded in this category include moments observed during the digital interpretative analysis process and stories shared by interviewees where the discourse within these groups centered on the sharing of advice on matters of personal and professional concern. Most often, the advice focused on how to deal with prejudicial behavior levied against their natural hair by coworkers, bosses, classmates, lovers, friends, and family members. The final thematic category that resonates with this chapter focuses on the data coded as strategies for navigating across differences. This category consists of moments in which the group played center court as the members struggled with issues of intersectionality. These were the moments when

these Black women recognized that although they share many similar sites of identity, they were not entirely homogenous.

These moments were often ripe with emotion when differences of opinion informed by class, religion, sexuality, or age differences sometimes threatened the sense of community within these groups. Throughout the chapter, I introduce some of the data coded within these thematic categories, to demonstrate how the enduring latent traces of the culture of traditional S.C manifests within the SMNHG. I argue that the shared culture and collective identity among the members of these SMNHG allows them to operate as spaces of healing, validation, and nurturing. Spaces members may feel comfortable enough to share counterhegemonic ideas and post images that resist mainstream narratives. In the sections below, I first provide examples of how the members of SMNHG have employed four of the community-focused behavioral practices of tradition S.C, to establish and sustain their movement. These four tenets that emerge from the work of several scholars, (Denton 1990; Gilroy 1993; Hughes & Heuman 2006; Collins 2000; Niles-Goins 2011), provide the heading for the sections below. In each section, I identify how these women are employing the group-affirming (Sherman et al., 2007) behavioral practices intrinsic to tradition S.C.

Second, identifying these groups as virtual S.C, also meant that these groups might struggle with some of the same counter-collectivity behaviors that have long threatened the harmony of traditional S.C. Far from utopian spaces, members in both traditional and these virtual S.C must navigate interpersonal issues, therefore before concluding the chapter; I identify how the occurrence of three counter-collectivity behaviors may negatively affect the potential for these women to participate in collective

defiance action. The chapter then concludes by arguing that there is a need to protect these digital sister circles because they serve to provide twenty-first-century Black women with new ways for forging and maintaining the necessary and liberating sisterhoods, that have historically benefitted their collective sociopolitical status in North America and across the diaspora.

Mirroring the Tenets of Traditional Sister Circles

Infused by the Trope of Kinship

The first tenet of traditional S.C embodied within these digital communities is the intense presence of an infusion of the trope of kinship. Sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993), who popularized the term, argued that the trope of kinship permeates Black understandings of culture and community to the point that African-Americans accept the notion that racial similarities can be the conduit for familial bonding. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) furthers the argument by noting that the perception of the trope of kinship is central to Black-influenced social and political projects, serving to inform the perception that a shared Black racial identity can be the basis for forging familial bonds (p.77). One of the fundamental ways in which the trope of kinship metamorphoses is through the presence of kinship infused language. Kinship language consists of the practices of extending to friends, associates, and at times, even strangers, relationship titles that some may reserve only for those with whom they share common DNA.

For instance, Collins (1998) writes that family language shapes everyday interactions. African-American strangers, she continues, often refer to one another as brother and sister, with some Black men referring to each other as blood or homies (p. 78). The use of kinship language is prevalent among users of SMNHG; often evoked as

terms of endearment, the members frequently referred to each other as sis, short for sister, or sib; short for sibling. What is notable about the use of the term sis, is, it is most often used when members are seeking to reiterate their similarity to other members. For example, in one post in KT, a member posted the following question *"is it just me, or do you attract different types of men based on your hairstyle."* Repeatedly, the responses to this post included the term sis, as many members affirmed that they had similar experiences. For instance, one responder stated *"me too sis, when I blow out my hair, I get noticed more,"* another said *"sisssss, most definitely, I thought it was only me,"* and yet another note, *"I become a whole new person sis, everything changes."* By using "sis" here, these members are evoking the kinship term to solidify their alliance with each other and reiterate that their shared lived experiences position them as members of this in-group.

Additionally, a prominent site for observing the use of these and other kinship terms is by examining posts that I categorized as the "baby reveal." In these regularly occurring non-hair related posts, members share photos of their newborn babies. Accompanying these photos are captions that include strains of kinship language. For instance, in one post in KT, a user's "baby reveal" photo included the caption *"hey aunties, your handsome nephew has arrived,"* and a similar post in CCL read, *"say hello to your new niece."* Additionally, CCL, another member, also posted, *"what are my grandbabies wearing to trick or treat, show them off, moms."* In these instances, the use of the terms: aunties, grandbabies, nephew and niece, all serve as an indication that these women recognition of their shared intersectional raced, and gender identities have adopted the use of fictive kinship narratives to, as Collins suggests, to build familial or

sisterly bonds (1998, p.78). In addition to kinship language, the presence of inclusionary terminology and behaviors, and the desire to share personal images from their lives may demonstrate that members of these groups are forging a kinship with each other.

Hogg & Terry (2000) argue that people who define and categorize themselves as members of an in-group will engage in the practice of comparing themselves with those standing outside of the group. What is most important here, the scholars suggest, is that the attempt to define and separate one in-group from the out-group serves to intensify people's commitment to members of their in-group. Therefore, the popularity of the use of the collective pronoun "we," opposed to the individualistic "I," in these groups may suggest that members are linking themselves to the collective. Additionally, when these women make use of the inclusionary term "us," to distinguish themselves from the oppositional "they" or "them," is also a definitive sign that members are drawing a stark comparison between their in-group (Black women with natural hair) and those who stand outside of it. Frequently throughout the semi-structured interviews, interviewees made use of these collective and inclusionary terms.

For example, during one interview session with a respondent name *Xaria*, she stated, I love these groups because we can learn from each other, and just be ourselves (*Xaria*, personal communication, Feb 27th, 2018). Here *Xaria*'s use of "us," "we," "our(selves)" serve as placeholders for the terms: Black women or naturalistas. By using these inclusionary pronouns, she signifies that she positions herself as a member of the collective. Similarly, *Ne* also used inclusionary terms during her interview sessions. In describing her excitement for an upcoming movie in which the protagonist is a Black woman with natural hair and the plot focused on the protagonist's experiences as a

naturalista, *Ne* stated, I can't wait to see it. I hope they get it right tho and do not make us look bad (*Ne*, personal communication, March 1st, 2018). *Ne*'s statement highlights that not only does *Ne* position herself as a part of the naturalista in-group by using the term "us," she alludes to the fact that as Black women and naturalistas, there is a collective penalty levied on all Black women when an individual member of the collective undergoes a negative portrayed in mediated text.

The use of these collective pronouns and familiar terms by both respondents emphasizes the existence of kinship tropes throughout these SMNHG. Additionally, the use of kinship language by members of these communities also suggest that there is a recognition of the similarities they share. Both these findings signal that a trope of kinship infuses the interactions between these group members, and as Collins (2018) notes, the perception of kinship is a central theme in Black-influenced social and political projects. Therefore, this finding suggests that these groups may serve as spaces capable of supporting resistance behaviors.

Formation of Culturally Relevant Spaces

The second tenet of traditional S.C found present in these communities, concludes that, like other forms of fictive kinship networks, S.C are culturally relevant spaces. Several studies have emphasized the importance of shared culture in shaping kinship relationships. For instance, in their study of the role of S.C in the treatment of Black women with anxiety, Neal-Barnett et al. (2011), found that by incorporating practices and strategies unique to the participants' lives as Black women, cognitive behavioral therapy practitioners can more effectively treat their patients. While, in their study of how Black

women viewed and managed self-esteem, DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter (2000) highlights the importance of gaining support within one's social group. These researchers draw a link between the development and maintenance of positive self-esteem among African American women, to the access and use of strong intragroup social support.

For Bell et al. (2000), the presence of shared cultural codes among Black women can help to intensify the degree of their interaction. The scholars state that these shared cultural codes may take a multitude of forms; food, hair, spirituality, or music, or they can be more abstract experiences related to their multiple consciousnesses as African American women (Bell et al. 2000, p.46). Goffman's (1959) notion of performativity may be salient here as well because individual actors perform their knowledge of the shared codes through their speech and behaviors, and by accurately tweaking their performances accordingly, they can fuse him or herself to the collective. Members of kinship and fictive kinship relationships demonstrate their identities by engaging in shared behavioral norms or what Rubinstein et al. (1991) term a shared cultural code of conduct (p. 271). For these scholars, members draw from these ideas or beliefs about the nature of things to foster their solidarity.

The behavioral norms within the SMNHG hint that members draw from shared cultural codes to inform the images, symbols, and videos they share and the textually based conversations they hold with each other. One of the most significant sources from which these members draw their cultural codes is from Black beauty salon culture. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Black beauty salon is an essential formalized site for S.C and an enduring third space (Oldenburg 1991) in which Black women fellowship and engage. Therefore, these Black, feminized, vicinities created and maintained by Black women to

serve the needs of Black women are bays of safety for Black women. As bays of safety, Black beauty salons are places where Black women feel welcomed and secure, a safe haven in which they can escape the tribulations of everyday life and the pressures and stresses of systemic gendered racism (Wingfield 2008, p.81). They are culturally rich conclaves and places of retreat and solidarity that afford Black women with a temporality solace from the intersecting pressures of identity politics (Rook, 1996).

Thus, these scholars like Wingfield 2008 and Rook 1996 suggest that Black beauty salons do not only serve only as sites for Black women to engage in beautification rituals. Instead, as Wingfield (2008) notes, because the owners, stylists, and customers are most often predominately Black women, there is often an atmosphere where anything and everything is open to discussion, and the topics are framed through Black women's experiences and perspectives (p.83). Serving as a location in which Black women can retreat into and discuss issues of the day from their unique intersectional perspective, is the most enduring cultural aspect of a beauty salon that is most evident among the users of the social media natural hair groups. Throughout this study, there was a clear recognition that this culture exists within these groups. In fact, in the very descriptions of the groups written in the "About this group" section of the Facebook profiles, administrators of these groups avow the presence of the Black beauty shop culture.

For example, a segment of CCL's description reads, *"this group is for Black women who wish to learn more about their hair. However, we are much like a salon because we don't just talk about hair here."* Similarly, Kinky Twists' (KT) description, which consists of a list of acceptable behaviors, states, *"while you are visiting our beauty parlor you can post about anything, we only ask that you include NHR when posting non-*

hair related topics.” Both these descriptions liken their groups to beauty salons, and by doing so, these administrators signal that they recognize and sanction the fact, that the cultural milieu that exists within their SMNHG, mirrors that which exists within Black beauty salons. Not only have the administrators created open spaces of discourse that moves beyond the topic of hair, but the SMNHG members also demonstrate their interest in maintaining these spaces as locales in which they can negotiate around a multitude of issues that resonate with them as Black women and even more specific as Black women with natural hair.

One of the most telling ways that members demonstrate their level of commitment to protecting the fluidity of these spaces can be observed whenever another member criticizes or fails to adhere to the prevailing group norms. Throughout this study, I saw instances in both communities when members complained about the presence of non-hair related posts. For example, in CCL, a member posted, *"I joined this group to learn about hair. I thought this was a hair group. I don't want to hear about your boyfriends."* Within minutes the comment section was flooded with over 100 replies. Most of the comments defended the group's all-inclusiveness,

For example, one member wrote, *"girllll, go create your own group we don't want to talk about hair all dam day."* Also, and more pointedly, many of the defenders directly referenced beauty salons as a means to justify the all-inclusive nature of the group. As in the case of the member who remarked, *"you must be new here, this is salon girl, so we gonna talk about whatever we want to if you don't like it hit the unfollow button."* Both these replies illustrate a significant dedication by the members to the maintenance of the

culture of Black beauty salons that allows for discussion about the multiple consciousnesses of Black womanhood.

These replies also signal that members of these groups are cognizant of the similarity between physical and their metaphysical "salons." During the interviews, some participants further confirmed this. During an interview with one respondent name *Nadia*, a hairdresser by trade, she notes the similarities between her natural hair group and her hair salon.

Nadia: It's like you get to catch up with your girlfriends when you are scrolling through. There is always some hair shop talk to suck you in.

Interviewer: I heard quite a few people describing these natural hair groups as hair salons, why do you think that is?

Nadia: [laughter] yea, I think the groups are very much like an online salon.

Interviewer: How so?

Nadia: When my clients are in my chair, they talk about life. I don't know if it is because no men are in there or whatever [chuckle]. Because you know, sometimes as women, we want always to appear like we got our shit together, but I have seen it so many times, whenever someone starts talking about problems with their man or kids or homegirls or whatever, you get to see how we are all the same. Everyone in the store jumps right in with their stories too. We all a hot mess.

Interviewer: So, you think the natural hair groups function similarly?

Nadia: Yea, I've seen posts where people air out their boyfriends or ask advice about how to react to something their sibling or friend or coworker did to them. Those posts get wild. Everyone has a story to share. I have been caught up for a hot minute, reading and going back and forth in the comments.

What is most interesting about *Nadia*'s statements is that she highlights the willingness of her fellow SMNHG members, like her real-world clients, to open up by

discussing issues in their personal and professional lives. Furthermore, she surmised that her clients freely spoke because no men are present, and thus they may be more willing to engage in transparent discourse. Although on several occasions, I observed men participating in these groups; by far, the most prominent active participants are women. Therefore, like *Nadia's* salon clientele, the SMNHG members can benefit from occupying a space created with their needs in mind. They can participate in the S.C ritual of freely engaging in discussing matters outside hegemonic or patriarchal constraints, which allows them to focus on their experiences from their perspectives.

Nadia was not alone in expressing the similarity, repeatedly; beauty salon was the term used by at least ten of the interviewees to describe the groups. Most used the phrase to highlight the fact that they are spaces where Black women can talk amongst themselves, while others describe them as a location that provides Black women the opportunity to share their experience and find solidarity without the fear of being framed as strange or different. Using Black beauty parlors as a reference point is not shocking, given the high probability that members of SMNHG would have had the experience of being indoctrinated in the Black beauty salon culture. Given the fact that hair salons continue to be one of the lasting segregated spaces, it is likely that Black beauty salons may well be one of the very few Black women dominated socializing areas in society today. Therefore, drawing from these Black beauty salons to inform their virtual naturalista-only spaces is entirely apropos. Although these women cannot access all the services of a beauty salon while using the social media groups, it appears that these women seized the opportunity to replicate aspects of the interactive cultural traditions native to the physical salons.

To successfully mirror these communicative interactions, members of these collectives, require an understanding of a shared interactive system. The language used within communities often reflects the culture of the members. Language can then function as a cultural artifact, and thus the presence of a shared lexicon among SMNHG members is the second essential indicator that these groups have coalesced into culturally relevant communities. Within these social media natural hair groups, the users communicate by using three types of culturally relevant lexicons. The first being an informal and casual mixture of Black Vernacular English, Patois, and Continental African Vernaculars. Although English is the dominant language used throughout all the groups, the use of slang, patois, and other African diaspora languages and dialects signal that a Black diasporic culture pervades these communities. Black Vernacular English, for instance, is heavily used to formulate jokes. While members make use of Afrocentric metaphors like "queen" when referencing each other and "crown" when describing each other's hair.

Although I further discuss the importance of these terms in Chapter 6, what is most noteworthy about them, is that they are inscribed with Black sociopolitical ideas. These slang terms emerge as phrases used to positively reinforces the value of the lives of Black women by framing them as regal beings with hair that is equally valuable and beautiful. Using the terms like queen and crown reinforces that the SMNHG plays home to a culture rich with Black body positivity. With the presence of this positivity, it should then not be shocking that the media text these members produce, will emit this culture by significantly contradicting the images of Black women's natural hair most often witnessed in mainstream media platforms: both in scripted content and in the beauty

supply industry's marketing campaigns. The second shared lexicon used by members of the SMNHG consists of an extensive glossary of acronyms, phrases, and terms central to the Black natural hair grooming culture.

Evidence of the use of this vocabulary is most apparent in product review videos, and in the conversation where users describe their hair care regimen. For example, users often debate about whether the LOC or LCO method of hair care is most helpful in retaining moisture in Black natural hair. At the core of this debate is the widely-held belief that for Black hair to be healthy, one must establish a grooming routine that includes the use of products that will allow for their hair follicles to retain moisture. Thus, moisture retention products are some of the most popularly purchased items by naturalistas and the most widely reviewed merchandise within these groups. There are three major category types for these moisturizing products; (L)otions, (C)reams or (O)ils, naturalistas hold a difference of opinion on what order to introduce these products to their hair to maximize the potential for the products to penetrate the follicles and thus remain moisturized over a substantial period. "LOC" or "LCO" represents a naturalista's preferred order of use.

What is most striking about the use of these acronyms and other acronyms by SMNGH members, is that they appear without an accompanying explanation or a definition. Only on a few occasions did I observe members providing clarification language to explain an acronym. What I surmised by this phenomenon is that the free use of these acronyms may suggest that the members expect commonality. That is, members may assume that all those within the group are a part of their in-group and thus capable of decoding the commonly used Black hair culture acronyms. The third culturally infused

lexicon used within the SMNHG derives from Black popular culture references. Like the use of cultural Black haircare acronyms and the use of Black vernacular language, the ability to use and decode Black popular culture references provide users of SMNHG with the opportunity to perform the type of in-group identity typical of Sister Circles.

Repeatedly, the users of these groups used pop culture terminologies when engaging in discussion. For example, in KT, while complaining that a product had resulted in significant hair breakage, a user wrote: *"So, I washed my hair with [name of product] why was I in the mirror the next morning crying, I was looking like Myra when Gina did her hair."*

Notably, the user did not clarify who Myra or Gina were. Despite not providing any additional context, users appeared to successfully decode her message. Many offered hair regrowth suggestions, having understood that the user was referencing a scene from the television sitcom *Martin* in which Gina (one of the show's protagonists) incorrectly chemically treated the hair of another character (Myra), resulting in a chaotic, comedic scene in which Myra's hair falls out in large clumps. The user's decision to reference this scene may signal her that she believed that, because the group comprises of Black women, they would be able to decode her reference from the sitcom *Martin*: one of the most highly rated Black pop culture 1990s Fox network shows. Equally, the group members' ability to attach meaning to this reference also signals that among these women, there is a shared popular culture referential point.

Similarly, members of the groups routinely use celebrity women as reference points when describing hairstyles to each other. For example, after Beyoncé's highly successful digital music and video album *Lemonade* debut, a hair braiding pattern worn

by the singer in one of her music videos inspired a hairstyle trend dubbed Lemonade braids. The term Lemonade braids frequently appear in Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT). What is noteworthy about its use, however, is that members reference the term without the need for an image. Again, by its use, members demonstrate an expectation that all those within the group would be able to understand the reference point given Beyonce's notoriety and popularity among Black women. It would be impossible to claim that all the members of these groups understand all the Black vernacular language, Black haircare culture acronyms, or the Black popular culture references used in these spaces. Identifying whether there is a global understanding is not the focus of this dissertation.

Instead, I would note that the very usage of these lexicons by even some group members, signals that like traditional S.C, the SMNHG members depend on shared cultural codes to inform how they communicate with each other. Identifying these spaces as communities with a shared culture that informs the behavior and lexicon of the members reiterates the similarities amongst the members. By using these phrases, members are effectively signaling their in-group membership and their competency navigating within the groups' prevailing culture. Furthermore, as Bell et al. (2000), noted the presence of shared cultural codes among Black women could help to intensify the degree of their interaction. In using these terms, members demonstrate their assumption that they are surrounded by others who share their in-group identity. This assumption is critical to this dissertation because I believe that it leads to the individual actors becoming more open with each other and more willing to participate in discussing and creating

content that addresses the struggles they collectively face due to societal pressures waged against their natural hair.

Discussing and bonding over shared experiences

hooks (1990) describes the safe spaces Black people [women] create as home places. For Collins (2000), one of the most endearing elements of hooks' (1990) homeplace, is that it provides a space where Black women and girls can relate to each other in unique and significant ways. Niles-Goins (2011) furthers this argument by noting that

Black females often are the supporters and listeners of other Black females. Friendships are important relationships for Black females because they affirm Black females' sense of self and nurture their spirit in an environment that often contradicts their experiences in the world. These friendship groups allow the females to speak with freedom, to strengthen their souls, and to tell stories that reinforce their identities, particularly in a society that magnifies their difference (p. 532).

Niles-Goins' statement highlights the third tenet of S.C found among the members of these SMNHG, that is; S.C provide Black women with the opportunity to support each other and to share, listen and discuss a multitude of issues of collective interest and concern. This opportunity, Niles-Goins (2011) adds, allows Black women to manage the tensions of their lives by moving society's dialogue of oppression to the periphery, instead of centering themselves in their discourse (p.532). When women in these fictive group structures recognize their similarities, it often gives rise to dialogue that covers the gamut of their lives (Niles, 2007, p. 97).

This open dialogue occurs within these SMNHG as the members discuss hair as well as other topics such as; family, finances, appearance, men, sex, and race. Open discussion leads to the formation of digital cathartic spaces, as naturalistas open up to

each other and increasingly recognize their similarities. These virtual cathartic spaces are assembling points in which strong emotion and open expression allow for the purging of emotions and the releasing of pent up feelings. During the interview sessions, when asked, several interviewees alluded to the cathartic nature of these groups. For example, *Jillian* a user of Kinky Twists (KT) noted,

Jillian: I like using the group because there is always some hot tea⁴.

Interviewer: Tea about who?

Jillian: [laughter] not like that, is like everyone is always saying, the group is like a hair salon, so we talk about anything. It gets juicy.

Interviewer: What have you personally talked about in there?

Jillian: I talk about a lot of different things, [pause] well recently I was venting bout one of my old professors and her comment about my hair.

Interviewer: What did the professor say?

Jillian: [sigh] I was taking this woman in business course one semester, and one of the class exercises was to attend a job fair. Our professor gave us a dress code checklist.

Interviewer: ok. How did that work out?

Jillian: girlll, so it was a list of dos and don'ts or whatever of what we should wear to the job fair. Oh, by the way, I was the only Black girl in the class [...], so I went to her and explained that it is impossible for me to get my hair into a bun because the list said women should have their hair slicked back in a low bun. She looked at me like and rolled her eyes and was like, you gonna do whatever you want, just don't show up looking like you are electrocuted.

Interviewer: How did you respond?

Jillian: I was so pissed, but I was pretty shy back then, this is like early my sophomore year, I think. I guess I didn't know how to reply, well not respectfully anyways. [...] it bothered me so much. I ended up getting it slicked down for day anyway because my mom made me get a blowout.

⁴ Hot tea is a Black Vernacular term that means very interesting gossip.

Interviewer: What made you share your story in the group?

Jillian: Recently, I saw someone was in the group talking bout something similar so I shared my story. I got so much advice about how to deal with the situation if it happens again. I was cool that so many people could relate. Before then, I never really had someone say something like that to me about hair. Now I am used to stuff like that, all of us are.

Interviewer: Does it happen to you often?

Jillian: Not too often, but it happens. I know when I was interviewing for law schools I immediately got a blowout because I was scared of what they would think.

Interviewer: How did you feel after sharing the story with the group?

Jillian: [...] It was comforting, but kinna sad to see that this stuff happens to so many other people in the group.

Jillian described a poignant example of an occasion when the group served as a platform to not only vent but a stage for one member to find comfort, understanding, and reassurance from others who previously endured and overcame similar experiences.

Jillian's example signals that, like members of traditional S.C, SMNHG provides its members with a location to discuss microaggressions. *Denise*, a thirty-three-year-old user of Coily Curl Love (CCL) also addresses venting in these SMNHG, by focusing on how group members use their communities to discuss and gain advice about romantic relationships.

Denise: I love the group, they are funny, especially when they are talking about men, it gets crazy

Interviewer: How so?

Denise: Well, the other day, a lady was saying her husband hates her natural hair. I think she said he does not think it is sexy. The post went left⁵ so quickly. Some people told her she should leave him [laughter]. I feel her pain though, it took my boyfriend some time to get used to my hair when I first

⁵ To go left means a conversation or a situation has a sudden or unexpected turn for the worst.

transitioned, but he likes it now [...] Some ladies complain about their men hair preference in there, and the advice they get is funny but real

Interviewer: Tell me more?

Denise: Like some of them told her to leave him [laughter]. It's all in fun, though. I think People come in there when they wanna vent or find something to laugh about.

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Denise: Everyone is very sarcastic and funny, so, you know, no matter how sad or wild your story is, in the end, somebody been there before, so no judgment. [laughter] even if someone gets petty, at least they going to help you laugh through it.

While determining whether these groups are indeed judgment-free zones or not is not critically important to ascertain at this time, *Denise's* statement suggests that the expectation of safety and acceptance is contributing to the open discourse found in these SMNHG. Last, *Princess*, a user of KT, also shared similar views about why she participates in the group, she stated:

Princess: It gives me something to do. I do not know [pause]. I use social media a lot, so I guess I check what's happening in the group out of habit. The posts are funny, and [I get] good information about my hair. Plus, I'm living far away from the rest of my family, and I am home alone with two babies most of the time, so sometimes scrolling along in there is just comforting.

Interviewer: What makes it comforting?

Princess: I don't know, hmm [long pause]

Interviewer: Let me ask you this, can you maybe describe a time you felt comforted while visiting the group?

Princess: so, I took a picture of myself in a head wrap. That day I ran errands with it on because it was wash day⁶ the day before, and it was still drying. Girllll, everyone kept looking at me like I was crazy. So, I posted the

⁶ Wash Day is the day a naturalista sets aside to wash their hair. It is termed wash day because the process often requires several steps that requires many hours to complete.

picture to the group, because I wanted an honest opinion from the ladies about how my wrap looked with my outfit.

Interviewer: What did reactions did you get?

Princess: oh, everyone in the comments kept asking where I got the wrap from and telling me how cute I looked. Then this one chick asked me if many of the women in my town wear head wraps.

Interviewer: Did you reply? What did you say?

Princess: Yeah, she made me really think about it. I told her there are not a lot of Black women in my town [laughter], so I'm sure that has something to do with the looks I was getting.

Interviewer: How so?

Princess: I use to live in Brooklyn, so scarfs and headwraps were everywhere. But now living in a small town in the midwest, I stand out. Maybe because I am Black, with bi-racial babies, but then here I go tossing in a colorful wrap into the mix [laughter]

Interviewer: How did their compliments make you feel?

Princess: They had me feeling myself, it was really reassuring, at least I knew it was not me, and it was not because I was out there looking a mess. It is just that I look different. I still notice the stares whenever I have my scarf, but its whatever, I know I look cute [laughter].

In all three examples, respondents describe events when they witnessed others, or they used the community as a space to vent or find reassurance. While *Jillian* found in the community consolation for a micro-aggressive experience, *Denise* illustrated how these women make use of comedy to address posts that otherwise may be potentially emotionally charged. Notably, as *Princess'* narrative unfolded, she moved from describing being in a place of dissonance to seeking out confirmation from the community members to arriving at resolve when she notes, "I know I look cute." This unfolding, progressive process is indicative of the notion of these spaces being cathartic, or as *Princess'* describes them, comforting. As cathartic spaces, these groups are not only

ripe for bonding around, but also strategizing about improving their shared everyday life experiences. The willingness to discuss these topics suggests that these groups are providing a location for these women to discuss the realities of being Black women and naturalistas.

Bonding Over Shared Every Day Lived Experiences. Even a cursory scan of the comment section within these SMNHG will reveal that it is not uncommon to observe hair tutorial videos and product reviews sitting alongside requests for advice on how to deal with teenage kids, ex-lovers, bosses, debt, health concerns or collective calls for political boycotts. What is most interesting about the content of those posts, is although the users share personal narratives, they often situate their stories within a broad discourse about the shared experiences of Black women. For example, in one post in KT, in which a user describes an uncomfortable encounter she shared with her work supervisor who accused her of being aggressive after she spoke out against his attempt to take credit for her presentation, she concluded her post with the following words, *“I’m so [angry] that as Black women, we have to tiptoe around because we cannot show that we are angry, [...] because they will call us aggressive, it is annoying that we have to deal with [expletive] like this every day.”*

Here, the poster does not merely present her experience as an interpersonal disagreement with her supervisor. Instead, she politicizes her encounter by framing the experience as representative of the micro-aggressions many Black women experiences. The post resonated with many fellow members, generating over a hundred comments within a few hours. Many members shared similar stories while reiterating the poster's argument that some chastise assertive Black women by labeling them aggressive. The

post sparked several emotionally charged conversations, as members offered encouraging words to each other, while others gave practical advice for successfully documenting and reporting micro-aggression in the workplace. Another example of the members engaging in discourse about shared lived experiences as Black women appeared in both Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT) in the days after news outlets featured a study which noted that according to the CDC, Black mothers in the U.S. die at three to four times the rate of white mothers during childbirth (Martin & Montagne, 2017).

In the article, the authors noted that racist notions about the capacity for Black bodies to endure pain contribute significantly to this disparity because these notions informed the care doctors and nurses provide to their patients. Post featuring this study appeared quite frequently in both CCL and KT, and they often prompted members to comment on their own experiences giving birth. In KT, one post created by a member who identified herself as a doula provided members with questions expecting mothers should ask when meeting with their health care providers. After over a thousand comments occurred on the post, the member soon decided to schedule a live discussion in the group, where she answered many questions asked by members. The post would later inspire the moderators of the group to call on all doulas and other health care providers who specialize in childbirth to privately message them. Many days after, a post created by one of the administrators appeared on the group's timeline, which included a list of names of doulas and private nurses and their city of residence. This post and others like it are examples of how their shared experiences as Black women serves as a lubricant for bonding, solidarity, and strategizing, which are traits inherent to traditional S.C.

Another unique way by which the members' collective historical experiences allow for bonding to occurs among members of these communities is through the sharing of nostalgic memes. For example, a meme consisting of pictures of several hair products, hair greases, oils, relaxers, and promenades accompanied by the words, "*which one did you use as a child*," went viral across many social media platforms, appearing in both KT and CCL. The meme was the new addition to an ever-growing number of memes featuring products popularity marketed to Black consumers in the 1980s and early 1990s. These memes called on the online viewers to reminisce about their use of the products. When posted in these social media natural hair groups, these memes provoked a significant number of comments. The commonalities that exist among the users became quite apparent as they share quite similar girlhood stories of their hair grooming experiences at the hands of their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and older sisters, who made use of their products in their weekly rituals of treating and caring for their hair. Many of these members recognize that there are shared experiences between them. The members

frequently articulate their pleasure in recognizing the parallels between their childhoods. For instance, when someone shared the meme in KT, one user commented, "[...] *I love this. It is like we all had the same childhood*", while another jokingly asked, "*did you guys all grow up with me in my grandmama's house?*" This meme and similar nostalgia infusing posts do not only allow for reminiscing, but they provide an opportunity for homophily to emerge amongst the members causing them to bond around their shared experiences given the fact that according to Denton (1990) there is a tendency to form relationships with persons like one's self (p.449). By providing an

opportunity for these members to identify their similar experiences, these posts increased the likelihood that a sense of community would emerge among the users. As Psychologist Seymour B. Sarason (1974, p.157), argues a sense of community arises among members of a group in which the perception of similarity exists.

There is then the potential for these women to bond with each other and forge intense relationships, when they actively participate in these groups, given Communication scholars Dana Rotman and Jennifer Preece (2010) claim that strong levels of emotional connection and intense discourse can emerge among online community members who engage themselves in repeated active participation (p.326). Therefore, by posting content that generates a discussion that allows each other to share narratives about their lives, these users create the opportunity to demonstrate their commonality, which Denton suggests is an essential step in Black women's bonding relationships. Upon demonstrating their shared identities and experiences, these Black women can draw upon their joint racial and gender affiliation, to not only stimulate their desire to form a community with each other, but it allows them to recognize and validate the shared social stressors they experience as Black women (Denton 1990, p. 456).

Bonding Over Shared Hair-Related Experiences. As spaces dedicated to Black natural hair, it was not shocking that the members devote a significant amount of time towards discussing the cost attached to wearing one's Black hair in its natural state. As argued in Chapter 3, hair presentation plays a vital role in how society at large evaluates the beauty of women. Hair classified as clean, beautiful, and professional affords its owner levels of privilege within social markets. Then, for Black women with natural hair textures not included within dominant conceptions of beauty, they face high

socioeconomic and psychological costs. The members create a substantial number of posts to discuss these costs. These members engage in sharing narratives about their personal experiences with encountering prejudicial behavior levied against their natural hair. For example, in a post appearing one morning in KT, a member stated that during a meeting with her boss, he suggested that she should "comb her hair" to ensure that she did not "scare clients." The user further noted that it was not his first time referencing her hair, and in the past, he would admire the hairstyles of other women of color in the office and suggest that she should duplicate their hairstyles.

This post appeared to strike a chord with many of the members, because, it quickly generated more than a thousand comments and three hundred reactions (consisting mainly of the angry face and crying face emojis). In their responses to this post, members shared their own experiences navigating corporate spaces as naturalistas, while others encouraged the poster to speak with her Human Resources manager or to seek legal counsel. This example suggests that members who share similar types of narratives within these groups, there is an awareness of the homogeneity that exists amongst the membership. Therefore, these members may assume that because of their shared naturalista identity, the spaces are safe locations in which to share and seek advice. That is, they may be willing to discuss these experiences because they may believe that other naturalistas will understand the impact of microaggressions and thus will not trivialize or dismiss such a story as insignificant.

Another type of post frequently appearing in these SMNHG that also suggests that members are drawing upon their shared identities, are those posts in which members

solicit hair related advice about their children or family members. For instance, a member of CCL posted,

“is anyone struggling to get their daughters to love their hair? It's hard [..]. My baby been natural her whole life, [...], but lately, she has been begging for a relaxer. ... last week, she told me she hated her hair because all the pretty girls at school have relaxers or weaves. I want her to [fit in], but I also want her to be [comfortable with herself] too...”

This example is particularly salient, because not only did this member seek advice about her daughter, but as she did so, she explicitly describes the tensions some Black women and girls face when considering how to present their hair. By doing so, this inspired hundreds of other members to comment. These comments included advice, commiserated about their daughters' similar struggles. Interestingly, the post also sparked several spin off⁷ posts, in which other members discussed their current efforts with "fitting in" with established beauty standards, and the impact their hair choices have had on the younger women in their lives.

Another hair related type of post often seen in the group was the sharing of news and blog articles about legal proceedings centered on the question of the appropriateness of Black natural hair in professional spaces. As noted in Chapter 2, in recent times, there have been several legal cases contesting the legality of policies that reject braids, cornrows, dreadlocks, and other hairstyles traditionally worn by Black men and women. As a true testament of these rulings' importance, whenever users share these articles in the communities, these posts earn a significant number of interactions and engagements. These posts often gain over a thousand comments, where the overwhelming reaction to

⁷ A spin off post is a social media post created in response to the content of another post.

these articles reflects a collective frustration with the narrowness of corporate dress codes, which forces Black men and women to seek legal recourse to justify their hairstyling choices. Observing the comment sections of these hair-related posts provided me with opportunities to witness these women supporting each as they built comradery around issues that potentially shapes and impact their lives.

The work of Digital Black Humanities scholars Andre Brock, Michelle Wright, and Sheri Williams rings true, as these SMNHG appear to be one type of the online spaces these scholars suggest Black [men and] women are creating in the digital universe. These spaces these scholars suggest, allow Black people to draw upon their shared life experiences while collectively participating in activities that bring attention to issues of communal concern. In doing so, they foster a sense of community, feelings of solidarity, or sisterhood among themselves (Wright, 2005, p.48). As they post, share, and discuss Black hair politics, they not only challenge laws and policies that affect their hair presentation practices, but they make distinctive pro-natural hair statements. These celebratory statements I argue, are ideologically resistant.

Engagement in Collective Action

Collective action among members is the final tenet of traditional Sister Circle found within these SMNHG. As argued in Chapter 3, collective action is the outcome of the joint labor of those who share a collective identity. Additionally, collective action emerges when individuals psychologically aligning themselves with the culture, norms, behaviors, and values of a social group (Tajfel, 1974). In sections before, I noted that social media natural hair groups are culturally relevant spaces, in which members bond over shared lived experiences, make use of a shared lexicon while participating in

culturally infused behavioral practices. These SMNHG are, therefore, highly conducive to collective action. To extrapolate instances of collective action within SMNHG, Toni Denton's study of the friendships between Black professional women proved vital. In her research, Denton identifies three types of joint bonding activities inherent to intimate Black female relationships. These three bonding activities were present in these online communities.

The first activity Denton (1990) puts forth emphasizes supportiveness, characterized by encouragement and a high commitment to one another (p.452). One of the most practical ways that the users of SMNHG demonstrate their supportive action is through their financial support of each other's businesses. There is the existence of a pro-buying Black culture within these groups. Both KT and CCL are communities in which Black women garner support for their companies: particularly organic hair care and skincare lines and their natural hair braiding and styling salons. The administrators in both Facebook communities demonstrate a high commitment to supporting the entrepreneurship endeavors of their members by designating specific days in which the only posts allowed are those reviewing or advertising products created and or sold by Black women. On days the moderators establish as CCL's "Make Money Mondays," the moderators encourage their members to review the products and services they previously purchased, to motivate others to buy. While *KT*'s administrators selected several business owners each "Business Fridays," to feature in their spotlight posts, these features provide biographical information about the business owner, descriptions of the product or services, hyperlinks to the company's website or digital storefronts.

Furthermore, as another testament to the level of support for entrepreneurship that exists in these spaces, KT's moderators established a subsidiary Facebook page, in which business owners advertise their products and services every day. Kinky Twists' (KT) administrators frequently encourage members to visit this secondary page. To further incentivize members to visit the secondary business page and to make purchases, some business owners offer discount codes to users of KT. Moreover, the business owners use the secondary group page to share investment and small business articles and to engage in discussion about their experiences as Black women business owners. The decisions made by the groups' administrator highlights a dedication to supportive behaviors. These types of behaviors germinate the fertile soil required for fictive sisterhood relationships to flourish within these SMNHG. The second identifiable bonding activity in these communities focuses on instrumental help, which includes the pragmatic helping behaviors of problem-solving and task help (Denton, 1990, p.452).

As aforementioned, members of these communities often discuss aspects of their private lives with each other. Not only do these women exchange practical advice and emotional support, but on occasion, they fuse their social and intellectual resources to intervene in cases of emergency. One example that demonstrates this corporate problem-solving practice features a young woman: *Yvette*, who posted a video in which she asked for advice on escaping an abusive relationship. Chief amongst her request was seeking practical advice on how to safely leave her current residence she shared with an abusive partner, and how to apply for emergency assistance to acquire an apartment for herself. Within minutes of the post going live, several hundred comments appeared, as members identifying themselves as directors of women shelters, pastors, police officers, and

lawyers began sharing information in the comment section. This problem-solving initiative did not remain encased within the digital universe. Instead, the members moved past, merely offering advice to pooling together their knowledge and resources to establish an "escape plan." In the days following, several follow up posts appeared in the group, each of these posts included a link to a GoFundMe page created to acquire funding to assist the young woman in her move.

A few weeks later, via a video upload, *Yvette* updated the group on her situation. In the video, she not only thanked members of the groups for their financial support, but she also named several members who extended physical and emotional support, mainly those who physically went to her apartment to assist her during her move. This example is, by far, not *sui generis*. Throughout the cyber-ethnographic study, other emotionally charged posts served to activate joint acts of emotional and physical intervention and problem-solving. For instance, there was an emancipated high school senior who gained step by step advice on how to apply for grants for college. There was also a mom who recently lost her job but found a hairdresser within the group willing to style her daughter's hair for prom free of charge. There are HR managers who call on group members struggling on the job market to send their C.V.s and cover letters for evaluation, and professionals in the financial field who offer credit score improvement, debt consolidation, and investment advice to the community. In all these cases, these members of these communities demonstrate a willingness to extend themselves by providing the support needed to aid their fellow members to overcome personal crises.

Additionally, during the interview, many respondents framed these groups as critical educational locales in which they access practical hair care support during their

journey as naturalistas. When prompted with the question “are there benefits to participating in these natural hair communities?” the following respondents highlighted the supportive nature of their communities. For example, *Andrea*, a participant in Coily Curl Love (CCL) stated,

Yes, there benefits [...] I learn a lot in there, when I first went natural, I had no clue what to do, and my hairdresser didn't style natural hair. So, most of the time I was on my own trying to learn [...], I think it was my sister told me to go to YouTube to learn stuff, so I did that a lot, but what I like about the Facebook groups is the conversations. I can ask questions and chat back and forth with other women who know what they are talking about. You can't really chat like that on YouTube.

Similarly, *Traci*, a CCL noted,

Last year when I first did the big chop, I cried for a month. I missed my long hair; I wasn't feeling myself. I could not find my sexy [laughter]. [...] So, when I first started using the hair group, I wanted to see how other women were styling their hair, but honestly, I kept coming back cuz it was so great seeing women loving themselves and rocking their hair with confidence. [...] The first time I posted a picture and got tons of compliments [laughter], I started to feel like yea this natural thing can work for me.

Tif, an active participant in KT for more than five years, also offers a similar reply. Besides noting the practical hair care knowledge, she gained from the community, she also said:

Sometimes I post pictures of new hairstyles I'm trying out, and I get compliments and sometimes hints on how to make it even cuter. I love the advice, but one thing I can count on is that they will gas me, and sometimes I need some gassing.

Embedded in the replies of all three women is a recognition that SMNHG can be both a source for stylistic technique improvement information and emotional support. While *Andrea* benefited from lively conversations and hair care advice from fellow members, *Traci* and *Tif* both discuss the more emotional support they gained from the groups. *Traci's* visits and ultimate participation allowed her to gain confidence in her new

identity as a naturalista, while *Tif* notes that she can continuously depend on the community of women in her group to compliment and boost her ego (gassing) when she needs it.

This public showing of solidarity and willingness to engage in strategy sessions with each other mirrors the behaviors Philosopher Michael Ayers (2003), notes are present among those who share a healthy level of collectivity and notion of community. Furthermore, as Communication scholar David Keating (2013) argues, information sharing practices and explicit supportive behaviors convey to members that they are a part of something bigger than themselves, which offers a sense of reassurance and validation to each other and serves to allow members to build a common ground with each other (p.1021). Finally, Denton's (1990) third bonding activity focuses on social companionship, underscored by comradeship and social activities, which is also quite apparent within these SMNHG. This bonding activity materializes as relationships forged in these communities, transcend their digital bounds, and spill into the real world. As demonstrated by the example of *Yvette*, members have and do engage with each other offline. In so doing, they further demonstrate that engagement within these groups can produce bonds that materialize in substantial rewards for the members.

For instance, in both SMNHG, there are meet up groups where group members who are new mothers, young professionals, college students, and art lovers, for instance, who reside in the same city plan weekly or monthly events. Additionally, KT members established an international travel club to plan vacations together. In fact, during the data collection stage of this study, the travel club was actively advertising their upcoming trip to Europe, which would have been their fifth summer trip as a group. These traveling

groups are part of the broader "travel noire" movement, a movement dedicated to encouraging Black men and women to become more comfortable traveling the world. The members extensively document these offline encounters by taking pictures and videos which they share with the community. Although, these digital meetings spaces continue to be the primary locations in which these women interact, their willingness to plan and engage offline interactions with each other, signifies a desire to deepen the established sisterly relationships.

The behavioral practices of being supportive, the offering of instrumental help, and the establishment of offline socializing opportunities, are all essential sisterly traits that operate within these communities. The types of on and offline collective action undertaken by the members of these communities proves that, despite the modern technology's potential to be divisive and isolating, some Black women have successfully transferred the supportive and life-affirming elements of traditional S.C that have sustained Black women for centuries into technological embodiments. In doing so, they created virtual sites in which they converge, converse, and produce digital texts that address the realities of navigating life in Black, female bodies.

Sisterhood Deferred

In the sections above, data collected throughout this study allowed for the argument that the SMNHG shares four of the critical tenets of traditional S.C. These examples demonstrate that within the SMNHG exists tropes of kinship, and the discourse within consists of a rich lexicon influenced by a shared raced and naturalista culture. Collectively these examples suggest that like traditional sister circles, these online communities allow Black women the opportunity to practice "homeplace" behaviors that

can result in collective restoration, affirmation, and liberation. A thorough examination of these communities, however, requires that we do not romanticize them as utopic locations. Like traditional S.C and most collectives that are driven by human interactions, within these SMNHG, there are moments of misgivings and interpersonal conflicts. Some of these anti-community building behaviors mirror some of those hurdles faced by members of traditional S.C.

The following are three anti-community building threats that have disrupted the potential for sisterly bonding practices among users of SMNHG. The first threat to sisterly bonding that affects these groups is a factor external to the communities themselves. It focuses on the question of who holds power to restrict access into and determine the content within the meeting space. In physical locations like Black beauty shops, the owners play an enormous role in establishing the prevailing culture. The beauty shops exist as spaces of solace by and large, due to the owners' legal right to determine who enters the store and what normative behaviors they will deem acceptable. The owners are thus highly influential because by restricting or emboldening practices, they can contribute to the emergence of a sense of community or sisterly affection among patrons. Ownership is, therefore, also crucial for SMNHG, although digital spaces may provide users with significantly more levels of content-producing power than traditional media platforms, the digital universe is not free from the politics of ownership.

With Facebook and its subsidiary Instagram serving as ground-zero for the DBNHM, in many ways, it is not merely the groups' administrators that own these groups, but the technology corporation itself wields much of that power. The fact that proponents of the digital Black natural hair movement do not maintain sole ownership

over their meeting spaces positions their movement in a precarious place. The corporate policies and terms and conditions that govern the social media platforms allow the Facebook organization to hold immense censorship authority over the digital media text produced within the natural hair groups. Hence, there is an ever-existing risk of content removal if found to be out of step with corporate politics. Therefore, there is a strong imperative for these women to consider the implications of Facebook's terms and conditions, because the company's rules can limit the growth of the communities, or even aid in the eradication of the movement. Therefore, SMNHG, like other Facebook communities, exists at Facebook's discretion.

This fact may be an increased cause for concern given Facebook's questionable past with matters of censorship and privacy. As recently as December 2018, the company faced accusations of selling consumer data and infringing on their user's privacy (Dance, G. J. X., LaForgia, M., & Confessore 2018). Furthermore, throughout much of 2018, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg repeatedly found himself answering questions of the company's complicity in political censorship. In April 2018, he stood before the U.S. Congress to respond to the accusation that his company failed to notify users that Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, successfully accessed the data of over 87 million Facebook users in an attempt to psychologically profile voters during the 2016 election (Kang, 2018). Facebook's growth, widespread use, and privacy concerns may eventually lead to greater legal regulation of the social media site and of other virtual communication platforms. In the interim, however, participants in digital movements like the DBNHM must balance the risk of online participation by calculating the cost attached to their diminished privacy, versus the benefits of forging online communities.

To further complicate the matter, the end of network neutrality in June 2018, would aggrandize the concerns about the tentative nature of the public's right to expression in cyberspace and their rights to equal access to content. This net neutrality ruling was yet another important reminder that digital media ownership and legal policies play a significant role in affecting the potential for a digital space to exist and the possibility for them to be counter-hegemonic. The encompassing creed of technology, "the code is law" (Lessing, 1999), allows technology corporations like Facebook to hold power to define, not only who can have access to these spaces, but what types of behaviors occur within them. The capacity to constrain the types of engagement that occur on social media spaces can, as Ren et al. (2007) argue, affect how people become attached to the community. Therefore, there is an intimate connection between the corporation's terms of condition, policies, norms, and values and the emergence of sisterly affection among the members of these SMNHG.

At this moment, it is also worth noting that the significant lack of race and gender diversity amongst owners of technology media platforms, may also be a point of concern for digital social movements like the DBNHM. With the large percentage of owners of these platforms continuing to be white males, there is the potential for the replication of some of the issues that plague traditional media. Although Coily Curl Love (CCL), Kinky Twists (KT), *Angel's* Instagram profile, and many of the natural hair digital groups may not be facing a high level of censorship at this time, Black beauty salons stand as an example of the importance of owning one's meeting site. Ownership bestows upon the owner the opportunity to ensure no suppression of their counter-hegemonic, or political engagement can occur. In addition to this external threat, the second anti-community

behavior that threatens the emergence of sisterhood in these spaces is the internalization of anti-Black ideologies such as colorism. The internalization of colorism by some members and the articulation of its destructive ideology diminishes the potential for sisterhoods to flourish.

As introduced in Chapter 2, colorism transfers increased levels of social capital to Black men and women whose hair textures and skin tones resemble those commonly found on White bodies. Colorism also serves as an anti-sisterhood ideology because, by rendering some women as not only more beautiful and desirable but more intelligent, professional, and refined, it contributes to fractures and mistrust among Black women. For example, in the text, *In search of our mothers' gardens*, Alice Walker (1983) shares several painful accounts of Black women whose skin tones or hair texture were weaponized against them by other Black women. Walker suggests that colorism can serve to annihilate the relationships between family members and classmates. Furthermore, she highlighted how painful rejection of their bodies, even occurring in childhood, left an indelible stain of mistrust and low self-esteem that fractured the communion Black women shared with other Black women throughout their adulthood.

Although these communities are mostly congenial, there were instances in which ideologies based on colorism infused some of the discussions. This divisive practice most often occurred when members evoke the historically problematic term "good hair" when describing natural hair textures that are longer, looser, and less coily. Additionally, one of the most recognizable ways in which colorism's ideology materializes in these groups is in the use of the widely popular hair texture categorization chart created by hairdresser Andre Walker. Walker's hair-type classification chart (see Appendix 4), which debuted

more than twenty years ago, is one of the highly-referenced classification systems used within the beauty-supply industry as a means by which to segment and advertise to their target markets. Consisting of ten hair-types, ranging from the Type 1A hair-texture; that is straight and fine, to Type 4C; that is kinky and tightly coiled, this system of categorization predicated on the belief that, different hair-types are fundamentally distinct from each other, suggests that different hair textures require significantly different hair care routines.

Though this pseudo-scientific classification system serves as a reference tool that promises to enhance one's beauty ritual, it is also a stratification system; a ranking structure that reiterates longstanding ideologies, and places those with phenotypes closely associated with African diaspora to the bottom of the ordering configuration. By positioning straight hair-textures into category one, and subsequently placing kinky hair-textures into the fourth and last category, Walker's system visually and affectively evokes the spirit of colorism. Additionally, in 2011, during an interview with Elle Magazine, Walker's comments further exacerbated the problematic aspects of the chart. During the interview he stated,

I always recommend embracing your natural texture. Kinky hair can have limited styling options; that's the only hair type that I suggest altering with professional relaxing (Walker 2011).

Here Walker's evaluation of 4C hair as the only hair type in need of altering is reminiscent of the early 20th-century advertising campaigns by beauty supply corporations that marketed chemical hair straighteners and skin cream bleaching systems to Black women as tools for social mobility.

Despite Walker's comments, his hair chart remains the frequently referenced tool used in discussing hair texture in marketing materials and within the SMNHG. On several occasions throughout the cyber-ethnographic study, Walker's hair texture chart served as a tool of division in the groups. For example, when one user/ *Cindy* created a post which read,

“I don’t know what to do with my younger daughter’s 4C hair, my older daughter’s texture is like mine, I wash it, it air dries cute and all ready to go, my baby tho, I am about to shave it off, and maybe it will grow back softer [crying face emoji]. 4C ladies help, how the hell do you guys do this every day”.

Immediately, users began to criticize *Cindy*’s posts. Many accused her of demonizing 4C hair textures by following in the tradition of problematizing the coarser texture as unwanted and untamable. Some users called upon the administrators to step in, arguing that *Cindy*’s statement was breaching the no texture shaming rule included in the group's description. Other members used the post as an opportunity to call for an open and frank discussion about the ranking of hair textures and the issue of colorism among African diasporic communities.

Eventually, the group's administrators turned off the ability to comment on the post before later deleting. However, seeking to clarify her statement, *Cindy*, created a spinoff post which read "*I was not throwing shade on 4C hair, I'm just not used to it, no one in my family has 4C hair, so I never had to deal with all these problems before.*" The new post ignited a storm of angry comments, which eventually resulted in the administrators deleting the new post and creating an announcement to the group. The statement read,

“[...] after reviewing the comments on the 4C hair thread, in the best interest of the community, we have removed *Cindy* from our group. Her comment was not only rude but was not keeping with the spirit of unity; we try to maintain in the

community. [...] quick reminder no [hair texture shaming] is allowed. [...] there are hair texture specific groups all over Facebook, join those if you like."

The administrators' decision to remove *Cindy* from the group demonstrated their commitment to rejecting hair hierarchal structures. *Cindy's* post and the reactions it generated is a vivid demonstration of how Walker's hair chart can operate as a tool for division. Regardless of *Cindy's* intent, her fellow group members decoded her statement as unfavorable because Walker's hair chart is not an innocuous tool, but it is a value-laden system. Therefore, when *Cindy* suggested that her daughter's 4C (the lowest-ranked hair texture) hair was problematic to the extent that she contemplated shaving her hair in hopes that it regrows in a more pleasing texture, her words triggered many of the fellow group members.

The use of Walker's chart in this way contributes to fracturing the positivity within these groups and serves as an anti-community building trait, that threatens the emergence of sisterhood among members of these groups. Similarly, on several occasions, I witnessed members chastising those who share of memes and comical skits in which tightly coiled 4B and 4C natural hair textures serve as the focus of the joke. For instance, during another uproar, yet another member was removed from KT, when she shared a highly popular meme ridiculed for its colorism infused humor. The meme featured in one frame the image of a smiling Black woman with headful of loosely curled natural hair with the caption "*the hair wants when you go natural.*" While in the next frame is a pensive Black woman with tightly kinked 4C hair with the caption "*your face when you see the hair you get instead.*" The underlying message once again evoked by this meme is that the 4C hair texture is undesirable and that only Black women with looser curls should dare "go natural."

The final threat to the emergence of a fictive sisterly affection among users relates to the question of intersectionality. In defining the requirements to forge sisterhoods among Black women, Bell et al., (2000) assert that although a shared racial and gender identity may be an initial spark for Black sisterhoods to emerge, sometimes just being Black women is not enough.

The authors argue that, in addition to the differences in personal characteristics, many cultural differences may impact the communication and relationship among African American women. (p.46). Although much of the responses from interview informants attributed positive attributes to these communities, during several interview sessions, informants noted moments when differences threatened the synergism of the group. The following three examples highlight some of those moments. First, *Gabby*, a user of KT.

Gabby: It can get intense in the group sometimes when people get too passionate about their views about life.

Interviewer: In what way?

Gabby: So sometimes, religion comes up. I hate when they talk about religion because it always gets messy, and people's feelings get hurt. Some people are so judgmental, so sometimes it blows up into arguments when someone feels like they are being judged or that their beliefs are being disrespected.

Interviewer: Does this happen a lot?

Gabby: In [KT] not that much, because [name of an administrator] don' t play, she will delete the post with the quickness if people get out of pocket, but in some other groups I am in, if religion or like sexuality or any of those topics come up, no one steps in, so it just goes on and on, sparking lots of drama.

Daniella, a user of several SMNHG, indicated her own experiences with contention in these groups. She said

Daniella: I left several groups because some people are so homophobic sometimes. You know how that goes, there is always someone wanting to preach to everyone about how they should live their lives.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example?

Daniella: Like this one time, this lady posted pictures from her wedding, she and her wife both have locks, and they had their hair styled so cute. Instead of focusing on their hair, some people kept discussing the topic of gay marriage. Of course, some people were hella rude too. I think she eventually deleted her post. It was so sad and disappointing.

Interviewer: Disappointing in what way?

Daniella: I guess I wish we Black women would realize we got to support each other no matter what. Like all this shit we gotta go through as Black women, tell me why are we letting things like whom we love to divide us? I think the shit is so dumb.

Last, *Natural Lady*, an administrator of KT for approximately five years, indicates that while she believes the groups are mainly a hub of congenial interaction, there are moments of concern.

Natural Lady: I think for the most part everyone is pretty chill, but now and then I have to Block people when they get out of pocket

Interviewer: Can you give me an example of a time when you removed someone from the group?

Natural Lady: You probably realize we talk about sex sometimes right [laugh]. Whenever it comes up, some prude starts complaining that we need to act more like ladies. I get so pissed, like what the [explicit] that suppose to mean? Ladies have sex, right?

Interviewer: So, do you block them if they say that?

Natural Lady: I allow some back and forth discussion because I think some of the older ladies need to get schooled a bit [laugh], but if someone starts being too disrespectful or slut-shaming someone, I kick them out.

These experiences all highlight that at times, the users of these spaces struggle with matters of intersectionality and the differences that dissect their seemingly

monolithic communities. A failure to attending to these differences, for example, those brought about by varying class, sexual identity, religion, or age, can serve as a deterrence to the emergence of fictive kinship feelings among members of these groups. *Gabby's* complaint that she hates when the group discusses religion because “some people are so judgmental” (Gabby, personal communication, April 20th, 2018), foreshadowed the decision by KT's administrators to disallow religious content from the group. Only two months after our interview and in the wake of the Supreme Court upholding the Trump administrations' ban on foreign nationals from predominately Muslim countries from entering the United States, the administrators made this decision. The decision came after fierce fighting erupted as the court's ruling polarized the group members and magnified the differences in the religious and political beliefs among the users. The arguments would later eventually result in some members leaving the group, criticizing the community of Islamophobia.

This example and countless others demonstrate that, although the potential for sisterhood to flourish remains high within the SMNHG, the occasional counter-community behaviors produce cacophony that threatens the collectivity and solidarity within. Notably, divisive behaviors such as comments inspired by elitism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, and religious intolerance routinely arise within these communities, serving to disturb the harmonious atmosphere within them. *Gabby*, *Natural Lady*, and *Daniella* all illustrate moments when the failure of the users to recognize and respect the intersectional differences among group women, resulted in their disapproval and sometimes exit from some hair groups. Therefore, despite a seemingly infinite number of benefits afforded members of these SMNHG, these communities are by no

means utopic. Instead, because the women who inhabit these digital groups bring along with them their notions about social identities, the hierarchal structures that order their offline lives, sometimes materialize and negatively influence the engagements within.

As Lisa Nakamura (2013) argues, the Internet is not a place devoid of socially constructed hierarchal structures. Thus, although these women share similar identities as naturalistas, differences such as class, nationality, sexuality, and religion have all, at times, served to fragment the community and strain the emerges of sisterly affection among them. Recognizing that these communities, at times, struggle with some of the same issues that face traditional S.C further echoes the similarities SMNHG share with those collective structures. These struggles, however, do not detract from these groups serving as sites for counter-hegemonic behaviors.

Conclusion

In Bell et al. (2000) study of African American women's communicative experiences with each other, the scholars suggest that there is a tendency of Black women to expect sisterhood from each other. An expectation fueled by what one of their respondents describes as, the natural connection that exists between Black women; a connection that emerges from their shared experiences (p.46). The findings of this study presented in this chapter serve as evidence that the Black women who use these SMNHG are drawing upon this legacy of forging sisterhoods to shape how they establish and engage within their groups. Thus, the SMNHG are not social networking spaces that emerged solely due to the exceptionalism of the Internet, nor are they wholly a modern-day phenomenon. Instead, because Black women have long-established a precedent for carving out spaces for restoring, affirming, and uplifting each other (hooks 1990, p.42),

the digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM) is the product of the labor of 21st-century women, who transition longstanding modes of fellowship into a new medium.

A medium that allows them to digitalize these collective behaviors while capitalizing on the far-reaching, discursive nature of the Internet which allows for quick and efficient ways of connecting. Technology has expanded how Black women can connect by allowing those who do not share close physical proximity to still participate in community building processes. Despite these gifts afforded by technology, it is essential, however, to recognize that any attempt to contextualize the digital interactive practices within the SMNHG, requires the recognition that some of the behavioral tenets native to traditional S.C, influence why and what these women share, like and discuss. Throughout this chapter, I identified how social media natural hair groups mirror four of these tenets. Identifying these tenets are vital because they serve to frame SMNHG as sites conducive to resistance acts.

I first argued that the use of kinship language and in-group pronouns made evident that within these groups, there exists a trope of kinship. Second, to demonstrate that these SMNHG are culturally relevant spaces, I argue that the normative behaviors within the groups are typical to those found in Black beauty salons. Furthermore, the communication lexicon within these groups consists of Black vernacular English, other African diasporic dialects, and an extensive glossary of acronyms, phrases, and terms that emerge from Black hair care culture and Black popular culture. Third, I argued that through participation and sharing of narratives within the groups, the women allow for opportunities to identify similarities among their lived experiences, which serve as a starting point from which to build connections with each other. Last, using the three

bonding activities, Toni Denton (1990) argues, are inherent to intimate Black female relationships, I highlighted how these SMNHG serve as spaces for collective action.

First, I suggest that one can witness their bonding activity by observing their support of each other's business ventures and their commitment to each other's progress. By providing practical help to each other and participating in problem-solving sessions, they display their willingness to assist each other even when it requires offline efforts. Last, by founding meet up groups, these women illustrate their commitment to forging social companionship with each other. Collectively, the arguments raised throughout the chapter, demonstrate that the SMNHG provide some of the elements of Sister Circle because they are locations in which Black women can enter to fast from what Audrey Lorde calls a consistent diet of metabolizing hatred (1988, p.152), and by doing so, find a supportive network. Identifying these tenets within the SMNHG allowed me to answer the first of the dissertation's three research questions. These presences of these tenets confirm that these are indeed sites in which there is an emergence of a sense of community/fictive sisterhood, as demonstrated by members of these communities engaging in collective behavioral acts and practices.

To end the chapter, I briefly identified some causes for concern, noting how the lack of ownership of the social media platforms, the presence of colorism infused thoughts and the failure by some to respect differences among members of the group, can potentially be fissures that may negatively impact the benefits associated with participation in these online communities. Although these three issues are urgent matters facing SMNHG, they do not detract from the fact these online groups are invaluable virtual incarnations of traditional Black feminized spaces of resistance, healing, and

solidarity. In an era in which many have voiced concerns that the significant time we dedicate to digital immaterial labor, contributes to the fragmentation of traditional community life, this dissertation considers how these Black women are not casting aside their traditional community-building skills, but instead transferring them into their virtual neighborhoods.

Although, it may be their shared need for information about how to care for their hair that initially serves as the basis for these geographically displaced strangers to seek out these communities, the benefits afforded to them through their participation, far exceeds the practical hair advice they gain. The opportunity to be vulnerable, to find commonality, to positively affirm each other, to engage in discussion about their personal lives, and execute actions necessary for individual or corporate progress, allow these SMNHG users to conjure up the spirit native to S.C. Therefore, these groups provide twenty-first-century Black women with new ways of forging and maintaining the necessary and liberating type of sisterhoods. Sisterhoods that have historically benefitted their collective sociopolitical status in North America and across the diaspora. Having identified SMNHG as digital S.C and virtual beauty salons, I suggest that they are capable of providing the type of environment members may feel safe to critique and challenge social norms and create and share counter-hegemonic content. Now, in the next chapter, I can proceed to identify examples of members using their in-group identity, shared cultural, communication, and behavioral codes to produce ideological resistance content.

CHAPTER VI

Ideological Resistance: Counter Hegemonic Digital Media Text

Key terms: Sister Circles (S.C), Social media natural hair groups (SMNHG), Digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM), Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT).

As raced, gendered, and classed figures, Black women's bodies undergo severe policing in patriarchal states in which beauty continues to operate as a socioeconomic currency. For women of color, this policing can be particularly grueling due to the racialized ideologies that inform western beauty standards. Given this reality, historically and contemporarily Black women who do not chemically alter their hair may find their social capital reduced in the beauty, media, and romantic markets. They may also experience negative professional ramifications for their hair presentation choices. Throughout Chapter 3, I argued that, in addition to the beauty industry, the mainstream media has served as a stalwart purveyor of beauty standards contributing to the legacy of situating Black natural hair textures at the end of beauty hierarchal structures. Dominant media's continuous presentation of mediate texts infused with negative ideas about the attractiveness and cleanliness of Black hair saturates popular artifacts to the point that these messages appear to be unshakeable facts.

The print, video, and digital ads used by beauty supply corporations are versions of such problematic mediated artifacts. Quite frequently, the messages permeating from these companies' marketing campaigns suggest that Black natural hair is problematic, unruly, undesirable, and thus, ever in need of intense chemical treatment. Despite the popularity of these messages, they have not existed without contestation. For generations, Black [women] people have rejected these ideas, and many have engaged with various

means to challenge these and other dehumanizing mediate presentations of their bodies and lives. This dissertation is thus an examination of one such way that Black women have resisted these images through the use of technological tools.

In contextualizing this resistance, I have argued that members of social media natural hair groups (SMNHG) engage in practices related to Scott's (1989) everyday form of resistance, because this resistance involves activities that are very much a part of their recreational, social media use practices. By creating digital media text that rejects the diminished aesthetic attached to Black natural hair, these Black women are employing technology as a tool for challenging an oppressive belief system. Much in the ways, other marginalized communities have used different tactics to contest and dismantle structures, this digitalized resistance may go unnoticed as it does not include physical acts of opposition but instead occurs in virtual spaces not typically seen as political battlegrounds. Yet, by making use of an anti-hegemonic lexicon to communicate with each other by creating and sharing images, videos, and text that celebrate Black natural hair, and by capitalizing on the viral nature of the Internet, they do the critical labor of pluralizing the mediated narratives about Black bodies. They engage in this emotive, pro-Black body politicking labor in the face of a sociopolitical climate that still attempts to undervalue it.

This type of resistance thus resides within the realm of the ideological. It is a resistance that consists of the production of messages and images that evoke ideas that buttress the value of Black natural hair at the expense of dominant narratives. Focusing on questions of ideology required me to pay close attention to language because the words, phrases, and terms we use are reflections of the politics and paradigms that shape

our *weltanschauung* or world view. So, in mounting my argument that these women make use of SMNHG to create content infused by counter-hegemonic ideologies, I focused on the language they used in their posts and the words used by the interview participants. Prioritizing language in this research follows in the tradition of Black digital scholars (e.g., Brock, 2012; Wright, 2005 and Williams, 2015) who argue that understanding the formulation of communities online by Black publics cannot occur without an exploration of the critical role communication plays in forging Black communities off and online. These scholars highlight that through practices such as storytelling, using jokes to extrapolate spiritual and worldly wisdom, and teasing, also known as playing the dozen, Black community members build bonds that establish counter publics.

As these counter publics negotiate and engage with each other, they create the types of fertile ground needed to stimulate collective strategizing. This rich oral culture does not dissipate as Black citizens enter virtual spaces. Instead, Black digital scholars suggest that Black men and women, digitalize their oral traditions and make use of them as they attempt to build virtual Black communities. These communities often serve a political purpose for Black publics, as Steel (2016) suggests when she argues that, social media sites provide Black men and women the opportunity to utilize narratives, storytelling, extended metaphors, and other features of oral culture for preserving Black culture and challenging the dominant culture (p.1). Although Steel cautions that lack of Black ownership of social media sites can negatively affect the potency of the content created within, she finds that digital spaces dominated by Black constituents can provide Black users with the ability to mirror Black oral culture. By duplicating this culture,

primarily as it exists within Black barbershops and salons, these Black men and women can navigate and manipulate technology in the creation of alternate publics (p.1).

Having already argued that these SMNHG exists as digital Black beauty salons (in Chapter 3), and having laid out the reasons why discourse centered on Black hair carries political weight (in Chapter 2), it stands to reason that the discussion within these Social media natural hair groups can also serve to challenge and resist against hegemonic messages. Throughout this chapter, I identify posts and interactions I witnessed throughout the data collection stage of the study, and I highlight stories shared by the interview participants to provide examples of the types of ideologically charged content found within these groups. Conclusively, the data presented in this chapter provide the evidence needed to argue that produced within these SMNHG are pro-Black natural hair digital texts infused with messages of self-love. Messages that declare that Black natural hair is beautiful, Black natural hair is desirable, and Black natural hair is healthy. As the encoders of these messages, the SMNHG's naturalistas have become empowered, alternative media producers, and active participants in participatory media culture.

No longer only relegated to the realms of consumers of media images, they are making use of their technological skills to pluralize mediate narratives about Black hair politics. As beneficiaries of the power that comes with the ability to write oneself into being digitally, these women contest the media's monopoly on producing symbolic forms (Atton 2008, p.31). Before identifying examples of the ideological content created in these communities, it is first necessary to note that by willingly participating in discussing and creating matter focused on revealing their often-complicated social experiences as naturalistas, these women are rejecting the domineering strong Black

woman ethos. An ethos that serves to silence Black women from sharing and finding resolve for social trauma. Therefore, not only does the content created in these communities resound defiance tropes, but the very act of participating in these communities is in itself an act of resistance.

Strong Black Woman Ethos

Before attempting to identify how a culture of resistance can lie within a digital space and materialize in the language and digital Black oral practices, it is necessary to briefly examine how the strong Black woman ethos (SBWE) affects the communication practices of Black women. Communication is critical to this study because the emergence of the defiant messages of pro-Black natural hair found these groups only manifest because members are willing to share stories and give voicing to sometimes traumatic micro and macro aggressions. This willingness to communicate with each other is a direct rejection of the silence, isolation, and other negative traits associated with the SBWE. The SBWE is a positionality many Black women adopt as a survival mechanism, a controlling image (Hill-Collins 2000), that historically affected the emotional and physical health of Black women. Despite its seemingly empowering name, for the Black feminist cultural critic, Michele Wallace (1978), the internalization of the SBWE serves no benefit to Black women.

Instead, the SBWE finds its genesis in the transatlantic slave trade era, where purveyors of scientific racism upheld the myth that Black people held an increased ability to endure pain. In labeling Black bodies as "strong," this myth declares a feign strength, one that appears to be positive, but in reality, the idea that Black bodies hold a high tolerance for pain has both historically and contemporarily contributed to the

pathologizing of Black people [women] as sub-human. This pathologizing occurs because by suggesting Black bodies hold a non-human like capacities, abusers of Black bodies during and after the slave trade were able to justify their abstract cruelty and physical violence. Thus, while this label of strength appears liberating, it contributes to the normalization of abusive practices waged against Black bodies and minds.

Contemporarily, the myth continues to serve to detach Black women from the privileges and reverence afforded to other feminized bodies. What is most concerning about the super strength allegory is that some Black women internalize it as a badge of honor.

The faux notion of strength sometimes dims their zeal to challenge the source of emotional and psychological trauma in their lives for several reasons. First, they may come to accept physical or emotional trauma as an inevitable part of Black womanhood, and second, they have internalized the notion that Black women do not need support in the face of trauma because they have an inherent capacity for enduring pain. As psychologists, Dawn Edge, and Anne Rogers suggests, the SBWE has an enduring cultural legacy, because it is a powerful cultural signifier that links generations of Black women who have overcome adversity, slavery, and racism (Edge and Roger 2005, p. 22). The SBWE thus appear to be empowering, because it appears as a testament to internal fortitude and a confirmation that Black women can overcome what Sheila Radford-Hill (2002) argues, are the all-too-common experiences of male rejection, economic deprivation, crushing family responsibilities, and countless forms of discrimination (p.1086). By negating the SBWE, I do not deny the psychological or physical strength and resilience of Black women. Instead, I find that it is only by belying SBWE as a

positive force within Black women's lives, one will be able to extrapolate its problematic effect on the healing practice of Black women.

SBWE leaves little spaces for Black women to express their vulnerability because by intimating that Black women hold an unshakable strength and resolve, SBWE places undue pressures on Black women to always appear in control, ever capable and immune to the effect of emotional trauma. The theatrics necessary to upkeep the image of SBWE can negate Black women's willingness to share and find a resolution for traumatic experiences, or request, and forge supportive systems like SC, even when their need for such a healing commune becomes undeniable critical to their mental and physical well-being. This negation emerges out of the notion that as Black women, an overt display of vulnerability and public cries for help are symbols of weakness simply not afforded to them. Therefore, as Joan Morgan (1999) notes in her highly-cited text *When chickenheads come home to roost*, there is a tendency for many Black women to remain silent, no matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity (p.91). The preeminent scholar and Black feminist intersectional thinker Audre Lorde (1984c), however, reminds Black women that their silence would not protect them, but it is by speaking the truth of their lives with other women, they can find true liberation and power.

Thus, by forging digital communities in which they share their personal experiences, these women, make use of the SMNHG to fracture the Strong Black woman ethos. Their choice to not remain silent, and to speak the truths of their negative experiences as naturalistas, allows for them to engage in collective acts of healing that counteract some of the ordeals they may encounter as women navigating the world in

bodies often marked as less than. As they share experiences with the rejection, seek out each other for affirmation and draw on each other's advice, they not only display their vulnerability, but they demonstrate that their digital communities provide them with the necessary socialization tools, the needed social culture, that makes the production of counter-hegemonic, alternative ideological media text possible.

Moderating the Culture of Resistance

By no means do I attempt to trivialize the intense process needed to reject old paradigms and re-establish counter ideologies. The norms that govern the distribution of aesthetic capital is so intensely intertwined within all social institutions, that any attempt to displace it will be no easy feat. Replacing these norms is made especially difficult given the pervasive nature of hegemonic beauty rules, and the fact that social reproduction of these standards occurs across generations would require one to challenge norms that have existed so long that they appear to be an unshakeable tenet of Western social life. Throughout this study, however, I found that the normative language and behavioral practices in these SMNHG served to center Black women's natural hair as the desirable standard which stands in opposition to the exclusionary beauty norms that have so long helped to "other" the bodies of Black women. Before I present some examples of this content, it is critical to consider the role the group administrators play in establishing the culture of resistance within these groups.

With the power to set the governing rules of these communities, the administrators determine what behaviors can occur and which are outlawed. As the gatekeepers of these groups, their impact on shaping these groups' normative practices cannot be understated as their rules delimit the types of narratives and content that

surface within. The most tangible way in which they demonstrate their influential power is by drafting their group's description. These descriptions not only delineate the purpose of the community but they layout the participation rules to which all users must adhere. For instance, in Kinky Twists' (KT) group description, it states, "*in this group, we learn to embrace who we are, as we learn to take care of our hair.*" The description later reads, "*no hair texture shaming is allowed in the group.*" Both statements suggest that alongside a focus on hair, the administrators envision that their SMNHG will function as a hub for Black women to engage in self-affirming practices.

Coily Curl Love's (CCL) administrators place a similar emphasis on establishing a community open to all Black women. Part of their group description reads, "*this, not the group for you if you think 'good hair' is a texture or if you want a different texture from your own or if you dislike some textures.*" Here not only does CCL distinguish their community as a site in which Black women can embrace their natural hair, but they also dismiss the legitimacy of colorism's good hair vs. bad hair trope while encouraging the members to be accepting of all textures. Later in the group description, they further reinforce this commitment by issuing a warning: "*you are not allowed to share anything that shames or shades Black women, this group was created for us to spread love.*" Markedly, on several occasions throughout this study, I witnessed moments where there was a testing of the validity of these descriptions. Those occasions typically involved moments when members would use colorism infused language to bolster some natural hair textures at the expense of others.

Examples of these behaviors consist of making disparaging remarks about shorter, coarse hair textures, or the term "good hair" when referencing hair types that are longer

with more defined curls. During this study, whenever these types of behaviors occur, not only were those posts flagged and denounced by other members, but the administrators frequently deleted the offending posts, publicly reprimand the offending members, and temporarily restrict the member or removed them from the community. By demonstrating a willingness to uphold their promise to prohibit content deemed defamatory, these administrators have shown their loyalty to maintain a congenial space. The administrators' policing behaviors are critically crucial to attempts to ensure that members will be willing to interact with each other and produce the type of content that leaves the indelible impression that within SMNHG Black hair textures and Black women bodies by extension, are adored. During each interview with two of the administrators of the SMNHG, I gained a heightened understanding of how vital a role the administrators play in shaping and maintaining pro-Black body culture in their communities.

When asked to define her role as an administrator, *Ne* replied, “*keeping the group safe.*”

Interviewer: Safe from what?

Ne: From toxic energy, drama, whatever. [...] I don't tolerate the good hair, bad hair conversations. [...] everyone is welcome. Everyone should enjoy themselves in here without worrying that they will be offended.

Like *Ne*, *Natural Lady* also framed herself as a protector of her digital realm. She stated,

It is important to have somewhere for Black women to talk about issues and insecurities they are facing and not get judged for it. [...] so, I delete anything that is judgmental or shady because I don't want anyone leaving the group sisters get enough of that every day, ain't nobody have time for that.

Both administrators tell of their investment in ensuring their communities are welcoming and that women feel comfortable enough to participate. Of course, in these fast pace

spaces, these administrators who mostly do this labor unpaid, are not able to catch every infraction of these rules. Hence, questionable content does appear in these communities, triggering arguments among the members. *Ne*, however, suggests that even when administrators miss this content, members step in and self-police the groups.

Ne stated,

We [administrators] can't catch everything, so it's a good thing that the members always flag posts for us. They are good at getting our attention, they will blow up the inbox when they want us to take a post down or when they think someone is acting out of pocket.

It is clear then by *Ne*'s statement that the members also partner in the process of maintaining the community and fictive sisterly spirit within these groups. This dedication by both administrators and users to flag problematic behaviors and the administrators' willingness to remove this content demonstrates that there is a conscientious attempt to maintain communities in which all members feel valued and in which there is a celebration of all hair types.

By attempting to ensure all images, videos, and conversations populating these groups adhere to the nature of inclusivity, and by willingly punish deviant behaviors, the administrators are pushing to ensure the messages emerging from these virtual media text production sites differ from those created by mainstream media producers. Such as those producers that either refuse to cast naturalistas into celebrated roles, or those who implicitly or explicitly induce naturalistas to alter their hair textures. They also differ from those producers who use colorism as a tool for casting only those Black women who fit into an unrelentingly narrow definition of beauty. By setting rules that outlaw negative discourse about the Black natural hair, in their rejection of colorism infused behavior, and by encouraging users to flatter each other, these administrators prove

themselves to be a critical cog in shaping these SMNHG. Their influence contributes to allowing these SMNHG to be healthy ideological, producing outlets that create and transmit messages about Black hair that stand in opposition to mainstream rigid aesthetic norms.

Counter Hegemonic Media Text

Two types of posts found in these communities posit counter-hegemonic messages. The first are those posts that focus on Black women's body politics. Echoed in these posts are positive utterances concerning natural hair. I classified these posts into seven categories (selfies, calls for reinforcement, showing reciprocal love, the featured post, the celebrity standard, our hair is not the butt of your jokes and Black natural hair is formal), which I further explain using examples below. The second type of counter-hegemonic post features the moment when members raise their voices in dissent. This dissent takes two forms: first, it materializes as challenges against corporate practices of the beauty supply industry. Second, it is noted on the occasions when members participate in hashtag activism, that is, when they use the platform to discuss contemporary social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo.

By presenting some of the emerging data that fall within these two post types, I demonstrate that these social media natural hair groups serve as digital sister circles and prime locations for launching anti-hegemonic ideological campaigns. To do so, I first argue that by creating content that focuses on Black women's body politics and Black natural hair positivity, these women are participating in resisting against the dominating negative ideological framing of Black natural hair. Next, I provide two examples of moments in which members make use of SMNHG to call for the boycott of two

corporations. In doing so, these communities serve as a platform for the members to flex their influential power on the beauty supply industry, by confronting business practices they deem oppressive or disrespectful. Last, I introduce the second category of posts coded as social justice discourse to highlight how the naturalistas also make use of the SMNHG to discuss political issues, and to participate in the ongoing digital-based movements that challenge systemic inequality in the lives of Black women. Collectively, the data presented in this chapter, not only highlights some of the regular daily practices of these users of these communities, but they also showcase that the members' digital labor engenders content laced with messages of ideological defiance.

Black Women's Body Politics/Natural Hair Positivity

As expected, much of the interaction within these communities centered on discussions surrounding Black natural hair. Many of the videos, images, and posts found in the groups are counter-hegemonic in nature because the language used in the captions that accompany them, and the comments they provoke serve to untether the "otherness" of Black natural hair by framing it as something to be desired. Identified below are seven frequently appearing categories of posts, from which to observe this ideological reframing of Black women's natural hair.

Selfies. One of the first types of posts from which to see the rejection of the idea that Black hair is wanting and somehow less than alluring are selfie posts. Selfie posts primarily consist of photographs of naturalistas focused on their faces and hair. Members make use of these selfies to proclaim their love for their hair, evident by the self-affirming captions that typically accompany these photos. Examples of these captions are

"new week, new look. My hair looks amazing today guys.", *"I finally get my wash and go just right, look at that shine."* or *"I dyed my tips myself, took me forever, but this color looks so good."* The spirit of pride that exudes from these selfie posts is also present when members create "journey posts." Journey posts are a derivative of selfies. They also feature pictures accompanied by positive body image captions. The goal of a journey post is to allow a member to showcase their "natural hair journey" via picture collages. These collages are supposed to demonstrate how the member's once chemically treated hair has transformed over time, becoming longer, thicker, with a noticeable curl pattern since they have "gone natural."

The ability to demonstrate that one's hair has accomplished this transformation is a matter of pride for some naturalistas who simultaneously reject dominant hair norms while striving to adhere to naturalista centered standards. The naturalista standards exist as counter stances to the Eurocentric ones that inform hegemonic norms. Yet, even though the naturalista standard provides these women with beautification codes to which Black hair textures can more easily align, the fact that naturalistas have established their own standards for evaluating hair is a reminder that beauty is an asset that always undergoes policing. Although these redefined norms may differ from community to community or naturalista to naturalista, the captions of journey posts suggest that length, thickness, and a defined curl pattern remain some of the most distinctive attributes that come under review when naturalistas weigh the health and beauty of Black natural hair. Members who successfully create journey posts that illustrate their attainment of these beauty norms can thus earn social capital in their community. Given the potential capital

rewards awaiting a member who shares a journey post, it may be easy to dismiss these types of posts as mere boastful undertakings. I do not believe this to be universally true.

While the positive affirmations members receive from other group members in response to their journey posts may boost the member's self-esteem, the captions that accompany journey posts sometimes suggest that these types of posts serve additional purposes. The captions reveal that selfies and journey posts also provide the naturalistas with a platform to express their love for their hair in a manner rarely afforded to them in other mediated spaces. For example, journey posts' captions often consist of the member declaring her love of her natural hair and her happiness that she endured the "going natural" journey. For example, in the caption for a journey post found in KT, the member states, *"it's my nappiversary⁸ guys, 2 years free of that creamy crack. I am happy with my progress thus far. It is growingly slowly, but it is definitely healthier than before[...]."*

While another post read, *"today, I looked in the mirror and thought dam I look good with my big hair to match these big ole lips and big hips."* A third wrote, *"took me forever to convince myself to go natural, I didn't think I could pull it off. You guys ever look at your old pics and think I'm so happy I'm natural now, yo the glow up is real lol."*

At first glance, these captions full of self-praise may appear to be the offshoot of what many believe is an ever-growing narcissistic social media culture. While I do not dismiss the possibility that egotistical desires to gain social capital may influence behaviors within these groups, these captions and the comments they provoke suggest that something entirely different is also occurring. The members positively responded to these selfies and journey posts. Missing from the majority of their responses is the

⁸ Naturalistas use the term nappiversary to signal the anniversary of the last time they chemically relaxed their hair, or the day of their big chop.

disdain one may expect to find when someone is reacting to acts of vanity. Instead of offering rude, sarcastic, or annoyed responses, these women respond to these posts by participating in the ritual known as "gassing each other up." That is, they engage in zealously complimenting each other's hair while using Black Vernacular English phrases such as "yassss sis," "you did that," "come thru sis" and "ok we see you." Each of these phrases is a positive declaration, and through their use, members signal that they are willing to avow the poster's resolute explicit statement of self-love. Their willingness to agree with these self-aggrandizing behaviors is critical because it indicates that the community members are not decoding their fellow members as vanity actors.

Instead, there appears to be a recognition and approval of these behaviors. Their approval signals that the norms of these communities allow for such self-celebratory practice that enables members to enjoy the pleasure of escaping within them to celebrate themselves as a form of self-care as women whose bodies not always celebrated in offline, real-world domains. The scarcity in real-world spaces outside of Black beauty salons and familial circles; may they be real or fictive, where they as Black women can collectively and safely announce this self-love, maybe a crucial catalyst that incentivizes participation in these safe havens. As they participate, they contribute to populating their groups' timelines with images of Black women with Black natural hair textures, and as they engage in offering each other positive compliments, these women are propelling a positive propaganda machine. A machine that disseminates the message that naturalistas are proud of their hair, which is a testimony of the kind of self-love that Lorde (1988) argues, can serve as an ideological tool of political warfare.

Calls for Reinforcement. The second type of post from which the ideological message of pro-Black natural hair develops, are those posts which I termed "calls for reinforcement." Members typically create these posts after they have endured a negative social encounter, and they are in search of positive reassurance. The posts usually feature stories about moments when racist ideologies inform the ways bosses, coworkers, or even strangers, reacted to a member's hair. It is in the comment sections of these posts where members discuss how institutional policies like corporate dress codes and the Army's Regulation 670-1 restricted their hair presentation choices. In Chapter 5, I provided examples of these types of posts in the section "bonding over shared hair-related experiences." The responses to these calls for reinforcement posts typically entail words of encouragement and strong statements rejecting the acts of ridicule. Black women face at the hands of non-Black women for exercising control over how they choose to presents their hair.

Notably, the reinforcement posts also feature stories in which the women discussed enduring negative interactions with other Black women. Unlike the ostracism fought by non-Black persons, these types of narratives give rise to conversations focused on the impact of internalized anti Blackness. These discourses are a reminder that some Black men and women having eaten a steady diet of images that othered Black natural hair textures have internalized these ideas. Furthermore, because most Black people are acutely aware of the importance of having beauty currency, there is a tendency for some Black men and women to, as I explained in Chapter 2, engage in heightened levels of self and community body policing practices. In many cases, this policing occurs at the hands of family members and loved ones who engage in respectability, politicking the bodies of

each other out of fear and trepidation of what may happen when one's Black body is deemed too distinct from the overarching social norms. Although it may be well-meaning, what often occurs when Black women's bodies endure intra-group policing, is that there is a reinforcement of hegemonic control.

When targeted towards hair presentation norms, these messages often suggest that becoming a naturalista is simply a risk some Black women cannot afford. Throughout the data collection process, I witnessed members frequently discussing their experiences with intragroup body policing. An example of one of these posts appeared in KT when a member complained that her sisters and mother warned her that she looks ugly with her natural hair because she was *"too dark to wear kinky hair."* With an outpouring of anger, and solidarity this post gave rise to several types of responses. Some members focused on self-esteem, authenticating statements such as *"girl you are gorgeous," "sis, your skin is flawless,"* and *"you are so pretty."* While other members shared their stories of facing the restrictive pressures brought on by colorism infused thought. Other members, however, focused their attention on challenging the internalized form of racism echoing from the words used by the poster's family members. For instance, one member wrote, *"your mama and sister must really hate themselves to talk that mess,"* while in a similar tone another responded *"that's some self-hating sh#t rite there, what they mean too dark?"* and still a third comment read *"they are probably jealous they don't have the confidence to wear their hair out, that is their problem, not yours."*

To understand the importance of these responses, one must recall the theory of colorism discussed in Chapter 2. The notion that a Black woman can be "too dark to wear kinky hair" is a popular colorism and anti-Black aesthetic trope. This trope is built upon

the belief that because Black women with darker skin tones hold a severely diminished beauty capital in western aesthetic markets, these women must take all and every step to "improve" herself. This improvement means that darker skin Black women must opt for more acceptable hair presentation styles such as chemically straightened hair, straight weaves, or wigs if they are to allow themselves to the opportunity to cash in their beauty for advancement in any of the socioeconomic or romantic markets. Colorism's ideals suggest that choosing to wear one's hair in its natural texture for darker skin Black women is too risky a choice, given the fragility of the value society places on their beauty. Therefore, by using the terms "self-hating" and "jealous," and by suggesting that her sisters and mother lacked "confidence," these members demonstrate that they recognize and resent that the family members were uttering words laced with internalized "anti-Blackness."

The willingness of these members to share their experiences with these issues, and the openness of the other members to discuss, challenge and dismiss internalized forms of oppression is yet another example of these SMNHG serving as propagating centers nurturing and allowing for the growth of a culture that is dismissive of ideas that fester scorn or ridicule for Black natural hair, in both the principal and intragroup spheres. Additionally, by engaging in reassuring each other that their hair is beautiful, the women participate in creating an extensive quantity of messages that affirms Black natural hair and detracts attempts to belittle or problematize it.

Showing Reciprocal Love. The third type of posts in which ideological messages reside are those posts in which members participate in an interactive game of "showing love." A CCL post provides an example of how this game typically unfolds. In this post,

the member shared a picture of herself with her natural hair twisted in large spiral curls accompanied by a caption that read *"ladies, its let's spread some love, show us your hairstyle and drop a compliment on the pic above yours."* In the comment section of this post, as with the other similar "reciprocal love" posts, the members frequently make use of emojis, memes, and "like/thumbs up" or "heart" reactions to signal their approval of each other's hair. Additionally, they leave flattering compliments for each other by referring to each other's hair as beautiful, gorgeous, pretty, and stunning. While some may dismiss this as a frivolous game of stroking each other's egos and the mutual distribution of social capital, the responses members often give to the positive messages they receive, indicate that these posts play a more symbolic role than one may initially think. For example, one member, in response to receiving several positive messages, wrote, *"I'm back on the dating market after my bf played me, so thanks, I needed all this love right now."* Another member responded similarly. She commented, *"this has been a rough week thanks for the smiles, ladies."*

These replies reiterate the psychological benefits of being a part of a community in which there is an innumerable number of naturalistas engaging in pro-Black natural hair discourse. The high frequency in which the showing of reciprocal love posts appear is a reminder that for some members, these communities provide an opportunity to gain access to other women who can offer the reassurance needed to feel beautiful in moments of vulnerability and self-doubt. Observing the comment made by members participating in reciprocal love games, provided one of the best opportunities to witness the emergence of counter-mainstream notions of beauty (RQ3). By participating in group activities that require them to give and gain positive reinforcement, these women dedicate themselves

to a cyclical process of boosting confidence and bolstering Black natural hair from existing under dominant ideologies' cloud of strangeness, to occupying a place of reverence.

The Featured Post. Observing *Angel's* Instagram profile provided an opportunity to witness a fourth example of how SMNHG serves to allow naturalistas to celebrate Black natural hair textures. The content *Angel* curates on her profile, demonstrate a fierce dedication to lauding and asserting the beauty of Black women and Black natural hair. She does so by not only sharing her daily selfies but by using her hair beauty of the week contest to provide a platform for her followers to discuss their relationship with their hair. To enter her beauty of the week, contests followers submit their pictures to her via her direct message inbox, and *Angel* selects a winner whom she features on her profile. What is intriguing about the contest is the caption that accompanies the images of each of the winners. The captions consist of answers to the four standardized questions *Angel* asks each winner. The first three questions require the winner to explain their hair care routine, such as what's your go-to haircare brand? And what product do you swear by? While the fourth question asks, "why do you love your hair?"

Most often, this question prompts the members to share narratives about how the coming of age as Black women in a racialized society, affected the way they viewed their hair. Through their replies, the members often reveal how they navigated through a complicated relationship with their hair to arrive at a place in which they have grown to love it. Despite divulging painful memories of rejection and low self-esteem, the members typically end their responses with a celebratory affirmation of her love for her hair texture. In making these declarations, the women make use of culturally infused, in-

group metaphors, and phrases. For example, one hair beauty of the week replied that she loved her hair because “*it grows upward and outward towards heaven.*” Another stated that she loved her hair because “*my mom always told me that my hair is a crown,*” and to love her crown, she continued is to “*embrace her divinity.*” The metaphorical use of the term “crown” to describe one's natural hair closely relates to pro-Black Afrocentric thought that denotes that before the enslavement of Black men and women, they were kings and queens.

The use of a crown to describe one's Black hair is then a declaration of one's royal identity. It suggests that, despite the literal removal of physical crowns from Black bodies, one's hair serves as a crown: an ever-present sign of regency that exists even in the face of historical and contemporary oppression. Crown is by far not the only term used in this way. Quite frequently, in response to images, they deem beautiful and inspiring; the followers of Angel's profile would respond by making use of the popularly used hashtags, #Queen, and #BlackGirlMagic. Both these hashtags also draw upon Afrocentric ideologies that seek to positively reinforce the priceless value of Black women and their bodies. As with the use of the crown metaphor, embedded in #Queen and #BlackGirlMagic are self-affirming cultural nuances, that declares that Black women are regal, and their bodies are worthy of worship.

To make such a declaration of regality is defiant for Black women whose bodies are typically distinctively different from the Disney infused, and Eurocentric visual image, one may conjure up, upon hearing the word Queen. Analogous to the use of #Queen, #BlackgirlMagic and crown, members also make use of #hairgoals. When a member includes #hairgoals in their comments in response to a post, the member is

declaring that the person's hair serves as an aspirational image, a desirable standard, or a prototype. To have a group member deem your hair #hairgoals is, therefore, one of the highest forms of flattery. The frequency in which the hashtag #hairgoals appear suggests that not only are members invested in sharing compliments, but they have established communities that position kinks, curls, and coils as the hair beauty standard. By doing so, they signal their refusal to be defined by the dominant's straight, blonde hair standard. Declaring that each other's natural hair as #hairgoals is thus not only a dismissive rejection of dominant beauty paragons, but it a signal that within their SMNHG, they are collectively constructing an alternative ideology about beauty; one not laced with messages that insinuate to naturalistas that beauty can only be achieved through hair altering processes. This alternative beauty ideology that exists in these hair groups allows for members to display their admiration for their hair textures while circumventing the predominant standard of beauty's refusal to welcome them into the fold.

The Celebrity Standard. As with most digital spaces, SMNHG do not escape the dominance of contemporary celebrity culture. Images and videos of Black celebrity women frequently populate the groups' timelines as members discuss the hair presentation practices of famous Black naturalistas. The responses to this content provide the chance to witness another means by which discourse within the SMNHG confronts dominant aesthetic norms and practices. For instance, when supermodel Naomi Campbell walked a red-carpet during a Paris fashion week event without her signature long straight weave, the picture quickly went viral. Draped in an elegant gown, Campbell sauntered down one of fashion's most revered red carpet with her natural hair. Repeatedly the image and video clip of the moment was shared in both Facebook group communities. When

one member posted a picture of Campbell's red carpet moment to KT, another member commented, "*wow she looks amazing, I love that she wore her hair out during fashion week,*" while another quirked "*yess sis rocking natural hair in fashion week, goals for real,*" and a third noted, "*I love seeing celebrities slay with their natural hair.*"

Much of the response to Campbell's photograph revealed that the naturalistas seem to exhibit a feeling of pride in Campbell's choice to show her natural tresses while walking across one of the most body policing spaces on earth: a press filled fashion industry event. Whether or not the model intended to make a political statement is debatable, but given the industry's history of elevating some bodies at the expense of others, Campbell's choice was read not merely as a fashion choice but a statement. A statement of refusal to accept the fashion norms that have long explicitly or subtly encouraged celebrity Black women to alter their hair through chemical or extension processes to gain entry into the upper echelon of the fashion world. It is this statement that the SMNHG members reacted to as they discuss how Campbell, who is no stranger to breaking barriers as one of the most recognizable Black supermodels of all time, broke with fashion's traditions by daring to embrace her natural hair texture. The members' reaction to Campbell's hair presentation choice demonstrated that they are aware of the implications of a Black woman gracing a fashion event in a manner contrary to conventional norms.

While Campbell's level of fame affords her an increased level of privilege to make such a defiant act, the members' exclamation of joy in seeing her do so is a testament to the fact that the SMNHG members celebrate her choice as a rebellious act and a refusal to acquiesce to the industry's dismissive standards as an iconic and symbolic

moment for all naturalistas. Campbell is not the only celebrity discussed in these groups. Throughout this study, it became apparent that there is a shared admiration for several famous women amongst the members of both Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT). Best described as hair icons, not only do the images of these women frequently appear in these communities, but the members discuss these women using celebratory phrases. The hair icons include Black women celebrities like actresses Lupita Nyong'o, Yara Shahidi, Tracee Ellis Ross, Zendaya, Issa Rae, and the singer Solange Knowles. Members demonstrate their appreciation for these women by also accompanying their photos with the hashtags #hairgoals or #BlackgirlMagic. Of these famous women, the discourse surrounding Lupita Nyong'o warrants further exploration.

As a Black woman with a dark skin tone and short tight coiled hair, the strikingly beautiful Lupita is not the face most often seen on magazine covers. When Lancome, a subsidiary of L'Oreal, named Lupita its first Black spokeswoman, her visibility in the fashion world increased exponentially. Furthermore, as one of the stars of the record-breaking Black Panther, Lupita has earned a significant number of front-page features on many of the top magazines; Vogue, Elle, InStyle, to name a few. What is profound about Lupita's commercial success is that, when members of the SMNHG share her images, they most often explicitly make mention of her hair texture type. For instance, one member captioned a photo of Lupita with the following words "*ok Elle [magazine] giving that 4C love*", while another member similarly captioned her photo "*all that dark chocolate Lupita is repping for 4C girls*". The consistent use of the term 4C by members suggests that Lupita is a symbol of pride not merely for Black women, but Black women with 4C hair texture; the coarsest texture according to the Andre' Walker's hair chart.

To uncloak a possible reason for the preoccupation with Lupita's hair texture type, one may observe some of the comments made by members of the SMNHG when focusing on images of other famous Black naturalista. For instance, when a promotional photograph featuring the female cast of the ABC sitcom *Blackish* appeared in the group, a member complained, "*everyone loves Yara [Shahidi] and Tracee [Ellis Ross], don't come for me, I love them too, and I really like Blackish, but do you guys wonder why these Black sitcoms barely ever show 4C girls any love.*" Responses to this post varied, while some criticized the poster for what they saw as an over sensitive preoccupation with hair texture, a significant majority of the responses supported the poster's argument. A comment from one such member read, "*yup, I say that all the time, all the Black women on tv either got weaves or if they are natural, they got that long wavy curls.*" While another member suggested, "*Hollywood hides 4C actresses, if they hire Black women, they are always light skin with 3a or 3b hair.*" Like the original poster, these members raise questions about what they believe is a limited presentation of natural hair textures in mainstream media productions.

Another member shares a similar sentiment, but in doing so, she points to the gendered nature of natural hair discrimination, she writes, "*in those shows, the fathers and brothers be 4C af, but all the wives and daughters got that Tracee curls, how sway?*" The argument being made here by this member is that although media producers are willing to cast Black men of varying skin tones and hair textures, there is a tendency to limit the body type of the women actresses. This limit often exempts naturalistas with tightly coiled hair textures. The complaints by these members echoed some of the

statements made by interview participants. During the interview *Natural Lady*, for instance, she addressed Hollywood's relationship with Black hair textures by saying,

Black television shows cast the same long curly hair, Black girls, time and time again. I wish I saw more Vanessa Huxtables, Issa Raes, and Brandys on the television, just more range in hair types. [...] we don't all have bouncing curls.

The presence of this widely held belief that Black women with 4C textures are rendered invisible even in Hollywood's Black targeted media offerings may explain why when discussing Lupita's rise in prominence there is a tendency to frame her not as another popular Black woman, but a Black woman with 4C hair. The members who mention her hair texture do so to emphasize how remarkable her rise in prominence has been. What is most significant about posts that feature Lupita and other women celebrity natural hair icons, is that they allow the members of these groups to engage in discourse that questions Hollywood's role in upholding colorism. These SMNHG thus plays home to conversations that challenge the unequal representation of Black bodies in the mainstream media. By engaging in these conversations, the members use these SMNHG to discuss the rejection of the mainstream media's and the beauty and fashion industry's limited and racialized definitions of beauty. Entrenched within their comments is a refusal to accept Hollywood's use of colorism in presenting Black naturalistas.

The concerns the members of these communities have about these presentations is not merely a matter of celebrity fanaticism. Instead, given the influential role mediate images have on the social norms and standards, the focus these women place on celebrity images may be the result of their continued concerns about the restrictive mediated representation of Black female bodies. Furthermore, their interest in these images may also be telling of these women's continued apprehension with the effect these images

have in shaping how naturalistas, both famous and non-famous, are treated across different avenues of society. It is these concerns that trigger these women to express their radical support for fierce barrier breakers like Naomi Campbell and Lupita Nyong'o, women who appear to be using their fame and their acceptance within the fashion industry to challenge the status quo. As all the hair icons listed above continue to grace high fashion spaces with their afros, twists outs, and locks, they provide SMNHG members with iconic images to spark charged discussions that challenges the limited presentation of Black bodies in high fashion, and across all mainstream media platforms.

Our Hair is Not the Butt of Your Jokes. Viral comedic sketches are some of the most widely shared digital media artifacts on social media platforms today. The videos most often shared in these communities are those produced by Black social media content creators. These comedic, less than a minute viral videos, popularized on platforms like Instagram and TikTok frequently make their rounds in the SMNHG. First, growing in popularity in the now-defunct platform Vine, these videos require the content creator to set a scene and land a punch line in a significantly short time. Given the limited time available in these videos, creators must devise content that will quickly grab their audience's attention. Therefore, to accomplish this goal and to succinctly tell their comedic tales, these creatives make use of Turow's (1997) routines. Routines allow these producers to draw upon highly predictable patterns that depend heavily on stereotypes, cultural tropes, and recycled narratives.

While many of the videos that appear in the SMNHG, typically stimulating laughter and positive reactions. Sometimes the dependency on stereotypes results in the creation of videos that have an adverse effect. The videos that earn the most negative

feedback are those in which Black women and their bodies are the central focus of the joke. For instance, one viral video features a young lady out on a date with the comedian who compliments her "*exotic beauty*." Eventually, he invites her to his home, and once there in anticipation of a sexual encounter, he encourages her to "*get comfortable*." The camera then temporarily wanders away when it refocuses on the young woman, she has taken off her wig to reveal a short, tightly coiled afro. Immediately the romantic music previously playing in the background screeches to an end, and the scene cuts to the comedian shoving the young woman out his apartment before tossing her wig and slamming the door shut as he yells "*take your ugly ass on home*." The unspoken joke here is that the long curly wig provided her with the highly desirable "exotic" beauty, that dissipated immediately upon revealing her short-kinked hair.

The term "exotic" and "foreign" are interchangeable words used by some members of Hip-Hop culture to denote women who are racially ambiguous, or at least their physical features; their hair texture and skin tones suggest that they are bi-racial. To be exotic or to be foreign, is to embody the "perfect" and desirable physical traits. Hence, when the young lady removed her wig, revealing her short and 4C textured natural hair, we the viewing audience is expected to understand that she has quite rightfully warranted the ire of the young man who can't possibly be attracted to her given the "shameful" revelation that she is not only a naturalista but one with "bad hair." This video and other videos with similar content depend on the existence of the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" hair that impacts the valuation placed upon the bodies of some Black women. Here colorism once again raises its head to fuel a dichotomy so deeply ingrained into

society's fabric that it materializes in the media content not only by mainstream media producers but those content created by some Black men and women as well.

Although some women in these groups seem to enjoy such videos demonstrating this by making use of the thumbs up or laughter reaction buttons, many the women display angry and emotional responses. When shared in KT, one member commented, *"here we go again another video hating on Black women."* Another stated, *"they clown us for wearing wigs and weaves, then when we don't wear it they clown us cause our hair don't look like wigs or weaves."* A third member questioned, *"will we ever be able to do whatever we want with our hair without somebody saying shit about it?"* In addition to these comments, there were numerous calls for the moderators to remove the video. One member stated, *"why the hell you posted this in here, no one needs to see that b.s,"* another member wrote, *"can we all agree to stop sharing [the name of the comic] videos, who hurt his a**, he must really hate Black women."* Calls for removal of this video did not go unnoticed by the administrators of KT, some days after I first saw the video go live, a post appeared in the group in which one of the administrators wrote,

We have deleted all the posts with the video by [name of content creator]. Sometimes there is a lapse in judgment when we approve content, and sometimes things slip by, and we do not catch it. [...] we are committed to keeping our group free from videos that shame or mock us. Thanks for bringing it to our attention, we will do better.

By declaring the video unwelcomed in their "safe space" and not in keeping with the group's focus on providing Black women with a location free of hate and ridicule, both the admin and members demonstrate that they recognized that there was a disconnect between the video's content and culture they are building in their group. Like the comedic videos, some digital media creators make use of memes to ridicule

naturalistas. A particularly nefarious version of these memes features a two-panel image. The first image features the picture of a Black woman with curly, long, and quite possibly 3A hair texture. Accompanying this picture is the words "*what girls hope to look like when they go natural.*" In the second panel, there is a picture of comedian Eddie Murphy with a low haircut, with an uncomfortable grin accompanied by the caption "*what they actually look like.*" The meme sends a clear message about what types of natural hair textures are desirable, but in doing so, it also calls up the long-standing trope that Black women lack feminine traits, and that their features are masculine. With hair being a marker of femininity, the meme suggests that Black women without long flowing hair are effectively male.

Notably, although the medium for these jokes is new, the running joke at the expense of Black women's hair is not new. Black male comedians have cross-dressed to mimic and make fun of Black women for decades. From Redd Foxx, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence to the new breed of social media comedians, the practice of dressing and mimicking Black women have always been an easily called upon arc that guarantees laughter from the audience. Patricia Hill Collins argues that this practice serves to reinforce the notion of Black women's bodies as grotesque and unfeminine. Furthermore, this comedic trend depends not only on racism and sexism to be successful, but it also valorizes colorism, because in seeking to create characters deemed ugly, loud, uncouth or angry, these men routinely don costumes that transform them into overweight, darker skin, and kinky haired Black women. By making these costume choices, these men not only contribute to the transformation of Black women into objects of revulsion and ridicule (Collins 2002,

p.125), but they reaffirm the notion that some Black feminized bodies are ever-available for criticism.

Many well-known comedic television shows and social media comedic videos, featuring a predominately Black cast, routinely feature Black women's hair as the object of ridicule. For example, one of the running jokes on the hit 1990s sitcom *Martin* featured the protagonist creatively insulting the kinky texture of one of the female stars. For five years, the writers create new and novel ways to elicit laughter at the expense of Pam's "nappy buckshots." This history provides the context needed for understanding why using their SMNHG to condemn these videos is significant. Through their objections and the use of angry emojis and reactions, these women demonstrate that they are unwilling to accept the continuity of the mockery of Black hair textures, mainly those hair textures that are shorter or more tightly coiled, in the name of providing comic relief. It is unlikely that their objection to this practice will silence this growing trend, after all, decades of opposition against similar mainstream images resulted in little change. Yet, the dedication of group administrators and some members to cast the videos out of their communities sends a resounding message that users of SMNHG are steadfast in their attempts to maintain communities that dismisses and condemns the lack of acceptance of all Black natural hair textures.

Black Natural Hair is Formal. In Chapters 2 and 3, I argued that the way Black women wear their hair could have socioeconomic implications. The notion that Black natural hair is unsophisticated and unrefined, and therefore naturalistas lack the level of attractiveness or refinement to succeed in a racialized patriarchal system, is the root cause of much of the micro and macro aggressions naturalistas face. Demands are thus placed

on naturalistas to assimilate to acceptable standards or risk ostracism or other forms of social ridicule. These demands are not often declared out loud, but they subtly have been interwoven into popular television, movies and commercial scripts, and music lyrics. As naturalistas and none-naturalistas alike consume media, they undergo a constant bombardment of messages that not only heralds straight, blonde, long hair as the beauty standard, but they simultaneously declare to naturalistas that they own deviant bodies.

The consistent consumption of these problematic ideologies impacts the hair presentation practices of some Black women who find themselves policing their own and other Black women's hair. In these groups, one of the ways these naturalistas demonstrate that they participate in body surveillance practices can be observed when they create posts that attempt to survey the group for advice on how to style their hair for an upcoming formal event such as a wedding or a prom. Found within these posts are expressions of anxiety about whether their natural hair textures are not aesthetically pleasing enough to grace a formal event. This hyper-awareness that these Black women place on their hair (Chapman, 2007) is not evidence of their conceitedness. Instead, it relates to the concern that naturalistas may have about the acceptability of their hair in a society heavy with a culture that has attached social stigmas against Black natural textures. Stigmas that have grown to suggest that natural hair textures do not belong in formal settings and women who choose to wear these textures do so at the risk of diminishing their sexual appeal.

The pervasiveness of these ideologies is evident in the fact that even in these SMNHG, where one may expect to find naturalistas who unabashedly celebrate Black natural hair as a norm, you will occasionally find members seeking out confirmation that

their natural hairstyles are "cute enough," "sexy enough" or "neat enough" to wear to a formal affair. Even some women who are comfortable with their natural hair in everyday situations may still find themselves struggling with the notion that sleeker, straight hairstyles better align with the social conventions that delineate the boundaries of high versus low fashion. One should not condemn these women for displaying uncertainty and trepidation because they have the burden of striking a healthy balance between the ideologies, they encounter in two different dimensions. The first being a digital dimension: their SMNHG, in which there is a reinforcement of self-love. While the second is the broader physical world in which their un sleeked hair is consistently framed as unpolished. It is worth noting, though, that on the occasions when members did seek out validation from their communities, I witness a dedicated effort by many of the members to unwaveringly contest the "Black natural hair is informal" misnomer.

The following example, which occurred in CCL, provides a sample of one such occasion. One morning accompanying a selfie was the following caption,

...going to be a bridesmaid in a friend's wedding a few months, we all met with the bride over the weekend to go over her plans. I'm so pissed, in front of everyone she told me and another girl who has dreads that we need to wear lace fronts [wigs] for the wedding because she thinks we will stick out and mess her pictures up [...] does my twist out look bad? I was planning to do a twist out and have my hairdresser give me a diva cut, but now I don't know if that will be good enough. Anyone wore their hair out for a wedding post a pic I need ideas? [...].

Within minutes the post gained more than sixty comments, and the number consistently grew throughout that evening. A large number of the members indulged her request for photographs: many shared images in which they showcased how they styled their hair while attending elegant events. When I revisited the post the day after it went live, I

noticed that the member had edited the caption of her post to include a thank you to the group for their replies. The updated caption included the following

thank you for all the compliments and the ideas. I think I will definitely wear my twist out to the wedding. I sent my friend some examples of how I might style it and told her to pick the styles she liked. She seems cool with it [...] thanks for all the help, ladies.

Although without the opportunity to interview this member, it appears that having had her natural hair rejected by her friend, and suffering from some level of self-doubt, she felt compelled to appeal to her fellow group members for support. The members demonstrated that the groups are places dedicated to supporting naturalistas by sharing images, offering styling tips, and sharing supportive comments. These responses appeared, at least in part, to contribute to boosting her confidence to the extent that she pushed back against her friend's demand for her to wear a wig. In addition to the photos, examining the members' responses to this post also provided an opportunity to observe how the members uphold Black natural hair as a celebrated standard. There were several types of comments; some focused on attempting to boost her ego: *"your hair is beautiful, it doesn't matter how you style it, you will look pretty.* "While other members focused their comments on criticizing her friend for disrespecting her hair texture, for example, *"girl, she ain't your friend, a friend won't shade your hair."* Another wrote, *"sis, you will stick out in the pictures tho, because your hair looks poppin, that why she wants you to cover it up with a wig."*

In offering up compliments and supportive words, these members showcase the supportive nature of the community. The most compelling comments, however, came from those members who directly addressed the prevailing ideology that Black natural hair is particularly ill-fitted to formal settings. One such comment read, *"dam, so she*

singled out the natural hair girls to embarrass, do better Black people.” This comment is much a critique of the friend, as it was a criticism of the internalization of the Black natural hair is in-formal ideology. In addition to those comments, some members used the practice of storytelling to reveal their position on the issue. These stories also addressed the problem with the internalization of anti-Black natural hair beliefs. One such story read, *“why do people think you must straighten for weddings, my mother in law was so mad I had braids for my wedding, she still talks about.”* While another member wrote,

my cousin kicked my daughter out of her wedding party because I told her I didn't want to risk messing her hair up by hot combing it. She wanted all the girls' hair to go up in a bun. Everyone kept telling me I was selfish for not agreeing to hot iron it because it is the bride's day. I really didn't want to ruin her day, but my baby's hair could go up in a bun without putting all that heat on it.

Reverberating from within these stories is evidence of a clear affront against the idea that naturalistas are required to alter their hair to make it presentable enough for special events. These examples and comments are some of many I witnessed that suggest that the members of SMNHG influenced by the sense of comradery and community within their groups appeal to each other for emotional and pragmatic help whenever they encounter dismissive critiques launched against their Black natural hair textures. By willingly aiding each other in moments like these, the members demonstrate a dedication to the furvert crusade of flagrantly pushing back against the ideologies that enable naturalistas to suffer under the thumb of restrictive beauty standard.

Dissenting Voices

The preceding section highlights seven categories of posts in which members of the groups exposit pro-Black natural hair statements and behaviors. It is in these statements and behaviors that the members demonstrate their ideological resistance

because this content signals that these members are redefining their own standards of beauty and rejected the dominant norms that have omitted them. In this section, I introduce two other ways in which the culture of resistance within these groups also materializes. In these examples, the members make use of these platforms to launch campaigns of dissent. First, the resisting dialectic emerges as a challenge to the beauty industry's business practices, and second, it appears when members make use of the community to participate in digital social justice discourse.

Challenging the Beauty Industry's Practices. In 2017, Shea Moisture, a Black-owned lauded haircare company, debuted a sixty-second digital commercial as part of its new #Breakthewalls campaign. The advertisement featuring mostly White models was a stark departure from the company's customary Black-centered branding, subsequently sparked outrage among their key Black, female demographic. Many women took social media to accuse the brand of abandoning their loyal consumers and instead adopting the whitewashed approach to haircare, so typical of the diversity-devoid beauty supply industry. Before the launch of the #Breakthewalls campaign, Shea Moisture had long held a cult-like following amongst naturalistas. Started in Harlem New York in 1991, the brand was one of the earliest and most popular lines created for and marketed explicitly towards naturalistas. Because of the brand's longstanding existence as a Black natural hair nurturing tool, as the DBNHM grew, the brand's recognition also grew.

Shea Moisture's products were amongst the most frequently discussed products within the groups: heavily featured in countless hair tutorials and product reviews videos. But in the wake of the new campaign in which the company appeared to be transitioning from a Black consumer-centered focus brand towards a more inclusive, mainstream

lifestyle brand, members raised concern. Members of the SMNHG began using their platform to discuss whether the brand that had long created products specifically for their hair textures, in an era when mainstream brands were not doing so, was now abandoning them for greener or profitable pastures. In anger, many of the members of SMNHG employed the use of practices common to digital activism movements like #BlackLivesMatter, such as the use of hashtags, creation of videos, memes, and open letters, to rapidly diffuse their critique of the brand, and to call for a boycott. When a member shared one of the company's new ads featuring a multicultural array of hair models with only one visually identifiable Black model, the proverbial alarm went off in KT.

Members hurried to the comment section to call for an all-out boycott of the brand, with some accusing the brand of being disingenuous in their business strategies. For example, one member wrote, *"made all their money from us, but I guess now they forgot about us,"* while a next noted, *"these companies always do that, get Black people to support them, and when they blow up, they go mainstream."* A third wrote, *"dam did SM just dump us?"* What resonated from these comments is that some of the naturalistas expected loyalty from the company. Of course, the very idea that consumers would expect loyalty from a company is laughable. Yet, given the fact that Shea Moisture's rise into mainstream prominence occurred due to the brand loyalty naturalistas have consistently shown, it is not as farfetched a notion that these core consumers would expect the company to remain committed to them. Therefore, upon witnessing the absence of Black women in the company's new advertisement, there was a feeling of resentment mounting amongst many naturalistas that the brand's latest campaign was

rendering them invisible. This type of invisibility they have known far too well given the beauty supply industry's long refusal to feature natural hair textures in their branding campaigns, and their failure to produce product lines tailored for Black natural hair textures.

The angst expressed by naturalistas against Shea Moisture's rebranding attempts was not an opposition against the brand's efforts to reposition itself in the beauty marketplace. It was an apprehension that the progress was coming at the expense of the brand's former position as a champion for Black natural hair textures. To demonstrate their anger, many used the SMNHG to make calls for boycotting the brand. In calling for boycotts, many the members encouraged each other as one stated to "*spend your money where you are appreciated, ladies*." Another advised "*don't spend another cent until they apologize*." These statements are a clear signal that some members, aware of the power they hold as consumers, were attempting to organize other members to weaponize their one actual influential standpoint as consumers: their purchasing power. Another clear indication of their recognition of these powers is made visible in the many posts in which members shared alternative brand lists. In these lists, members suggest to the community to purchase competitive brands to serve as Shea Moisture's replacement. Members would frequently describe products as "better than Shea Moisture," "a dupe for Shea moisture's conditioner," or "just as good as the SM leave-in conditioner."

Despite mounting a quick response to the backlash, which included the removal of the ad from their website and YouTube station, and the releasing of an official statement reaffirming its commitment to serving Black women, there has been permanent damage to the brand's image within sectors of these communities. Although the financial

impact of the backlash is not publicly known, noticeably, the tide of viral marketing buzz within the SMNHG that allowed for Shea Moisture's heighten brand recognition has since abated. Alternative brands have risen in prominence in these communities, as product reviewers began declaring these products as the new "holy grails" and products naturalistas "must try." Shea Moisture's ill-fated campaign could not have occurred in a less opportune time, because as the brand began to lose its foothold within the natural hair community, new mainstream brands like Herbal Essences, Pantene and Garnier began moving in touting their cheaper, widely available, extended "for Black natural hair" lines at naturalistas. The backlash from the campaign then made it easier for Shea Moisture to lose market share in the Black haircare sector. This Shea Moisture example is merely one of several similar occurrences in which the members of SMNHG have demonstrated the powerful impact their collective viral action can render on the market.

Another example of the SMNHG members making use of their platforms to "call out" corporations came at the expense of Walmart. The controversy began when a social media user recorded herself in her local Walmart, attempting to purchase a "made for Black hair textures" shampoo. The video captured the moment as the user walks up to a locked cage in which many products explicitly marketed for Black beauty care sat encased. The young woman recording the video complains that Walmart was discriminating against Black women because by locking away the products targeted to them, they were insinuating that Black women were thieves. As the video ends, the user also panned her camera to show other mainstream hair care products sitting freely accessible on their shelves. The footage quickly went viral, sparking other social media

users to record similar scenes at their neighborhood Walmart. Many of these videos also became viral in the SMNHG.

The Walmart videos grew in popularity in the groups when news articles began to circulate detailing a lawsuit brought against Walmart by a Long Island New York customer. The consumer, represented by well-known attorney Gloria Allred, complained that Walmart's practice of locking Black beauty and hair products was discriminatory. When the original video made its way to the KT, one member commented "*so I guess Walmart thinks we are all a bunch of thieves?*", and another noted, "*products well over \$100 are all over that dam store, but I guess Walmart think we will risk going to jail for some \$3 f* gel.*" In its response to the lawsuit, Walmart attempted to argue that the practice was not racially discriminatory, but it was a measure undertaken as a matter of security. Through its spokeswoman LeMia Jenkins, Walmart claimed that they encased these products because they are likely to be stolen. She also noted that we are sensitive to this situation but, like other retailers, that some products such as electronics, automotive, cosmetics, and other personal care products are subject to additional security (Griffith, 2019).

Though the company attempted to justify their decision, the responses by some of the members of SMNHG suggest that they felt that Walmart was upholding the tradition of hyper-surveillance of Black bodies. By locking away these products made specifically for Black hair care, the corporation seems to render suspicion on these women by labeling them as inherently criminal. Walmart's financial dominance may certainly ensure that despite these complaints, this practice may not change. Though this may be so, like Shea Moisture, the brand earned affronts to their brand goodwill among many of the

members of SMNHG who may feel that these companies have disregarded them and fail to respect them as people. In Chapter 7, I further explore the relationship between the movement and the beauty industry, but what is most important to note here is that calls for boycotts in these communities allow these women to flex their buying power. By making use of their communities to criticize brands, these women benefit from the power digital media platforms afford consumers.

For members of SMNHG, using these platforms to amplify their consumer-based concerns is apropos, given the fact that the culture within their communities already consists of a spirit of hegemonic deviance and a willingness to contest the status quo. The two examples presented here highlights how these women make use of these groups to launch calls for a boycott against corporations thought to have disparage naturalistas. Furthermore, these examples highlight that these members are capitalizing on the Internet's ability to provide consumers with an amplified position from which to reject what they see as dismissive corporate marketing and operating practices.

A Hub for Hashtag Activism. Within the first few days within these communities, it was evident that these spaces do not only consist of conversations focused on hair. While the large percentage of the content and digital discourse found in these communities revolve around the promotion of positive ideas about Black natural hair, the members also produce non-hair related content as well. Some of that non-hair relevant content focuses on pop culture discourse, shopping, sports, and cooking. This non-hair content is, however, not random, the presence of a shared cultural reference point, and a universal expectation of homogeneity informs the behaviors of the members and influences the topics each member chooses to introduce to the community. Therefore,

non-hair related content remains within the realm of topics that significantly speaks to the lives of Black women.

In addition to the previously mentioned content, a broad cross-section of non-hair related content focused on social justice topics. Regularly members share online newspaper and blog articles and video clips about cases of police brutality and racial profiling. Digital movements like #MeToo, #SayHerName, and #BlackLivesMatter find in the SMNHG welcoming spaces in which to reside, with members make use of these hashtags to join in the conversations surrounding rape culture, and the lack of mainstream media attention paid to Black women who are victims or survivors of sexual and violent crimes. Although these digital conversations appear to be exceedingly different from the natural hair digital text, I argue that their presence in these SMNHG is well suited because the messages reverberating from this social justice content resembles that which emerges from the hair focus content. The ideological beliefs embedded within both types of messages essentializes Black women's body politics. #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName and to a lesser extent #MeToo, are some of the more popular digital activism movements of the day that focuses on a pro-Black lives' agenda.

Although all three of these movements focus on different aspects of social justice work, a lingering thread weaves between them all, that is, they all situate Black bodies, at the center of their concern. Much in the way that I argue that the DBNHM has made possible spaces for Black women to contest discrimination against their hair textures, these movements reject structural, institutional, and personal forms of oppression levied against the physical bodies of Black men and women. When posts focused on social justice appear in these communities, they often evoke passionate, politically infused

responses (RQ2). One type of post that provoked such comments were #WhileBlack posts. #WhileBlack posts first gained momentum in 2018 in response to what appeared to be a seemingly never-ending number of viral videos in which white citizens followed and questioned Black men and women while accusing them of trespassing on public and communal spaces.

Examples of these videos shared in these communities include an April 2018, video in which two Black men awaiting the arrival of a business acquaintance at a Philadelphia Starbucks were arrested when the manager of the coffee shop called in police officers to have them removed for appearing "suspicious." Later that month, also in Philadelphia, a group of five Black women found themselves face to face with the cops when the owner of the golf course accused them of playing too slowly. Then in May of that year, a Black Yale university graduate student asleep in a dorm common area was questioned by a fellow student about her presence there. The officers would later force the young lady to prove her status as a student, although she had keys to her dorm room in her possession and a student ID in hand. In California that same month, police officers accosted two couples leaving an Airbnb after a neighbor called the cops reporting them as burglars. Although in each of these cases the Black men and women did not face any charges, these videos evoked emotive responses from SMNHG members who like many users of other digital spaces argued that these videos demonstrated that the fear that some attach to Black bodies places Black people at risk even when doing the seemingly mundane of activities.

The idea that Black bodies appear to be out of place in a coffee shop, on a golf course, in an upscale neighborhood or lounging in an Ivy League college campus, bears a

sickening resemblance to stop and frisk laws that depend upon marking Black bodies as the unwanted other to justify feelings of fear or concern. It is the same feeling of trepidation that brought about the senseless murder of Trayvon Martin. To cast attention on these forms of racism that brings about the constant policing of Black bodies in public spaces by citizens and police officers alike, members of the SMNHG joined with users across the internet by creating #WhileBlack posts. In these posts, they shared personal experiences of unjust surveillance while shopping, driving, or dining out. For example, a popular meme shared within the communities read, "list things you can't do while Black or Brown."

In response to the meme, members share personal stories of moments when, while participating in a mundane activity, they endured acts of prejudice or surveillance. For instance, on one occasion, when the meme appeared, some members wrote, *"you can't sit in your driveway at night #WhileBlack."* Another wrote, *"don't stand outside your car and search for your keys; it is suspicious #WhileBlack."* A similar post read, *"don't forget your umbrella and have to run in the rain with your hoodie up to your car when you leave a store, you will be tackled #WhileBlack."* Yet another noted, *"#WhileBlack never host a birthday party in your community pool even if you pay the freakin HOA fees."* What is compelling about the ironic cautionary #WhileBlack tales is that in many ways, members create these hashtags to provoke intra-group discussions about race and space. Therefore, #WhileBlack stories are most effective when used in digital spaces created by Black people to congregate. The SMNHG are such spaces in which members can comfortably participate in using this hashtag. In their response to #WhileBlack stories,

members frequently offer words of encouragement to each other. At other times, some members would advise the poster of any legal recourse they believe to be available.

In giving their responses, they routinely use social justice leaning language that positions the collective Black community "we" apart from the hoard of racist "them." For example, a comment read, *"I hope they know that we are not going to stand for this,"* and *"we need to push for a federal law against using the police to intimidate minorities."*

While using the #WhileBlack hashtag, the SMNHG members also include emojis such as a fist, images such as the Pan African flag, and members featuring the photos and quotations from prominent Civil Rights activists in their comments. Witnessing this type of content and discussions reiterates my argument that there is a spirit of resistance within these groups. Furthermore, observing the members participating in hashtag activism is a reminder that the DBNHM and its goal of celebrating Black natural hair do not occur in a vacuum. It is not separate from other contemporary movements focused on the lived experiences of Black men and women.

Even though there is a tendency of some to weigh the value of digital activism solely in terms of its relationship to real-world protests or other acts of physical resistance, the DBNHM, like these hashtag-based movements, are examples of how new technologies and especially the Internet and social media have transformed social justice participation and engagement. It would be impetuous to measure the impact of these movements purely in terms of the legal changes they inspire. It is imperative that in assessing the success of DBNHM as with other digitally-based movements, one must also consider the ideological, emotional, and psychological benefits it brings to participants. Thus, despite the tendency to discard digital activism as slacktivism, the DBNHM

propelled by the SMNHG provides these social media users with what Lim and Kann (2008) argue is a greater scope for freedom, autonomy, creativity, and collaboration than previous media (Lim and Kann 2008, 82). Therefore, the collaborative nature of social media platforms like SMNHG, have disrupted the traditional media production and consumption patterns, and in so doing, individuals no longer depend on centralized media producers to disperse information and content.

Instead, these women make use of their social media spaces to forge themselves into a community to discuss and inform each other's ideologies, and to create content informed by those beliefs that challenge social norms, ideas, and dogmas. It is in this way, the DBNHM resembles other popular digital movements, as they are all driven by the creation and sharing of ideologies and thoughts outside the mainstream media's information-sharing structure. Additionally, they primarily focus on confronting institutional and systemic subjugation of Black bodies. By introducing hashtags, terms, and imagery native to other social justice movements, the members of SMNHG demonstrate their close alliance with the other digitally-based movements and the counter-hegemonic norms embedded within them.

Conclusion

Digital media texts are the textual based, graphics/images, sounds, or visuals used to communicate information and ideas to audiences using Internet platforms. Therefore, the content created in these SMNHG, the conversations, the memes, the review videos, and hashtags are all media texts produced through the digital labor of members of these groups. Embedded within the texts are pro-Black ideologies that attempt to disturb the prevailing standards of beauty while declaring a profound pro-Black body politics

message. Not only are these SMNHG alternative media producing locales (RQ3), but these groups also resemble some of the other Black dominated digital spaces being used by activists today (RQ2). The pro-Black lexicon, phrases, symbols, and terms the members use when discussing their hair and the hair of other Black women, harkens back to the language found in spaces like Twitter where digital activists engage in challenging social inequality. Although I do not define the DBNHM as a social justice movement in the same ways that #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo are, the language found in SMNHG signals that these communities also operate as one type of counter-hegemonic digital havens that Black people [women] are forging for themselves across the Internet.

The resounding ideological messages emanating from these communities are those that proclaim that naturalistas find joy and pleasure in their hair. Even in the moments when they require reconfirmation from each other having encountered micro and macroaggressions, there is a clear sense that these women use these communities to communicate their self-love and to define a less hegemonic beauty standard. Beauty is, of course, a contested term, there exist multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions of beauty existing in a given time or space. Yet, even as these various standards circulate, it is the hegemonic definitions that remain dominant because social institutions and those with sociocultural, political, and economic power uphold and normalize them. Challenging the dominant culture's refusal to extend its beauty limits to include all Black natural hair textures, is thus not a pursuit of vanity. Instead, because beauty operates as a vital resource in western societies, these women understand the importance of maximizing their available beauty capital, if they are to compete across socioeconomic markets successfully.

Therefore, as these women draw upon their shared experiences as naturalistas and their knowledge of in-group lexicons, cultural and behavioral norms to craft their communities, one reading of their casual use of their social media sites is to place it in the realm of Scott's (1989) everyday resistance. A resistance marked by the self-celebration seen as they share hair journey pictures, declare their self-love, flatter each other, discuss the hair of celebrity hair icons, admonish anti-natural hair ridicule, and declare that Black natural hair is sexy and formal. Although these groups are not physical locations, such as the churches, women's clubs, and other locales Black women assemble, the users of these SMNHG mirrors many of the behavioral norms typical to Black women's traditional safe spaces of resistance. For example, as they make use of the hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic and #Hairgoals to affirm each other's hair, they frame natural hair as the desirable standard within their communities.

By using these hashtags, these women are not only rejecting dominant notions of beauty, but they are redefining beauty norms on their terms, and, by so doing, they can serve as spaces of intervention and healing, traditionally found in Black women safe places. In describing traditional Black women's safe spaces, African American literary scholar Sondra O'Neale writes,

These spaces are not only safe—they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other. In these spaces Black women "observe the feminine images of the 'larger' culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community (1986, 139).

Hence, the pro-Black language used in the caption of selfies and journey posts, *Angel's* beauty of week competition, calls to solicit affirmation from each other, are not insignificant elements and actions. They are all examples of how these women make use

of these groups to engage in the radical act of loving their hair and affirm each other's beauty, in overtly resistant and anti-hegemonic, ideologically redefining manner. As a proponent of the use of alternative media production as a tool for resistance, I surmise that these SMNHG have become one of the critical counter-hierarchical digital avenues etched out by Black women to participate in disseminating content that addresses all aspects of the politics of their lived experiences as Black women.

These examples of the types of posts and replies that populate these social media profiles demonstrate that some of the language generated within these spaces stand diametrically opposite to the negative mainstream messages that often attempt to diminish the social and aesthetic capital attached to Black natural hair. Using these words, phrases, and hashtags, is of itself a radical act for Black women, given the historical and contemporary factors presented in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the production of this digital text content by these women, signals that these SMNHG are locales in which Black women can engage in digital media production and drive media text narratives, that foci an explicit celebration of Black hair (RQ1). Using their shared experiences as naturalistas, in-group lexicons, cultural, and behavioral norms, they have crafted safe communities. Locations in which they can share hair journey pictures, declare their self-love, flatter each other, discuss the hair of celebrity hair icons, admonish anti-natural hair ridicule, and say that Black natural hair is sexy and formal. Undertaking these actions allows these actors to engage in the resistance act of "claiming beauty."

Claims of beauty have also been central to anti-racist resistance, according to Craig (2006). For instance, Marcus Garvey Afrocentric movement in the early 20th

century include calls by the Black nationalists for Black women to train their attention on each other to define their standard of beauty by putting aside the standards set by the White scarlets of the day and replacing those icons by elevating, your own women to that place of honor' (Garvey, 1968, p.29).

For Garvey, tied together are beauty and racial pride, because both play critical roles in the psychological shifts needed for Black men and women to embrace their bodies, after centuries of feeding upon damaging messages. Claiming one's Black body as beautiful, is, therefore, an assault on racialized oppression. As members draw upon Black oral traditions to discuss beauty, hair, and race in these SMNHG, they are not only reestablishing a beauty aesthetic that places Black hair as the standard, but they are resisting against racialized aggression and hegemonic othering.

In creating these communities, these women uphold the tradition of forging S.C by drawing on their shared identities and experiences to participate in pro-Black natural hair and pro-Black liberation discourse. Their online interactions give rise to digital media text (their discussions, their memes, videos, and symbols) embedded messages that offer a strong declaration of self-love and challenges against the beauty status quo. Additionally, echoed in their offering of praise to each other is a liberation dogma that drives towards a paradigm shift that upends dominant ideologies about Black women's bodies. Although these spaces are virtual and they comprise of women who at first share weak ties, the findings presented in this chapter highlight an example of how technological tools are providing for a reconceptualization of the notion of proximity, closeness, community, and ideological resistance. These new conceptions allow for

actors to forge communities and engage in digital forms of resistant practices while positioned in geographically displaced locations.

CHAPTER VII

Resistance Interrupted: The Beauty Supply Industry's Impact on the Digital Black Natural Hair Movement.

Key terms: Sister Circles (S.C), Social media natural hair groups (SMNHG) and Digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM)

Black women are writing themselves into being across the Internet's landscape. In recent times, these social media natural hair groups (SMNHG), have become some of the most popular locations in which they digitally congregate and exchange media content. Strangers, fusing themselves into collectives, forged by the shared experiences of daring to embrace their kinks, coils, and curls. Through the creation of images, videos, and the sharing of symbols and emojis, these women engage in digital labor practices I argued should best defined as a form of everyday ideological resistance. To support this argument, in Chapter 3, I first identified how everyday resistance serves as a tool undertaken by the marginalized to challenge hegemony. Then, I argued that everyday resistance practices occur within the Sister Circles structures that Black women have historically established.

Within these fictive kinship structures, these women collectively engage in exerting counterhegemonic, transformative, emotional, and physical labor. Having situated the critical importance of Sister Circles to the liberation praxis of Black women, I dedicated Chapter 5 to arguing that in building their SMNHG members have drawn upon the S.C. blueprints to erect a virtual replica of such communities. The findings presented in Chapter 5 suggest that the normative behavioral culture found within these groups are conducive to collective healing, corporate validation, strategizing, and the production and celebration of counter-hegemonic discourse and text. Therefore, I ended

that chapter by arguing that SMNHG mirrors the tenets of these S.C., and by doing so, within these SMNHG is the environment necessary to empower members to engage in ideological resistance through the production of counter-hegemonic media messages.

In Chapter 6, I proceeded to identify critical examples of the types of counter-hegemonic messages and behaviors observed in these communities, and discussed by the interviewees. The finding emerging from that chapter suggests that through their discussions, production of images, videos, and symbolic messages and their willingness to engage in offline and online group affirming behaviors, these groups replicate the enduring latent trace of the culture of resistance. One of the ways the SMNHG members operate as S.C. and a site for resistance is by producing content that counters negative mainstream notions about Black natural hair. Emanating from these communities is a rich self-love culture that allows the DBNHM to exist as an anti-hegemonic movement. The pro-Black natural hair digital content created and shared in the SMNHG provides an oppositional narrative to the traditionally found in mainstream media platforms. The beauty industry continues to be one of the premier contributors to these restrictive hegemonic media messages.

The messages found in the industry's marketing campaigns often renders Black natural hair textures invisible or hyper-visible. The invisibility occurs when these brands continuously fail to include Black natural hair models in their television commercials and magazine ad campaigns for their mainstream products. Inversely, when these ad campaigns focus on products created explicitly for "Black natural hair textures," there messaging renders the textures hyper-visible through a process of framing them as distinctively different, labor-intensive to care for, and inherently lacking. In the wake of

shifting hair presentation norms amongst some Black women, many of beauty corporations launched these specialized product lines, aimed at retaining the brand loyalty of naturalistas. While much of the wording included in these aggressive advertisement campaigns explicitly praise the beauty of Black natural hair textures, at times, the messages often also seem to suggest that these textures are unrelentingly dry, coarse, unmanageable, and inherently in need of specialized care.

Given the beauty industry's power in shaping how many members of society read and understand Black natural hair textures, it would be foolhardy to ignore the interconnected relationship that exists between the digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM) and the beauty supply industry.

For Black Natural Hair Textures Product Lines

Examining the relationship between the beauty industry and the DBNHM is critical to presenting a holistic analysis of SMNHG. Given the industry's significant role in shaping the beauty norms, the movement is actively seeking to expand if not dismantle; it is not shocking that as the movement grew, it significantly negatively impacted the industry's profit margins. Ever vigilant, as sales diminished in the chemical relaxers segment of the market, beauty executives quickly struck back by investing money into creating extensive "for Black natural hair" product lines. This new found fervent attention towards providing tools for caring for Black natural hair textures is notable given the industry's history of rendering these hair textures invisible. In 2017, Toya Mitchell, a multicultural analyst at Mintel Group Ltd, highlighted the impact of the movement on the beauty industry.

She stated in the company's annual report that,

The Black haircare market is in transition, as soft sales growth is wedged between two very different consumer trends. One, a booming natural and regimen-focused product segment vs. the precipitous sales free-fall of relaxers, which were formerly anchor products for several heritage brands. Black consumers prefer, and expect; hair care products made for their texture, haircare issues, and styling choices. As a result, Black-targeted and mainstream haircare companies are vying for consideration, and purchase among Black consumers with tailored products with the promise of expected efficacy (Mintel Group Limited, 2017).

Mitchell's statement confirms several essential factors. It proves that there has been a shift in the Black haircare segment brought about by a decline in the use of chemical relaxer, and in its wake, companies who previously focused on marketing to Black consumers tools, for altering their textures, were now plying products said to aid in naturalistas choices to embrace their curls, kinks, and coils. These companies have seen the necessity for changing their marketing and strategizing practices to ensure they continue to be viable within the shifting Black hair care niche.

Creating products specifically for Black hair textures, was the risk industry executives took, to attempt to maintain their market share by ensuring their consumers do not abandon their brand loyalty. In marketing these products to naturalistas, these corporations inform their messages with the pro-self-love ideologies inherent to the DBNHM. For instance, many of the brands would include terms like "crown," "magic," "freedom," and "queen" to reference Black hair and naturalistas. Additionally, when Procter & Gamble launched the Pantene Gold Series product line, the company made use of the Black cultural tradition of spoken word in their ad campaign as a means of celebrating Black natural hair within an art form that is recognizable by their target market. What is worth noting about the marketing campaigns for these products, however, is that even as they attempt to locate themselves within Black cultural traditions and mimicking the "Black is beautiful" message of the DBNHM, these

companies' chief call to action is to remind the naturalistas, that they must still engage in beauty work.

That is, the message to these naturalistas seems to suggest that, although they reject the limitation of dominant beauty standards, they must remain dependent on hair care products to do the work needed to be beautiful. These messages sent to naturalistas are in keeping with those sent to all women; that true beauty lies at the bottom of the bottle of a cosmetic and hair care product. These images and messages reinforce the dependency on beauty aids, ensuring that even in their resistance to dominant beauty norms, naturalistas remain active beauty laborers and participants in the constant consumption practices that have served to allow the beauty industry to be worth billions. It is then not surprising that the growth in the number of SMNHG and the messages of self-love, emerging from within them has garnered the attention of corporate executives who may be wary that the movement may impact their sales.

As early as 2013, reports by the Mintel Group Ltd began focusing on the Black natural hair movement and shrinking the chemical relaxer segment. Quoting the report from Mintel, several mainstream media outlets began framing the movement through the economic lens, noting that it was on pace to have a substantial, strong industry influence. History has shown us, however, that the market is ever resilient, counter-hegemonic movements existing within its grasp must contend with attempts to commodify them at every given turn. Throughout this chapter, I begin considering what has occurred amid the collision between the DBNHM and the beauty industry. I suggest that in the aftermath of the crash, the once-fringe movement has transitioned into a more recognizable one. In

its transition, beauty industry executives have successfully gained a foothold in shaping the movement in ways that have undercut its culture of resistance.

There are two main ways that the beauty industry has impacted the culture of resistance, the first being that as these corporations launch their "for Black natural hair" product lines, these companies encourage a bulk buying culture. They achieve this by launching hair care systems that consist of upwards of six or seven individual products. They justify these elaborate systems by suggesting that the complexity of Black natural hair textures requires several steps to successfully tame, control, and provide moisture to these unendingly dried out textures. Although these new advertisements are different in tone to the commercials I had witnessed throughout my childhood, that suggested to me that chemical relaxers were my gateway to beauty, buried within the messaging for these "made for Black natural hair texture," product lines, are some of the same motifs that long problematized Black natural textures as something in need of fixing. These messages encourage naturalistas to continuously invest in products set at a noticeably higher price point than other mainstream brands.

Furthermore, in casting hair models for their commercials, these companies are often demonstrating a level of preference for those natural hair textures that are longer, less tightly coiled, looser, and curlier (For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, Shea Moisture's campaign misstep). By informing their casting decisions with the same colorism ideologies that have historically othered some Black natural hair textures, these companies continue a legacy, ranking Black women's bodies according to a racialized dominant standard of beauty. Although these companies willingly celebrate alongside naturalistas as they dethrone hegemonic beauty standards, they subtly erect new ones by

elevating some natural hair textures as the prototype "acceptable" standard. These casting practices also feed the bulk buying culture by indirectly suggesting to naturalistas that they should continuously purchase products in their continuous search for the "holy grail" products. That is, not the products that will allow their hair to be its healthiest version. Instead, these ads encourage naturalistas to set out on a quest for the products that can transform their natural hair into the "acceptable," and highly colorism influenced version of what the industry has now established as the new standard for naturalistas.

In this way, the beauty industry's interest in the movement is counterproductive to the pro-Black natural hair ideologies and self-love narratives found within SMNHG. The second way in which the beauty industry's growing interest in the DBNHM impacts the resistance nature of the movement is by employing product influencers to infiltrate these communities. These influencers, most often recognizable faces in the movement, hired by beauty corporations, create and share product review videos. I suggest that this practice disturbs the spirit of solidarity found in these groups because these influencers do not always reveal the relationships they share with these brands. This omission allows their reviews to appear as authentic and unbiased. There is, however, growing recognition of the relationship some influencers share with corporate sponsors. This recognition not only calls the authenticity of the reviews and the influencer into question, but it fractures the comradery that engenders in these spaces and creates cracks in the spirit of fictive sisterhood.

Fracturing the fictive sisterhood impedes the potential for resistance to occur because, as I noted in Chapter 5, comradery is a necessary catalyst needed to fuel the type of bonding behaviors essential for collective actions of defiance and resistance. In the

following sections, I further unpack these two arguments, but, before doing so, I first identify the DBNHM as a movement that transitioned from fringe to gaining mainstream recognition. Doing so is a necessary step in unpacking the commodification of the movement at the hands of the beauty industry.

From Fringed Movement to Mainstream Recognition

When, in 2013, the Mintel Group Ltd, released its beauty industry report, they sounded a metaphoric alarm. It announced to the mainstream media outlets and the blogosphere, a fact to which beauty supply corporation executives were already painfully aware. That is, that the trend among some Black women to abandon chemical relaxers for natural hairstyles was not only proving to be more than a fleeting moment; it was now significantly negatively impacting their corporate earnings. Four years later, in its 2017 report, the Mintel corporation would further solidify the contemporary Black natural hair movement's financial weightiness when the report noted that that the sales of chemical relaxers plummeted a noteworthy 36.6 percent between 2012-2017(Mintel Group Limited, 2017). This substantial downward shift was, for Toya Mitchell, a testament of the fact that among Black consumers, wearing their hair naturally was no longer an emerging trend, but rather a lifestyle and a way forward (Mintel Group Limited, 2017).

Notably, it is not merely the growing numbers of Black women returning to wearing their hair in its natural state or the rising popularity of SMNHG, in which these women discuss and engage around the sociopolitical and emotional underpinning of Black natural hair in their lives, that garnered the attention of the beauty supply executives. Instead, it is the movement's impact on the financial market that has earned it its mainstream notoriety. As the enormous spending power of these women shifted,

company executives invested in maintaining their market share in the \$2.56 billion Black haircare market, have had little choice but to take notice of the movement. The market responded to the decline of the chemical relaxer segment as it always does; it adjusted. The adjustment saw beauty supply executives finding new ways to recapture the brand loyalty of customers by creating new products that addressed naturalistas' shifting haircare practices. Furthermore, in promoting these products, these executives keenly aware of the socio-cultural implications of Black women returning to wearing their hair in its natural state, capitalized on the opportunity to create advertisement campaigns infused with the ideologies embedded within the DBNHM.

This fact is made evident by the branding and positioning strategies beauty executives have adopted, which attempt to frame their companies' extension of their product lines as not merely a business strategy to increase sales. Instead, they hope that their marketing campaigns impress upon consumers that the brand has an emotional investment in participating in naturalistas' desires to "embrace their natural selves," "be naturally beautiful," and to "free their curls." For example, Pantene Pro-V, a subsidiary of Procter & Gamble, launched the "Strong is Beautiful" campaign aimed to celebrate the heritage, diversity, and beauty of African American hair (Procter & Gamble, 2017). In a press release announcing the premiere of the campaign's first commercial, the press release quotes Jodi Allen, the Vice President of Hair Care for North America at Procter & Gamble who moved to position the brand as a committed partner by noting that,

A part of Pantene's commitment to better serve the unique hair needs of African American women, the brand created a premium collection of products – Pantene Gold Series – which delivers the strength hair needs to conquer any desired style (Procter & Gamble, 2017).

With this statement, the company presents itself not only as producers of the hair care tools that Black women need, but they also frame themselves as the overall supporters of Black women in general. Pantene Gold Series is the Brand's first hair care collection co-created with a team of African American Ph.D.'s, scientists, stylists, and dermatologists, specifically designed to deliver Pro-V Nutrient Blends to provide superior strength and moisture for women with relaxed, natural and transitioning hair (Procter & Gamble, 2017). Additionally, to strengthen its identity as an ally to the ever-growing natural hair movement, the press release proceeds to state, Finally, to further cement itself as a helpmate in naturalistas' strides to freeing their curls, the advertisement made use of the spoken word tradition and body reaffirming language that resembles much of the content I observed in the SMNHG. The commercial features Black women of all ages with a cross-section of hair textures dance across the screen, as a voice reads,

We are proudly born, with hair that grows strong as a storm and does not conform to a beauty norm that isn't our own. So many wrong things are said about how it grows from our head, but to think that beauty is only sleek or wavy is crazy. So, whether we chose to wear it relaxed or natural, every strand is testimony to our history, that makes us stronger and strong is beautiful (Pantene Pro-V, 2017)

As the emotional and thought-provoking ad ends, the image of three of the new products graces the screen. These products are; a bottle of leave-in dangler milk, a tube of hydrating butter cream, and a jar of curl defining cream. The ending of the commercial is a testament to the complicated and often contradictory messages the beauty industry sends to women. Here even after heralding the hair as being "strong as a storm" and non-restrain by external beauty norms (which they helped to establish), Pantene does not deviate from its capitalist-driven focus. While commodifying the celebratory messages of

the DBNHM, they carefully ensured that by the end of the ad, that self-love doctrine was safely reattachment to consumption. That is, the images of the products at the end of the commercial were semiotic reinforcements that suggested that despite this being a moment of liberation for Black natural textured hair, naturalistas must still engage in beauty work.

In this case, it is a reminder that naturalistas must actively participate in purchasing Pantene products to rid their hair of its coarse nature through detangling and curl activating tools, and they must continue making use of these products in their purists to bring moisture to their hair's dryness. Of course, for Pantene and all other brands, a successful commercial is one that posits a self-love message while impressing on consumers that they cannot on their own learn to love their curls, but by purchasing the right products, from a socially conscious brand, the journey to self-love is made less tedious. One of the strategies undertaken by these executives is to borrow heavily from symbols and the ideologically infused language used by followers of the movement. This commodification strategy is in keeping with the tradition of corporations leaning upon anthropomorphism to frame their companies as a partner and friend equally invested in social issues. The Coca Cola Company's infamous Hilltop commercial is one stand out example of this branding strategy.

By positioning their products in the hands of singers who vow to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony, Coca Cola sought out to reap the financial rewards of aligning itself to the 1970s spirit of social revolution, although without explicitly making any definitive political statement. In her study of Coca-Cola's globalization and cultural branding practices, Cultural Studies scholar, Laura Hymson, argues that the motive of the Coca Cola company was not merely to act as a conduit for global harmony. Instead, Coca

Cola used the notions of peace and the global community to highlight its position as a globally recognizable brand. Hymson (2011) writes,

Coca-Cola did not only market itself to the various nations and cultures captured in this imagery; more ambitiously, it created an explicitly "diverse" mass market of consumers traversing distinct cultures. [...] its global image depended on the national cultures [...]. Representations of far-reaching diversity, the very chorus of locals in the global sphere, constituted the central proof that Coca-Cola was global in its U.S. advertising and marketing campaigns (p.9).

Coca Cola is by far not the only company to attempt to capitalize on social movements, shifting social or political norms or counter-culture fashion trends. In 2017 Coca Cola's longtime rival Pepsi, attempted a similar feat, by creating a three-minute commercial in which socialite Kendall Jenner appears to defuse the tension between police officers and a group of protesters by handing an officer a can of Pepsi. The commercial consisted of no dialogue. Instead, the camera lens tells a story of protesters marching for an undefined cause, carrying signs with the words "peace," "love," and "join the conversation." Given the social climate in which the commercial emerged, it appears that Pepsi was attempting to create a connotation between its brand and the ideals of movements like Black Lives Matter and other political movements of the day. Although the commercial does not explicitly reference the Black Lives Matter movement, the imagery appeared to have drawn some inspiration from a viral image of a young Black woman named Iesha Evans, who silently and calmly but defiantly stood in the face of riot gear-clad Louisiana state troopers during a Black Lives Matter protest in Baton Rouge.

Evan's image of quiet strength quickly became a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Pepsi's commercial seems to draw heavily from it. However, in doing so, Pepsi safely stops short of valorizing any of the political concerns voiced by the movement's proponents. Instead, the commercial is ripe with ambiguity and conjures up

the spirit of the Black Lives Matter movement without attending to the messiness and political weight it brings. The ad quickly earned intense backlash across social media platforms as viewers accused the company of minimizing and oversimplifying the social justice issues of the day and the relationship Black men and women share with police departments. As a smiling Jenner, a White woman, calmly handing a can of soft drink to a White police officer, the protest transforms into a celebration, as protesters began to cheer and dance. The commercial felt disingenuous, given the intense and violent interactions between Black Lives Matter protesters in cities like Baltimore, Baton Rouge, and Ferguson.

What is most striking here is, like Coca Cola and Pepsi, the beauty supply corporations are creating marketing campaigns that borrow the rhythm of the movement while infusing capitalistic greed that corrupts the movement's rhyme. Beauty corporations are stripping away the political realities of the DBNHM to its barest form by merely parroting the key phrases and messages, but they do not account for the role they play in shaping the hegemonic beliefs that render the movement necessary. Even more concerning is that they financially capitalize on this process. Symbolism proves to be a handy tool for these haircare companies who create television and print ads that situate their products as firmly a part of the DBNHM. They accomplish this by referencing images and behavioral practices intimately related to African American culture and the Black hair culture as well.

Terms like "crown," "queen" frequently appear in these commercials as naturalistas, dressed in Afro-centric clothing or urban streetwear, engage in excessive laughter with other naturalistas, dance the latest dance craze, sit in the beauty salon or

engaging in other activities one may imagine the members of Black sisterly fictive kinship structures enjoying. These companies create these formulaic marketing images with the hope that consumers view their purchasing of the brand's products not merely as an act of consumption. Instead, they hope that consumers consciously or subconsciously make their purchasing choices based on the assumption that the brand is a partner in the movement towards enhancing the aesthetic capital dominant society places on Black natural hair. These companies capitalize by cloaking consumerism as an act of exercising freedom of choice, applauding consumers for bravely embracing their hair texture while simultaneously situating their products as necessary tools needed along the journey to embracing natural hair.

This strategy employs tropes of gender equality and female emancipation, which are proven tactics that carry the promise of economic growth for companies (Dimulescu 2015, p. 509). Although there are always exceptions to the rule, I believe, in most cases, the real value these corporate entities place on the DBNHM is not its impact on the lives of its followers. Instead, the value of the DBNHM lies in the spending power of its followers. Yet, these company executives are aware that to capitalize on this movement successfully, they must tailor their marketing strategies to appeal to the emotional connection these women share with their hair, while reminding them that science has proven that genetically, their hair requires copious amounts of products. Therefore, they must stay consistent consumers of the products needed to remain active beauty laborers if they are to repeat the rewards reserved for women with the type of beauty currency that is valued.

This non-altruistic marketing and business trends by beauty corporations is a reactionary reflex by an industry striving to recoup its losses and grow profits. As a testament to the market's ability to adjust to changes quickly, the beauty market has adapted to the new purchasing behaviors brought about by the natural hair movement. Mitchell's statement solidifies this argument. She writes,

The Black haircare market has adjusted to the new natural hair normal. Product innovation expanded retail distribution, and brand messaging recognize that the future of the Black haircare market is dependent on chemical-free consumers (Mintel Group Limited, 2017).

This statement suggests that it is highly likely that naturalistas, a historically underserved segment of the market, will continue to garner significant attention from corporations who are keenly aware that ignoring this community and its enormous spending power can spell disaster for any brand. Repeatedly, the respondent of this study signaled that they had recognized the growth in product lines marketed directly at naturalistas.

Many of these respondents happily welcomed the expansion. For example, *Brenda* argued that in comparison to her youth, there had been a significant increase in the number of products made specifically for natural hair. In describing the vast array of choices, *Brenda* quips, *you can get dizzy in the "ethnic" section of the grocery aisle* (*Brenda*, personal communication, March 4th, 2018). Similarly, *Gabby* stated that *everyone is selling natural products now, even Herbal Essences has a line for our hair* (*Gabby*, personal communication, April 20th, 2018). In both cases, these women validate *Toya Mitchell's* statement that, to capture the brand loyalty of Black consumers who prefer hair care products made for their hair textures, beauty supply companies are tailoring their products to effectively meet their haircare and styling needs (Mintel Group Limited, 2017). By prioritizing the needs of naturalistas, although undoubtedly for

materialistic reasons, the beauty supply industry has signaled that the mainstream has recognized the significance of the movement.

In so doing, the contemporary natural hair movement and its digital embodiment, the DBNHM shifts from existing as a movement known only within African diasporic spaces, to a movement recognized within dominant markets. Although there are benefits brought about by the movement's rise in popularity, for example, the expansion of the Black hair care segment, there should always be some trepidation about the movement's heightened profile, given some of the tragic historical examples of the industry's ability to obliterate the core of sub-culture movements. As the economic strength of the purveyors of the DBNHM thrusts SMNHG into the mainstream spotlight, there is a need to consider the possible fall out that may occur, as this once-fringed movement gains the attention of a capital-driven industry. After all, the beauty industry has been a critical upholder of hegemonic notions of beauty that has severely affected the lives of naturalistas. The likelihood that this industry will willingly deconstruct all tenets of hegemonic beauty norms is doubtful. Especially given the arguments by Michele Wallace that, even when restrictive beauty standards expand, as they tend to do overtime, they do not always stretch enough to include all Black women (1979, p.4).

As I explore the relationship between beauty corporations and the DBNHM, I am aware that this relationship would require a throughout and expansive exploration far beyond this chapter. The chapter does, however, serves as an initial theorizing space to begin questioning what occurs when a counter-hegemonic movement like DBNHM gains mainstream attention.

The Product Junkie Culture

The Mintel Group Limited's 2017 Black haircare report by the Mintel Group Ltd, a leading industry reporting organization since 1972, provides market forecasting, consumer behavior data, brand and company recognition reviews, and sales data to its clients. Companies then use this information to adjust old or adopt new business practices to align with current or projected trends. Thus, this information provides an insight into how the beauty supply market and beauty industry experts are reacting to and conceptualizing the changes in the Black haircare market. One of the studies conducted by the company and reported on in their 2017 report, was an online survey of haircare product users over the age of eighteen. The survey required the participants to indicate how many products they routinely use in their hair care regimen. The results of that study revealed that on average, Black women use more products (4.5 products) in their hair care regimen than White women (3.7 products) and Black men (2.5 products) (Mintel Group Limited, 2017).

The fact that Black women use more products in their hair care routines is not at all shocking, given the sales figures of the Black beauty supply segment and the presence of the "product junkie" culture within the Black natural hair movement. The terms product junkie or product hoarder, are often used by naturalistas to describe their bulk and excessive buying practices. This existing product junkie culture is one of the most tenable locations from which to observe how the beauty industry has successfully benefitted from the growth of this movement. It is critical to note that identifying as a product junkie is not a matter of shame. Many members of SMNHG refer to themselves as product junkies in a boastful manner. One type of post in which members use these terms are in posts I describe as the "product haul" posts. Product haul posts frequently

feature pictures of member's bathroom cupboards and drawers, which are stock full of hair care products. The accompanying captions often include playful confessions of being product junkies. At times these posts also serve as evidence of the couponing skills of a naturalista.

Therefore, these posts provide a platform not only for a member to show off her ability to save money but her skill in doing so while still treating herself to her favorite brand name items. There is thus a measure of pride that is connected to being a product junkie, as demonstrated by CCL user *Denise*.

Interviewer: Have you ever purchase a product you saw reviewed in your community”?

Denise: [laughter], of course, well ... I'm a product junkie.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Denise: My bathroom looks like Walgreens, I have like six barely used conditioners on my shelf right now, oh and I was testing out detanglers, so I have a few of those. I give them away when I don't like them, because before I finish one bottle, I already found something else, and I want to try.

Interviewer: Why do you think you do that?

Denise: I got some products that are my staple, they are in my go-to stash, but whenever I see someone in the group talking about some new product, first I look at their hair to see if it seems cute and healthy, then boom I'm online checking what store has it the cheapest. I like experimenting [...] my friends come to me about new products [laughter], because they know I probably tried it before [laughter].

Denise's product junkie identity affords her a level of social capital amongst her friends, which may also potentially be one possible reason why naturalistas participate in this excessive ritual.

Yet another explanation may be that given the beauty industry's use of problematic scientific language when describing Afro-textured hair, there exists a belief that Afro-textured hair is challenging to manage and inherently flawed. For example, some of the scientific research (e.g., Scott 1988; Draelos 1997 and Davis-Sivasothy 2011) focused on Afro-textured hair, have emphasized the fact that, because Afro-textured hair is curly, it retains less moisture content than hair textures of those in other racial categories. Although among members of the African diaspora, there are significant variations in hair textures, many researchers believe that generally, Afro-hair textures do not have naturally straight follicles. They suggest that the curvature of their follicles affects the amount of water and sebum, which is a lubricant that naturally secretes from the scalp, that can pass down the hair shaft and thus moisturize the hair strands. It is this curvature of the follicles that dermatologist Amy McMichael (2007, p.7) notes, places Black women at risk for hair breakage due to the dry nature of their hair.

Though this information may be scientifically sound, what is troubling is that beauty supply corporations use this information not merely to improve the quality of their products, but they exaggerate this information when marketing their products. Advertisement campaigns are thus full of language that seeks to capitalize on the hair insecurities of some Black women. For example, in the advertisements of haircare products explicitly marketed to Black women, the words "moisture," "nourishing," and "anti-breakage" sometimes appear in the place of terms like beautiful and healthy. Furthermore, these commercials promise these women that they can find the cure for their hair's innate failings by using their products. The framing of Black hair textures in these commercials seem to suggest that Black women are victims of losing at the genetic

lottery, therefore their chance for their hair to be beautiful lies in their ability to purchase an extensive array of creams, oils and serums set often at exorbitant price points.

These company executives, aware of the social pressures Black women face in the beauty market, and the impact of respectability politics on the body grooming practices of Black women (discussed in Chapter 2) are then able to further capitalize on this widespread scientific acceptance of the dryness of Black hair. This information pervades their marketing strategy for their latest moisture infused, six product hair care system. During the interview sessions, several respondents described their product intensive hair care routines, primarily when they introduced the topic of “wash-day” rituals into the discourse. These women describe their wash day routine, as not only lasting for several hours but including the use of six or more products throughout the process.

Toya Mitchell notes that companies are recognizing the profitability of creating extensive hair care systems. She writes,

While the total haircare market among Black consumers is flat, regimen-focused product lines are growing in relevance and, most importantly, sales, driving double-digit growth. As Black-consumer-targeted brands push a regimen-focused message to increase sales among new and loyal users, they may encroach upon mainstream brands (Mintel Group Limited, 2017).

Mitchell’s statement highlights that companies are banking on the fact that naturalistas, whether correctly or incorrectly, may have accepted that developing a multi-product-focused hair care regimen is a critical and in-escapable requirement to ensure their hair remains healthy, shiny and beautiful. Of course, while some naturalistas may purchase in bulk for many different reasons, it is not out of the realm of possibility that these companies can entice some of the bulk purchasing behavior by drawing on the notion that Black hair is inherently dry and thus requires extensive moisturizing products.

Furthermore, this tactic would be in keeping with a long history of the beauty industry problematizing women's bodies as a marketing tactic.

The beauty industry has consistently depended upon the upholding dominant culture's norms of teaching women to not only be insecure about their bodies, but to continually monitor themselves for signs of imperfection and to consistently engaged in physical improvement (Bordo 1995, p.57). Therefore, as the DBNHM rages on and with it the ideology that Black hair in its natural state is beautiful and professional, beauty supply corporations are quickly adapting to the new beauty norm among some Black women. Although they may have adjusted some of their marketing strategies to align with the shifting norms, such as including more naturalistas in their marketing campaigns, these corporations have not abandoned all hegemonic rules, after all they remain powerful gatekeepers of these rules.

They continue to uphold the importance of women engaging in beauty rituals as essential aspects of the performance of femininity. Despite that fact, the DBNHM is seeking to expand the definitions of beauty. These companies continue to create strategies that align with what Gender Studies scholar Meeta Jha (2015) argues is the beauty industry's practice of contribution to an entire range of inadequacies and beauty-related pathologies, that enact a new form of social control on women's lives (p.1). For example, in marketing their expanded product lines to naturalistas, many of the commercials or printed advertisements seem to disproportionately feature naturalistas with longer, less tightly coiled, looser, and curlier in texture. Often absent are hair textures that are coily, short with less defined curls. These casting choices are not entirely shocking, given Jha's indictment of the industry's practice of preying on insecurities.

Furthermore, these images are in keeping with, as argued through this dissertation, the tendency to present mediated images of Black women through a colorism infused lens. In making these decisions to make prominent only certain types of naturalistas, these companies delineate a hierarchy amongst naturalistas by effectively suggesting that some textures are more acceptable and more beautiful than others.

This hierarchy also fuels the bulk buying culture because by continuously rendering some textures invisible in their marketing materials, there is the establishment of the image of the ideal naturalista. The assentation of this limited ideal for Black natural hair textures may subconsciously influence naturalistas, as they engage in their relentless pursuit of the products that will render their hair "perfect." During my interview with one interviewee, there was a moment in which she briefly touches on this topic. In response to my opening question of "*tell me when did you go natural and what led to this decision,*" she noted that

when I was first thinking about the big chop, I almost didn't. But I did it anyway because I kept telling myself that my mom has a nice curly curly texture, so I hoped for the best. I was so scared my hair would not have a cute curl pattern. [...] as soon as my hair started growing back, I was nope no big juicy curls for me. I blame my dad [laugh]. I won't lie I was disappointed, so I textualized my hair a few times. I loved the texture it gave me, but it wrecked my hair, and I had to chop it all over again. Then I began trying different curl creams and puddings. I like the curl pudding from [name of brand]. It helps define my curls more. [...] I go through a whole jar in a week, and that shit was like \$16.

In this interaction, the interviewee expressed a fear, not at all uncommon amongst some naturalistas who recently did the big chop. The fear that their curl pattern would not be one of the "cute curl patterns." Although she never describes what a cute pattern looks like, her choice to use a texturizer⁹ suggest that she had a desire for a hair texture closely

⁹ A texturizer is a gentler form of a chemical relaxer. Texturizers loosen one's curl pattern without rendering it bone straight.

resembling her mother's, which has a more defined curl pattern. Her quest for the "big juicy curls" so closely associated with the acceptable naturalista image upheld by beauty supply companies, spurred her decision to experiment with several products as she sought tools to allow her to mimic the texture she desired. There is also a class element to this product junkie process. Members of these communities frequently discuss the high price point of "made for Black natural hair textures" products. For example, when one member in Kinky Twists (KT) inquires from the group their opinion on a newly launched moisturizing line of products by a mainstream brand, the post was met not only by reviews but by repeated complaints that the products are incredibly overpriced.

In one comment, a member noted, *"my sister loves it, I can't afford it though. It is like \$24 for the conditioner alone. I can buy both a shampoo and conditioner for that price."* Another commented, *"I am a broke natural, I keep saying I will try but dam near \$50 for two products shit, I can't."* These complaints and the complaints by other SMNHG members are by far not the only voices complaining about the high cost of these specialized product lines. Across the blogosphere, bloggers write posts inquiring into why natural hair products seemingly outprice other mainstream products. For instance, the title of a November 2019 article on Essence.com read Does It Cost More To Have Natural Hair? After surveyed several haircare experts and naturalista influencers, the article's author concluded that naturalistas have widely accepted that it is an expensive undertaking to be a naturalista. One respondent noted, "the good quality products are well over \$12 on the low end. And if it's something that I really would want or could benefit my hair routine, it's like \$20 or \$40" (Evans, 2019). Repeatedly many companies depend on scientific facts to justify their price point, often suggesting that unlike the sulfates and

chemicals found in traditional brands, natural hair brands cost more due to the use of organic ingredients and essential oils.

These pricing strategies, however, seem to rehearse the repetitive narrative that Black textures hair requires an expensive, intensive, and specialized multi-product regime. Moreover, those without the disposable income to participate in the necessary continuous consumption process by purchasing the complex systems are thus invariably losing in the zero-sum beauty game. These messages I would argue, stand counter to the "embrace your beautiful natural hair texture" message that pervades the SMNHG I explored. Additionally, another strategy employed by the companies to promote the product junkie culture is to engage in continuously expanding their product lines. By frequently touting new and enhanced formulas and bosting that they have discovered yet another about scientific moisturizing breakthrough, these companies activate sales by suggesting that a discriminate naturalista must rush out to try it to believe it. By using these types of strategies to drive profit margins, these companies bolster the product junkie culture by aggrandizing the notion that Black hair care is not a simple undertaking, but it is extensive and, justifiably expensive.

Although the beauty industry alone did not establish dominant beauty standards, throughout their marketing choices, they uphold them. This fact echoes in the works of feminist scholars like Naomi Wolf (2008), Sandra Bartky (1990), Susan Bordo (1995), and Peg Brand (2000) who created a substantial body of work that identifies the intimate relationship shared between body politics, notions of beauty and capitalism. Bordo (1995), for example, suggests that the body is not only an individual material asset but also a site of cultural and political struggles. Women's bodies, she notes, are a

battleground fought over, not only by religious ideologies and national and political institutions, but also by media, beauty, and health corporations. These corporate entities play an important part in attempting to socialize and discipline female bodies by molding them as subjects within capitalists' societies (p.16). Corporations accomplish this by informing their production and marketing practices with ideologies about the value of bodies and by positioning their products as the tools for improvement, which emboldens the practices of consumption as a means of obtaining social normative standards of beauty, attractiveness and femininity.

Jha (2015) further expands on how beauty corporations sell the notion that through consumption, women can gain access to femininity. Femininity, or rather the confirmation that one's femininity meets hegemonic standards, is a necessary step that women must attain if they are to gain status, validation, and identity (p.2). Similarly, philosopher and gender scholar Venera Dimulescu (2015) notes that contemporary representations of female beauty within western societies are by-products of multiple economic, political, and cultural factors. Under the emerging forces of consumerism, female beauty has become an industry and has penetrated all economic areas (p.507). For Dimulescu (2015), corporations inform their marketing practices by transforming Michelle Lazar's "the right to be beautiful" (Lazar in Gill and Scharff 2011, p. 39) as a means of presenting beauty as something equally available to all, and by placing the onus upon women to purchase the right aids and do the necessary labor to achieve beauty and style in a contemporary western society construct, within the consumerist hegemonic discourse (p.508).

Given that these are the longstanding practices by the beauty industry, and the Black natural hair's history in the United States, it is little wonder that as these companies seek to affirm their place in the digital Black natural hair movement (DBNHM), their marketing strategies continue to reflect the insecurity driving dogma that has for so long driven the billion-dollar industry. While it is notable that many of the advertisement copy on printed advertisements or the language used in the television commercials for products positioned as created explicitly for Afro-textured hair, appear to celebrate the notion that Black women are freeing themselves of the straight hair ideal. This seeming liberating advertisements simultaneously do the work of redefining the process towards that freedom. These campaigns are not a celebration of the unadulterated beauty of Black natural hair, but instead, they are a reminder to naturalistas, that beauty is a process that entails consumption and labor. Therefore, despite the DBNHM attempts to destabilize the existence of a limited standard of beauty, by allowing members of SMNHG to uphold Black natural hair textures as desirable and beautiful, the affective turn brought about by the beauty industry's interest in wooing the women of the movement is in direct opposition to the self-loving ideology that grounds the movement.

Admittedly, this argument does not suggest that these products are not necessary tools for hair care, or that it is surprising that it is profits that drive these corporations. I do believe there is a need for beauty products, and the industry's recent focus on naturalistas after decades of invisibility, is in many ways, a cause for celebration. Yet, I suggest that naturalistas should be wary of the beauty industry's seeking to frame itself as a partner in achieving the goals of DBNHM, removing the stigma around Black natural hair textures. After all, as corporations, their main goal is to earn profits, and this

economically driven focus has led to a commodification of the movement. Therefore, even as the movement attempts to strip away at the dominant hair standards, these corporations are contributing to erecting new beauty standards. These new standards, although more inclusive than their predecessors, are still fraught with hierarchal ordering. This ordering continues to replicate the anti-DBNHM narratives that Black natural hair, in its rawest form, is inadequate and that some textures are unquestionably more desirable and acceptable.

The Rise and Impact of Hair Product Influencers

In the first chapter, the definition of a naturalista read; a Black woman who not only wears her hair in its natural/non-chemically treated state but someone who follows a set regiment of hair care practices. These hair care practices include not only the directives for the best methods for cleaning and styling Black natural hair but also the best products and brands that will aid in achieving beautiful and healthy hair.

Determining which products to include in one's regiment is often a process of trial and error, where a naturalista may depend on her intuition and on the reviews of others to determine which products to purchase. Product reviews are thus critical information tools for naturalistas. Different types of reviews appear in these groups. Some reviews consist of members posting a picture of a product and captioning their views. Another variety is video reviews members record specifically to share in their communities.

The third type of review, are also video reviews, but those imported from external sites like YouTube or other video hosting sites. These reviews, when posted, earn a large number of comments and reactions. Therefore, access to a location where there is an active and vibrant dialogue about products is one of the many attractive perks afforded

members of these communities. Most often, these videos consist of a reviewer discussing how to use, benefits of, or critiques of using a product. In addition to these review videos, users also create and share hairstyling tutorial videos which focus on teaching styling and care techniques. Both of these types of videos are amongst the most frequently shared content in these communities. Notably, community members do not always positively react to the content of these videos. At times, both these types of videos spark considerable debates among members and stimulate conversation in which the women may condemn hair care practices or criticize the profiled products and beauty brands.

For example, in December 2017, a member of KT posted a video in which she reviewed three products for pre-pooing¹⁰. While two of the products were from mainstream brands, the third was a homemade concoction of aloe vera, egg yolks, and olive oil. Four types of responses emerged, first those members who affirmed her argument that the homemade blend produced the best results. Second, members who instead argued their preference for one of the other two mainstream products. Third, those who offered up the names of alternative products which they believed to be better than those she reviewed, and last, those who denounced pre-pooing altogether, arguing that it is not a beneficial hair care ritual. What is pivotal about this post and countless similar others, is not only that they stimulate debate and discussion about products, but that the information shared during these debates influences the spending habits of the members.

¹⁰ Pre-pooing is a process done before washing one's hair. Essential oils are applied to the hair before shampooing. Pre-poo provides a protective layer over the hair to ensure that the chemicals in the shampoo do not strip away all of the hair's moisture.

This fact is made evident by observing some of the comments made in both Coily Curl Love (CCL) and Kinky Twists (KT). For instance, in a post made by a KT user in which she praised a co-wash shampoo, she noted that “*I tried this product because I saw [product reviewer’s name] used it in her video...*” Similarly, in a critique of a popular moisturizing product, a user of CCL noted that “*maybe I did it wrong because [product reviewer’s name] hair looked so good after using [product’s name], but my hair felt like [...]*”. In both these examples, the members affirm that the content they encountered in their SMNHG inspired their purchasing choices. Interview participants also discussed how content found in their group influences their purchasing behaviors. During the session with *Brenda*, a user of CCL, she broached the topic while explaining why she is a member of her SMNHG.

Interviewer: So, what made you decide to visit a natural hair group?

Brenda: My daughters were members, and they were always showing me videos or
pictures from their groups, so I eventually decided to start following.

Interviewer: What is it about the group that you like?

Brenda: I like seeing what everyone else is using in their hair. I feel that this generation
has so much more knowledge about how to take care of their hair. When I was coming up, we didn’t know all the terminology and techniques, [laughter] we just did whatever, bought some shampoo and conditioner and grease, [laughter] my mom use to grease our scalp like once a week. It was very simple back then because there weren't many products to choose as there is now.

Interviewer: What do you think about all the product choices?

Brenda: I get dizzy when I'm in the ethnic section [laughter] of the grocery. [...] I like
trying new products, but I need help figuring out what to do with half that stuff. If my daughters can't help me, I ask questions in the group.

Interviewer: What type of questions do you ask?

Brenda: Everything, but mostly before trying a new brand, I will ask the group if anyone has used it, so I get some honest feedback before spending my coins.

Interviewer: Do you also watch the product review videos in the group?

Brenda: Yes, all the time, but I try not too because whatever I see in those videos I am going to buy it all and my poor husband, he is always telling me ok enough stuff, you got enough shit [laughter].

Like *Brenda*, *Jillian*, a user of KT, also describes the role the SMNHG plays in shaping her purchasing habits.

Interviewer: How frequently do you visit KT.

Jillian: A few times a day, you know how it goes, when I get bored, I catch up on social media. So, I usually check to see what new posts are up. I like watching hair tutorials and videos when people talk about conditioners. I need a new conditioner.

Interviewer: Why do you watch those videos?

Jillian: I use to go to a hairdresser, but it got so expensive, so I am trying to learn how to care for my hair for myself, you know. So, I pick up styling tips from the videos. A lot of the products I use in my hair I saw in videos.

Both these women indicate that their participation in these communities impacts their purchasing behaviors. *Brenda* suggests that the recent explosion in the number of natural hair care lines available to naturalistas has led to her depending on her fellow members to help parse through the clutter. Furthermore, she notes that she feels compelled to purchase products seen in review videos, much to her husband's dismay. Similarly, *Jillian* uses these videos to assist in learning how to care for her hair and to inform her purchasing choices.

Product review videos and conversations in which products are discussed are, therefore, some of the most vitally essential types of digital media texts appearing in these platforms. These texts hold the potential to diminish or improve a brand's goodwill and market share.

The Product Influencer

Far beyond merely being chatter, SMNHG's digital media text has and may in the future have an enormous financial impact on both beauty supply companies and the naturalistas who participate in the movement. It is then necessary to frame SMNHG as sites in which there are a constant evaluation and negotiation about the goodwill attached to beauty care brands. Those who hold the highest level of power in this arbitration process are those members who possess an elevated level of social capital. Many of the members who amass this social capital do so due to the time and energy they dedicated to creating product review videos. The notoriety they gain allows their opinions to be highly valued, which means they hold the potential to move a product from obscurity to popularity or vice versa. Their positive or negative reviews of a product can alter the level of product loyalty members hold. A brand or product deemed as the “holy grail” can be at any point dethroned and cast aside if the wave of discourse turns its attention to another product.

This fact is increasingly true if the product reviewers suggest that a new product is a healthier or cheaper priced alternative to a once lauded item. Given the fact that the Black natural hair segment of the beauty industry is now a rapidly expanding market, we cannot trivialize the importance of these reviews. These SMNHG are battlegrounds, in which reviewers are welcoming other members to join in pitting brand against brand to

duke it out. Therefore, the digital labor of members of SMNHG takes a center court position in the billion-dollar industry. This influential power held by these women is significantly exceptional given the fact that before recent years with the exception to a small number of hair care brands explicitly created for Black natural hair, the beauty industry had long ignored Black natural hair as a viable segment. Scholars like Rooks, 1996; Byrd and Tharps, 2001; and Harvey-Wingfield; 2008, lamented this fact. Furthermore, these scholars noted that even when the beauty industry did turn its attention to naturalistas, most of the products marketed to them were chemicals aimed at changing their textures.

It is then increasingly ironic that in the wake of the DBNHM, these consumers can now use technology to participate in shaping a marketplace that once ignored them. The influential nature of SMNHG and the power that rests in the hands of popular product review content creators, hair models: the women who create hairstyling and hair care tutorials and all members of the SMNHG who discuss products, has not gone unnoticed by corporate entities. It is not surprising that beauty supply executives have begun to strategize means by which to shape conversations within SMNHG towards their end. It is certainly likely that marketing and research and development departments are even now still fine-tuning even more effective means for intruding into these spaces, to bring about positive returns for their brand. During this study, it became apparent that one of the ways these companies have already entered into these spaces is by hiring social media brand influencers or hair models to increase their brand's popularity among naturalistas.

These brand influencers monetarize the weight of their opinion by creating and sharing positive brand content within SMNHG. Selecting these brand influencers is not a haphazard process. As expected, these companies are strategic in their process as they appear to choose influencers based on the size of their following and their visibility within the DBNHM. These corporate executives seem ready to bet that the trust members place in the opinion of influencers will transfer into an increase in sales. This growing trend at face value seems harmless and, in many ways, progressive as it has already allowed several naturalistas to monetarize their once affective, unpaid labor. For instance, *Angel's* success as the owner and vlogger of a YouTube channel that boasts over a million subscribers and her previous appearance on media outlets to discuss natural hair earned her the opportunity to be a brand ambassador for a successful mainstream beauty brand.

As a highly recognizable natural hair social media influencer, *Angel* holds a heightened level of trust amongst her followers, which undoubtedly contributed to the beauty brand company partnership with her. Like *Angel*, countless numbers of other naturalistas, many of them being hairstylists and small business owners, have been able to attract sponsorship deals from corporations seeking to monetarize their sizable user following. I would yet advise caution before celebrating this rising trend. While beneficial to some Black women entrepreneurs, there is a need to consider how one aspect of this trend may have a debilitating effect on the culture of resistance existing within the SMNHG. This factor may negatively affect the sense of community and comradery that exists among members of these communities. This cause for concern lies with the rising apprehension among social media natural hair groups members that the

business alliances between hair reviewers and beauty suppliers will negatively affect the validity of product reviews. As brand influencers, they are opinion leaders who are able to impact the norms of communities like KT and CCL significantly.

It is, therefore, important that as they influence these groups, their actions do not disrupt the nature of these fictive kinship structures. As argued in Chapter 5, these groups mirror tenets of sister circles. This means that they are potential breathing ground for community building behaviors and locations where members discuss and may bond over shared lived experience. It would be misguided to assume that members hold a heightened level of expectancy that every member is trustworthy or loyal to collective progress. I would argue, however, that the utilitarian purpose of these groups is to provide hair care advice; that these women hold at least some level of expectation and that the information shared is valid. Thus, it became increasingly intriguing that throughout this study, I observed that members of the groups were voicing their concern about the adverse effect of influencers.

There was a noticeable air of suspicion where even well-known vloggers, who had long been recognizable icons in the movement, were coming under suspicion as members were questioning the authenticity of everything they post. During the interview with *Ne*, she demonstrated her suspicion by saying,

[name of popular vlogger], she has a lot of videos with her daughters. [...] I am in her Facebook group. I like her videos because she reviews products for children, too [...]. She reviewed all the new products from [name of a leading Black natural textures brand]. They def changed their formula everything in that new line is trash, it is so watered down, and I think I read that they added a bunch of new chemicals [...], but I was so shocked when she was saying she liked the new line. But anyway, I think it is probably because they sent her all of it for free, so she going to say she loves it. You know that's what they are all doing that now.

Admittedly, most users of the Internet have a healthy dose of skepticism about anything they encounter online. *Ne's* statement, however, reflects that she blames what she sees as the vloggers' inaccurate review on the fact that she and the brand share a business relationship.

Ne's assertion that "they are all doing that now" also highlights the rising sentiment among members that not only have vloggers monetarizing their digital labor but that their reviews are less authentic because of it. Interestingly, some members have even devised strategies to get around their concerns. During our interview, *Tif*, for instance, suggested that when selecting videos to watch, the quality of the video is an essential determining factor. She further indicated that she prefers poorly produced videos because she suspects a vlogger is featuring sponsored content when, "*they switch up, [...] get a new camera, and they add an extra extra long intro to their videos.* *Tif's* statement, although comical, hinted to me what I believe is the matter of gravest concern about the brand-influencer trend. That is, the fact that some of the vloggers are less than transparent about their business arrangement.

While some hair vloggers, like *Angel*, for instance, disclose this information, others do not. *Angel* typically begins her sponsored review videos *by* explicitly revealing that she was given the products under review, or that she is discussing the items in her capacity as a brand ambassador. *For this reason, Angel* stands out as one of the most transparent vloggers, having dedicated several videos to explain that although she does not get paid for all her reviews, companies send her free products in exchange for her vlogging about her opinion. *Angel's* openness about her arrangements seem to allow *Angel's* reviews to continue to carry a high level of credibility. Additionally, *Angel*

frequently heavily criticizes some of these products, which further lends credence to the fact that *Angel*'s reviews are not tainted. In describing why she follows *Angel*'s Instagram page, *Sasha* said, I like *Angel* because she is real about her reviews. When I prompted her to explain what she meant by that statement, she replied,

Sasha: You know how some of these hair models be lying, they get sponsored by companies to give good reviews. [The name of a popular vlogger] was talking about this leave-in conditioner my sister gave me. It was supposed to be great on 4c hair, but it was made my scalp burn and flake. I was scrolling through the comments to see if anyone else was having the same problem to make sure something wasn't wrong with me, and I saw a bunch of comments from other people accusing her of selling out. They kept saying that she was giving positive reviews to anything just for the money. [...] That's when I found out that I should always look in the video description.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Sasha: [...] because I think legally [...] they have to say its sponsored in the description. But I never looked at the description of videos, but now I do. So many of these reviews are paid for, so you don't know what to trust.

Sasha's reference to the description is critical here. Many of the videos shared in SMNHG originating from YouTube. In these videos, some product influencers who fail to vocalize their business relationships explicitly may instead opt for the more covert method of including disclosure text in the description caption of their video. I would argue that the warnings in the description sections may go unnoticed, or as *Sasha* describes, naturalistas may not even be aware that they exist. The video description section on YouTube is arguably not in the ideal location, because in most cases it is not immediately visible, especially when watching videos via a mobile browser. In most cases, one must scroll down past the video itself and actively click on the description box for the entirety of a video's description to expand. Furthermore, when users share videos from websites external to Facebook, such as YouTube, users of the SMNHG can view the

video without ever visiting the hosting site. Thus, further dismissing the possibility that the users will read the sponsored content warning in the video's description.

Therefore, when well-known vloggers create sponsored content and present it in this way, members may be less inclined to question the content given the vlogger's prominence in the movement. Companies can then financially benefit from these types of reviews. In this way, beauty supply corporations are infiltrating and impacting the experiences of those participating in these SMNHG. The followers of the DBNHM are not the only consumers voicing concern with some of the unscrupulous practices of social media influencers. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has expressed trepidation with some of the more clandestine methods undertaken by all Internet influencers who fail to disclose the relationship they share with a corporate entity. In an April 19th, 2017, press release, the Commission noted that prompted by a petition by Public Citizen, an advocacy group, the Commission had launched an investigation into Instagram posts by celebrities, athletes, and other influencers.

Finding that these influencers were failing to disclose their relationships with companies clearly and conspicuously when promoting or endorsing products through social media (Federal Trade Commission 2017), the Commission proceeded to send over 90 letters to influencers and marketers. In a template of the letter sent, available on the Commission's website, the Commission's Associate Director Division of Advertising Practices Mary K. Engle wrote,

Your material connection to that company should be clearly and conspicuously disclosed in your endorsements. To make disclosure both "clear" and "conspicuous," you should use unambiguous language and make the disclosure stand out. Consumers should be able to notice the disclosure easily and not have to look for it. For example, consumers viewing posts in their Instagram streams on mobile devices typically see only the first three lines of a longer post unless

they click "more," and many consumers may not click "more." Therefore, you should disclose any material connection above the "more" button (Engle, 2017).

The long-term impact of the Commission attempts to real in and clearly outline the best practices for the marketing trend is still yet unseen. In the interim, the promotional strategy and some of its more nefarious tactics show little sign of slowing down.

While the ability for naturalistas to financially benefit from their digital labor is not harmful, the steps taken to achieve this benefit demands attention. Especially given the fact that the presence of shared identity among the users and the expectation of shared lived-experiences have not only contributed to a prevailing sisterly culture in these SMNHG, but they may have spurred enhanced feelings of trust, that may be at the root of users' willingness to purchase products suggested by others. Hence, the growing recognition that the content in these groups may be tainted by influencers operating as agents of a corporation, not only calls the authenticity of the products or the influencer into question, but it fractures the supposed "safety" of these spaces and creates cracks in the spirit of fictive sisterhood. While undoubtedly, most of us as twenty-first-century citizens have all adopted a healthy level of distrust in much of what we read online. I would argue that that the fact that members are now devising strategies for sorting through the sponsored and none sponsored clutter, they have not abandoned the product review. It continues to hold a place of significance in these communities.

What this suggests to me is that product reviews remain a core aspect of the movement. Hence, the reduction in the credibility of the content is a matter of concern. Surreptitious influencer practices influence the culture within these groups impeding the level of trustworthiness amongst what members will share. This practice thus reduces the potential for the fostering of a spirit of fictive sisterhood within these groups. With the

spirit of fictive sisterhood being such an intrinsic catalyst for influencing the members to engage in bonding behaviors (as argued in Chapter 5), the mistrust they render to the reviews may seep into other aspects of the groups. If this occurs, members may be less willing to share their lived experiences and offer advice. This shift in behavior will certainly negatively impact the resistance nature of DBNHM because it is these types of conversation that most often sparks the sharing of media texts laced with ideological resistance messages that celebrate the lives and bodies of Black women.

When influencers do not disclose the financial relationship, they share with a brand, they provide the corporation with an unvetted entrance into the community and an unfair advantage in the chase to gain brand loyalty. This practice effectively shifts the nature of these communities. Transforming them from being spaces in which naturalistas can openly and honestly share their opinions about hair care with each other, into yet another platform in which corporate greed supersedes and decimates the congenial nature of a community and hampers the spirit of fictive sisterhood necessary to uphold such an ideological resistant movement.

The Culture of Resistance in an “Institutionalization” DBNHM

There are costs attached to a movement becoming mainstream. These costs are incurred by the members of marginalized communities when their movement shifts from being an in-group matter of concern into a recognized group dissent that has gained the attention of the mainstream. One of the significant costs incurred by a movement's followers is the reduction in control they hold as the movement grows. As a living organism, social, political, or ideological movements transform from conception to infancy to maturity and unto death. Many sociologists (e.g., Hopper, 1950; Blumer 1969;

Tilly 1978 and Spector and Kitsuse 2017) have argued that movements undergo a four-stage process, moving from obscurity to becoming identifiable. The strengths, opportunities, weakness, and threats facing that movement also evolve as it matures throughout its life cycle. Whether it may be a traditional social movement like Civil Rights or Women's Suffrage, or a digital movement like #BlackLivesMatter or the DBNHM, the awareness, support and impact of the movement typically increases and decreases in correlation to the movement's growth among its proponents, and its recognition by the wider society.

During the preliminary stage or emergence of a movement, awareness of the underlying issues is only at inchoation, as agitation with the circumstances at hand is beginning to grow. During this stage, which Herbert Blumer (1969) calls the social ferment stage, there is little or no organization. Although, it is difficult to identify the exact spark that ignited the emergence of the DBNHM, in 2010, the initial stage of the digital movement emerged, as YouTube hair tutorial channels and blogs focused on discussing Black natural hair began increasing in prominence. Bolstered by an already thriving YouTube vlogging culture, the vloggers and bloggers during this period, capitalized on the viral nature of their social media platforms as they began providing their viewers with an intimate gaze into their daily lives as they shared their journeys of "going natural" and experiencing their jobs, school and dating lives as a naturalista. Despite the growing popularity of these natural hair vloggers, the movement, as we now understand it, had not yet provoked mainstream attention.

Unlike the emergence stage, during the second or coalescence stage, the agitation of members of the movements become legitimized as concerned parties begin to unite

and organize into a collective. For Rex D. Hopper (1950), an essential characteristic of the coalescence stage is that the movement sheds its individualistic nature, as the individual actors who championed the movement during its preliminary stage begin to become aware of each other (p.273). No longer uncoordinated or individualized; instead, the purveyors of the DBNHM became a focalized collective as vloggers began featuring each other in their blog posts, and social media groups like KT and CCL started to emerge allowing naturalistas to collect into digital locations and communicate with each other. These SMNHG also allowed for more democratic movement as the one-directional communication that occurred on blogs and sites like YouTube, gave way to more socializing spaces like Facebook Groups, in which all members of the communities could engage in creating and sharing content.

During this stage, the once dispersed movement, consisting of voices scattered across the digital landscape, became more localized as these SMNHG became the hubs in which the followers and recognizable leaders of the movement were meeting, discussing, organizing, and sharing their narratives about their natural hair. It is during this stage that the DBNHM began to distinguish itself as a financially powerful movement as users engage in product reviews that influence each other's spending behaviors. During both these early stages, the supporters of the DBNHM held significant levels of control of the movement, as they determined the norms of their SMNHG and engaged in practices they deemed desirable. This level of control over defining the movement and shaping the behavior within the SMNHG has diminished recently as the DBNHM entered the third and its present stage, the institutionalization stage (Hopper, 1950).

Having shed much of its grassroots or fringe identity, the DBNHM has become a recognizable part of the broader society, engendering interest from executives of beauty supply corporations. Naturalistas' control over defining the movement has since decreased as the beauty industry has rushed in an attempt to control the narrative. In this institutionalization stage, which Blumer (1969) describes as the formalization period, movements become distinct aspects of society. Occupying this new visible space does not signify that all members of that society have adopted the goals of the movement as their own, rather it denotes that the movement has gained the attention of those previously unfamiliar or uninterested in the cause. For Blumer (1969), this increased attention is primarily due to the movement becoming a matter of concern for the influencers of social reproduction; political, social, economic, and information institutions. Likewise, for the DBNHM, the institutionalization stage first began as the followers of the movement change in spending behavior, began to impact the beauty supply industry.

Spurred on by statistical evidence of the millions of dollars naturalistas were withdrawing from the beauty supply market, as I previously argued, these corporations refocused their production and marketing initiatives and expanded their product offerings. These changes, as I earlier suggested, has led to some positive outcomes, including the increase in mainstream visibility of Black natural hair. This increased visibility, at least in theory, contributes to the inflation of the Black natural hair's beauty currency. Yet, as the extension of product lines and the birth of new product categories bring to naturalistas a wealth of products to choose from, beauty corporations are opting towards playing upon the insecurities of naturalistas to shape their purchasing behaviors. Armed with scientific support that Black natural hair is inherently dry and in need of

moisture, companies do not merely improve their products. Instead, they use this fact to galvanizes their marketing strategies and to suggest to naturalistas that they must invest corpus amounts of money, labor and time buying, testing, and identifying a multiproduct system to ensure their hair care regiment is perfect.

Additionally, by continuously releasing new products and rebranding older ones, these companies hope to ensure that naturalistas are forever engaging in the bulk-buying and chase for the "holy grail." These practices are in keeping with consumer goods corporations' tradition of insinuating that through consumption, one can earn empowerment. By framing themselves as partners in the process of naturalistas freeing themselves of oppressive beauty standards, these companies transform their products into objects that are a necessary part of naturalista's personal development (Miller 1987).

These companies, thus, are not selling commodities to naturalistas.

Instead, through the process of objectification, these products appear to be valuable assets to successfully construct one's personal identity attainable only through the act of consumption (Dimulescu 2015). Also, the rise of social media hair influencers provide these companies with the opportunity to embed themselves directly within the SMNHG. The non-transparent practices by these influencers prompt concerns because they contribute to the increase of the brand's goodwill at the expense of the harmony of these groups.

These practices also strip away at the feeling of intimacy among the users, thereby jeopardizing the possibility for these SMNHG to continue functioning as digital sister circles. It is counterproductive when corporate entities begin participating in shaping a movement, especially in a movement whose underlying focus is to empower Black

women as they challenge the beauty standards that these very corporations have historically contributed to erecting. Despite being a decentralized movement with no defined statement of purpose, the findings in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 study revealed the normative behavior practices undertaken by the movement's followers. These practices provided me with a keen understanding of the movement, its purpose, and its impact. These findings of this dissertation suggest that the underlying ideology that grounds the digital Black natural hair movement is one that challenges and resists unacceptable and destructive beauty standards that seek to "other" the hair of Black women. It is by observing the movement through this lens that it inspired me to argue that as this formerly fringe movement grows in notoriety, corporate mitigation is serving to move it further away from its core ideologies.

After all if in fact the goal of a re-signification campaigns is to provide disenfranchised publics the opportunity to code [new] media text with oppositional messages (Verón, 1971), then it is a cause for concern that the beauty industry executives are becoming the most important coders of the most popularized images of naturalistas available for mainstream consumption. So, although there are many reasons to celebrate this movement, and there is hope that it will contribute to a growth in the acceptance of Black natural hair. I would advise proceeding cautiously, especially, given the acrimonious historical relationship Black natural hair shares with mainstream beauty standards, the likelihood that these industries have abandoned the restrictive ideologies that have served to other Black bodies for decades is doubtful. Therefore, to gain a holistic understanding of this movement and the potential, it has to contribute to redefining how society views and values Black natural hair. There is a need for a

thorough study of the cost attached to corporate interest in this movement. Although this chapter cannot address this issue in totality, it begins framing this necessary work.

CHAPTER VIII

Conclusion: Combing the Ends

This dissertation provides empirical evidence of how some Black women make use of digital media platforms to engage in an everyday ideological form of resistance. What defines this type of resistance is the creation and sharing of digital media texts laced with liberation doctrine. These texts allow members of these communities to collectively push against restrictive and harmful hegemonic ideas that “other” Black natural hair textures. I liken this ideological resistance behavior to the re-signification campaigns that Verón (1971) argues afford disenfranchised publics the ability to recode media text with oppositional messages. By seizing this opportunity to foster communities around producing content that celebrates themselves, these women are demonstrating how they are transferring some of the traditional Black community building and joint defiant behaviors as they participate in contemporary digital media culture.

To obtain the data necessary for contextualizing the normative behaviors within these groups, I made use of two methodological tools; digital interpretative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. During the data collection phase of this study, three research questions framed this work. First, I focused on the behavioral practices of community members to identify whether, amongst them, there was an emergence of a sense of community/fictive sisterhood. Second, I focused on the use of pro-Black lexicon, phrases, symbols, and terms when discussing their hair and questioned whether the language used in these groups signaled a connection between the DBNHM and other pro-Black digital activism movements of the day. Last, I observed the images, videos, and

symbols shared in the communities to determine whether they constituted alternative media texts that counter mainstream notions of beauty.

The significant findings, as presented in the three discussion chapters (Chapter 5, 6, and 7) suggests that SMNHG members borrow heavily from the Black women fictive structures known as traditional Sister Circle (RQ1) to establish communities that allow for and supports anti-hegemonic language and behaviors (RQ3). These anti-hegemonic ideas reverberate in the pro-Black lexicon, phrases, symbols, and terms used by members to describe Black natural hair textures (RQ2). In the remainder of this chapter, I further rehearse these key findings and identify the principal contributions of this work to academic research. I also highlight the limitations faced during this project before concluding by offering future recommendations for this study.

Wrapping Up

This research study yielded three significant findings that I presented throughout the three discussion chapters (Chapter 5, 6, and 7).

Digital Sister Circles

First, in chapter 5 I argued that the normative behavioral practices by members suggest that there is a sense of community within these groups (RQ1) typified by presence of tropes of kinship, the use of a culturally relevant lexicon, acts of discussing and bonding over shared lived experiences and the willingness to engage in collective action. Upon identifying the presence of these four attributes, I argued that these social media natural hair groups (SMNHG) are digital incarnations of Sister Circles (S.C). That is, technology-driven versions of the fictive kinship structures Black women have for

generations created and retreat into, to engage in sharing personal stories of pain, affirming, restoring, and uplifting each other as they unite around shared identities and shared lived experiences. I further noted that S.C are versions of fictive family structures that scholars like Giddings (1985); Neal-Barnett (2003); McDonald (2006), Chatters et al. (1994); Dill et al. (1998); and Stewart (2007) all argued serve as homeplaces and places of refuge for Black women to build friendship and engage in behaviors towards collective benefits.

Likening SMNHG to traditional sister circles was a necessary step in declaring that these communities are also priming ground for resistance discourse. Furthermore, throughout Chapter 5, I provided examples of how SMNHG members replicate some of the behavioral norms traditionally found within Black beauty salons. These findings allowed me to argue that these women transformed their communities from mere social media spaces into digital "third places" (Oldenburg 1991). These virtual spaces exemplify how Black women [people] are fusing their culture with technology to forge discursive and rhetorical virtual spaces geared towards the production of anti-hegemonic and resistance content. Ultimately, Chapter 5 frames SMNHG as invaluable virtual incarnations of traditional Black feminized enclaves of resistance, healing, and solidarity. The chapter provided the framework for Chapter 6 by suggesting that by creating and maintaining such spaces, naturalistas establish within their groups a welcoming space that allows for the production of counter-hegemonic digital media texts.

Resistance Acts

In Chapter 6, I provided evidence of the types of counter-hegemonic digital media texts that typically appears in the SMNHG. I further argue that producing such texts

demonstrates a form of ideological resistance because the message that reverberates from within the language, symbols, and images are pro-Black natural hair ideologies.

Therefore, these women are producing and sharing doctrines that stand in contrast to the mainstream media and the beauty industry's historical and contemporary othering of Black natural hair (RQ3). One can observe these anti-hegemonic messages within two distinctive types of posts. The first group consists of posts that focus on Black women's body politics (RQ3). These posts typically include messages in which members demonstrated explicit forms of self-love. In boldly declaring their love for their hair, these women are not merely exhibiting vanity. Instead, given the domination of negative mainstream narratives about their Black natural textures, these acts of displaying their self-love are resistant in nature and reminiscent of the kind of love Lorde (1988) argues, can serve as an ideological tool of political warfare. In addition to engaging in self-love, these women also dedicated themselves to a cyclical process of complimenting and boosting each other's confidence.

By participating in these group affirmation practices, these SMNHG members show that these groups serve as spaces where the content bolsters Black natural hair from existing under dominant ideologies' cloud of strangeness. Witnessing these interactions provided me with the most advantageous point from which to observe members demonstrating their explicit rejections of prevailing beauty norms. Most often, they did so by making use of hashtags like #BlackgirlMagic, #Queen, and #Hairgoals. These hashtags are powerful declarations that these women view each other's hair as aspirational, regal, and a desired standard. In addition to discussing their bodies, these group members also use the images of famous naturalistas to spark ideologically

redefining discussions that challenge the limited presentation of Black bodies in high fashion, and across all mainstream media platforms. Collectively, these posts allow women to exhibit their rejection of dominant beauty limits and to push back against the myth that their hair is unclean, unsophisticated, and a detriment to their beauty capital.

The second group of posts that renders counter-hegemonic messages are those that feature moments when members raised their voices to dissent against corporate practices and social issues (RQ2). For instance, on several occasions, I witnessed members challenging the business practices of beauty supply corporations. Using two case studies (Shea Moisture and Walmart), I provided examples of how these women make use of these groups to call for boycotts and converse about the issues that lie at the intersection of Black women's hair politics, corporate America, and the beauty supply industry. The second type of posts identifies occasions when members engage in hashtag activism. In addition to discussing their hair, the women also frequently use these communities to address contemporary social justice matters, for instance, #BlackLivesMatter, #WhileBlack, and the #MeToo movements. In doing so, these women mark these SMNHG as welcoming spaces in which digital activism discourse resides. The presence of this content reiterates that a spirit of resistance exists within these virtual communes.

Observing the members participating in hashtag activism is a reminder that the DBNHM and its goal of celebrating Black natural hair do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, the DBNHM is a part of a broad cross-section of digitally and physically-based movements focused on the improvement of the lived experiences of Black women [and men]. Although the Digital Black Natural hair movement (DBNHM) the is not similar in

every way to other digital movements like #BlackLiveMatter or #SayHerName, the DBNHM is akin to these movements because they all direct attention towards the political nature of Black bodies by challenging the culture of policing and critiquing these bodies because of their difference to European standard (RQ2).

As digital versions of Collins' (2000) realms of safe discourse, SMNHG provide an essential location for these Black women to collectively engage in discussing and creating content that rejects the exclusion of their bodies as sites of beauty and by so doing, they participate in the vulnerable act of sharing personal narratives about what Collins calls hegemonic attempts of domination (p.100).

The SMNHG are, thus, digital spaces of resistance, created and maintained by Black women, for Black women, and it would be foolhardy to dismiss the DBNHM merely as a derivative of contemporary social media culture. Instead, the DBNHM is a modern conceptualization of a longstanding, culturally rich practices of Black women etching out avenues to sit, plan, discuss, and strategies amongst themselves on how to overcome systemic forms of racialized and gendered oppression in their lives. Collectively, the messages created and shared and the behavioral practices of members demonstrate that SMNHG are nexuses for offering practical and emotional support to each other while partnering to challenge corporate behaviors and social justice issues. Thus, the findings from this dissertation allow me to argue that SMNHG are one type of digital enclave that Black women are carving out for themselves across the Internet terrain to engage in pro-Black and anti-hegemonic discourse and behavior. Although these spaces are virtual and they comprise of women who at first share weak ties, the findings presented in this chapter highlight an example of how Internet technology is

providing for a reconceptualization of the notion of proximity, closeness, community, and ideological resistance. These new conceptions allow for actors to forge communities and engage in digital forms of resistant practices while positioned in geographically displaced locations.

The Beauty Industry's Impact on Resistance

One of the findings of this study revealed that product reviews and discourse about beauty hair brands are some of the most popular posts that appear in these social media natural hair groups. These posts have a significant impact on shaping the purchasing behavior of the members. Given the billion-dollar spending power attributed to Black consumers of beauty products, it was not shocking that as the SMNHG grew in mainstream visibility, that corporations were beginning to take a greater interest in these communities and the digital Black natural hair movement at large. In the wake of a significant decline in the chemical relaxer segment, these companies have adapted to the growth of the DBNHM by extending their product lines to include products made specifically for Black natural hair textures. In marketing these products, the corporations borrow heavily from the pro-self-love ideologies inherent to the DBNHM. For instance, many of the brands would include terms like "crown," "magic," "freedom," and "queen" to reference Black hair and naturalistas.

I argue, however, that although these campaigns attempt to locate themselves within Black cultural traditions and mimicking the "Black is beautiful" message of the DBNHM, these companies' chief call to action is to remind the naturalistas, that they must still engage in beauty work. These messages embedded in these campaigns suggest mirrors those sent to all women; that true beauty lies at the bottom of the bottle of a

cosmetic and hair care product. Hence, the images and messages used to market these products reinforce the dependency on beauty aids, ensuring that even as naturalistas engage in resistance to dominant beauty norms, there is ever the reminder that as women they must remain active beauty laborers and participants in the constant consumption practices that have served to allow the beauty industry to be worth billions. Additionally, I note that two business practices undertaken by beauty industry executives have impacted the culture of resistance.

First, these companies encourage a product junkie or bulk buying culture by amplifying scientific research that argues that Black hair follicles are less capable of retaining moisture. This scientific information further engorges these companies' profit lines because their executives use the information to encourage naturalistas to purchase high priced hair care systems that often consists of six or seven products. The success of these elaborate systems I argue depends on messaging that frames Black hair care as a complicated process and Black hair as inherently dry and ever in need of multifaceted treatment. These messages replicate the anti-DBNHM narratives that Black natural hair, in its rawest form, is inadequate and that some textures are unquestionably more desirable and acceptable. Hence, I suggest that drenching their marketing material with the movement's pro-Black natural hair messages is a deliberate act of commodification because even as they frame themselves as supporters of the naturalistas, some of their business practices demonstrate that they are simultaneously contributing to the erection of a new colorism influenced Black natural hair beauty standards.

These new standards, although more inclusive than their predecessors, are still fraught with hierarchal ordering. Therefore, because the images and messages these

companies create about the movement quickly become the most widely consumed, these companies are gaining an increased level of power over framing the movement.

Proponents of the DBNHM should then be concerned about whether these gatekeepers of dominant beauty norms will ever truly be selfless partners in their movement. The second way in which the beauty industry's growing interest in the DBNHM impacts the resistance nature of the movement is by employing product influencers to infiltrate these communities. During several of my interview sessions, respondents addressed the hair influencer trend. Repeatedly, they discussed their misgivings with the fact that some influencers fail to disclose their relationship with beauty brands. This growing trend impacts the level of trust members have in the content they observe in these groups. I proposed that this mistrust fractures of the essence of solidarity in SMNHG.

As more members begin to call the authenticity of the reviews into question, it creates cracks in the fictive sisterhood. Rupturing the catalyst for the emergence of fictive sisterhoods hampers the potential for resistance to occur in these communities, given the fact that as argued in Chapter 5, comradery and feelings of solidarity are critical instigators needed to fuel the type of bonding behaviors essential for collective actions of defiance and resistance. Therefore, the use of influencers who covertly operate without full disclosure of their economic incentive to create their content is concerning. These practices shift these communities from spaces where naturalistas can openly and honestly share their opinions about hair care, into yet another platform in which corporate greed supersedes and decimates the congenial nature of a community. In its aftermath, this serves to obliterate the chances for an ideological resistant movement to survive.

Despite these troubling concerns, collectively, all the findings presented in Chapter 6 provided evidence that SMNHG are one of the prominent communes in which Black women are establishing online. Communes that serve modern means for organizing beyond geographic limits and upholding the important community based strategize that Black communities have relied upon for healing, political organizing and, and standing points to engage in [ideological] resistance behaviors.

Situating Research in Academia

In Chapter 1, as I identified the theoretical framing for this dissertation, I argued that this research draws from an interdisciplinary cross-section of scholarship. Therefore, I sit the findings of this study alongside research that emerges from within the traditions of Black feminist theory, media studies, and the digital humanities. First, this work aligns with the growing body of digital scholars who are focused on creating research that moves the experiences of Black women [and men] with digital technology from the margins to the center of academic concern. The dissertation also attends to the call by preeminent and Black digital studies scholar Andre Brock (2012) for scholars seeking to understand the relationship between Black people and technology to provides a more in-depth analysis of how everyday discourse online can foster the creation of alternate public spheres. I attend to this call by first arguing that the content created in these communities are digital media texts. By focusing on the language used by SMNHG members, I was then able to suggest that these digital media texts transmit ideological messages that challenge and resist against hegemonic beauty standards that seek to "other" the hair of some Black women.

The findings from this dissertation thus join with media scholars like Wright (2005), Brock (2012), Kvasny & Hales (2010), Williams (2015), and Curtis (2015), who dispel the tendency to render all social media use as frivolous. Instead, the research illuminates how by interacting and sharing content in social media groups, members can also create, transmit, and challenge ideological messages. This dissertation then provides critical evidence of the liberating possibilities of social media usage by illustrating how a community of women alienated from positions of mainstream producing power are building communities and gaining self-affirmation benefits from participating in digital alternative media production. By rejecting mainstream racialized narratives about their bodies, I suggest that these women provide an example of how contemporary Black women are seizing the power of digital media to challenge attempts to dominate and objectify their hair as strange or unkempt. As they do so, they engage in the Black feminist liberation act of defining themselves, for themselves to withstand the attempts to crush them (Lorde, 1984).

Furthermore, this work also provides an example of how media scholars are extending James C Scott's (1989) theory of everyday resistance to the digital world. Doing so allows for de-trivialize social media interaction and a politicizing of the digital media texts. Therefore, with this work, I suggest that in users' casual use of social media platforms, they can create memes, videos, and images that make politicized statements and quite possibly provoke sociopolitical or as in this case, ideological shifts. This work also contributes to Black feminist theory because even as I argue that the findings demonstrate that these women engage in digital forms of everyday resistance, I do not attribute these behavioral practices solely to contemporary internet culture. Instead, I note

that the success of these communities relies on these women drawing upon Black cultural traditions to shape and uphold their communities. While the everyday forms of resistance observed in SMNHG are made possible only by technology's ability to transform these women who share loose ties into a digital collective, it is their skill in digitalizing the tradition of forging Sister Circles that ensures their communities are thriving.

It is by cultivating the norms and practices Black feminist thinkers Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks identified as being inherent to S.C that these women establish a virtual public and engage in collective acts of creating ideological resistant content. Therefore, this work considers how changes in technology and digital media culture is reshaping the power dynamic between marginalized communities and structures of hegemonic control, by highlighting how Black women are digitally transferring the cultural norms and traditions that have long aided in their collective survival and liberation. In this way, this dissertation provides evidence to support the arguments emerging from digital humanities camps that social media is a critical platform in which Black women are continuing their tradition of what hooks (1990) notes is their willingness to always invested their labor into building themselves spaces of resistance. Furthermore, because the type of resistance I suggest that is evident amongst the members of SMNHG is ideological resistance, this dissertation may provide empirical evidence that proves what some sociologist like M. Bahati Kuumba and Femi Ajanaku argues that ideological forms of resistance have become a prime undertaken by purveyors of new social movements.

By emphasizing culture, symbolism, collective identity, and ideology, my work replicates the type of collective resistance efforts Kuumba and Ajanaku (1998, p. 228)

suggest is atypical of modern movements. The findings of this dissertation may then sit counter to academics and cultural critics alike who heavily scrutinize social media usage and digital forms of counter-hegemonic expression, or those who render all social media-based resistance practices into the category of slacktivism. Instead, this study illustrates that in exploring how social media-based movements impact the lives of their followers, one must move beyond a focus on material winnings of such movements to consider instead how a movement's victories can also materialize in ideological, emotional, and psychological ways. Though it may not be easy to monetize such non-economic or tangible benefits, they are invaluable to the women who earn them. Identifying SMNHG as sites for such resistance work highlights that even as urbanization has fractured physical community structures, some Black women are employing new technology to re-imagine the notion of the community they had lost due to the mass mobilization, longer working hours and busy life schedules. These SMNHG showcase how online community members can build new bonds and work together to recreate what Mathews (1992) argues is the intimacy of village life they left behind (p. 62).

Thus, this research provides evidence that feelings of solidarity, shared identity markers, shared culture, and experiences can embolden the counter-hegemonic practices of members of marginalized communities. In doing so, these group members, even without sharing close physical proximity, can foster a sense of community by doing as Howard Rheingold (1993) carry on public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling. Furthermore, this work aligns with Michelle Wright's (2005) argument that Black women negotiate around their intersectional identities while navigating Internet landscapes and in doing so they can find a "space" online (p.57), where they can

engage in the form of Black nationalist politics that is free from the constraints of patriarchal control (p.57). Last, participating in this research focused on SMNHG disrupts the tendency of some scholars to only focus on the source of oppressive power in the lives of Black women. By instead casting a light on how Black women resist this power and framing these women as resistant actors and active shapers of their own and their communities' liberation social, economic, and political movements, this work also sits alongside the Black feminist scholars and Africana studies researchers who strip Black women of the label of the perpetual victim. By not rendering Black women as powerless and agentless, I am engaging in the Black feminist tradition of exploring the complexity of Black body politics, hegemonic control, and socioeconomic oppression.

Limitations

When forging my methodological praxis, I decided that to diminish ethical concerns about lurking, I would only visit SMNHG that are public or open¹¹. As a non-participant observer, I decided to use these groups because I felt that unlike private SMNHG, where members undergo an application process, and non-members cannot observe their observing participation, the members of open groups might hold less expectation of privacy. While I stand firm in this decision, it also came with some cost, as my inability to research private communities limited the scope of the study. There are some nuanced differences between the open and closed SMNHG that could have potentially further illuminated my understanding of the movement. For instance, administrators of private groups hold an even more immense level of power in private

¹¹ Public or open SMNHG are groups that were freely assessable to any user of these social media platforms, requiring no membership application.

groups. These administrator's authority begins even before members participate in the groups, as these administrators hold the deciding factor over who gains entrance into the groups.

Furthermore, in most private communities, posts are heavily policed, as no new content appears in the group until approved by administrators. Although I discussed the vital role of administrators in Chapter 6, missing from that analysis was the even more critical role administrators play in the private community. This missing information impacted the limit by which I could truly analyze how administrators are essential shapers of the culture of the DBNHM. The second limitation also relates to my decision not to research private SMNHG. I suggest that by restricting access to a selected private group of members the potential for intimacy to increase is heightened. This intimacy may result in members being more open and expressive as they may believe that they are not only surrounded by like-minded women, but that out-group individuals will not be privy to their interactions. This openness may give rise to even more personal or politically charged conversations that may have yielded findings that may have expanded my understanding of the role of these communities in the lives of their members.

The Future Research Trajectory

Further exploring the relationship between the digital Black natural hair movement and corporate and legal entities promises to be the richest future course for this work. The issues raised in Chapter 7 are merely a first step in the exploration of the response of the beauty industry to the movement. A more extensive study would require interviews with beauty industry insiders, marketers, and naturalistas, to ascertain how these corporations are adjusting to the changing beauty norms among some Black

women. In addition to the beauty industry, charting the response of the mainstream media industry would further elucidate the impact of the DBNHM. During several interviews, interviewees suggested that they noticed a shift in the casting norms on television. These women indicate that media executives are intentionally casting naturalistas into their productions. It would be interesting to observe whether this increase is informing new narratives Black natural hair or whether these images evoke old tropes. Are these companies widening the limits of the types of feminized bodies they celebrate, or is colorism still a detriment in these new offerings.

Last, examining the impact of the DBNHM on the judicial system has quickly become a substantially intriguing potential focus for this work as well. Exploring the DBNHM vis-à-vis the legal system would be timely, given the fact that even now, as this dissertation draws to a close, state legislators across the United States are introducing bills focused on addressing formalized discrimination against Black natural hair. These legislators suggest that these steps are necessary given the failure of U.S. law to afford explicit protection against race-based hair discrimination. This failure is especially alarming given as I have argued earlier hair serves as a distinctive feature of Black identity and thus like skin tone, Black people's [women] hair that comes under racialized policing. The lack of protection against hair based discriminatory acts prompted the formulation of the CROWN¹² coalition¹³. The CROWN coalition set as its mission the advancement of efforts to end hair discrimination and to create a more equitable and inclusive beauty experience for Black women and girls ([Thecrownact.com](https://www.thecrownact.com/)). The coalition

¹² CROWN is an acronym that means; Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair.

¹³ The CROWN coalition consists of a partnership between the National Urban League, Color of Change, and Western Center on Law and Poverty and the Dove Unilever brand. (<https://www.thecrownact.com/>)

first cosponsored the CROWN Act (SB 188) in California in January 2019. The Crown Act pledges protection against discrimination based on hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles in the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) and state Education Codes.

In July 2019, both California and New York's governors would sign the Act into law, with New York's taking immediate effect and California's becoming effective on January 1st, 2020. By establishing the Act, these two states effectively became the first two U.S. states to criminalize discrimination against Black hair textures. Although discrimination laws sometimes do not translate into real-life changes in the lives of those oppressed because oppressors often cloak their prejudice under legitimate acts, the CROWN act is an essential step to addressing the raced and often gendered discrimination Black women and girls experience in schools and workplaces due to their hair texture. Despite the continued lack of a federal law the successful passing of the Act in these two states have in recent months inspired state legislators in states like New Jersey, Michigan, Florida, South Carolina, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusetts to introduce anti-hair discrimination bills.

The fact that states would require such laws is a clear representation of how deeply entrenched ideologies that disparage Black bodies are within social and cultural structures in North American society. Thus, establishing a future study that will explore the interconnection between the rise of visibility of the DBNHM and CROWN Act may not only further elucidate the reach of the DBNHM, but it will add to scholarship that questions the real-world application and impact of digitally based movements.

APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me when did you go natural, and what led to this decision?
2. How long have you been a member of an online natural hair group?
3. How often do you participate in discussions in this group?
4. In what ways do you participate?
5. Why do you participate in these natural hair communities?
6. Why do you think other members use it?
7. Have you ever posted to the group?
8. Have you ever requested information about a product?
9. Have you reviewed a product?
10. Has a product reviewed in the group shaped your purchasing behavior?
11. Have you posted a picture of yourself in the group or engaged in discussing your hair?
12. Did the feedback from your post shape your hair care routine or change any of your practices?
13. What have been the benefits of participating in these natural hair communities?
14. Have you ever had any negative experiences while participating in the natural hair group?
15. Have you ever purchased a product you saw reviewed in your community?
16. Do you think there is a Black natural hair movement in progress?
17. What effects do you think the natural hair movement has on the beauty supply industry?
18. How would you describe the movement?
19. What role do you think these natural groups play in the movement?
20. What is a naturalista?
21. Do you consider yourself a naturalista?
22. How would you describe the type of relationship you share with other members of these groups?
23. Have you developed friendships or relationships with previously unknown people in the group?
24. Do you think belonging to this group has shaped your opinion about natural hair in general?
25. Do you discuss, or have you observed non-hair related topics in this space?
26. If so, what non-hair related topics typically get included?
27. What does the hashtag #blackgirlmagic mean to you, and why do you think it is used?

Additional pre-prepared questions for moderators.

1. Why and when did you become an administrator of your community?
2. What are your responsibilities as an administrator/moderator?
3. Have you removed/blocked or denied a member from the group? If so, why?
4. Can you further elaborate on your group's description and or purpose?

APPENDIX B

Are you a member of a natural hair social media group?



Are you a
Black woman over the age of 18?
Do you visit, post and or comment at least once a week in a natural hair
Facebook group, Instagram account or YouTube station?

Are you willing to participate in a phone or Skype interview?

**We want to hear about your
experiences!**
This study questions why and how Black women make use of

Participation will be approximately 30 mins
Each participant will be entered into an raffle for the chance to win a

\$30 Visa Gift Card!

To sign up please visit our website
<http://bit.ly/NaturalHairInterviews>

Contact us: Natural Hair Groups Research
naturalhairresearch@gmail.com

This flyer was approved for use by the Rutgers University IRB on 5.26.17. Approval expires on 5.26.18

APPENDIX C

Attachment 4

Consent form for audio recording of interview

This form will be inputted using Google Form and participants will complete this form digitally

I am a PhD candidate in the department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, and I am conducting interviews for dissertation research. I am studying: the Black natural hair movement by focusing on online natural communities and their impact on the lived experiences of their users.

During this study, you will be asked to answer some questions as to learn about your individual experiences owning and or using these social media groups. This interview was designed to be approximately a half hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about you includes you gender, age range, ethnicity and personal experiences using these social media sites. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure password protected location. The data gathered in this study are confidential with respect to your personal identity unless you specify otherwise.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. All study data will be kept for three years and then permanently erased and destroyed.

You are aware that your participation in this interview is voluntary. You understand the intent and purpose of this research. If, for any reason, at any time, you wish to stop the interview, you may do so without having to give an explanation and without penalty.

There are no foreseeable risks of participating in this study.

You have been told that the benefits of taking part in this study may be the opportunity to win a Visa gift card worth \$100.

These interviews will be audio recorded and used for transcribing and data analyzing and education purposes only by the research team.

The recording will include all discourse conducted during the interview. Names and personal identifiable information will not be included in this recording. If you say anything that you believe at a later point may be hurtful and/or damage your reputation, then you can ask the interviewer to rewind the recording and record over such information OR you can ask that certain text be removed from the dataset/transcripts.

The recording will be stored in a password protected audio file on a cloud storage service. You will be given a non-identifiable pseudonym which will be used to identify and label your recording, allowing you to have full anonymity.

For IRB Use Only. This Section Must be Included on the Consent Form and Cannot Be Altered Except For Updates to the Version Date.











<p>APPROVED</p> <p>MAY 26 2017</p> <p>Approved by the Rutgers IRB</p>	<p>IRB Stamp Box</p> <p>EXPIRES</p> <p>MAY 25 2018</p> <p>Approved by the Rutgers IRB</p>
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Version Date: v1.0
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APPENDIX D

ANDRE WALKER

HAIR TYPING SYSTEM™

TYPE 1	STRAIGHT HAIR Fine & Fragile to Coarse & Thin (Curl Resistant)	A  B  C 
TYPE 2	WAVY HAIR Fine & Thin to Coarse & Frizzy	A  B  C 
TYPE 3	CURLY HAIR Loose Curls to Corkscrew Curls	A  B 
TYPE 4	KINKY HAIR Tight Coils to Z-Angled Coils	A  B 

Source: Walker, A. (n.d.). Hair type chart. Retrieved from <https://andrewalkerhair.com/#andre-walker>

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