

## Embracing natural hair: Online spaces of self-definition, e-sisterhoods and resistance

### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the use of online blogs as spaces where Black South African women create sisterhoods and self-define. Using online blogs, the women learn about natural black hair, affirm blackness and resist hierarchal ideologies of beautiful hair. Whereas predominantly, existing studies find that media representations of beauty and beautiful hair are defined via whiteness and that Black women also participate in self-production in ways that suggest an acceptance of the hierarchy that locates Black looks at the margins, very little research has been done about Black women who resist the hegemonic representation of and assumed superior status of white looks in general and flowing hair specifically.

Drawing on two theories: whiteness and Africana womanism, and using purposive sampling, this study examined 17 qualitative interviews with Black South African women and *Chocolate Hair Sisters*, *Natural Sisters*, and *FroChic* three online blogs started by Black South African women advocating for natural hair.

The findings indicate that online spaces have become sites of resistance, learning, positive Black affirmation, and support for and by Black women – sisterhood nets. In interviews, women narrated stories of how they had to learn to nurture and love their hair, something they were not taught from an early age. The absence of knowledge about dealing with natural hair led women to the online blogs where they found e-learning communities of sisters. This study's focus is how social hierarchies of appearance are contested online and overflow to offline spaces to affirm physical features of a race long-marginalised in social understandings of beauty.

### INTRODUCTION

This study is located at the intersection of race, gender, culture, and identity politics. In other words, Black South African women whose practices and approaches to hair are examined here are not just Black and South African; they also simultaneously occupy certain class positions, and have different sexual identities. Their lives are not just reducible to one simplistic identity factor such as race, gender or nationality. Collins and Bilge (2016) explain that intersectionality makes it clear that life experiences are shaped by diverse and mutually influencing ways because some

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people are advantaged while others are disadvantaged and that there are certain principles that have become institutionalised and elevated as normal or superior. This also means that the Black women whose practices this study examines navigate multiple and complicated oppressions that should not be boxed up or reduced to just one feature of their bodies. However, elevating hair as this study does is intended to show the complicated lives of Black South African women who negotiate everyday challenges including socially constructed issues about natural body features (such as hair) which they did not choose.

Black South African women have been involved in resistance struggles for a long time and actively fought alongside men against apartheid. However, unlike Black men, Black women have experienced a “shared disadvantage dual heritage and history of marginalisation because their culture and tradition considered them as subordinates to men because of their gender” (Onyebadi & Memani, 2017). Before apartheid, South Africa was under British imperial rule from the early 1800s. During the colonial period, imperialist cultures disrupted those of the colonized, whom they considered to be inferior others (Said, 1993). Colonisation did not only mean land seizure and cultural encroachment by a dominant nation, but it also perpetuated an ideology of inferiority of the colonised, an oppression that was resisted by Black people (Biko, 2002; Said, 1993). While colonisation ended decades ago, the ideology, practices and beliefs that elevated whiteness continue.

In this study’s context, this means that there is an entrenched perception of a white beauty ideal in which white women and their features are used as a beauty standard. Such features include silky, flowing hair, a thin body type and a fair skin tone. In other words, there is a persistent narrow beauty standard that is underpinned by whiteness. Regarding hair, a 2012 report commissioned by the South African Department of Trade and Industry noted that 60% of spending on cosmetic products goes toward buying face and hair products, particularly hair products for ethnic South African hair. This attentiveness to beauty includes a concern for straightened hair. A story on *News 24*, a South African online news source, reports that 80% of salon business is on straightening Black women’s hair. Similarly, *e-tv*, a South African-based television news investigative report that aired in 2012 showed that billions of South African Rands are spent on hair annually.

As indicated above, spending on women’s body products does not only pertain to hair products. There are scholars who connect expenditure on body products to pressure on women to be beautiful (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). This beauty is not limited to just hair and hairstyles but extends to an overall feminine beauty ideal that is standardised in media representations. Thapan (1995) writes that women strive to look like the media images they see. Roberts (2007) notes that messages embedded in media texts encourage women to construct the self as deficient before suggesting products to fix the deficiency. Beauty is therefore tied to consumerism and class. In other words, to achieve the constructed beauty ideal, women are encouraged to spend money. Ultimately, femininity intersects with media representations and race identity to construct the appearance of women of colour as inferior. All of this shows that women’s subjugation is multi-faceted and cannot be reduced to just one factor. In other words, colonisation, while responsible for initiating damage on African soil is not solely to blame. There are other factors that shape

women's identities and choices. These factors include women's own familial socialisation, as this study will show.

Regarding media representations of beauty and beautiful hair, it is important to note that these representations are actively resisted, as this study argues. This study links resistance with online spaces. In the contemporary world and with technological development and internet access, people spend a fair amount of time online. Many scholars, such as Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal (2007), note that online spaces have emerged as sites where people wage resistance. Discussions have moved past debates of whether online activism amounts to "real" engagement, and beyond merely co-opting the language of resistance and struggle (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2009).

Beyond the goal of activism, the internet has for decades become the first stop for information gathering. The wealth of information available online is plentiful and ranges from the mundane to complex issues, and can be useful, while some is also hazardous. For instance, Cline and Haynes (2001) note concerns about the quality of health information available online. Nonetheless, the availability of information is a positive step. Blogs about hair have also become a source of information for Black South African women intent on learning about their natural hair, products to use, hairstyles to try, and looking for hair salons that cater for natural hair.

As this study will show, these blogs are also sites of resistance as women use the information they gain to nurture their hair rather than conform to the normalised binary that locates natural black hair on the margins while elevating chemically processed and fake hair that does not resemble an afro (unprocessed African hair). In so doing, the women are agents for change and working to self-define their own appearance with the help of their e-sisters (the communities they have built online).

## **1. WHITENESS AND AFRICANA WOMANISM**

I draw theoretically from two scholars, Hudson-Weems (2004) and Richard Dyer (1997; 2017). Dyer pays pay critical attention to the politics of representation and finds that white women are consistently used as a standard of beauty for women of different races. Dyer (1997; 2017) analyses the representation of white people noting that in general, white people are positively represented, considered to be beautiful, and shown to have high morals. Dyer's observations are rooted in his textual analysis of films, photographs and of advertisements. It is in these that whiteness is represented as an explicit ideal of beauty.

By using whiteness as a theoretical framework, this study hopes to highlight the problems with the practices and hierarchical dominance of white people. In addition, this study will show that whiteness is actively resisted. It is important to note that whiteness transcends race and is inextricably linked to gender (Ferber, 2010), class (Roediger, 1999), sexuality (Ratele, 2009), and other factors. For instance, in the South African context, Green, Sonn and Matsebula (2007) note the complex ways in which whiteness is reproduced and how this manifests in perpetual racism, which according to Munro (2012) is connected to gender and queer politics of identity.

Regarding whiteness and media representations, research indicates that when women of different races such as Black women are included in the mass media their features are whitewashed (Holloway, 2016). In this way, the media message is clear: to be beautiful a Black woman must assimilate to the white beauty standard. An example is the current practice of “photoshopping” or digitally “correcting” Black bodies (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2017) such that they conform to or approximate the narrow white feminine ideal of thinness and fairer skin tone. For instance, Mbunyuza-Memani (2017) critiques the *True Love* magazine’s digital manipulation of Black bodies to make women look other than themselves (light skin-toned), a practice for which this South African women’s magazine has been publicly criticised.

Beyond media practices, people, and Black women specifically are assimilating the trends of self-production either via the hair choices they make (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2018), or the skin lightening creams they use (Molebatsi, 2009). This does not mean that women are passive audiences or that the media are a “silver bullet”; instead it shows the pervasiveness of media practices and the powerful role of the media in shaping beliefs. Other scholars such as Hunter (2007) argue that systems that champion colonial ideologies of whiteness as an ideal tend to reward those who conform to whiteness.

We learn through Foucault’s (1980) work that power can be resisted. For this reason, Hudson-Weems’ Africana womanism concept is important for this work. Hudson Weems, an African-American professor of English at the University of Missouri-Columbia posits that Africana womanism is a methodological approach to studying Africana women’s lives (2004).

In building this concept, Hudson-Weems identifies 18 characteristics. One of these characteristics is self-definition. Self-definition, explains Hudson-Weems (2004), is important instead of taking on labels coined by society. This is because to “self-define is to self-empower”. Some of the labels imposed on women emanate from the media and are normalised in repetitive media representations, while some have been internalised and are reproduced in society in general including by women themselves. The media can, through the represented images of Black women, inculcate ideologies about how a Black woman ought to self-define by reproducing her image following media representations of beauty that emphasise white beauty standards.

In addition, Hudson-Weems (2004) highlights that when a woman self-defines she rescues herself from damaging definitions and affirms herself. Efforts at self-definition are frustrated by the persistent emulation of Europeans (Fanon, 1967). Since the colonial period, Africans in Africa and later in the diaspora were discouraged from speaking African languages, while imitating Europe was encouraged, including imitating Europe’s material culture (Ani, 2000; Wa Thiong’o, 1994; Fanon, 1967). In her study with Black women, Perellin (2012) uses the notion of self-definition to examine how Black women define themselves despite prevalent media images that “demonise” Black women. As part of her study, women took photographs that capture how they see themselves and how they wish to be perceived.

Sisterhood, another feature of Hudson-Weems’ (2004) Africana womanism emanates from women-to-women empowerment. As a term, sisterhood explains the care and support that women

offer one another. This means there is reciprocity in these relationships with women propping one another up as they work to create, build and sustain bonds rather than breaking one another down. Sisterhood also demystifies the myth in which women are represented as gossip-mongers interested in constantly pulling other women down. Feminist scholars such as McDonald (2006) have also written extensively about the importance of sisterhoods. These scholars highlight the positive role that women play in other women's lives by helping to open up space and amplify one another's voices to challenge the multitude of societal oppressions.

In this study I use the concept Africana womanism, aware of its limitations. For instance, while this study is about Black South African women, Africana womanism was developed by an African-American scholar. Whereas the theory presents itself as legitimately appropriate to African women's lives, readers must be aware that race and culture manifest differently in different spaces. In other words, African women in the USA occupy a different space and context than those in South Africa. As such, I am aware that in the context of self and media representations of hair, Black women's experiences in the American context may be dissimilar to those faced by Black women in Africa and South Africa specifically.

However, it is important for readers to note that several continental African scholars have used Africana womanism as an overarching framework, while others have selected from its 18 elements in their research. For instance, Muwati and Gambahaya (2012) use one characteristic of Africana womanism, "flexible role player" in their study to challenge feminism's views on gender and space. In their study, Muwati and Gambahaya (2012:100) argue that in the Ndebele and Shona cultures in Zimbabwe, space is not interpreted as "private female and public male" and that, even as a private space, the home is not understood as an oppressive space for women. Similarly, Mararike (2012) uses the point of the centrality of family and writes about the significance of the kitchen in a Zimbabwean family, thus explaining the conceptualisation of the kitchen and its centrality to the vitality of life in Zimbabwe. Regarding self-definition, Mboti (2012) uses Africana womanism to examine the representation of Black women in two American films, *The Last King of Scotland* and *Blood Diamond*, and criticises the stereotypical way in which African womanhood is represented in the films, arguing that African women are disgraced and represented as prostitutes. Thus, emphasises Mboti (2012), there is a need for self-definition. No theory is full proof; however, the examples above illustrate and justify the relevance of Africana womanism in African studies and the theory's usefulness in this study.

## **2. IDENTITY, HAIR AND ONLINE RESISTANCE**

This section is divided into two. First, it summarises studies around identity and hair, before moving to research that has been conducted about e-communities and activism.

Many scholars and industry researchers, such as Kilbourne (1994), have argued that the media reinforce a beauty ideal based on white bodies. The white body as a standard of beauty includes its various features such as hair. Wolf (2013:25) states, "the mass media have made hair an important part of fashion and beauty", an element that is emphasised and makes a statement on

its own. Hair politics are not just topical in media images. Indeed, in August 2016 in South Africa, hair and the politics of Blackness re-entered public discourse through mainstream and social media reports of students protesting exclusionary school policies that policed “natural” black hair. Black female students narrated stories of discrimination based on their natural hair and hairstyles seen as distracting and untidy.

There is an increasing number of studies that focus on hair. Consider a study by Akinro and Mbunyuza-Memani (2019), which tracked women’s images published in leading South African and Nigerian women’s magazines between 2010 and 2015. These researchers found that over 72% of the women featured in the magazines had store-bought or processed hair. Consistent with beauty that elevates white femininity, with hair too it is hair that resembles that of white women that is considered beautiful. In other words, while there are varying types of hair, in part based on ethnicity and race, scholars such as Hooks (1992) have found a general absence of natural black hair in the media. Hooks (1992) argues that this erasure of natural black hair has led Black people to place great importance on straightened hair rather than their natural hair. Hooks (1993:85) also writes of the “obsession” that Black women have with hair, in part because for a long period an assumption prevailed “that straight hair was better, and it took less time and effort to manage”. Similarly, Thompson (2009) stresses that the emphasis on flowing hair as beautiful negatively impacts Black women’s ideas of beauty.

Tracing the history of Black people and hair in the US context, Byrd and Tharps (2001:14) argue, “African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans. Many white people went so far as to insist that blacks did not have real hair, preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as ‘wool’”. Consequently, Black women accepted this beauty ideal and “began to perceive themselves as ugly and inferior and further internalised the racist rhetoric and passed it on to their sons and daughters” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001:14).

The early American anthropologist Cuvier (1833:50) had long before asserted the superiority of white people in terms of beauty and intelligence, mocking Black people and their features, particularly skin colour and “woolly hair”. Therefore, to be considered “feminine”, Black women had to adopt features prescribed as beautiful by White people, features including “long straight hair”, since “dark skin and kinky hair were considered ugly and inferior” (Byrd & Tharps, 2001:14). While the association of natural black hair with inferiority is not new, it is ongoing. Hunter (2007) argues that the enduring superior value of white aesthetics such as light hair is a colonial legacy. However, as this study will show, the negativity and inferiority associated with natural Black hair is being actively resisted.

Regarding blogs, for a long time online activism was compared to street-style physical activism and seen as “less than the real deal”. However, there is a wealth of research that demonstrates the “reality” and importance of online activism. Hands (2011) writes of new ways of e-cooperation made possible by technologies that connect masses of people across the globe. Literature about blogging in the southern African context is thin. A few existing studies have focused on blogging and journalism (see research by Mpofo, 2017, and Bosch, 2010). Other studies have focused on the use of blogs for educational purposes (see studies by Waghid, 2016; Gachago & Ivala, 2012).

In other contexts, studies that connect women's voices and blogs are plentiful. However, there is still a paucity of research coming out of the southern African region. A recent study (Mpofu, 2018) examines women's use of blogs in Zimbabwe and finds that blogging has become an avenue for women to resist oppressive political and social norms. Elsewhere, blogs have been providing space for women activists for over a decade. For instance, Pierce (2010) analysed a blog started by an Iraqi woman and notes the blogger's use of songs and poetry as a strategy to question her patriarchal society.

Blogs have acted as platforms to accentuate women's voices. These voices may start out small, through one blog post, but help to spotlight social justice issues in far-flung areas. Researchers who study social movements also note that by using online spaces and technology, a revolution may begin in one small corner but ultimately reverberate across the globe, bringing needed attention to humanitarian issues (Huang & Hara, 2011). As a result, issues of human crises, for instance, receive attention leading to pressure on governments and later positive social change.

The rise of online activism has led to the emergence of terminology that succinctly captures the online social phenomena. For instance, Earl and Schussman (2003:162) see forms of online mobilisation and cooperation as "e-protests" and "e-movements". However, as this study notes, online protests are not just platforms for protest. These spaces with their technological affordances also allow users to leave comments, post replies, or lurk without commenting. In this way, online blogs contribute to forming communities (Pan, MacLaurin & Crofts, 2007). These affordances open up space for learning to occur.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Three research questions underpin this study. These are: what role do blogs about hair play in providing information to Black South African women and what kind of information do women seek from the blogs? Second, what inspires Black South African women to form online communities premised on hair, and third, what benefits do users derive from the blogs? To answer these questions, data for this study were drawn from online blog posts and interviews with Black South African women. Drawing on the two theories and literature discussed above and using purposive sampling, this paper examines three online blogs started by Black South African women and 17 qualitative interviews conducted with Black South African women. These approaches will help to show how women find sisterhoods online and use information shared online in their everyday lives both on and offline.

People use the internet for various reasons, including soliciting advice for hair tips. This paper is based on research conducted on three blogs. The first two, *Chocolate Hair Sisters* and *Natural Sisters*, were purposively selected following an internet search. Lindolf and Taylor (2011) explain that purposive sampling allows researchers to learn from communities most relevant for the research. Researchers make a "deliberate choice" based on who can provide information necessary to untangle research questions (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016:2). In addition, Tongco (2007) states that purposive sampling ensures that researchers acquire knowledge that is culturally specific.

The third blog site, *FroChic*, was identified through a snowball sampling method which has been successfully used in qualitative research by scholars such as Noy (2008). Also, Browne (2003) used a snowball sampling method in a women-specific study such as this present study. Browne (2003) states that snowball sampling allows researchers to find participants by using social networks of available participants. Indeed, I learned of *FroChic* through an interview participant who actively uses the site as a source of information.

I found these three blog sites to be relevant for this study because of their focus on natural black hair and because they were started and are maintained by Black South African women. Blogs that did not meet the criteria set for this study were excluded. For instance, although many other blogs were found during the data sourcing stage, many seemed to advocate for natural hair in word only, as pictures included on the sites featured chemically processed hair, hair straightening products and weaves (fake hair, and styles that do not resemble an afro).

Some of the blogs included products intended to straighten the coils out of natural black hair. Based on the selection strategy, only blogs that positively represented natural black hair, included pictures of natural black hair, and hosted an interactive space for conversations were included in this study.

Regarding the interviews, I interviewed 17 Black women following a semi-structured interview approach advanced by Lindolf and Taylor (2011). This type of interviewing allows researchers to prepare questions in advance although researchers also have flexibility to probe participants for in-depth information. The women represent a diverse range of geographic locations including Johannesburg, Cape Town, East London, Grahamstown, Pretoria, Polokwane, and various other parts of the country. This study is part of a larger research project. Four of the women interviewed for this present study were part of the larger project and they helped me find other interview participants. This means I found 14 of the women through the snowballing method. Of the women interviewed, 16 are in their mid to late 30s and most hold mid to senior level positions in their places of employment. Of the seventeen women, thirteen were interviewed between 2014 and 2015, while three were interviewed at the height of the student protests against exclusionary school policies in South Africa in August 2016.

In conducting the interviews, I relied on strategies advanced by Rubin and Rubin (2011) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), who caution against asking leading questions, and promote a conversational style of interviewing. Researchers such as Lindolf and Taylor (2011) have also argued for interviewing that does not threaten participants. These scholars prefer interview engagements in which interviewers keep an open mind, “willing to be students”, and are “charming conversationalists” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011:171).

I coded the data using the line-by-line coding approach explained by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011). I was looked for language that is indicated in the Africana womanism as features of sisterhoods and self-definition, the whiteness framework and existing literature about hair, and studies conducted about how people use online communication spaces. In other words, I used



a deductive approach explained by Lindolf and Taylor (2011:246) as the process of “applying concepts from theory and existing research”. Therefore, the theoretical frameworks and literature were instrumental in sensitising me about what could be important in the data I was analysing. This was necessary to identify how the women were framing our interview conversations. After several instances of reading and coding the data, themes began to emerge. Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999) suggest that researchers should read the data numerous times while making note of emergent themes. This method of identifying themes following the coding stage has been explained by several scholars including Crabtree and Miller (1999) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Thematic analysis necessarily focuses on identifying patterns in the data rather than simply summarising the data based on the research questions (Clark & Braun, 2013). Following on Clark and Braun’s (2007) suggestion, I looked beyond the surface of the data and examined the underlying meanings in what the women shared with me and what I was finding in the blogs. I later categorised these themes such as the women’s own identity construction based on lessons acquired from the blogs, how the women built e-relationships/sisterhoods, and how e-sisterhoods and lessons learned helped the women to resist long-held oppressive ideologies about their hair.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

##### **4.1 White correct: beliefs about natural black hair**

In relation to the first research question about the role of blogs in providing information and the kind of information that women seek, the following are the results. In presenting these results I sketch out some critical background necessary to understand the women’s perceptions, feelings, and practices about their hair which are rooted in the women’s childhoods.

More than half of the participants in this study spoke about their hair as an “inconvenience.” It emerged that the issue of hair that is not chemically processed to make it silky is tied to the women’s own upbringing as little girls. Many participants told stories of how they grew up observing women in their lives straightening or what I call disciplining their natural hair into *soft submission*. This suggests a perpetuation of colonial and apartheid beliefs that Blackness is inferior – something Biko (2002) questioned.

In the women’s childhoods, natural black hair was treated as a problem that had to be “white corrected” (see Mbunyuza-Memani, 2018 for a further discussion on white correction). The women were convinced through observations, lessons from their social, and individual as well as collective experiences that their hair was an inconvenience so difficult to manage that a better solution was necessary. Consider the extract from an interview with Anta, who said:

I have once used weaves. Besides beautifying myself with weaves ... I believed that they were making my hair life easier ... For me having a weave meant I could wake up and go without making any effort to beautify myself ... so I thought. I was never taught how to manage my natural hair ... and I also never learnt to do that either. My

hair is coarse, kinky and coily, meaning that combing it was painful and I also believe that my natural hair could not grow to be long and manageable ... so [I] decided to put on chemicals/relaxers to make it more manageable.

Here we find a revelation that would be repeated by many of the people in the study – that they were never taught how to manage natural hair. Zee, one of the interview participants, noted, “We have high maintenance hair. That’s all.” This means that the women negatively evaluate their hair, with some of them in search of means to manage the inconvenience. This pervasive belief that natural black hair is difficult to manage is consistent with an argument by Hooks (1993) that Black women tended to perceive chemically processed hair as easy to manage, and beautiful.

Furthermore, not only was natural hair “absent” physically, it was also largely absent in conversations and was not seen as “normal” or beautiful. This abnormality of a natural occurring feature of the self (hair) led the women to believe that natural black hair is a feature that must always be physically absent. In other words, absence in conversations also led to physical absence. On the rare occasion of conversing about natural hair, it was to comment on the difficulty of combing out the coils and the general pain associated with managing Black hair. Upon probing further, I learned that women compared two hair types and experiences. That is, the experience and pain associated with combing unprocessed natural hair to the ease of styling silky hair. These comparative experiences led women to regard their hair as an inconvenience and as ugly.

Negative beliefs about natural hair extended to how the women dealt with their own children’s hair in ways that conform to whiteness standards. In other words, the women’s own experiences intermingled with whiteness ideologies that consider hair that assimilates that of White people as supreme. When I interviewed Kozu, a mother of two girls, her oldest daughter was 10 years old at the time. During our interview she admitted that it had been years since she began straightening her daughter’s hair, saying, “I straightened my older daughter’s hair as early as 6 years; it was frustrating when it came to combing time ... I suppose I thought it would be easily manageable or something ... then, there is the issue of neatness.” By the time I interviewed Kozu a pattern had emerged – a pattern of women convinced of the need to “whiten the kinks out”, believing that natural hair is ugly and that to be beautiful one must assimilate white standards. In this interview extract we also find the association of straightened hair with neatness, which suggests that natural black hair is considered untidy, hence the need to fix it. What we also see here is that the negative perceptions adopted from an early age continue to be passed on from generation to generation.

However, I also noted some interesting outliers. My earlier research (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2017; Akinro & Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019) noted the absence of natural black hair in the South African media representation. Hooks (1992) also argued that the absence of natural black hair in media representations convinces Black women that their hair is ugly. What emerged from the present data indicates that connecting media representations and beautiful

hair begins from an early age. Lika, mother of a six-year-old girl at the time of our interview, narrated a story of how she sometimes feels like succumbing to pressure from her daughter, who does not see herself positively represented in the South African media. Lika said:

Our South African women in media/TV wear their make up all the time ... My daughter wants to look like them, e.g. when she sees these ladies with long hair ... she will scream, "Mama! Mama! Can you do my hair like that?" I have to explain to her that I love her with her natural look.

For some women, motherhood seemed to play a compelling role. An intricate mix of questions from their daughters about hair, problematic media representations, and their own motivation to be positive role models helped the women become change agents, setting the women on a journey of self-discovery, and self-definition. For instance, in one interview, Lishe, a mother of two girls, explained how her nonchalant feelings about hair and how following fashion trends of straightened hair and wearing hair extensions such as weaves were abruptly disrupted by her two young daughters, who were unrelenting in their questions about hair and identity. The girls asked their mother why her hair was silky, straight and different from their afro (natural and chemically processed Black hair) and whether she was white, and whether she thought their hair was ugly. These questions, she admits, "were sobering" and forced her to rethink her views and practices about not just hair but her identity as a Black woman and what she was teaching her young children about Blackness. Lishe, like other women I interviewed, began to self-define their own standards of beautiful hair.

Similarly, the blog *Chocolate Hair Sisters* was started by a woman with two young daughters, frustrated by ineptness at styling her own young daughters' hair. She writes about how she had to "relearn everything and stop all the bad habits". In attempts to self-define, a feature Hudson-Weems (2003; 2004) considers to be characteristic of Africana women, the women I interviewed turned to the online space. As I show below, the online space allowed the women to find narrative tools to talk about their hair, learn to deal with frustrations of managing natural hair later in life, and the absence of positive natural black hair affirmation in the media.

#### **4.2 Embodied resistance and self-definition**

Navigating a desire to change their attitudes toward their hair along with their appearance, women fraught with the anxiety of hair illiteracy found lessons online through natural hair blogs. This is what inspired women to form their own online communities, and thus answers the second research question.

The blogs were started by women frustrated by the lack of information about natural black hair, the negative representation of black natural hair and its absence in the mass media. All the blogs analysed provide a background to how the sites began and offer advice to women seeking information about transitioning from chemically processed hair or those just looking for tips on treating their hair. Consider this example from *Natural Sisters*:

I am just another sister who loves hair and healthy living and has taken the task to research, try out specific products and styling methods, to put it all in writing and encourage, warn, help and inspire others along the way. I am still learning as I walk along this journey.

Similarly, *FroChic*, another blog started by two Black South African women, states that the blog is “for all naturals & healthy hair enthusiasts ... and continues to be a great resource for all naturals.” Consistent with the “tradition” of blogging, women who began these blogs also offer personal stories about their hair journeys and offer advice on styling and managing their natural hair. However, the bloggers also make it clear that they challenge the relegation of natural hair to the margins. For example, explaining the goal of the blog, *Natural Sisters* write:

We create and promote spaces that seek to build a community that educates, but also where identity is encouraged, and celebrated. We are to challenge the perception, misinformation and poor representation of natural hair.

The bloggers recognise that natural black hair is fraught with frustrations and negative perceptions and stigma. For this reason, these women bloggers have taken it upon themselves to ensure that blackness is affirmed and that the absence of their own identity feature, “natural black hair” is addressed and corrected. Evident here is the goal of education, identity affirmation and resistance.

The bloggers’ efforts are acknowledged, as demonstrated by this comment on *FroChic*:

Every time I see naturals anywhere in South Africa I JUST FEEL SO GOOD on their behalf, it’s like: YES, finally we are loving our coils! and I am so glad we have representatives in our entertainment industry. All the ladies in this post have amazing hair! I love seeing this!

Also, *Natural Hair* purports to:

... connect the ambassadors, business and natural hair community; promoting conversations that inspire, creating opportunities that empower, and supporting spaces that will connect the movement that is challenging the status quo on the definition of beauty.

What we learn here is that bloggers situate their identity as important and necessary to reclaim and elevate, defining their own beauty standards oppositional to normalised feminine ideals of flowing silky hair associated with that of White women. In other words, rather than the blogs functioning simply as personal journals fulfilling individualistic needs of journaling personal hair stories, Black female bloggers and their followers are activists working to resist the persistent construction of natural black hair as inferior.

In this way, Black South African women, consistent with Hudson-Weems's (2004) assertions, are self-defining. In other words, rather than conforming to hegemonic media representations and other societal preferences of beautiful hair, these women actively chose themselves and their natural black hair. The women, acting as change agents use the online space to challenge the hierarchical representation and assumption of silky, processed, fake, store-bought, and unnatural black hair as beautiful and preferred. That is, the bloggers define a different standard of beautiful hair for themselves and other women who follow their blogs and possibly those with whom they interact in offline spaces. As the data indicate, the goal is to construct and represent natural black hair as beautiful, normal, and a feature that should be socially accepted without question.

Featured on these blogs are visual images of Black South African women, including celebrities, who sport natural black hair. These visuals include videos that demonstrate step-by-step processes of nurturing, products to use, and caring for natural black hair, and these often spark debates and inquisitive comments from the users. As such, while the blogs function as sites of positively representing natural black hair, these sites also double up as classrooms where Black women intent on disrupting the hegemonic absence of their hair are groomed and where sisterhood bonds are formed.

#### **4.3 Lessons and e-sisterhoods**

The interactive capabilities of blogs allow users to leave comments, ask questions, respond to questions posed and generally “*e-nteract*” (interact electronically) among themselves. The findings in this sub-section relate to the third research question and focus on the benefits women gain from the blogs. As this discussion will show, women benefit through receiving lessons in a supportive environment, leading to the creation of sisterhood bonds.

Like face-to-face offline conversations, with turn taking, questions and responses, with online blogs too there are instances of back and forth questions and responses, as users share advice, suggestions and guidance. The questions asked are interesting and warrant attention. Consider this question from a user on *Natural Sisters*: “Hi ladies, Can I wash my dreads with Sunlight laundry bar as they get dandruff now and again?”

Questions like this are generally followed by several suggestions and advice, as we see here:

Hi Thobi, I think Sunlight Laundry Bar can be too harsh on your locks, so I would avoid using it. Try to use shampoos that remove build up from your locks. I would recommend ORS Olive Oil Creamy Aloe Shampoo. It works great to remove any dirt and grease that has built up, but won't strip moisture from your hair. I would also suggest that you use natural oils on your scalp, like coconut oil and olive oil. It possible that your scalp might be dry hence the dandruff. Hope that helps.

Beyond functioning as spaces of information exchange, the blogs also work as support groups where women vent their frustrations about hair and receive support and encouragement. Examples of such posts include the following post on *FroChic*:

When I first read about hair types my natural hair hadn't really grown out enough to be able to determine my hair type but I was secretly wishing and hoping it would be a 3C or at least 4A lol. I mean my mum has coils in this category so why shouldn't I? ... [I] had coarse looking hair staring me in the face 😞😞

In another post on *Chocolate Hair Sisters*, a mother frustrated with her daughter's hair vented, "My daughter's hair is a total mess. Her hair has knots, no growth at all even when she plaits her hair. It also dries up so quickly at the back 😞."

In each instance, women are not judged, ridiculed or admonished. Instead, advice is freely shared, and love given, as is the case in this response to the frustrated user on *FroChic*:

I can imagine your reaction when you found out your 4C hair. Just breathe. Take all negatively out your mind. Now you have a clear direction on how to care for it. Remember all hair is beautiful and unique. It's boils down to caring for your hair. What's best to you is different from what's best to someone else. Smile girl!

Similarly, a post in *Chocolate Hair Sisters* encourages mothers to model love for natural hair in the way they speak about theirs and their children's hair. "Your children must see you loving your hair before they love theirs. Speak only good things about them, their hair and yours."

The women's work of support is greatly appreciated, as illustrated by these examples from *FroChic*:

Awesome blog. Always good to find a community of local natural hair lovers because it is not difficult to then find the products suggested. I have had natural hair for as long as I can remember but kept cutting and doing whatever else, now I want it to grow.

Here is another example:

Yayyy! Am smiling ... it's really good having the support of someone with more experience. Thank you, this helps.

There is an interesting use of emoticons here that generally emphasises frustration, through a crying emoticon, or elation, demonstrated by using a smiling emoticon. Scholars have noted that emoticons are accepted as devices that in computer-mediated communication compensate for missing face-to-face clues (Walther & D'Addario, 2001). The women share tears and smiles and in so doing make meaning from their conversations and learning about their hair while developing sisterhood bonds.

Whereas conflicts generally arise online as people become emboldened to communicate frankly without the concern of being in the same physical space, something that Suler (2004) attributes to the invisibility afforded by computer media communication, one of the striking features of these blogs is how the women are generally respectful of another. In all three blogs analysed, women frequently use the salutation “Hi ladies”, as we see in the example above. Also consider this example, “Hi Sesi Ruth, I’m in need of assistance in growing my hairline and covering the bold spots on my hair, what can you recommend I use? Please assist.” The word “sesi” literally means “sister”, and in Black South African society, “sister” is used to indicate respect.

Consistent with Hudson-Weems’s (2004) assertions, these women are forming sisterhoods. On these online sites, women bond over their common interest – natural hair – demonstrating the embracing of a feature of their identity and a resistance to whiteness, specifically hair hierarchies that marginalise natural black hair. Bonds further form as the women respond to one another and offer testimonies in words and images about hair growth, attitude toward natural hair, and hairstyles learned through following advice received on the blogs. Not only do the blogs become spaces of learning and resistance, but women have also found caring communities where their identity is positively affirmed.

#### **4.4 Limitations of the study**

Conducting research on blogs can be challenging as sites are taken down without notice, making it difficult to go back and track conversations. However, even with this challenge, this study provides new knowledge about an area of identity politics engendered online and celebrated in offline spaces. The insight this study provides is not without limitations. First, the number of participants is small. For this reason, this small sample of participants is not intended to be representative of all Black women in South Africa with or without natural hair. In other words, the women are not representative of a generalised population of Black women in the country. However, I believe that the in-depth information I gained from the qualitative interviews is a first step that can inform similar future studies. Second, while the blogs analysed offer insight into ways in which women are creating online communities of learning and resistance, the number of blogs analysed is very small. As such, there are limitations to the study’s generalisability. Future research should consider a broader sample of participants and online sites.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The internet and associated technologies have changed the way we imagine communication. Now, individual users with access to internet connectivity can *e-nteract* with mass audiences across the world. In addition, the internet with its wealth of information has become a one-stop shop for people in search of information that is not readily available elsewhere. With this information, this study sought to answer two related questions about the role of hair blogs as information platforms: the reasons Black South African women created their own information

communities premised on hair, and what benefits accrue to the women. As this study has shown, women frustrated with their natural hair, having grown up in a world in which natural black hair is absent, turned to the online space and became content producers and consumers.

Flowing from an analysis of three blogs started by Black women, I showed how women create online communities of sisterhoods while learning new ways of nurturing their hair. In addition, these Black sisters connect with others with whom they share and celebrate a common identity. Importantly, these online communities also function as spaces for affirming identity and defining their own standard of beautiful hair. In other words, the women work to define themselves, challenge oppressive representations of natural black hair and wrest power away from those who look down on Blackness.

Whereas neither beauty nor power are reducible to hair or skin colour, these two features have become ways in which beauty is coded in the media. Specifically, resistance to whiteness comes via the women's insistence on defining themselves. The resistance embodies negating hegemonic and global standards of beauty that are politically, socially and economically represented and legitimised as attractive and convenient.

Through their strategies of resistance, the women's voices and online activities function to reclaim their identity, as Black society continues to decolonise itself and works to challenge various forms of white dominance.

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