

**The Third Wave Afro:  
How the Black beauty blogosphere has mobilized new meaning and movement**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

The afro holds a rich American history and has come to signify a wide range of social and political meanings. While slavery and civil rights once bolstered the meanings attributed to Black hair, social media has given rise to nuanced meanings and has mobilized a natural hair “movement.” This analysis explores the social and technological affordances of social media that have enabled the rapid success of a movement; the ways in which social media spaces have saturated the afro with new meanings; and the ways in which Black women have negotiated these meanings. A textual analysis of blogs and video blogs was paired with a focus group discussion to collect data. Based on the findings, this analysis argues for the importance of self-representation, transparency, nonlinearity, and spreadability of social media in mobilizing a movement and that the current afro has been redefined in terms of liberation, sustainability, beauty, camaraderie, and authenticity.

## **Introduction**

Hair styles and textures carry the weight of endless emotionally and politically charged connotations including conceptions of beauty, gender, class, race and identity. Understandings of hair in relation to wider societal contexts are strongly perpetuated in mainstream media channels depicting idealized standards of beauty and class. The stringent Eurocentric beauty ideals reinforced by mass media channels can be particularly problematic for women of color who do not easily fit the Eurocentric mold and who are generally underrepresented in mainstream texts. When Black women are included in visual media content, more often than not, naturally curly and kinky African American hair textures are excluded, leaving the majority of Black female faces exhibiting straight-styled hair, nearly absencing Black women with Afrocentric hair textures completely.

An explosion of niche web content on social media platforms, referred to as the Black beauty blogosphere, has emerged illuminating Afrocentric features as a separate-but-equal kind of beautiful. What differentiates these niche web platforms from mainstream texts are their projections of Black female self-representation and their interactive structure. Unlike mainstream and traditional broadcasts, these interactive web platforms embracing natural hair are being produced by Black women for Black women.

Through a textual analysis of interactive web platforms and a focus group discussion, this study will examine the ways in which the social media sphere has played a pivotal role in the saturating the textured afro with new meanings. This study will also explore the ways in which the technological and social structures of interactive web platforms have propelled a movement by investigating the nature of the participation these spaces invite. We will also evaluate how

Black women are participating in a natural hair movement and how Black women negotiate the nuanced meanings which natural hair has come to signify.

Definitions of natural hair are highly varied throughout the Black community, though natural hair is generally defined as Black hair in its naturally textured state, without the use of texture-altering chemicals. Around 70 to 80 percent of Black American women use chemical treatments, also known as relaxers, on their hair to loosen curly or kinky hair into textures more comparable to Caucasian hair (Thompson, 2008). The increasing presence of natural hair blogs and video blogs (vlogs) along with increasing interests in a natural hair “movement” not only encourages Black women to refrain from the common usage of chemical relaxers and to begin wearing their hair in its naturally textured state, but posits new standards and negotiations of beauty more accessible to Black women.

The introduction of Web 2.0 and interactive media has created an expressional outlet where more varied projections of Black beauty and Black women can be negotiated. Differences in the opinions and values asserted to natural hair can lead to tensions and disconnects among Black women if the meanings being attached to natural hair either exclude or over-generalize. On the flipside, framing natural hair in a certain light can also encourage solidarity among Black women with shared experiences. Though the natural hair discourse often coins natural hair as a “movement” or something progressive, it is important to evaluate the multiple and conflicting ways in which natural hair is being signified, as these understandings vary within the Black community.

These social media platforms found on the web function in a manner unique to their interactive nature where content is both directed at audiences and created by audiences, differing from traditional mass media broadcasts that operate using a one-way model of content

transmission. The exchange of ideas taking place on social media spaces pertaining to natural hair, as opposed to mainstream broadcasts, differs drastically because Black women are actively engaging with and creating self-representations rather than receiving content created by corporate media producers. Rak (2005) explains how “bloggers have an uncanny willingness to be ‘real’ (that is, to discuss actual experiences and to tell the truth),” which is detected and appreciated by their audiences, (p. 175). Thus, interactive media have created spaces for mediated expression and appreciation of naturally textured Black hair along with testimonials of the natural hair experience.

Examining how certain site structures may be facilitating active participation in the natural hair discourse will shed light on the extent to which interactive media formats can mobilize an entire movement and shift the cultural norms and meanings we attribute to a concept as archaic as hair. Analyzing the ways in which Black women audiences are renegotiating new meanings attributed to the afro offers insight into how perceptions of Black hair are shifting and how the historical conversation involving Black hair has evolved. This analysis will support the notion of a new wave afro whose meanings have been propelled and redefined by a shift in the internet landscape to a highly social environment.

## **Literature Review**

### **Black “Hairstory” and Politics**

Kinks and curls are nothing new. For as long as African Americans have been present in the United States, so has the textured afro. What have shifted are the social and political landscapes behind the evolving perceptions of the afro throughout time and space. In discussing

the importance of hair in the context of Black American identity and self-representation in the media, it is important to understand the history and politics behind African American hair. The historical racial hierarchy at the root of African American oppression has given rise to a “color complex” among Blacks today, where lighter complexions are valued over darker skin tones more revealing of African descent, (Robinson, 2011). A similar complex exists in relation to Black hair textures and hair styles linked to race, reflective of a 15<sup>th</sup> century African history where hair dress signified a range of meanings including “marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth and rank,” (Thompson, 2009). When migrated to the United States, African hair took on a new wealth of meanings.

### *First Wave*

We can consider textured African American hair as it existed during slavery as the “first wave afro” signifying class or classlessness. During American slavery African hair adopted new connotations in the United States revealing of the type of labor forced upon the slaves; field slaves had less time for maintaining their hair and were known to keep their hair covered and hidden while house slaves wore wigs to mimic the hair textures of slave owners, (Thompson, 2009). Conceptions of “good” and “bad” hair within the Black community are thought to have emerged from the privileged status attributed to Blacks with straighter or looser hair textures post slavery, who were assumed a “non-slave status before the Civil War” and who faced more employment opportunities afterwards, (Robinson, 2011). As a result, kinky hair textures have come to signify Blackness and classlessness, while looser hair textures have come to signify Whiteness and privilege when discussing race relations in the history of the United States. Through continual exposure to American culture perpetuated in mainstream media young Black

American girls learn to devalue Blackness and value more typically White features, which have “contributed to the oppression of Black girlhood,” (Hopson, 2009, p. 31).

Today, conflicting views exist regarding the African American economy where Blacks are applauded for breakthroughs and growth in the cosmetic industry while conversely being criticized for an obsessive overconsumption of hair products and for “sustaining a multi-billion dollar Black hair care industry,” (Robinson, 2009). Patents including Madam C.J. Walker’s hot comb in the early 1900’s along with George E. Johnson’s chemical relaxer in the 1960’s were created by Black Americans for Black Americans to obtain straight styles and were generally considered major strides in both the African American social, economic, and hair struggles (Thompson, 2009). Today, over 70 percent of Black women chemically relax their hair while some African Americans are combating notions of “good” hair and have criticized the tendency of Black women to resort to chemicals, wigs, and weaves to alter their natural hair textures, including Chris Rock’s humorous film *Good Hair* (2009) shedding light on these issues.

### *Second Wave*

With the rise of the civil rights movement and a shifting social and political landscape during the 1960s and 1970s came the circulation of textured African American hair images in mainstream contexts where the Afro became politically charged. The increasing popularity of the television over time as a common household item was also a means through which the politics and activism occurring out-of-home on the streets were being familiarized and introduced into people’s homes on the screens in their living rooms. As a young Black reporter in the early 1970’s, Furguson (2007) explains how the news director, a White man, had told her she would “have to get rid of that Afro,” if she wanted to keep her job as a reporter, (p. 80). He insisted that



the news station had been receiving calls from viewers, a majority of whom were White, saying that she looked “militant, like Angela Davis,” and that she was “scaring them,” (Ferguson, 2007). In opting to wear Afrocentric hairstyles and by refraining from the usage of chemical relaxers it often was, and often still is, assumed that Black women are either asserting politically charged messages about civil liberties or Black pride. White (2005) explains that “the choice to wear one’s hair natural is both an act of resistance and affirmation,” resisting typically Eurocentric beauty ideals and affirming Afrocentric beauty standards, (p. 295). White’s description of natural hair as a “choice” also implies a politicized nature of Black hair texture, suggesting that hair styles are never neutral but always reflective of a politicized decision.

The idea of natural hair as resistance to internalized racism and Black oppression also impresses ideas of natural hair as an affirmation of Black female liberation that intermingled with the Feminist movement during the time. Collins (2000), highlights six “distinguishing features” of what she terms Black Feminist Thought including (1) Black female empowerment and the resistance of oppression, (2) unique reactions of individual Black women to similar challenges, (3) connections between Black women as a collective group, (4) Black women intellectuals, (5) the welcoming and encouragement of change, and (6) activism (pp. 22-43). The language involving natural hair as an expression of resistance along with the interactive, communal nature of social web platforms positions natural hair in light of Black Feminist Thought by discussing natural hair as an “everyday acts of resistance” to oppression and as reflective of individualized experiences to similar challenges, group connections, and the advocating of change, (Collins, 1989, p. 746).

### *Third Wave*

As the social and political landscape has changed since the 1960s and 1970s, so have perceptions of the afro. Similar to how the feminist movement has existed in waves responsive to the particular environments of the time, the afro discussed in the context of a natural hair movement also seems to have existed in similar waves of meaning receptive to particular time periods. As the internet landscape has shifted since its introduction in the early 1990's to a highly populated and social space, the explosion of social media platforms have provided a means through which the meanings attached to natural hair can be renegotiated and re-represented by Black women. Though it can be argued that the afro still holds politicized meanings, this analysis explores the ways in which the afro has become politicized in nuanced ways and how its meaning has been perpetuated particularly by social media spaces as liberating, sustainable, authentic, therapeutic, and beautiful.

Asserting the idea of natural hair as symbolic places assumptions both on Black women with and without natural hair. For example, certain representations of natural hair might suggest to a broader audience that all Black women with natural hair are actively participating in acts of resistance or that all women with relaxed hair are actively participating in acts of self hatred by "trying to maintain their hair in a way that is unnatural to them," (White, 2005). Discourse of natural hair as liberal or progressive may suggest that certain Black women typed on the basis of hair texture are either on board or off board this "movement" away from Black oppression. The Black natural hair rhetoric is not a new phenomenon but rather historical and evolving over time with the current natural hair discourse being a contemporary paradigm.

### **The Black Beauty Blogosphere**

Castells (2007) explains how institutional systems, including the media, are reflective of “power relations as negotiated by a historical process of domination and counter domination,” in society, (p. 239). In general, the blogosphere is a space where members of what Castells (2007) identifies as the “counter-power” group, or sub-cultural groups, have the ability to “resist and challenge power relations” with “opposing values and interests,” (p. 239). In discussing the interwoven relationships between media, technology, and audiences, Castells (2007) develops the idea of an “active audience” whose interaction with media is a combination of controlling and following media texts, differing from traditional conceptions of a passive who receive content without much space for renegotiation or response. The progression of media technologies has given rise to “a new form of socialized [mass] communication” which Castells (2007) coins as “mass self-communication,” where active audience members are self-generating content directed at a potentially global audience, countering traditional mass communication forms, (p.248). Blogging and vlogging are forms of mass self-communication where amateur media producers and active audience members are both self-generating content and actively engaging with the content.

The socialized format of mass self-communication also has implications on the different ways of thinking about groups or subcultures of people. Castells (2007) discusses the importance of thinking about media as related to the “public mind.” Whatever content is excluded or included in mass media channels is also excluded or included in the “public mind,” (Castells, 2007). Conceptions of the “public mind,” and the way we think about groups are shifting due to the social affordances of internet technologies in relation to sub-cultural groups. Black women can be thought of as a subgroup of African Americans which can then be thought of as a cultural

subgroup of Americans. Black women with natural hair are an even smaller branch, being a subgroup of African American women.

Although individual Black women making up the active audience have unique experiences, their collective participation is what composites the larger conversation and natural hair discourse of the group. Wellman (2003) stresses how the rise of internet technology has impressed a shift “away from groups and towards networked individualism,” occurring at multiple tiers including interpersonal, organizational, and inter-organizational, (p. 1). The idea of networked individualism speaks to the ways individuals are self-generating content and then directing content outward to mass networks in a web-like, as opposed to linear, model. Natural hair blogs and vlogs are places where members of a minute subgroup of a subculture, Black women with natural hair, are participating as an interactive audience while simultaneously building networks.

Hookway (2008) defines blogs as “a series of frequently updated, reverse chronological ordered posts on a common webpage...characterized by instant text/graphic publishing, an archiving system...and a feedback mechanism in which readers can ‘comment’ on specific posts,” (p. 92). Vlogs can be similarly defined as blogs in the form of audio-visual video clips rather than scripted posts. Blogging and vlogging are relatively new phenomena that have exploded in popularity within the last two decades, (Nelson, 2006). Blogging started in the early 1990’s, when a minority of HTML literate “internet enthusiasts” began coding weblogs with links to other sites and reader’s comments, (Nelson, 2006). By the late 1990s and early 2000’s, programmers developed blogging software enabling amateurs to create blogs without any prior knowledge of HTML coding, (Nelson, 2006). Today, the number of blogs published in one day trumps the number of books published in the span of one year, (Nelson, 2006). The ease and

accessibility of the blogosphere have created a space for national and global conversation significantly impacting societal trends, news reporting, and public opinion (Nelson, 2006).

### *Social/Tech Affordances*

The uses and values of blogs and vlogs differ in some ways from traditional media broadcasts, as they offer spaces for self-representation often absent in mainstream broadcasts. Since blogs are created from amateurs, rather than corporate media producers, it can be argued that Black beauty blogs, offering wider and multifaceted depictions of Black women, have emerged to compensate for a lacking in mainstream media where Black women with dominant Afrocentric features feel underrepresented. Understanding differences in the blogosphere in comparison to mainstreamed texts targeted to African Americans is important to explain why Black women engage with the natural hair blogosphere at all. Lucrative participation from members of the niche community is particularly important for the blogosphere, as user traffic, or views, is both figuratively and literally thought of as “currency,” and for many bloggers, a source of income, (Nelson, 2006).

When discussing audience participation on these interactive web platforms, it is also useful to consider the affordances or structures of the sites themselves and how certain elements of structural design may prompt or limit particular uses and functions. Gaver (1991) defines affordances as “properties...that are compatible with and relevant for people’s interactions,” (p. 79). Users of web content will perceive “potentials for action,” (Gaver, 1991, p. 79). Similarly to how the affordances, or potentials for action, of a door handle might prompt someone to either push the door open, rather than pull, the vertical elongated structure of a scrollbar, for instance, allows users to scroll up and down as opposed to side to side, (Gaver, 1991). While visual affordances, such as arrows or text boxes, may be perceived by viewers as an initial clue of how

to interact, aural affordances, such as clicking noises or audio streams, may be perceived by viewers as a reinforcement of certain interactions, prompting users to repeat the same types of interactions on the sites (Gaver, 1991).

The particular interfaces used in blogs and vlogs can prompt a feeling of intimacy and level of interaction between users and sites depending on the website's affordances. Wellman et al. (2003) discuss how "social affordances" of the internet environment lend an opportunity for the interactive audience participation taking place on the web. These "social affordances" include a broad bandwidth or the "rapid exchange of large amounts of data," twenty-four hour connectedness, globalized connectedness, personalization, and wireless portability, (Wellman et al., 2003). Visual, aural and social affordances of internet platforms such as blogs and vlogs impact the frequency of participation along with the intimate nature of participation from the active audiences. For example, wireless portability may sway audiences to engage in web content more frequently because the information can be accessed while on-the-go, anywhere on the globe with wireless connection. Personalization could impact the nature of participation if audience members are more likely to share intimate responses on web spaces where content most reflects their interests and passions and where their commentary is most likely to be acknowledged and responded to.

#### *Keeping the Media Under Control*

Two important factors to consider when discussing the potential of social media to propel a movement are accessibility and usability, or the way social media reaches users and the way users are interacting with social media sites. Social media is unique from other more stagnant media forms in the way that it is often discussed as viral, exponentially spreading throughout the masses in a very short period of time in a manner that feels outside of our control. Jenkins, Ford,

& Green, (2013) coined the term “spreadable” media as a more accurate way of describing the flow of ideas on the web in an effort to “facilitate a more nuanced account of how and why things spread and to encourage...a more holistic and sustainable model for understanding how digital culture operates,” (pp.3-4). They argue that spreadable media acts as a catalyst for cultural reconceptualization where social, political, legal and economical issues can be reworked and posits the idea that “spreadable” does not necessarily mean uncontrollable, (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Social media is unique compared to more traditional media forms in the ways in which it is actually used. The web-like atmosphere of the internet invites an interactive experience where audiences not only actively participate but experience some form of control verses linear viewing experiences where information is received in a less controllable manner. Park (2007) discusses new media design as being purposefully empowering for participants and how programmers envision users experiencing senses of agency when using new media sites through “tactile senses through using the keyboard and mouse” and through authorship, (pp.175-185). Park (2007) distinguishes different layers of interactive communication taking place on these sites including user-to-user, user-to-machine, user-to-users, and users-to-user communication. The nonlinear experience of social media provides the opportunity for a unique individualized experience for each user. Nonlinearity also makes it near-impossible for any two users to have the same web experience, compared with two viewers who read the same newspaper article or watch the same television show. This analysis explores the various ways in which social and technological affordances, such as nonlinearity, invites a spectrum of active engagement where active participation can be further categorized as more or less frequent or intimate.

*Missing Voices*

Although social media provide spaces where more voices can be heard and acknowledged through active participation, authorship, renegotiations and self representation, there are still ways in which certain voices are excluded. Jenkins et al. (2013) discuss what Wikipedia has called a “systematic bias” seen in the limitations and imbalances of Wikipedia content created by disproportionate demographics. Wealthier people from household incomes of over \$75,000 a year are three times more likely to engage in active participation on the web, by sharing and producing content, than are less wealthy people from household incomes less than \$30,000 (Jenkins, 2013). When considering the intersections of race, class and gender, it becomes more difficult to understand exactly whose voices are being involved or excluded on natural hair blogs made up of a majority of Black middle-to-upper-class women who may not accurately represent the Black American population of women. Though the digital divide reduces a sense of democracy and diversity of voice, social media still provides a space where social and political constructs can be reworked and rapidly spread.

***Research Question 1:*** How do the social and technological affordances of blogs and vlogs play a critical role in the mobilization of a “natural hair movement” and a collective understanding of the afro?

## **The Natural Hair Network**

### *Natural Solidarity*

There are multiple ways in which natural hair discourse constructs natural hair as a signifier of a unity that manifests in online spaces. The segment of the blogosphere that specifically addresses natural hair care and styling is often referred to as the “natural hair



community” by Black women. From an anthropological perspective, the idea of a natural hair community highlights the ways in which Black women with natural hair that participate on these blogs might function as a subculture or folk group. For example, the practices associated with natural hair maintenance can be discussed as ritualistic, the terminologies used to describe aspects of the natural hair experience can be discussed as a type of shared language, and the social media spaces created by and for Black women with natural hair can be discussed as a form of material culture. Extending beyond an anthropological view point, are also the ways in which social technologies create a sense of interconnectedness within niche groups, revisiting the ideas of the “public mind” and “networked individualism” discussed earlier (Castells, 2007; Wellman 2003).

Black women with natural hair make up an extremely niche social group. Social media platforms act as spaces where Black women can discover, support, and interact with each other. Women who choose to wear their hair natural or short often face harsh criticisms from within the Black community from those who perceive long, straight hair as idyllic, beautiful, or feminine. White (2005) discusses how many of her subjects reported receiving “looks of puzzlement, or questions and comments such as: ‘Why would you do such a thing to your hair...you are far too pretty to wear your hair like that,’” from within Black community circles including family, pastors, friends, and men, (p. 302). Natural hair blogs and vlogs provide personal accounts where Black women exchange similar experiences and images of people who are like themselves. Goins (2011) stresses the importance of Black female friendships as they “satisfy needs of affection and acceptance,” and provide a safe, home place where Black women can speak freely without fear of marginalization or oppression, (p. 532).

When discussing natural hair as a symbol of transcending the oppression of Black womanhood, the recognition of intra-racial connections becomes key in framing natural hair as a “movement.” Black women participating in the natural hair online conversation are thought to be moving together as a collective, mobilizing one another. Depending on how natural hair is discursively framed within the content of these natural hair blogs and vlogs, Black women may respond differently based on their unique experiences with or without naturally textured hair. Although some Black women may be responding to content with reinforcement and support, there can also be disconnects within the community, subgroup, or network manifesting in the language used in commentary directed at the sites and at each other.

### *Texture Wars*

Just as there are unique experiences of having naturally textured African American hair, there are conflicting perceptions of what it means to be natural in relation to being Black. These differences speak to the multiple ways in which certain hair textures get coded as authentic or inauthentic within the Black community. Robinson (2011) compares hair textures to the “color complex” or “colorism,” an intra-racial hierarchy or grading system on the basis of skin tone where lighter complexions are viewed as superior in status and beauty, (p. 359). Within the greater Black community are perceptions of “good” and “bad” hair, where “bad” hair is coily, highly textured and more Afrocentric, while “good” hair is “wavy or straight in texture,” and more Eurocentric, (p. 359). Within the natural hair discourse, a texture continuum also exists where the values of hair types become parallel in some ways and inversed in others. Kinkier textures revealing of African descent are considered more pure or authentic, while looser textures revealing of interracial mixing and Whiteness are less authentic. At the same time, certain curl

patterns and longer hair lengths tend to be valued similarly to how Eurocentric features are often valued as “good.”

Language embracing Black natural hair textures combats notions of good and bad hair and includes kinky textures in conceptions of “good” hair. However, within the natural hair community, there are often conflicting perceptions of which textures are considered “natural” or “authentic” and what curl patterns are considered ideal. Similarly to colorism, an issue of what might be considered “texturism” arises. Depending on how natural hair is being linked to Blackness, it is possible that some Black women with varied Black experiences and varied hair textures may feel excluded or devalued. By combating the social restraints deeming Afrocentric hair textures as shameful, natural hair discourses are policing hair in new ways. The natural hair community existing in the form of social media spaces stands in for a larger, collective, authoritative voice that instructs particular ways of being natural. This analysis explores the ways in which natural hair blogs and vlogs have come to authorize the natural hair experience and how new meanings have become attached to the textured afro through these spaces. This analysis also explored the ways in which Black women with unique Black hair experiences have used social media as a space to renegotiate, reinforce, or reject these meanings.

***Research question 2:*** How have natural hair blogs and vlogs signified new meanings attached to natural African American hair textures?

***Research question 3:*** How are these meanings being negotiated by Black women audiences?

## **Methodology**

### **A Pluralistic Analysis**

Herring (2010) makes note of the limitations of traditional content analyses when analyzing the web and suggests the usage of a pluralistic paradigm of analyses, incorporating an assortment of both traditional and non-traditional techniques. Herring's (2010) model of the extended paradigm of web content analysis includes image analysis, theme analysis, feature analysis, link analysis, exchange analysis and language analysis which together can be used to form a more holistic understanding of web texts. Brock, Kvasny, & Hales (2010) also utilized a multiple analyses approach which they refer to as a critical techno-cultural discourse analysis to gather information about the "weblog discourses about Black women in the matrimonial market" (p. 1041). The study incorporated a close reading of a number of blog posts, a "thematic analysis of the comments," along with an interface analysis focusing on the "format, imagery, and code" of each blog site (Brock et al., 2010, p. 1046). Considering the open ended nature of these research questions relating both to the use of social media technology and natural hair discourse, this study will borrow from both the pluralistic paradigm approach and the techno-cultural discourse analysis approach to collect data. A textual analysis will be used incorporating close readings of blog posts and comments, theme analysis, visual analysis and interface analysis to address how technological affordances invite particular types and levels of interaction and to address how meanings are being both created and negotiated in regards to the textured afro.

Close reading, theme analysis and visual analysis will address the different contexts brought up by blogosphere producers through which natural hair has acquired new meanings. Theme and visual analysis will also be used to analyze user comments, addressing the ways in which Black women are negotiating, rejecting, or reinforcing these meanings. Interface analysis will study the different features, designs, functionalities and affordances of each blog site and vlog channel in relation to user participation. Affordances will include the social and technical

aspects of each web space that facilitate or limit participation from the audience. This pluralistic textual analysis approach will help understand how natural hair discourses are being constructed on these sites and how they relate to meanings held within wider contexts. This study will also explore the ways in which it is either acceptable or unacceptable to talk about natural hair.

A sample of four natural hair blogs and a sample of five natural hair vlogs were selected for analysis based on a range of popularity and content. Popularity is determined by factors including number of followers, page views, total video views, and subscribers. The blogosphere as a whole is rather immeasurable as it is continually shifting in scale due to the rapid rate of blogs being created every day, the extensive amount of private inaccessible content, and international blogs written in other languages outside of English (Herring, 2010). Therefore, obtaining a truly random sample is difficult and would not necessarily represent the blogs and vlogs that have had the most impact or that best highlight the thematic frameworks explored in this analysis.

The five blogs include: Around the Way Curls, Afrobella, Curly Nikki, and Black Girl Long Hair. All five video blogs are YouTube based and include: Taren916 (135,801 subscribers and 15,225,177 views), ColouredBeautiful (125,357 subscribers and 10,892,334 views), HairCrush (91,467 subscribers and 5,560,114 views), DenimPixie (31,389 subscribers and 3,056,963 views), and MelsharyA (8,443 subscribers, 381,137 views). As a collective, the producers of these channels include a range of ages from young adult to around middle-aged. All of the content producers are of varied African American ethnicities and have varied hair types. All of the bloggers and YouTubers identify as either natural hair or beauty bloggers and vloggers and they all generally cover a range of topics including fashion, beauty, health and lifestyle with a focus on the maintenance of natural African American hair. Each channel is varied in the

extent of time it has existed and in the frequency it is updated, though all of the channels are currently updated on a generally regular basis.

### **The Focus Group Discussion**

To supplement data collected from these interactive blogs, the textual analysis was coupled with a semi-structured focus group discussion. The additional data from the transcript provides the opportunity to triangulate findings by offering new perspectives in a format outside of commentary on the web. The focus group discussion address multiple areas in which Black women are thinking about the ways in which natural hair has come to define particular meanings. The focus group setup, as opposed to one-on-one interviews, aligns with this study's focus on a networked conception of natural hair taking place within a sub-cultural group rather than an individual level. Transcript content must be considered on a group basis, rather than individual basis, because of the interactive dynamic of focus groups involving multiple people in open discussion.

Participants were recruited on the University of Michigan campus via announcements at natural hair related campus events and email blasts to the University of Michigan's natural hair student organization Naturally Yours. Student group Naturally Yours was a fitting pool of potential participants as it is comprised of a majority of Black women between the ages of 18-25 who are all aware of the larger natural hair conversation and who are all active audience members involved with web-based natural hair media. This study is most interested in college-aged African American women because it is a common demographic within the natural hair online network. The analysis of college aged women also provides insight on how the natural hair conversation has evolved with newer generations in comparison to how natural hair has been

previously discussed by older generations participating in natural hair discourses during the 1960's and 1970's.

The focus group involved a total of seven people including two researchers who mediated the discussion. The group involved a majority of women with natural unprocessed hair and one participant with relaxed hair. All participants have had some level of involvement or familiarity with natural hair blogs and vlogs.

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their hair experiences, the media, social media, and meaning making (see Appendix A for transcript). Questions were typically asked one at a time and the conversation was loosely structured, free to progress in any direction. Some questions were generated based on participants' responses. Some questions were based off of the findings from the textual analysis. The questions asked looked to address the nature of participation taking place on weblogs in addition to frequency. Some questions were asked to reveal some of the ways in which participants negotiated different meanings attributed to natural hair. The discussion was recorded, transcribed and then evaluated in relation to the pluralistic textual analysis of blogs and vlogs. Both the textual analysis and focus group discussion were used in addressing all of the three research questions.

## **Analysis**

### **Technological and Social Affordances**

#### *The Search for Content*

During the focus group, participants expressed a familiarity with natural hair and beauty blogs and vlogs and most participants had actively participated with the sites either occasionally or frequently. When asked how they became aware of social media resources for hair and beauty, some participants described it as an intentional search while others described it more as happenstance and factor of the site structures and affordances. Bahiya explained how she actively searched for content more when she started producing her own media content:

“I just started looking up blogs and Tumblr, where they could show me a whole bunch of videos, and YouTube, too...I feel like I actually searched for mine...I feel like once I made my blog then I started really looking for it.”

For Marlowe, who is both a vlogger and blogger, her recognition of the natural hair blogosphere felt more like chance as well as something that was bound to happen:

“I think I stumbled upon it... I’m a YouTuber and in general beauty videos are quite popular and you know how you get to the YouTube loop with the recommended videos, and then reminds me to subscribe to hundreds of people. So for me, it really was kind of just, I was already an active user of the site and still am, and just stumbled upon it via recommendations from the site mostly.”

Her description of the “loop” describes the algorithmic recommendations of YouTube that propel a user’s search to the desired content.

### *Vlogs and Blogs Alike*

There are many ways in which the structural components of blogs and YouTube vlogs overlap and many ways in which each medium exhibits unique features. Both spaces provide features affording unique and personalized experiences. Regardless of the channel being viewed, YouTube always offers a search bar at the top of the page where viewers can be directed to



whatever specific content they want to view with the use of keywords, titles, or usernames if the name of the channel is known. All four blogs also had a search bar function somewhere on the home page situated either at the very top or side of the screen. When watching a video, YouTube also provides a list of videos off to the side of the screen where viewers can see a screen shot reduced to the size of an icon, the video title, the name of the channel or YouTuber who produced the video, and the number of people who have previously viewed the video. These videos listed on the side are usually related to the video being watched, either through channel or topic, and the lists vary depending on the viewer and on the video being viewed. All four blogs had a similar recommendation function labeled as “You might also like” that provided a list of article titles and icons directing the viewer to similar content from within the blog. Three of the four blogs had a section providing lists of trends with a sense of recency and timeliness leaving the viewer with the assumption that the list will be different during the next site visit since “trends” constantly change. Curly Nikki’s trending section is labeled “Hot this month” suggesting that this list changes monthly.

Both the YouTube vlogs and blogs also had a number of similar social affordances inviting user feedback. Below each video on YouTube and below each article on the blogs is a space for comments, though there are slight differences in terms of accountability. In order to comment on a YouTube video, the viewer must set up a YouTube account where every video they post or respond to is linked to their one same user name. On all four blogs, the viewer has the option to use their official user name or to manually type their name in each time. Though entering a name is usually required in order to comment, unlike YouTube it is possible for the viewer to enter “Anonymous” or enter a pseudonym in place of their name for commenting. Both comment sections on the blogs and YouTube provide the opportunity for both the viewers and

content producers to comment either as a response to any particular user comment or to begin their own comment separate from the others. This reply function common to all blogs and vlogs enables a flow of conversation and different levels of communication including user-to-user, user-to-producer, or producer-to-user. Most bloggers and vloggers concluded their videos or blog post with phrases inviting user feedback such as:

“I mean, let’s talk about it. Tell me how do you think about the hair typing system, if it’s something that you like to use, if it’s beneficial for you, why you like to use it? You can do a video response or you can leave it down below in the comment box (point finger downward).”

All five vlogs included links to or icons of other social media platforms such as Facebook or blogs to direct their viewers to other spaces on the web where their content could be viewed. These were all located either on their channel’s banner or in their information section on the main page of their channels. Three of the four blogs also showcased a list of social media icons on various locations on the home page either at the top of the screen near the banner, incorporated into the banner, or off to the side of the page. Though some blogs include a label over these icons such as “Follow Nikki,” the same icons used on every social media space make the icons particularly recognizable and viewers know, for example, to click on the “f” icon to be redirected to the vlogger/blogger’s Facebook page or to click on the bird icon to be redirected to Twitter.

Both YouTube vlogs and blogs placed a monetary value onto viewership with the use of advertising and the constant tracking of eyeballs or number views. All five blogs incorporated either sponsored or pay-per-click advertisements on their home pages. Some also incorporated embedded styled ads in the articles. All of the natural hair vlogs particularly used views as

currency and featured advertisements from time-to-time either embedded in the video or as a preview to the video.

### *Vlogs and Blogs Apart*

Video blogs had a number of social and technological affordances absent in any of the blogs. The major difference between vlogs and blogs is that vlogs are video focused while blogs are text focused. Though some vlog videos incorporate the use of still images and texts in a slide-show format, the majority of vlog videos had an audio-visual component where the video producer is shown facing the camera and talking or demonstrating a particular technique. Unlike blogs, YouTube also provides viewers the ability to leave video responses to vlog videos as opposed to textual comments only. Responding to a video with a video mimics face-to-face confrontation more closely as both the video producer and video responder can visually see each other's facial expressions and hear each other's voice inflections. YouTube also provides the opportunity for vloggers to produce videos in real time where they can invite their subscribers to visit their channel on a particular time and date for a "live" chat, question and answer session, tutorial or anything they can manage to video capture and share without the use of editing.

The act of reposting content to other social sites like Facebook or blogs is much more straightforward with YouTube videos than with blog posts. YouTube video links are always provided at the top of the page on the URL bar or can also be found in the "share" tab located under the video screen. When clicking "share," the viewer has the option to copy and paste the YouTube link or "embed" the video into an original blog post or website. To embed, YouTube provides a code that viewers can copy and paste directly into the coding of their blog post or website. To repost blog articles is also possible, but viewers more than likely have to copy and paste the contents of the post or copy and paste the link from the URL bar. YouTube also offers

video transcripts providing captions, though they are highly inaccurate. At minute 1:46 in her video titled “My Hair Texture,” HairCrush says, “...I just washed my hair now and it’s like starting to dry up,” which YouTube transcribed as, “mandates by Friday may I know but started rather,” which is a translation that would be of no use for the deaf or hearing impaired.

Beyond the idea of blog content as more accessible to the hearing impaired, as opposed to audio videos with little to no text, are a number of other affordances blog sites have that YouTube lacks. All four blogs included a number of different tabs on the top of the homepage underneath the blog banner linking to pages within the blog. Most of the sites also included tabs within tabs that became visible when the main tab was scrolled over with the mouse. On average, the blogs had around 10 main tabs across the top of the page ranging from a list of general topics and branching out into a list of more specific tabs when scrolled over. Curly Nikki had the largest total of 61 tabs making the Curly Nikki blog experience highly varied depending on which tabs might be of interest to individual viewers. The main tabs on Curly Nikki, for example, include Home, About Me, My Travels, On the Couch, Mind and Body, Forum, Henna, Styles, and The Basics. The “Styles” tab on Curly Nikki when scrolled over opens a drop-down menu with subtabs including Children, Down and Out, Natural Updos, TWA (Teeny Weeny Afro), Heat Styled, Locs, Videos, and Curly Salons.

The differences between relying on video versus photo images also afforded blog spaces unique user experiences different from those of vlogs. All four blogs incorporated the use a variety grade of images ranging from what appears to be low quality images taken from a cell phone, candid shots, amateur photography, photo shoots/glamour shots and professional/high tech photography. The use of lower quality images creates a casual style, homely, or photo-album feel while the more professional grade shots lend the site to what could be considered a

magazine spread or more formal style. The use of photography is one of the more significant social affordances of blogs as the viewers send many of the photos in. Black Girl Long Hair has a BGLH (Black Girl Long Hair) Gallery box on the home page where 100 images of Black women from all over the country, and occasionally international, are rotated one at a time. These are not photographs of the content producers of Black Girl Long Hair, but rather the images of people who engage with the site and who have emailed their natural hair photos onto the site knowing they will be published.

Three of the four blogs included a tab archiving “features” of women with natural hair, where a post is dedicated to the display of one woman’s natural hair story. Around the Way Curles labeled their features section as “Hair Stories,” Curly Nikki used the label “Hair Idols” and Black Girl Long Hair used the label “Style Icons” which they feature directly on the home page. These features usually include photos, a written interview using a standard set of questions, and the links to where the featured “style icon” or “hair idol” can be found online whether through Facebook, blogs, Twitter, Tumblr or any social media space.

Some blogs also collaborate with other blogs through guest posting or “taking over” other web spaces. On Thursdays, Curly Nikki posts the same intro sentence, “It’s Thursday which means we’ve officially taken over Essence for the day!” and posts a link to wear viewers are redirected to the Essence Magazine website where there is an article or question and answer written by Nikki Walton, founder of Curly Nikki.

### *Favorable Features*

When discussing social media spaces, the participants brought up a number of features about vlogs and blogs that are either preferred or unfavorable when it comes to engagement with the sites. Many of the comments were focused on structural qualities while others focused more

on content that might differentiate a good blog or vlog channel from a less favorable one.

Marlowe discussed the several markers of what she considers a good blog/vlog along with the reasons why she prefers vlogs to blogs:

“I guess photo quality...think that’s quite important. If there are words, then I don’t know, easy to read. I guess that sort of things. Kind of like with newspapers I guess...I do follow blogs, but I use an RSS feeder thing but I don’t really check it that much. So for me, I like YouTube in general for beauty and hair things ‘cause you’re really getting a full-on demonstration of something so it’s a bit easier to see what they’re doing verses just reading about something. That’s my personal preference or difference I see between the two forms.”

Bahiya commented on the endlessness or linkability of the blogosphere which she described as addictive and factoring into the extent of time spent engaging on the sites:

“There are so many blogs. They were just coming all at me at one time that I’d just be at the computer screen for like an hour and I’d be like you ‘gotta do your homework’ and then I just couldn’t because I just wanted to learn more...So I think mostly I kept following more people and kept re-blogging stuff and having people re-blog my stuff. It was just never ending. I was sort of addicted to it.”

Related to both structure and content, the issue of sponsorship and viewership was also discussed as a factor of usability and quality. Linda described her preference for sponsored sites:

“I like using stuff that already has a lot of people subscribed to it or a lot of views already because then you already know that it should be kind of good.”

While Marlowe expressed a complicated preference for the more amateur, out-of-hobby, type spaces while also acknowledging a kind of stigma against monetized content:

“I prefer the latter, the more less-sponsored sort of thing. But at the same time, the majority of blogs that do have the sponsorship started off without having the sponsorship. ‘Cause they gain momentum and viewers and then people want to start sponsoring them. Which is fine, I mean, I’m not [against sponsorship]. Some people are really anti-that I know.”

Original and innovative content was also an important aspect of blogs and vlogs. Bahiya mentioned how “If I look at it [a blog or vlog] and the first thing I see is real basic, I’ll just automatically go to the next website.”

Marlowe also mentioned how certain blog content can feel repetitive or boring:

“In my opinion, certain things kind of just get constantly talked about. Like if it’s something really obvious, like this is boring. I think when blogs have maybe more original content or specific things that maybe that person has discovered that are more interesting than just...the usual sort of thing, I guess I find that more worth following ‘cause it’s a more unique perspective.”

### *Importance of Social Spaces*

A few of the participants discussed the important role social media spaces held in regards to the state of their hair. Linda recalled how social media actually impacted her decision to wear her hair natural:

“I actually think that, last semester, if I hadn’t started watching YouTube videos, then I would have ended up probably getting a perm because it was just rough trying to go through that.”

For Jamie, the natural hair social media sphere also served as an important resource for the natural hair experience:

“For those that are maybe going through that transition from not being natural to going to whatever form of natural they want to be. I think it serves as also kind of like a guide or companion in a way, because they know someone else has gone through it and they’ve written about it and kind of like a tour guide of sorts.”

Her reference to companionship highlights the intimacy of interaction invited by the structure of the site’s ability to display videos and receive both comments and video responses. Marlowe commented about the use of social media as a practical, informational guide:

“I’d say a big thing is tips. People constantly seem to want tips. Whether it be through styling or products and things like that, so. I think it’s kind of like a main resource for a lot of people for tips.”

For Bahiya, natural hair blogs and vlogs filled the void she experienced in mainstream content where she felt as though Black beauty is excluded:

“I very much look forward to looking at people of color on my blog or popping up on my dash board ‘cause I just feel like it’s not enough in mainstream media... When I look at my blog, I can depend on my followers and the people that I’m following to really



perpetuate that Black beauty is there. ‘Cause I don’t see on TV. I don’t see it in front of me a lot of times.”

These dialogue speak to the reliance on social media to learn more about one’s own self that stands separate from yet networked with others from within these sites. These findings also shed light on the types of interactions occurring on these sites and the ways in which the sites serve as venues to mediate and enable discussions around the afro.

### **Meaning Making**

#### *Hair Speaks*

The majority of the focus group discussion focused much on how natural hair and Black hair in general speaks in multiple ways, communicating inward toward the self and outward onto others. Marlowe discussed how straight hair gets perceived as more neutral while curly hair often feels more declarative. She also comments on how the afro today still holds some ties to the associations made during the civil rights time period, while having lost some of those ties at the same time:

“I know when I don’t straighten my hair, I feel like I’m making more of a statement or something...It’s just how I sort of feel. It’s not like I’m intending to, but I feel like I just automatically, because it’s not conformed, I suppose...I think the statement that your hair can make if it’s bigger, wilder, whatever, is more in line with what people had ideas about in the sixties seventies. But at the same time, because it is so much more popular, it is becoming more normalized I suppose at the same time.”

Madison, agreeing with Marlowe, added:

“Because I mostly straighten my hair, the times where I do where it natural for a few days, I feel like I know I’m going to get comments...I feel like I’m just out there saying something with it when I chose to not straighten it.”

Stereotypes attributed to natural hair were also brought up in the ways that participants felt that they receive different treatment from the public when wearing their hair curly as opposed to straight. Linda described feeling as though people were staring at her for “a little bit longer than usual” when she started wearing her hair natural and how “it was just really uncomfortable.”

Bahiya felt as though people generally make assumptions about her lifestyle based on her hair:

“They automatically assume you’re like vegan or vegetarian or you just love the Earth and all this other stuff...”

These expressions of hair as meaningful speak to the idea that the textured afro never lost meanings, but that these meanings have evolved into nuances where the meanings are less easily articulated as to what exactly they are, but are felt just as strongly.

### *The Journey*

Both vloggers and bloggers contextualized hair in multiple different ways and in many ways overlapping. The natural hair experience is often discussed as a “journey” where individuals experience a kind of realization, boost or loss of confidence, and both hair and personal growth and struggles. Blogger/vlogger Antoinette of Around the Way Curls writes:

“... I also didn’t acknowledge or really grasp the fact that my hair was curly until I was about 15. This has truly been a journey but I finally feel settled in and at home with where I am at and who I am. This post is dedicated to those transitioning [to natural]...Just keep your eyes on the prize because it will all be worth it in the end.”

She also comments on how her “big chop” experience, or that of cutting off all the relaxed, chemically treated ends of hair, was traumatizing at times:

“You may think that a big chop leaves every woman feeling empowered like Angela Basset in *Waiting to Exhale* but I was still struggling with the way I looked. I cried all night after I cut it. Some tears were because I missed my old self, some were because I was going to miss the attention my being ‘light skin with long hair’ got me and some were because I was coming to terms with how truly shallow and unaware of myself I had been up until that point.”

Vlogger HairCrush described a very different big chop experience:

“I had the itch [to big chop] the week before...I couldn’t wait y’all...I was at home at my apartment by myself and I just cut it off and it was completely liberating...You know people say it and it’s, you know, cliché in a way now because people always say ‘I felt so free’...but, it’s really the truth... It’s like, you wait so long to do it and all this anticipation and I get to the point where I’m done. No more struggling with the two hair textures...It was just like, I just loved my hair so much.”

Some bloggers and vloggers also described a kind of epiphany, coming-of-age, or realization on their hair journey. Taren916 describes how her perception of her textured hair shifted from hatred in her childhood to love in her adulthood:

“I hated it during my childhood. And I learned to love it as I got older. So now I love it. I think it’s beautiful. And I am just so changed from that mindset... I love it. I embrace it now.”

Beyond natural hair, some content producers also reflect on the natural hair movement and natural hair blogosphere itself as related to their life journey. Blogger Patrice Yursik from Afrobella comments on the role of the blogosphere on her career as an aspiring writer:

“My attempts to reach out to writers at publications in my era didn’t go far...I never made a connection at Essence or Ebony until I was well into my blogging career. Blogs changed the game for me. Suddenly being an incredible writer and content creator was all you needed to make a name and an impact. The walls that seemed insurmountably high weren’t as insurmountable as I thought. I built my own platform. And that platform has led to all kinds of amazing things that I never could have dreamed of before.”

This statement shows the agency and control experienced by users on these platforms that have not only enabled an organic movement but have enabled women to pursue entire careers as natural hair web advocates.

*Saying No to the ‘Creamy Crack’*

All of the four participants with natural hair also expressed some appreciation of the freedom attributed to their natural and curly hair textures. Both Marlowe and Madison had never used a chemical relaxer. Marlowe describes the versatility she experienced from being natural her entire life:

“I’ve never had a relaxer...Like in the summer, I don’t really straighten my hair. But other times in the year, I straighten it more. And that’s just how it’s always been, you know. And growing up I never straightened my hair until I was a bit older.”

For some of the women who experienced a transition from having relaxed hair to then going natural, their curly texture often spoke to a larger, personal transition to a heightened self esteem. Bahiya discusses her hair as a signifier of self acceptance:

“I just really like being able to look in the mirror and just really love the hair that I have on my head. ‘Cause you know it took me a really long time to get like that. ‘Cause at first when I was in high school or whatever, I started going natural...I wanted to be natural, but I wanted to be that silky natural. And I was like your hair is never gonna get like that because your hair is not like that. It’s big. It’s puffy. It’s frizzy. It’s crazy. But now, it’s like, I kind of embrace it. I really like big hair. I’m happy I don’t have to go to the salon no more...I can get caught in the rain and I ‘aint got to run.”

Linda also discussed her decision to go natural as a new found freedom.

“I don’t have to spend as much time on my hair anymore. ‘Cause I used to straighten my hair way too often. And that just took forever...Also, it might sound kind of weird, but when I was younger I used to think, at least when I used to have perms, I used to think I would never live in a really warm place because the humidity. And that would just ruin my hair all the time. But ever since I’ve gone natural it’s like, oh, maybe I will live somewhere warm. ‘Cause it won’t ever matter.”

Her thoughts touch on the idea of relaxed hair or straight styled hair as a kind of bondage, disabling her from physically travelling to places she would otherwise have gone.

### *Ownership and Confidence*

Nearly all of the blogs and vlogs used the term “liberating” or “freedom” at some point in time when describing the experience of being natural and all described multiple different ways of

experiencing freedom. Ownership and control of one's body through their relationship with their hair was a recurring theme throughout most of the sites. When asked "What's the best thing about being curly?" by Curly Nikki, a featured "Hair Idol" answered:

"The best thing about being curly is the ownership of my curls. I love the fact that I am not dreading my hair routine or that I'm not stuck to the rules and schedule of maintaining relaxed hair. As I mentioned, relaxing my hair was more like a chore and now that I'm two and a half years natural, maintaining my curls feels more like a treat!"

Another Hair Idol from a separate feature responded to the same question saying:

"Freedom from heat and harsh chemicals. Freedom to jump in the lake and not worry about getting my hair wet...It's "just hair" but it makes me feel special, confident, and beautiful."

Vlogger HairCrush also comments on how wearing her natural required a level of confidence that may not have necessarily been needed otherwise and a gained ability to disregard the disapproval of others:

"I knew it was gonna be negativity. It was gonna be negative comments...I went into it expecting negative comments or people not knowing what to say so I wasn't expecting anything positive because I had made up in my mind that I liked my hair and it didn't matter what anybody else would say because they didn't understand it or they didn't get it, so it didn't matter...don't look for somebody else's comments or compliments to validate your style and to help you feel good about your hair."

This dialogue also suggests a sense of transcendence that comes with going natural. When she mentions how other people, non-Black or non-natural, "didn't understand" or "didn't

get it,” she asserts her own ability to understand a larger issue that they could not because of her naturalness.

These dialogues express the ways in which naturalness has come to signify freedom, thematically nostalgic of the feminist and civil rights movement but also nuanced and relevant to the standards of today.

*The Natural Authorities*

When understood as a resource, natural hair blogs and vlogs acquire a sense of authority, functioning as a guide book. Vlogger HairCrush posted a video titled “How to Go Natural!!” where she talks through step-by-step instructions on how to transition from relaxed to natural, suggesting there is a particular, correct, or dominant way to be natural.

“I know the entire process of going natural can be confusing. You don’t know where to start and what to do. So I’m going to give these basic tips or basic steps on how to go natural or how to start your natural hair journey.”

She continues with a lengthy list of advice including the set up of a transitioning plan and how to accurately calculate hair growth. Some vloggers and bloggers also express a concern for being perceived as bossy, controlling or “police.” Taren916 posted a video that she shot in the middle of a visit to a hair salon where she left the salon with rollers in her hair to return to her car for the amount of time needed to shoot a video before returning back to the salon to continue her styling service.

“I felt like a natural hair Nazi being in the salon...in walks this woman and... I noticed that she was getting a perm. And you know, I was just like, in my head I’m like, no! Don’t get a perm! Because when I was looking at her hair, it was really thin, like strands, like really thin, and her edges were like, messed up and her hair was so greasy and her scalp was packed with grease.

So all of those components together, I was just like, dying on the inside... I am not anti perm of course, you know, do what you do...that's not my thing. Not my concern. But what makes me kind of cringe is definitely the misconceptions and myths of Black hair care, i.e. greasing your scalp. You know, that is such a myth...you know, back, back in the back, back, back days, that's what it was all about. You know, sitting between legs and greasing your scalp... I was thinking, I was like, should I tell her? Should I inform her? And I felt like I just had to. It was my duty. To not talk her out of getting a perm or anything like that, because I'm not trying to convert you to become natural, that is just not my thing, but...I was just like, you know what, why do you grease your scalp every day? She was just like, 'well my scalp is really itchy and you know, it's irritated...I said, well all you got to do is get some tea tree oil and put it on your scalp at least once a week...I said greasing your scalp is such an old-school way of dealing with your hair care and your scalp. I said that just clogs up your pores...So I'm telling you, I suggest that you stop doing that. So, she was really receptive to it. She didn't like, shoot me down or tell me mind my business...and on top of that, I just commend everyone out there who is spreading the word for healthy hair care. Especially healthy Black hair care because there's so many myths and misconceptions about what we should do with our hair, natural or permed.'

This dialogue suggests a superior, modernized way of being natural or having healthy hair. Taren916 describes the ways in which certain hair practices like using grease are reflective of "back, back in the back, back, back days" or "old-school" while new improved methods and products like tea tree oil are modern, more effective, and superior in a way that connotes class and privileges. She also battles with conflicting concerns of being overly authoritative or a "natural hair Nazi" while balancing her "duty" to be verbal about Black hair misconceptions and "commending" other naturals who have also spread the word or put their authority to use as a



natural women properly educated on Black hair care. This dialogue highlights the ways in which this third wave afro has risen to the level of a movement where participants actively advocate to the public and debate opinions.

*The 'Mixed' Assumption*

All of the participants identified as Black or African American race with varying ethnicities. None of the participants considered themselves to be of mixed race. When questioned about the idea of natural hair as a signifier of Blackness, many of the women discussed frustrations with the common tendency to associate long hair and/or lighter skin with mixed race. Bahiya comments on the assumption that Black women have an inability to grow their hair long and healthy and comments on why she feels that being perceived by others as mixed is irritating:

“I get that all the time. Like, ‘what are you mixed with?’ Both my parents are Black. All my grandparents are Black so there’s no trace of anything else in there...They say ‘your hair is so long, you have to be something else.’ ... Every time that question was asked to me, I always sit back like what are you talking about? Like please, do not ask me that question ‘cause it’s such a hard thing to deal with. I know that there were long, long lines down the line, probably during slavery or something, where some Black woman was raped by some white master, and that’s how we came out looking like this. But it’s like, why? What is the need for you to ask me that every time you see me?...Why can’t you just see Bahiya...I just don’t know everyone’s fascination with knowing exactly what you are.”

Questions of “how mixed” also were discussed. While most participants agreed that being biracial or half Black was a reasonable amount of otherness for one to identify or be

identified as mixed, there was some debate about whether people with traces of White or non-Black people in their distant family histories were can identify as mixed. Jamie reasoned:

“On the other side of that, like if she is half Italian, I don’t see anything wrong with necessarily being proud of being both of those things [Black and Italian]. Yes, your Black, it’s your race, but I think, I don’t know, I don’t necessarily think there’s anything wrong with being proud of everything that you are.”

Marlowe mentioned how certain hair product lines have attempted to capitalize off of the association of lighter shades of Black with natural and curly hair:

“That one hair line, Mixed Chicks, I don’t know if you guys heard about this... Team light skin [a hash tag] was trending or something, and then that company in order to get more exposure tweeted like ‘team light skin check out our products’ or something like that and you know, people were really mad... Plus, they’re falling into this awkward twitter battle. But I don’t know. It kind of implies light skin people are a demographic.”

After a video by HairCrush discussing tips on maintaining natural hair, where HairCrush speaks into the camera revealing long waist-length textured hair, a viewer commented on the video bringing up concerns linking intra-racial divides directly to hair texture:

“PLEASE tell me that you are not mixed with anything it’s so hard to find girls with natural hair that are completely Black on YT. Mixed girls have an easier time managing natural hair than we do.”

HairCrush responded that she is indeed fully Black.

Oftentimes questions regarding textures and race are brought up both by vloggers/bloggers and viewers/commenters where texture and color hierarchies get both supported, as seen in the comment above, and critiqued as we see in the article “Ending Our Association with Long Hair and Mixed Heritage” posted on Black Girl Long Hair:

“What do we mean when we assert that we are 100% Black?...Questions or statements about an individual’s background always seem to arise. The following statements/questions come from the comment sections of a selection of bloggers/vloggers: “Are you mixed?” “You’re mixed with something right?” These questions/responses are then followed by either the individual or others asserting the Blackness of the individual: “Why do people think Black people need to be mixed to have great healthy long hair?!!!” “No. No she’s not mixed with something.”...I find assertions like “100% Black” or those alluding to someone being “all Black” to be puzzling since it is just not true.”

She later references an article from The Root discussing the mixed DNA of Black Americans and lists the average ethnic and racial percentages of Black Americans. She continues:

“From my perspective acknowledging this racial mixing does not diminish our history because it is a part of the history. Nor does it downplay the Black experience and what it means to be Black in America. The creation of racial groups in American society was a social construction that had a lot less to do with genetics and more to do with physical appearance. In the area of hair care I think awareness of this history is also important...So when we observe someone with hair that would be considered

exceptionally long or a looser curl pattern we shouldn't immediately run to determine their racial/ethnic make-up in order to explain the ease of their hair care routine or growth. For one thing, those same individuals proposing the question are more than likely some sort of racial mix as well...the differences we observe should be accepted as part of the Black experience instead of being used as a litmus test for Blackness.”

This blog post comments on some of the disconnects within the natural hair community around the color spectrum critiquing the tendency to distinguish certain types of Blackness as having an easier or more difficult natural hair experience. This post also comments on the ways in which differences in textures stand in for different levels of Blackness when she makes reference to using difference “as a litmus test for Blackness.”

The idea of the afro as a measure or marker of Blackness demonstrates ties to previous connotations of the afro as Black pride. However, as familiar as the concept of Black authenticity and pride may sound, this third wave afro comes with anxieties revolved around purity. The somewhat obsession of “testing” one's Blackness when seeing the afro as a racial marker exposes a kind of shame or repression of a past of racial intermixing that was charged with power and racial hierarchies. While the pride associated with the afro in the past was associated with an attempt to be equal or closer to White privilege, the third wave afro reflects a need to identify as far removed from Whiteness, where markers of Whiteness such as looser hair textures signify a past of slavery, submission, and rape.

### *I Am Not My Hair*

Bloggers and Vloggers often talk about their relationships with their hair in contradictory ways. As discussed above, some YouTubers and Bloggers discuss natural hair metonymically in

the context of how it stands in to signify their Black identity, personal growth discussed as a journey, or even personality. Taren916 discusses how her feelings and personality actually change depending on the state of her hair:

“When my hair is curly I feel carefree, free spirited, young, sexy, vibrant, you know. Actually I always say that my natural hair gives me a positive energy. When my hair is straight I feel a little bit more serious, sophisticated, I look a little bit older, a little bit mature...”

Other vloggers have verbalized the idea that hair is completely separate from their own personal state and that attaching meaningful assumptions and personal attributes onto hair is actually damaging. When discussing her opinions on a “natural hair preference” verses a straight hair preference, vlogger DenimPixie said:

“Men who come up to me and they say ‘oh sistah, I’m so glad to see you rocking your natural hair. You don’t see a lot of that, you know, our women are so brainwashed into getting weaves and relaxers and keeping their hair straight. They’re down...and oppressed by the white man.’ You know, I have to walk away from that...I know that they are going to assume a number of things because I’m wearing my hair in its natural state and nine out of ten of those assumptions are not going to be true. Some assumptions about natural hair that you are neo soul...that you read poetry daily. Nope. Haven’t done that (laughs). Or that you were most likely a member of your Black Student Association, possibly president, and were often hard pressing for the Black issues at your college. No wasn’t that either, I actually boycotted my BSA...They think you’re down to earth. They think that you’re instantly more secure with yourself. I know a bunch of insecure women

with natural hair. So those are just all complete assumptions and misconceptions of natural hair and it's like, I don't want to deal with that...So I wish that people would stop going both ways on the natural hair spectrum and making all these assumptions. Even saying that if you love your natural hair you're X, Y, Z or if you relax your hair you're X, Y, Z because I think both of those are very damaging."

This dialogue addresses the ways in which some vloggers and bloggers attempt to depoliticize hair, stripping natural hair of any kind of connotations or charges it might have. Opinions like DenimPixie's seem to reject the more historical ways in which the afro came to signify types of Blackness or Black pride.

#### *A Curl is a Curl*

Similarly to how some bloggers and vloggers either support or reject the idea of differentiating levels of Blackness, some YouTubers and blog writers have also negotiated the idea of distinguishing textures. YouTuber MelsharyA comments on how she disagrees with what is known as the "hair typing system" where textures are categorized into numbers and letters with 1 being straight, 2 being wavy, 3 being curly, 4 being kinky and the letters A, B, and C being gradients of each:

"I just don't agree with the hair typing system... (She runs fingers through her hair to show her hair texture more clearly). You can see the different texture. It's not all the same and you can see...So showing you my different textures, it goes right into why I don't hair type. It's because I have so many different textures in my hair...I don't fit into any one category and it doesn't make no sense... and I feel like we're just all naturals. We don't need anything else to kind of divide us up and who has a looser texture and

why they have a looser texture and this one has a curlier and a tighter texture. It doesn't matter... Everybody's journey is going to be different but nobody's journey is better than anybody else and no one's is easier than anybody else's."

Her concern with the hair typing system speaks to the idea of distinguishing "types" of people as inherently problematic. This concept of hair typing, and the fact that so many natural hair vloggers and bloggers disagree with the system somewhat contradicts the entire natural movement or the identification of being "natural" which is ultimately another type of hair typing system using different language where authenticity is at play rather than just the physical hair type. The category of "natural" isn't used to signify a particular texture of hair, as many naturals have different natural hair textures, though is still a way of categorizing women into groups with distinctions that are also arbitrary in different ways than a hair typing system, where some women like MelsharyA may have multiple textures. Some women may also have a mix of "natural" or non-natural hair as well, depending on definitions of "natural" and depending on what stage a woman is at on her natural hair "journey," if she is transitioning.

These vlogs and blogs have also opened up a space where content viewers and producers negotiate which "types" of natural or which "types" of Black women have the right to speak on these issues relating to typing systems. Similar to the commenter concerned with whether HairCrush was entirely Black, a commenter posted on MelsharyA's video on hair typing stating his/her assumption as to why MelsharyA rejects hair typing. The commenter wrote:

"This is the second video I've seen where someone with looser hair pretty much tells other people [with kinkier textures] to suck it up. Yet you have a favorable texture. I hate

hair typing as well because it's pointless. But I feel you don't want to identify your texture because you don't want to hear that you have it easier than kinky hair girls..."

MelsharyA replied to the comment saying:

"...It is in your opinion that I have a "favorable texture". And that's the problem right there. Love whatever it is you have. What you have is Favorable because it's yours."

This idea of "favorable" textures also surfaces on these blogs and vlogs which becomes another way to differentiate types of people and experiences. All five video blogs included an extensive number of tutorials where viewers can watch and learn the techniques and methods required to obtain a particular type of curl or look. When reviewing products, Taren916 praises products that make her looser curls "pop" or give great "curl definition." There are also words that get recycled as negative or devalued such as "frizzy," "puffy," or "looking crazy," For women with kinkier textures, it is generally more difficult to achieve certain types of curls as many types of Black hair types do not "curl" at all. The varying textures of women who identify as natural often questions authenticity and there are a number of frustrations on both ends of the kinky-curly hair type spectrum regarding both difficulty in manageability, type or level of Blackness, and "realness" of the hair itself as hair. Taren916 comments on how others perceive her looser textured hair:

"The only thing that I don't like is when someone assumes that it's a wig or a weave. I don't mind you asking me, that's no problem. But for you to one hundred percent assume that it is [fake] and come up to me and ask me 'what kind of hair did you buy? Where did you get that hair from?' ...I get questions like that and it's like are you serious? Like, I



bought it from scalp (laughs). Because this is my hair. So the audacity to assume one hundred percent is just ridiculous, that this is not my hair I mean.”

Discussions about hair textures arise often with Taren916 in particular because she is biracial and openly discusses her mixed identity and mixed hair on her channel. As previously discussed, the value of Black authenticity complicates the meaning of naturalness for those women who do have mixed blood where their natural hair and skin reflect aspects of Whiteness either through biracialism or through a history of slave ownership and rape which are two very different kinds of racial blending, one innocent and one villainous. The tendency for women with natural hair to be offended when their hair is perceived as artificial stems from the perception of natural hair as a test of one's Blackness, where looser textures are indicative of impurity. The offense also reflects on the common assumption that Black hair cannot possibly be beautiful or long, concluding that hair when perceived as beautiful gets assumed as artificial if worn by a Black woman. These constant negotiations of Black beauty and authenticity highlight the ways in which social media spaces have served as platforms through which beauty and Blackness are constantly being struck against each other to spark debate.

### *Team Natural*

The idea of naturalness as a type of category, or identity, or “team” was also discussed. While some participants discussed the categories of natural and non-natural as more absolute, others commented on how the grouping of natural and non-natural is not necessarily a clear divide. While Linda defined being natural simply as refraining from using chemical relaxers, other participants had more complicated perceptions of what it means to be natural. Marlowe

explained how she never considered herself a “natural” until college even though she had been relaxer-free her entire life:

“I never even thought of myself as natural until in college and everyone’s talking about natural hair. Just because I didn’t realize, like oh yeah, I guess I never have had a relaxer. So at the same time, I never considered myself like I’m natural, ‘cause I do wear my hair straight eighty percent of the time...At the same time, I don’t think I’m not natural. I don’t know. ‘Cause I don’t have a [relaxer], you know what I mean? It’s kind of like a spectrum maybe? I don’t know.”

Madison’s dialogue highlights how the phenomenon of “natural hair movement” is somewhat new and current, still in the process of catching on while hair textures themselves have not changed. She also discussed how using flat irons and heat instead of relaxers to straighten hair complicates the meaning of natural:

“I always thought of natural hair as not chemically processed, because then it’s altered, but I guess, I don’t know, coming to college, and even in high school, I kind of realized that straightening it is kind of altering it as well, even though it’s not in the same way...So I feel like it’s still natural, but, with people talking about natural hair as a movement and going natural and converting from having had a perm, I feel like it’s people that wear their hair the way it grows naturally out of your head on a constant basis. And I kind of feel in between.”

Madison also expressed feeling somewhat uncomfortable with “broadcasting” her distinction as natural:

“One of my best friends in high school...would always make it a point to tell people that [that they were both natural] because they would comment on our long hair and how it was straight all of the time, and she’d be like, ‘yeah and we’ve never had perms either. We’re the only ones.’ And I mean, I just don’t understand why she always made it a point to tell people that. I mean it doesn’t really matter if someone’s hair is straight because it’s permed or...because they can get it straight naturally. It doesn’t make a difference, but it really bothered me that she would always broadcast that.”

When discussing the tensions that arise between “team” natural and non-natural, Jamie explained feeling pressure from her natural peers to “convert” and stop using relaxers as she normally did.

“Growing up...it was just natural for me to get a perm ‘cause my mom has completely different texture hair than I do. So that wasn’t anything me and my friends talked about, whether people had natural hair or permed hair, but coming to college, it was maybe one of the first conversations I had. Someone asked me if I had a perm and why I did it and [asked] was I planning on going natural sometime soon and I was really uncomfortable because I felt like, you know, they showed me these [YouTube] videos and I was just like, no. I felt really uncomfortable...I was being judged, on my choice – well it wasn’t really my choice, of having permed hair. So I think definitely in college I see those tensions...”

The idea of “teams” is a concept propagated by social media sites like Twitter that are then rehashed and recycled onward to a larger scale. By creating certain levels of solidarity among natural haired women, the natural hair social media sphere has ultimately created inevitable

divides for women who either do not identify as natural or for those women who have complex perceptions of self identity where they feel “in between” categories. The supportive, sisterly connotations of the third wave afro are continually negotiated on online spaces where Black women with or without natural hair may feel tensions, disconnects, and divides in some areas while feeling at home and among peers in others.

### *Time is Money*

One of the questions often talked about on these natural hair blogs and vlogs relating to a spectrum of textures and manageability is how natural hair becomes either time consuming or saving. While some bloggers discuss their “teeny weeny afro” experiences after the big chop as “get-up-and-go” and “easy styling,” other vloggers describe a much more tedious experience. A guest blogger on Curly Nikki wrote, “Having natural hair sometimes feels like a second job.”

Taren916 describes a similar hair experience:

“With the curly hair, people have the misconception that just because it’s natural, this is the get-up-and-go hair and it’s not. That’s total BS. Total misconception. This? (Touches her curly hair) It takes a lot to maintain your natural hair. It really does. I mean you have to find the right products, you know, how to get your fresh curls and everything. I mean, it takes a lot. It’s annoying at times and I’m pretty sure some of you guys out there can relate.”

### *Anti-Commercialism*

When discussing the depiction of natural hair in main stream media and commercial advertising, some participants acknowledged an over representation while others pointed out an

under representation, depending on the media context. When discussing commercialized product lines within the cosmetic, beauty, and hair-care industry, Madison commented on how her own beauty type or hair type gets excluded from advertisements that target either straight hair or relaxed hair exclusively:

“I’ll be watching commercials and it’ll talk about some hair treatment product and I’ll be like, man, that sounds like it would really work and then I stop and say ‘well, it’s for White women. There’s only white women in the commercial. It’s white women that they did the little transformation-from-before-and-after to, so my hair probably wouldn’t turn out like that.’ And it seems like most of the advertisements that they have for Black women are for relaxed hair and I’ve never had a relaxer. So I just feel like there’s nothing really out there for me.”

Bahiya also expressed a disconnect between the hair types presented in commercial images. She explains that while commercials do incorporate a variety of hair textures, the types of curls shown are usually far from what she actually witnesses among her peers and herself:

“I feel like you do see a lot of versatility. Like, you see the girls with the natural hair, or the natural hair where the curls are perfectly defined, and I’ll be like no one’s natural hair ever looks like that.”

When discussing commercial advertising and mainstream media texts outside of a cosmetic or beauty context, Marlowe discussed an overrepresentation of natural hair, used as a token of Blackness:

“One thing I noticed is, I think I saw this online actually, it was a blog post about how in a lot of commercials where you have detergent and things like that, when they have a

Black actress, she has curly hair. And it's just one of those things I always noticed...She doesn't always have curly hair. But lots of times she will."

Some of the participants also discussed their hair in relation to commercial products and purchasing decisions. Bahiya explains how she tries to refrain from using commercial products and prefers using natural ingredients likely found in food products:

"I actually just converted from not using shampoo anymore and just doing apple cider vinegar rinses. It's just through trial and error, but I feel as long as it's natural, I'm just gonna put it in my hair (laughs). Like my mom had bought me, do you guys all know what the Magic Bullet is? The blender. I was like, 'I'm just gonna make all types of hair smoothies in this.' I was mixing avocado and coconut oil, olive oil, honey. I was just mixing it all in there and I was like I'm just gonna put it in my hair and see what happens. And it actually ended up working, 'cause I really wanted to get out of having to use products from the store 'cause of the shelf life, the chemicals, the whatever. I would like to just be able to use something where I know all the [ingredients]...I feel very comfortable with it."

Marlowe also expressed comfort with and trust in natural as opposed to store-bought products:

"I don't see really why you'd be scared, right? I mean, what bad can an avocado do?...You know, think about it. You go and you buy Herbal Essence or something and there's loads of chemicals in that, I'm sure an avocado won't do any harm."

Jamie, who regularly wears straight styles and uses relaxers, described a different relationship with her hair, relying on commercial products and professional stylists to do her hair:

“I’m on the way opposite spectrum...I’ve always grown up in a hair salon...So I generally like to have people do my hair. And makeup and stuff like that, I’m not super into it, but I’d rather have someone else do it for me...I’m sure with me, the avocado would do harm (laughs). So I just generally don’t like to get too creative.”

An extensive amount of YouTube vlogs and many of the blogs contain either video tutorials or tabs where natural hair do-it-yourself recipes are shared. These recipes include a number of house hold food items not limited to mayonnaise, honey, vegetable, plant, and flower based oils, flaxseeds, aloe vera gel, caramel, oatmeal, and sugar. Curly Nikki reposted a recipe from another hair blog where the blogger justified the extensive mixing process by explaining how “the ingredients are pretty easy to find and inexpensive.” Often times, do-it-yourself recipes can be cost effective. Confounding the idea of cost efficiency, however, many of the ingredients often used in these recipes such as exotic oils and butters or flaxseeds can eventually add up to being costlier than store bought products.

Natural hair practices also get discussed as being cost effective when comparing them with the use of chemical treatments. YouTube and Blogs have become spaces abundant with easily accessible information and tutorials that can overshadow salons and professional stylists. Many of the bloggers and vloggers mention that they have not visited a salon in an extensive amount of time while others still make use of salons but make an effort to seek out salons that

specialize in natural or curly hair care, abandoning the traditional Black salons they might have used while relaxed.

When talking about her experience meeting a woman who was getting a perm in the salon, Taren916 comments on the competition introduced by the growing popularity of natural hair and its impact on the economy of Black hair salons:

“What I noticed was that she [the woman getting a relaxer] barely had new growth. My assumption was that she was kind of addicted to touch ups. Like, any little piece of new growth she saw, she wanted to come into the salon and get a touch up. And I was just like oh God, your hair...But my thing was, you know, the stylist didn't say anything to her...of course the controversy that I put on my instagram post was are they [the stylists] just aware and don't want to say anything because of some money? You know she clearly does not need a touch up right now. She could go another three weeks...based off what I saw. But the stylist wasn't gonna tell her that because perms are expensive. Perms are where the bulk of the money is. I don't know, I just found it interesting that you know, number one, the stylist didn't really correct her, and I had to kind of chime in and she was very appreciative of it.”

This dialogue touches upon economic tensions that have arisen alongside the natural hair movement where hair products marketed toward Black women with chemically treated hair have had to adjust their marketing and even the products themselves.

In a blog post titled “6 Relaxer Lines That Have Gone Natural,” Black Girl Long Hair also comments on the economy of Black hair and the ways in which the popularity of natural hair has prompted shifting:



“Hair care for Black women has been a booming industry for decades. In fact, we spend millions of dollars a year just to keep it looking right and tight. Over the past 6 years, we have all witnessed the popularity of natural hair soar — and the subsequent decline in the profitability of perm kits. The dip in sales of relaxers and related straight-hair products coincide with the rise in popularity of natural hair products, bloggers, and vloggers. There’s nothing like a pinch in the pocket that makes an industry listen.”

In this post, she also makes reference to the power the natural hair movement has had on larger cosmetic industries functioning somewhat like a boycott or what she called a “pinch in the pocket.”

### *Questions of Integrity*

The social media space itself also reinforces an attachment of Black hair with money. As previously discussed, many natural hair bloggers and vloggers are monetized through either YouTube or Google Ad Sense where content producers receive compensation per number of views or clicks. When considering natural hair as a hobby, questions of integrity often arise if the amount of profit received by vloggers and bloggers is known to the viewers. Though exact earnings are impossible to know without contacting the vloggers directly, the fact that Taren916 has over 15 million video views and 135,376 subscribers communicates to the viewer a clear distinction between what she earns and what MelsharyA earns, with 8,369 subscribers and less than half a million views.

Not only do natural hair vloggers and bloggers have an opportunity to profit through pay-per-view and pay-per-click commercial, but often times have that opportunity for a kind of product placement type advertising where their actual blog or vlog content advertises some other

brand of product usually in the form of product reviews. Many of the product reviews viewed in this analysis were using products that the vloggers/bloggers actually paid for themselves and posted up as a hobby, some were reviews that content producers would post with compensation from the product company, and many were reviews posted in exchange for free full sized products. When YouTubers and Bloggers start increasing in subscribers and views, getting monetized, or even in some cases like Curly Nikki, getting books published, their ranking shift from “natural hair vlogger/blogger” to “paraprofessional” and this shifting is when viewers begin to question the integrity or honesty of content, preferring reviews that have been done out of one’s own pocket money rather than through compensation from a product line. The questions of integrity and commercialism present on natural hair vlogs reinforces both issues of the Black economy and authenticity. Commercialized natural hair YouTubers come to stand in for the commercialized Black economy that has been negotiated by Black women either positively or negatively. The aversion against sponsored paraprofessionals stands in for the shifts in the Black economy where consumers have also averted farther away from the commercialized Black sphere that relied on relaxers and hot combs for profit. Questioning the authenticity of paraprofessionals as honest hobbyist is also interesting to consider in relation to the ways in which the afro stands in for Black authenticity. The commercialization of YouTubers who started as hobbyist elevates their status further from amateur, average Black women – if there is such a thing – to a higher caliber producer closer to the mainstream and farther from the niche. The authenticity of their videos and sincerity becomes linked with the perception of authenticity in terms of how “real” they may be as a representation of Black women.

Taren916 is a YouTuber who quickly shifted to being perceived as a paraprofessional. Her channel features footage of numerous national scale natural hair events where she has hosted

or led, along with footage of her with other popular vloggers, bloggers, and hairstylist known nationwide. She has an extensive amount of product reviews which essentially market the products to all of her 300,000 plus subscribers along with the entirety of YouTube viewers who may stumble on her page. She also has a number of reviews of hair salons which also markets the salon's services and stylists. Taren916 posted a half hour long video titled "The Ugly Truth About YouTube and Business" where she discussed issues regarding paraprofessionals and compensation on YouTube:

"I feel like I fall into the category of a vlogger who this has turned into a business for me. And I do love doing this as a hobby. It's just something I love to do. So it's a mixture of both for me... 'It' being what I do for a living."

She continues to discuss what she calls different "lenses" on YouTube including the lens of the viewer and the lens of the "vlogger who is on both sides" who participates in viewing and producing videos. She discusses the "value of web presence" and the different types of advertising potentials that come with it including "accidental" or "intentional." She argues:

"When your numbers grow and your value grows...I'm talking about business value...there has to be some kind of point where it stops. When free products coming in for free reviews stop. You need to take a stand for your value with these companies...I feel like there's a conversation that needs to start happening about compensation...When you really understand how powerful you are as far as advertising goes, we are engagers. Video people. Web presence. Vloggers. We are engagers. We're more powerful than a commercial slot. We're more powerful than a billboard. We're more powerful than even the banner on a blog. We are engaging our viewers. We are having dialogue...We gain

the trust of our viewers and the companies know this... They pay millions of dollars for... ads that are not as effective as us. But yet they don't want to pay us. Or they want to pay us peanuts. And we accept it. And that's the problem."

Her video received extensive amounts of feedback from viewers and an extensive number of video responses from other vloggers including both MelsharyA and DenimPixie. DenimPixie expressed similar views to Taren916:

"Deliverables and deadlines...that's work... When I'm like hey I can't go out tonight...because I have to have this video done for this company by noon tomorrow, that's work. For me to work, you have to compensate me...I just don't run around with a list of to-dos and deliverables out of the goodness of my heart."

She also expressed her thoughts on how compensation might impact integrity from the lens of the viewer:

"I do think that the question of integrity is a valid concern, but at the same time... people need to understand what that vlogger's mission is and what their goal is for being on YouTube or having a blog before they decide how they are going to treat someone, like if they're going to treat someone [the vlogger] like a brand or whether they want to treat someone like a person...Someone commented on one of my videos and they were like 'it must be nice to get all your products for free.'...and unless I show her a receipt...that she's not gonna believe that I actually paid for it."

She critiques viewer's distrust by commenting on how viewers oftentimes demand more from vloggers than what vloggers would normally do out of hobby, in which case compensation would help improve viewer's experiences with higher quality videos:

“People get on other people’s videos ...saying can you do a close up shot of your hair? I really need to see your hair follicle...I need you to get a HD camera...I need you to learn how to edit better...People constantly are asking you for more or giving you unsolicited feedback about what they think you should be doing yet they don’t want to either contribute, or even be ok with you doing something that may help you get to the level that they want you to be at. Cameras cost money. Lighting cost money. Computers cost money. Video editing software cost money...products cost money. Everything cost money, but you just want these people to be sitting here on YouTube providing you with information out of the goodness of their hearts.”

### *Aesthetics*

Many natural hair blogs and vlogs get categorized under beauty since much of the content is about styling methods. Beyond tutorials and instructional videos, there are also particular ways in which vloggers and bloggers position natural hair as fitting into a certain aesthetic. Often natural hair is equated with boldness, confidence, sex appeal and funk. Even while discussing topics unrelated to fashion, it is common for natural hair vloggers especially to appear styled. When Taren916 begins her “Ugly Truth About YouTube” video, she points out what kind of curly extensions she has in her hair. She wears a full face of makeup, false eye lashes, pink lipstick, what appears like a zebra-print-like shirt, and large yellow metal earrings that hang down past her collar bone.

Oftentimes wearing hair natural is referred to as “rocking natural hair” suggesting that wearing natural hair expends some level of effort or adjustment to an otherwise neutral state. Black Girl Long Hair posted an article “7 Looks that Go Well with Natural Hair” providing a guide of how to style an appropriate wardrobe ensemble specifically for textured hair.

“One of the most fun aspects of having natural hair is building a look around it. There are several styles that go hand in hand with highly textured hair... There’s no denying natural hair has a lot of character. It lends itself to bright, bold color choices.”

The suggested styles included fitted dresses, bright colors, bold lipstick, red lipstick, turbans, bold prints, and “statement” earrings.

While a number of commenters expressed irritation with the slide-show format of the blog post, one commenter stated a concern with the blog prescribing particular looks to natural hair:

“...I am not understanding the need for an article like this. I mean are there any looks that don’t go well with natural hair? Does the fact that you have natural hair mean you fit into a box in terms of style? Maybe I’m doing too much, but I really don’t see what the texture of your hair has to do with the clothes you wear. So are other styles less becoming with women/girls with natural hair?”

The grouping of “natural” in relation to texture begins to spill over into other categories like style where natural hair becomes associated with bold, fierce looks and bright colors.

One commenter mentions how the bold aesthetic often attributed to natural hair excluded women with natural hair who may not fit that mold:

“One of the ‘problems’ I have with a lot of hair sites and articles about natural hair is the overwhelming amount of styles that are “funky”/”Afrocentric’/”bold.” I feel that it may cause someone who is on a more conservative career path to deem that it is not for them. Natural hair is not a style but simply accepting the texture that grows out of your scalp. Whatever style you want it to take you can. The concentration of articles like this is one of the reasons why so many women ask how am I going to wear my hair for an interview/work/etc... It would be nice to see the elegance, softness of natural hair and not just it being loud and bold.”

### *The Natural Trend*

Participants sometimes used the word “trendy” to describe the growing popularity of natural hair. Although “trendy” was not used with a negative connotation, it was often used in a context suggesting that the act of going natural is often reactive and incited by others going natural rather than from one’s own desire to be natural. Marlowe commented on how natural hair as a growing trend has given rise to many larger scale conversations about natural hair:

“I think that you kind of have that intense Nazi-like preaching I suppose, really because I feel like it became super trendy. It, being natural hair...I don’t remember people even talking about this, even this discussion, you know what I mean...when I was growing up at all. And at least not to this extent and I also feel like I see more people that are going natural in real life and on the internet...”

### *Length*

Similarly to how looser textures get discussed as more manageable, longer lengths are often discussed as more ideal. The infinite number of cuts, lengths and styles that come with any

hair texture opens the opportunity for discussion and debate about the aesthetics of particular lengths or styles.

When revealing her new hair cut, beauty vlogger ColouredBeautiful speaks to both the idea of natural hair as funky and bold as well as the idea of long hair as more ideal:

“The funk has been calling me for a very long time and I cut my hair. Ok? I only cut one side of it, just like that, that’s it...I put a hard A-line bob into both sides of my hair. I just wanted a different shape. I got tired of that same old look, I got tired of it...Although the color gives me some of that funky edge that I like, the shape was just boring to me...The bob wasn’t cutting it...I didn’t like the way that it was situating my face shape. Now the shape of your hair has a lot to do with the angles in your face and whether it helps or hurts you know, your features...I am not attached to length. For those of you who are attached to length, I appreciate where you are in your journey, but that’s just not where I am. You know, I’m very happy with my hair. I’m very happy with the decisions that I make for my hair, so if you’re feeling some kind of way about me cutting my hair, I’m very sorry that it affects you that deeply...”

#### *On the Couch*

Both natural hair vloggers and bloggers have the tendency to extend beyond hair and delve quite a bit into the personal. Sometimes content producers open up to viewers with their own personal accounts and sometimes they invite viewers to reach out with personal stories or concerns. Natural hair blogs are often marketed as resources for women with natural hair to not only discuss hair but to discuss life and issues in general. The Curly Nikki banner reflects this in its text that reads “hair therapy on the couch with Curly Nikki.” Nikki Walton, founder of Curly



Nikki, is a licensed and practicing psychotherapist who explains in her biography her passion for “assisting Black women in learning to love their hair.” She wrote:

“People will say on the site sometimes: ‘It’s just hair, it’s not that deep,’ but they come to the site [CurlyNikki.com] everyday, so maybe it is that deep. For Black women especially, it’s wrapped up in our quality of life.”

Vloggers, too, have ways in which natural hair becomes wrapped up in the personal sphere. Even though she identifies as a natural hair vlogger, MelsharyA produces a series of advice videos that are often unrelated to hair at all. The series is set up as a question/answer session where each video addresses a different question such as “I’m pregnant, should I tell him?” in which she discusses her viewpoint on the issue as a way to distribute advice to her viewers.

Along with digging into the personal lives of her viewers, MelsharyA also digresses from hair in a number of her videos to discuss her own personal issues. In her video “Lesbian Natural Hair Vlogger: My Coming Out Story” she discusses her goal to help others who may be in a similar position:

“This subject for me is kind of a heavy subject but...I’m really honest about everything else and I’ve been getting a lot of questions and messages and people just really seeking advice because they know about my lifestyle as an out lesbian. (Tears up) This is my first time trying to film it and I’m not gonna edit it and it’s just gonna be totally raw because it’s that serious to me and I think it’s necessary now and I might lose some of you...and that’s okay by me. I’m not gonna challenge your beliefs...but as far as I’m concerned, my lifestyle has nothing to do with my hair which is what this channel is about. But I chose to put this video out because some people have contacted me about advice and how

I came out and how it was and I'm more so about helping people and becoming what you truly are.”

She then continues to talk about her emotional coming out story. Instances like this one where hair, Blackness, sexuality and emotion all come into play highlight the ways in which all intersectionalities involved with Black womanhood should all be considered in consolidation when discussing the implications and meanings behind the “third wave afro” movement.

## **Findings**

### **Social Media and Momentum**

The first research question addresses the multiple ways in which the social and technological affordances of blogs and vlogs play a critical role in mobilizing the “natural hair movement” and how social media has shaped a current, collective understanding of the afro. A number of different technical, structural, and social aspects specific to blogs and vlogs were identified and sorted into four overlapping categories including (1) self-representation, (2) transparency, (3) nonlinearity, and (4) spreadability. All four of these characteristics that were analyzed have interacted and overlapped, contributing to the mobilization of a “movement” and have helped shape collective, shared perceptions of the current afro.

#### *Self-Representation*

Many of the features of blogs and vlogs afforded a sense of self-representation that is often absent in mainstream texts. Even mainstreamed text produced by and for minorities do not

provide as comprehensive self-representations as provided within the blogosphere. Rather than one or few minority producers creating niche content and broadcasting that content onward to individuals, blogs and vlogs create a space where any amateur minority media producer can create content. The content producers of blogs and vlogs are rarely major production companies or experienced producers, but rather the media viewers themselves.

The candid photography often used in blogs and the amateur grade filming materials and techniques often used in the production of YouTube videos enables producers to showcase themselves in their natural environments. When glamour shots or higher grade professional shots are used in blogs or when more professional style editing is used in YouTube videos, the producers are still perceived as average people or “YouTubers,” of a lesser caliber than a minority producer such as Tyler Perry, even when the “YouTuber” relies on producing videos for income.

Many vlog and blog content producers not only produce original content, but rely on viewers to send in material in the form of pictures, articles, or interview responses. The inclusion of “features” of Natural women, labeled as “style icons” or “hair idols,” also creates a space where minority viewers can feel a literal sense of self representation when seeing the faces of either themselves or their peers included in content.

Self-representation is important for the mobilization of a “movement” because people are able to connect with the content and understand the content as “for them.” Being able to see one’s own face or the faces of familiar people embedded within media texts hails or speaks to the viewer in a way that enables meaningful acknowledgement and consideration of the content. The ability to produce videos in real-time enables viewers to engage with content and feel “spoken

to” in the literal sense of the term, where viewers can type questions and remarks in the commentary section and expect an instantaneous and direct response from the YouTuber.

Participants in the focus group discussion also emphasized a need for self-representation that they feel is fulfilled in natural-hair-centered social media that is lacking in mainstream.

Bahiya made this need clear when she said,

“When I look at my blog, I can depend on my followers and the people that I’m following to really perpetuate that Black beauty is there. ‘Cause I don’t see on TV. I don’t see it in front of me a lot of times.”

Her quote reflects the yearning to feel represented more often and more accurately in media as beautiful and to be represented at all.

### *Transparency*

The second important aspect of the natural hair social media sphere that has enabled a movement is transparency, or the extent of exposure of the producer. While blogs and vlogs have varying features, both have a number of features that enable viewers to feel as if they know the content producers on a personal level. YouTube videos allow viewers to physically see into the bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, cars, backyards, social gatherings, events and entire lives of the YouTubers. In many ways, Blogs function as a kind of journal or diary where bloggers upload daily content of texts that often extend beyond any relevance to hair. Viewers can see pictures of Nikki Walton’s (Curly Nikki) daughter being potty-trained, they can see a photo spread of Patrice Yursik’s (Afro Bella) entire week in Instagrams, or they can click on the “about me” tab or any of its nine sub-tabs to read about Nikki Walton’s biography, hair regimen,

motherhood, hair story, or favorite products. Coming “to know” the content producers on what feels like a personal level allows for a kind of intimacy that continues to grow deeper with continual viewership and engagement.

Similar to Curly Nikki, many of the blogs featured an extensive amount of tabs with an “about me” section or content pertaining to the everyday occurrences of the content producers such as “outfit of the day” photos. The commentary sections in both blogs and YouTube based channels also create the sense of getting to know the producer as a conversation starts unfolding and commenters learn the opinions of the producers while the producers learn about their viewers in turn. The idea of “speaking” to the producers as someone familiar occurs frequently on both vlogs and blogs in the form of reposts, features, or guest bloggers where bloggers cite or make reference to other bloggers or vloggers and also in the form of video responses where viewers can personally address particular producers or commenters specifically.

Not only do blogs and vlogs provide a space where viewers can peer directly into the personal lives of producers, but they also encourage viewers to seek out other social media platforms through which they can essentially stalk the producers, seeing into multiple aspects of their lives. Every blog and vlog analyzed included either icons, direct links, lines of speech incorporated into the video, or all three, prompting viewers to “follow” them on other social sites including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest. Most content producers make it a point to be active on a wide range of social spaces where their viewers can have access to a more robust vision of their personal lives.

The intimacy of engagement involved with natural hair blogs and vlogs becomes another means to bridge far away people closer together and to form senses of camaraderie and concern.

Feeling comfortable on a personal level is important for producer-producer, producer-viewer, and viewer-viewer dynamics, making it possible for blogs and vlogs to extend content beyond hair and to delve into larger issues regarding sexuality as seen in MelsharyA's coming out story, or the "ugly truth about YouTube" as seen in Taren916's video rant. The level of intimacy needed for the online hair conversation to branch outwards and to link onto larger issues has played an important role in charging natural hair as meaningful or mobile. Intimacy has become a kind of adhesive bonding hair to politics.

### *Nonlinearity*

Park (2007) discusses the ways in which new media is often designed specifically to invite a nonlinear media experience for media consumers. The nonlinear experience through which viewers experience blog and vlog content is another factor playing into the ability of social media to mobilize a movement. Nonlinear experiences afford a sense of power for the consumer who has a means to control both the amount and the genre of content within each site enabling a personalized experience.

The technical features of YouTube itself create the sense of a personalized experience through the inclusion of recommended videos generated algorithmically based on the content and genre of the current video being viewed. The search bar option available on both blogs and vlogs as well as the extensive number of tabs and subtabs available on blogs allows viewers to be redirected to the particular content they are looking for rather than being limited to one generalized homepage.

The nonlinear experience also opens the space for a high level of interaction directly to and from producers and viewers. Not only can viewers respond to content, directing their

comments directly to specific producers and other viewers, but producers and other viewers can then answer back directly to those responses creating an entire web of conversation.

Park (2007) also differentiates active and passive participation distinguishing levels of engagement. Both vlogs and blogs accommodate all levels of engagement where viewers can participate either actively through video responses and comments or more passively through simply viewing, subscribing, or “liking” content.

Discussion participants also commented on the ways in which natural hair blogs and vlogs are highly engaging spaces. Linda mentioned the idea of engagement as a measure of quality:

“I like using stuff [vlogs] that already has a lot of people subscribed to it or a lot of views already because then you already know that it should be kind of good.”

Marlowe commented on how YouTube particularly grabs people in a way that she called the “YouTube loop” making reference to the recommended videos.

Interactivity and engagement are important aspects in mobilizing a movement because viewers have the ability to incite each other. Interaction provides access to diversified viewpoints, acts as a means for encouragement, and helps cultivate a sense of togetherness.

### *Spreadability*

Borrowing from Jenkins (2013), this analysis related a number of attributes to “spreadability” and the role viewers play in actively spreading content impacting what content spreads, the directions they take, and which pockets of people they reach. The unique features and landscape of the social media sphere is what has made content involving natural hair and

natural hair movement so currently widespread and salient. As Marlowe discussed in the focus group, these are new conversations that did not occur in her middle school or high school years. Social media spaces integrated people into an old conversation that rapidly morphed into the multidimensional conception, or “third wave” of afro today.

Not only is social media content “spreadable,” but it actually requires a level of spreadability to function and relies on eyeballs as a kind of currency.

A number of natural hair vloggers and bloggers rely on the natural hair blogosphere as a means of earnings and as a demographic to advertise to. Vlogger Taren916 discussed in her video “The Ugly Truth About YouTube” how vlogging, which began as a hobby, quickly transitioned into a business where her vlog alone acts as a sufficient income and her “web presence” acts as valuable marketing potential for businesses. Most YouTube videos are laced with ads and sponsorships contributing both to the sustainability of YouTube and YouTubers. HairCrush is another example of a YouTuber whose number rose significantly in the short span of two years. HairCrush joined YouTube as a vlogger in January 2011. As of April 7, 2013 the vlogger subscriptions skyrocketed to 90,689 subscribers and a total of well over five million video views.

Curly Nikki has recognized the social media landscape as a space for synergistic self promotion as well. In January 2013, Nikki Walton published her book *Better Than Good Hair* which she continues to advertise in her blog banner and through the social media spaces of fellow natural hair bloggers and vloggers who promote her book on their channels.



Outside of the monetary value of views, there are a number of other features of blogs and vlogs that promote the spread of content. There are ways in which content is spread haphazardly and ways through which content is spread with intention and awareness.

During the discussion, Bahiya explained how she purposefully searched for content which then led her to viewing related content and how she then purposefully participated in spreading content through her networks:

“I just started looking up blogs and Tumblr where they could show me a whole bunch of videos, and YouTube, too... I feel like once I made my blog then I started really looking for it...I kept following more people and kept re-blogging stuff and having people re-blog my stuff. It was just never ending.”

The ability to embed YouTube videos onto personal social media sites provides a convenient method for viewers to play a purposeful role in the spread of content as well as the use of links and reposts.

Marlowe spoke of finding natural hair related content as more coincidental:

“I was already an active user of the site and still am and just stumbled upon it via recommendations from the site mostly...I do follow blogs, but I use an RSS feeder thing but I don't really check it that much.”

Her inactive use of an RSS feed reader, where content from already subscribed channels is automatically sorted and updated, further emphasized her point that she does not spend much of her time actively searching for content and that there is often little to no intention behind finding content related to natural hair.

The idea of views themselves exponentially creating more views was also discussed. Linda's preference of "using stuff that already has a lot of people subscribed to it or a lot of views already," as previously mentioned, highlights the ways in which a high number of views can prompt an even more expansive numbers of views.

There are also ways in which media producers can create more easily spreadable content outside of the quality of the content itself being perceived as share-worthy by viewers. Bloggers can use search engine optimization through blogging sites like WordPress to ensure that their site content is included in search results when viewers search for related keywords. Some blogs like Curly Nikki collaborate with other blogs and websites in order to attract the viewers loyal to the other blog. When Curly Nikki "takes over" the Essence hair advice column on Thursdays, Essence viewers who may not have been previously aware of Curly Nikki become aware after seeing her featured article on the Essence site. As previously discussed, bloggers and vloggers encouraging viewers to "follow" them on other social sites using links and icons is another method through which media content becomes more spreadable.

When posing the question of what natural hair content is most spreadable, it's important to consider the different kinds of spreadable. Content discussing natural hair controversies such as the hair typing system, the integrity of YouTubers, or "Stuff Relaxed Girls Say to Naturals" and vice versa get frequent video responses as they can be inflammatory inciting people to respond. Unlike comments, video responses are very much related to spreadability because the viewers are actively producing content that purposefully spreads the message and topics onward to their own circle of followers who more than likely will link back to the original video to see where the controversy originated. Informational content like beauty tips, tutorials, and outfits of

the day are more spreadable in other ways as they are likely to be “shared” or reposted to other social media spaces outside of YouTube and Blogs.

Spreadability plays an integral role in the mobilization of a “movement” because often time the success of a movement depends on mass numbers of people participating. The spreadability of social media content has broadened an awareness of the growing popularity of natural hair along with all of the associations. Spreadability allows information to spread outwards, as a way to recruit new social media engagers on board the natural hair movement, as well as interspersed within an already existing network as to reinforce particular meanings.

### **The Afro Redefined**

The second and third research questions address how natural hair blogs and vlogs have signified new meanings to natural African American hair textures and how Black women audiences negotiate these meanings. While natural hair was contextualized in a number of different ways, many of the themes discussed were recurrent in both the textual analysis and participant data analysis. The multiple connotations of the afro discussed in both the textual and participant data analysis were grouped into one of five major dimensions that have collectively and complexly come to define the current, nuanced afro. These dimensions include (1) liberation, (2) sustainability, (3) authenticity, (4) beauty, and (5) camaraderie.

*Liberation: “I can get caught in the rain and I ‘aunt got to run.”*

Many of themes involved in the analysis relate to a sense of liberation that comes with being natural. Blogs and vlogs often mention the experience of having natural hair, or any hair, as a hair journey. Natural hair specifically comes to signify growth and coming-of-age where a certain “mindset” more critical of textured hair evolves to embrace textured hair later on, usually

in adulthood. Along with the idea of a journey, blogs and vlogs often highlight both the triumph and trauma that come with learning to love one's own natural hair texture. Oftentimes, these positive and negative experiences circulate in the form of articles or videos that serve as a guide book for other women with natural hair.

The freedom linked to natural hair is usually expressed with feelings of ownership of one's body, a boost in self confidence and the ability to disregard negative reactions from others. With being natural comes to the freedom and ability to allow a Black woman's features to remain as they naturally are rather than forcing features into Eurocentric beauty molds including straight hair styles.

While social media spaces often perpetuate natural hair as liberating, women with natural hair hold varied viewpoints regarding both feelings of freedom and bondage attributed to their hair. While Linda spoke of her natural hair as a kind of passport, allowing her to venture to humid regions of the world where straight hair would not allow she also spoke of the ways in which people still place political assumptions onto women with natural hair as militant. Bahiya also discussed feeling subjected to stereotypes because of her natural hair where she becomes bound to particular lifestyles that she is not necessarily a part of.

Women also hold negotiated meanings of the kinds of freedoms that come with natural hair. While Bahiya discussed her hair as a signifier of self acceptance and embrace, Marlowe, who has been natural her whole life, discussed freedom in regard to styling versatility, being positive because of the ability to style her hair straight or curly whenever she pleased.

*Sustainability: "Perms are where the bulk of the money is."*

Sustainability and self sufficiency in relation to time, money, and resources were often coupled with natural hair within the blogosphere. Topics regarding natural hair maintenance

usually surfaced concerns with time management. While many bloggers and vloggers described moments of their natural hair journey as being easier, timelier, enjoyable, and more manageable, others describe the maintenance of natural hair as comparable to having a “second job.”

Beyond time management, natural hair was often contextualized with the backdrop of the Black economy. Issues and ethics involving salon culture and profitability, the integrity of paraprofessionals, and purchasing decisions are common topics of conversation involving natural Black hair. Taren916 argued that “perms are where the bulk of the money is” and critiqued salons for being dishonest and accepting customers requesting perms when their hair is not ready for the sake of profit. Other bloggers have argued that the rising popularity of natural hair has actually led to the “subsequent decline in the profitability of perm kits,” and that relaxer brands have had to re-strategize with the launch of new product lines targeting natural hair to compensate for the “dip in sales.”

Not only does the blogosphere discuss natural hair as having the economic power to impact both products and sales of commercial brands, but the natural hair blogosphere has also discussed the social media sphere itself as a powerful clutch for liquidating the Black economy. While some Black women react negatively towards the shift of natural hair blogs and vlogs from a hobby to a business, some Black women embrace the blogosphere as a space for Black women to produce their own income and promote other Black-owned businesses.

During the focus group discussion, participants also discussed commercialism in relation to natural hair and a tendency to avoid certain commercial products that either excluded them or contained unhealthy ingredients. Madison reflected on how she felt many cosmetic products advertisements targeted White women, making her doubt their effectiveness on her texture. Bahiya discussed how having natural hair factored into her decision to discontinue the

purchasing of store-bought hair products and begin using a number of natural products and food products to concoct her own formulas.

While some women agreed with the idea of boycotting certain commercial brands, some Black women remain uncomfortable with the idea of turning to their kitchens to produce their own hair products. Jamie mentioned her preference of relying on professional stylists and hair products in the commercial market. Though she uses a relaxer, her views are still representative of a number of women who do not feel compelled to use entirely natural products on their natural hair.

*Authenticity: "I bought it from Scalp."*

Similarly to how natural hair becomes framed as a marker of liberation and self-embrace, choosing to wear one's natural texture is often associated as a signifier of Black authenticity. Questions related to gradations of Black give rise to conflicting views regarding certain types of Black experiences as either easier or less Black than others. While many vloggers and bloggers openly reject notions of curl typing systems and make equality claims like, "A curl is a curl," constant debate occurs on social media spaces where vloggers, bloggers and viewers negotiate the value and use of distinguishing different curl types as "easier."

While some vloggers like Taren916 identify as biracial, many YouTubers and bloggers identify as Black. There are moments in the social media sphere where content producers who identify as Black as opposed to mixed race get legitimized in a way that mixed race content producers do not, regardless of texture.

There is also a type of authenticity related to being natural where certain practices and regimens are considered "the natural way," like the "curly girl method" for example, while other methods are considered incorrect or less natural. This spectrum of natural authenticity was

discussed during the focus group where Marlowe and Madison both expressed conflicts with identifying as completely natural since they both chose to straight style their hair quite often.

The concept of a “natural way” also creates a sense of authority or policing that occurs on these social spaces where a certain methods are deemed inferior or “old school.” The phrase “natural hair Nazi” gets circulated to describe moments when either content producers or viewers feel a sense of duty behind their natural hair to inform other women about the correct ways of being natural.

Related to authenticity is also the issue of natural hair as “real” hair compared to synthetic hair in the form of wigs and weaves. Even if a wig is made of human hair, the concept of a wig as a whole is perceived as artificial regardless of its texture. One Black woman with naturally wavy hair still gets categorized as “natural” similarly to another Black woman with naturally kinky hair. However, a women who has either chemically altered her hair from a state of kinky to wavy or who wears a wavy wig is not natural. In this sense, “naturalness” is not always indicative of texture, but rather indicates authenticity. The assumption that anyone’s natural hair texture may be a wig or weave is considered offensive regardless of the texture which is tied in with racist assumptions that Black women either always wear artificial hair or have an inability to grow their hair long.

The idea of varying levels of Blackness was also discussed during the focus group. Similarly to how the assumption that one’s hair is a wig is offensive, so is the assumption that someone with natural hair is mixed. Though the connection of the afro with Black pride has significantly shifted since the 1960’s and 1970’s, there are still remnants of Black pride that remain where natural hair has come to signify different types of Black pride. Instead of a focus

on civil equality, there is a focus on beauty equality along with the repression of a history of unjust racial mixing.

Bahiya reflects on her looser hair texture and lighter skin color while questioning the need to acknowledge her traces of Whiteness that reflect a history where “some Black woman was raped by some White master.”

While some women may value the racial signification attached to their textured hair, others find assumptions and identifications of being mixed race as less troublesome.

Jamie noted how she doesn't “necessarily think there's” anything wrong with being proud of everything that you are.”

While the relationship between different kinds of authenticity and different textures of hair is complex, it is an important reoccurring context through which bloggers, vloggers and viewers negotiate meanings attributed to natural hair and Black hair in general.

*Beauty: “One of the... fun aspects of having natural hair is building a look around it.”*

Natural hair blogs and vlogs serve multiple purposes, though are usually described by content producers as spaces where curly and kinky Afrocentric textures can be portrayed as equally beautiful without Eurocentric standards. Blogs and vlogs become an archive of sorts where Black viewers can both post and sift through an extensive amount of Black hair and Black women as icons of beauty. It can be argued that the afro as a signifier of Black beauty, or a type of beauty unbecoming to the Eurocentric mold, may be the most pressing and most wide spread of all.

The bulk of social media content related to Black hair is tutorial or styling based. Much of the content also branches out into other realms of style including make-up/cosmetics, wardrobe/fashion, body image and art/design. Many vloggers like Taren916 incorporate the



promotion of a particular aesthetic in her content that relates to both appearing and feeling healthy, fit, bold, bright and funky.

Black Girl Long Hair's article "7 Looks That Go Well with Natural Hair" highlight the ways in which the textured afro often gets coupled to boldness and confidence. The article also suggests that certain looks have become more appropriate or fitting for afros than others. Many Black women enjoy the kind of fashion "statement" an afro introduces to an entire look while other more conservative woman express frustration with the definition of an afro as a particular type of style. One commenter notes how "natural hair is not a style but simply accepting the texture that grows out of your scalp." The association of the afro as "funky" or trendy has also been critiqued by Black women out of fear of perpetuating the association of the textured afro as unprofessional.

The notion of a natural hair "trend" itself also suggest a kind of fad that will continue to be recycled in new ways over the course of time while falling "out of style" just as often. The concept of a natural hair "fad" is also an aspect of beauty that becomes negotiated among Black women. While some women view natural hair as a recent trend that may possible fade out, other women perceive the natural hair movement as a permanently shifting of cultural and ideological views. The natural hair social media sphere is a space where standards of Black beauty get reconceptualized and where Black women can renegotiate the afro's signification of beauty.

*Camaraderie: "Hair therapy on the couch with Curly Nikki"*

Natural hair blogs and vlogs focus on natural hair care and maintenance, but much of the content delves beyond the practical into the personal. In many ways, natural hair has become an aspect of identity where natural women look towards other natural women with shared experiences and understandings. The natural hair blogosphere as a whole has become a type of

material culture where viewers have become familiarized with the same online “dramas” that occasionally occur between YouTubers or become familiarized with the same streams of updated content on their RSS feeds. Natural hair bloggers and vloggers actively engage their readers and viewers to form a sense of community and camaraderie.

The natural hair blogosphere has become laced with a therapeutic sentiment where viewers can tune in to their computer screens for a session of “hair therapy on the couch with Curly Nikki” or can sign in to YouTube to send MelsharyA a personal question where she may respond with a video to answer viewers’ concerns. The experience of natural hair as a “journey” with both traumas and triumphs sets up the idea that there are internal social and psychological issues that can be talked through in depth. Content producers and viewers, who were once strangers, become subscribers and followers who then evolve into friends who then evolve into therapists. Natural hair becomes linked to the idea of both a supportive network and a need for one.

In the focus group discussion, the idea of a natural “team” was mentioned when discussing race relations and shades of Blackness. Distinctions between natural haired people as separate from non-natural people were made, though a few participants expressed a lack of clarity regarding where “natural” begins and where “non-natural” ends. Definitions of what exactly it means to be natural are still in constant flux and participants expressed varied perceptions of what natural means as well as an inability to place themselves into either category.

Jamie’s uncomfortable experience feeling as though her natural peers were “converting” her also speaks to the ways in which Black women are constantly negotiating the value of identifying as natural and acknowledging both the bridges and tensions a natural hair movement might create. All in all, the natural hair blogosphere has positioned natural hair as a common

ground through which Black women from all over the country and the globe can come together in solidarity to form friendships, build trust, and support each other through both the good hair days and the bad.

### **Conclusion**

The afro is an old and timeless American relic with a rich history of renewal and transformation. While the afro has adopted a number of meanings, those meanings have shifted in waves with new generations, responsive to the particular political, social, and economical landscapes of the times. While the first wave of textured African American hair became associated with slavery and classlessness, Afrocentric hair textures and styles like the afro were reappropriated with new meanings during the civil political movements throughout the 1960s and 1970s when race and sex equality were at the forefront of the public agenda.

While slavery and civil rights served as the spinal structure for the branches of meanings attributed to kinky hair textures at the times, the rise of social media has become the central platform of the current paradigm that has proliferated new meanings and has mobilized an entire movement around the textured afro. Even though a digital divide exists where the voices of the impoverished are often excluded, the expansive reach, accessibility, and affordances of the internet and social media spaces have enabled rapid and successful movement toward expanding the range of hair textures accepted as beautiful. The naturally curly and kinky hair textures of many African American women serves as a common ground through which Black women have both cultivated solidarity and carved divides among one another. Through the enabling of social spaces on the internet, media producers and interactive audiences have massaged the meanings of natural hair, using social media as a medium of renegotiation.

A pluralistic textual analysis of web content coupled with an intimate focus group discussion have shed light on the ways in which the social and technological affordances of the vlog and blogospheres have played a critical role in the mobilization of a “movement.” Four major aspects of blogs and vlogs were identified as having had significant impact on the forwarding of a natural hair movement including self-representation, transparency, nonlinearity, and spreadability. The social media landscape has propelled a nuanced and complex meaning of natural African American hair textures by providing an opportunity for Black women to produce and spread content. The social media sphere is also a place where natural hair textures and beauty always intersect with race, gender, and class and must be analyzed in terms of how the intersections have provided particular depictions of racial identity, the Black economy, personal and social liberty, beauty and support systems.

Exploring the ability of blogs and vlogs to mobilize a movement is important as it emphasizes the power of social media and the blogosphere’s potential impact on shifting cultural norms that have been stagnant for entire decades within the course of a few years. Without the innovation and rising popularity of social media platforms such as blogs and vlogs, it can be argued that the growth and mobility of the natural hair movement would be somewhat stunted. While cultural perceptions of natural hair have continually shifted since slavery and again since civil rights, the current and collective perceptions of a “third wave” afro would not stand today as they are without the impact of social media spaces.

While the signification of the current afro is reminiscent of the civil rights and feminist movements during the 1960s and 1970s, the current afro signifies a progressive collection of meanings that stand very much apart and distinct from that of older generations. Textured hair as

a third “wave” is distinguished through these web platforms through which natural hair is charged with associations of liberation, sustainability, authenticity, beauty and camaraderie.

The analysis has also explored the ways in which natural hair blogs and vlogs have provided a venue through which natural African American hair textures have absorbed new social, cultural, political and economic meanings and how these meanings have been shared and negotiated by Black women audiences. Social media have provided easily accessible means through which minority women can gather to fill the void, where Black women and Black beauty have felt misrepresented and underrepresented, by creating and sharing original content produced by and for Black female amateur producers. The accessibility and spreadability of social web spaces places control in the hands of amateur media producers who would have otherwise had minimal chances of being heard by mass audiences. The social affordances of blogs and vlogs also provide active users with a sense of control over what aspects of the “third wave” afro should be mobilized and with what networks the content will be shared.

The natural hair blogosphere is a space where Black women have engaged with media texts and where they both figuratively and literally witness representations of themselves and portrayals of beauty within their physical reach. This ability has propelled a mobile “movement” spreading awareness and acceptance of a “third wave” definition of the afro. While the politicization of natural hair frustrates some African American women, it can be argued that all hair textures stand in for larger meanings. Whether a head of hair is styled cropped and gray, pigtailed and blonde, or kinky and curly, all hair is symbolic and all hair speaks to the larger social and political landscape of the time.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Transcript

**Dora – So yeah, to reiterate, can you reflect on a time when you remember as a kid with your mom doing your hair. Whether you enjoyed it, hated it, or your first salon trip or anything kind of like that?**

**Marlowe** —I'll start. I know...I mean I was really indifferent. But, I wore my hair the same way every single day when I was little which was in a bun. And then when it was a fancier occasion, I remember my first trip to the salon and I remember being kind of like, I don't know, not disruptive, but I wasn't really the best person I guess (laughs) from a salon standpoint 'cause I was kind of like playing with things and stuff, but, yeah.

**Madison** – I remember usually Sunday nights my mom would wash my hair and blow dry it, comb it out, braid it up while it was wet and I just remember I don't really remember going to the salon often. I just remember that long process Sunday night and that Monday morning it was easier to do and she would just do a lot of braids usually.

**Bahiya** – I can remember wanting to straighten my hair so badly, but my mom had this rule where nobody, none of the girls could get their hair straightened 'till they were in sixth grade almost so that was a really, really happy day for me because my hair stayed in braids from three up 'till sixth grade.

**Linda** – I kind of hated when my mom would do my hair 'cause it would hurt so bad but she would usually just put it in braids.

**Dora – So what do you guys think about hair, specifically black hair in the popular press and the media? Do you think it's overdone or not enough? I guess, I'm thinking of the Michelle Obama bangs and that whole story, and Beyonce when she had the box braids and carrying her baby and everyone was blowing up about her box braids. Or the Olympics, Gabby Douglas, when people commented on her hair, and that kind of thing. So I guess, what are your general thoughts about how the popular press addresses black hair if you have any?**

**Bahiya** – I don't know. I think it's really weird because I feel like you do see a lot of versatility. Like, you see the girls with the natural hair, or the natural hair where the curls are perfectly defined and I'll be like no one's natural hair ever looks like that (Laughs). But then, you see the people with the straight hair and I don't know, I just think that's the beauty of being black is just the versatility where you can where your hair straight, you can do it curly, whatever you want to do.



**Marlowe** – One thing I noticed is I think I saw this online actually, it was a blog post about how in a lot of commercials where you have detergent and things like that, like when they have a black actress, she has curly hair. And it's just one of those things I always noticed. Not always, she doesn't always have curly hair. But, lots of times, she will. I always found that kind of interesting. It's an observation.

**Madison** – I noticed that too. A lot of commercials or even TV shows, there will be the one black mom and she has natural hair and I don't know, at first it kind of made me mad because I thought like, they did everyone else's hair, why couldn't they do her hair? But then, as I got older, I thought well, that is her natural hair, and more like white women, when they have naturally straight hair, a lot of them are her counterparts, so it would make sense that the black woman would be wearing her natural hair. And then I kind of saw it as not a bad thing, not like oh, they didn't do her hair, but they were just kind of embracing the naturalness and not conforming.

**Marlowe** – I guess I just sort of found it as surprising because you hear about, you know, the whole, like the rejection of natural hair in the workplace and things like that, and whatever, but it's just kind of interesting how prominent those types of styles are in commercial advertising I guess.

**Dora** – **So going off of that, have you noticed that in workplace settings, like in pictures and media images of kind of corporate or more professional images, do you notice that black people or black women in general are depicted more with natural hair or more with straight styled hair? Or do you think there is kind of a time and a place to have natural hair in the popular press?**

**Marlowe** – Perhaps. Maybe, I don't know, I guess I can't, maybe if you think of TV shows, typically I guess, usually, black actresses have straight hair. This is totally a generalization but I'm just saying. I feel like for the most part. So maybe there is more of an inclination to portray that sort of style in those sorts of settings, verses if your selling toothpaste maybe a curly look, I don't know (laughs).

**Dora** – **So one of the things I'm interested in my research is kind of how blogs kind of create this space where more nuanced depictions or different depictions of black hair can be shown, and also there's this idea of kind of a self representation going on where black women themselves are representing their own selves on screen. So, are any of you familiar with online, or Facebook, YouTube, twitter, you know, all the online spaces where people participate in natural hair talk?**

**Unknown** – yup

**Dora** – **Okay, so what are some of the sights you guys use or view?**

**Bahiya** – Well I have a tumbler and mine is very much focused on black beauty, natural hair, all types of stuff. But I follow a whole bunch of blogs like Black Girls are Pretty Too, I Love Box Braids, it's so many I can't even, I follow about 100 or something blogs on just black culture. I can't think of the other ones. Praying for Africa's one of them, a really good one that they do, it's a lot. It's so many I can't even think of them all.

**Linda** – yeah, I usually just go on YouTube, and watch a lot of just different videos.

**Marlowe** – likewise, as you know. I watch loads of YouTube videos. Just for fun. They're not even relevant to me lots of times. But, in general I find those interesting.

**Timeka** – **When did you all start watching YouTube videos and paying attention to hair and to these digital media spaces? Did you start in high school? Was it a college thing?**

**Linda** – I started last semester after I decided to go natural with my hair, 'cause I really didn't know anything about natural hair at all, so it's just nice to see so many people talk positively about it and how to do different styles and all that with it.

**Bahiya** – I started probably about freshman year, or beginning of freshman year when I decided to go totally natural. I just started looking up blogs and Tumblr where they could show me a whole bunch of videos, and YouTube, too.

**Marlowe** – Yeah, I watch lots of beauty videos just in general so, since high school, like hair or anything like that I find interesting.

**Timeka** – **And how did you know to go to YouTube or to go to some, how did you know how to access these types of things? Were your friends doing it and talking about it? Was it something that you read about or saw a link for in something else that you were looking at? Did you sort of Google it?**

**Marlowe** – I think I stumbled upon it. Because, beauty. Well, actually I'm a YouTuber and in general beauty videos are quite popular and so, you know how you get to the YouTube loop with the recommended videos and then remind me to subscribe to hundreds of people so for me it really was kind of just, I was already an active user of the site and still am, and just stumbled upon it via recommendations from the site mostly.

**Bahiya** – I feel like I actually searched for mine. I can't remember, 'cause I think I might have actually went natural my senior year of high school for sure, maybe straightened it a couple times. I feel like once I made my blog then I started really looking for it. I saw this one it's called (?) it has all natural hair, everything's natural. And I think I went from that.

**Linda** – I never thought of using YouTube until last semester. I went to that first meeting for naturally yours and they suggested going on YouTube and watching videos.

**Dora – So are there any particular qualities about these sites you use that kind of encourage you to use them more or more actively? I guess verses other sites that you don't use as much or you don't view as much?**

**Marlowe** – In relation to hair? Well I guess for me, I do follow blogs, but I use an RSS feeder thing but I don't really check it that much, so for me I like YouTube in general for beauty and hair things 'cause you're really getting a full on demonstration of something so it's a bit easier to see what they're doing verses just reading about something. That's my personal preference or difference I see between the two forms.

**Dora – Is there anything about blogging in particular, aside from YouTube? Like what attracted you to one blog over another blog?**

**Bahiya** – There are so many blogs. They were just coming all at me at one time that I'd just be at the computer screen for like an hour and I'd be like you 'gotta do your homework and then I just couldn't because I just wanted to learn more about the natural hair remedies and all that stuff. So I think mostly I kept following more people and kept re-blogging stuff and having people re-blog my stuff. It was just never ending. I was sort of addicted to it.

**Marlowe** – I guess photo quality, if that's the sort of thing you mean, too. But I think that's quite important. If there are words then, I don't know, easy to read. I guess that sort of things. Kind of like with newspapers I guess, like catchy. Maybe a catchy title, I don't know.

**Linda** – I like using stuff that already has a lot of people subscribed to it or a lot of views already because then you already know that it should be kind of good

**Marlowe** – You hope.

**Timeka – So what's an example of a bad, what would a bad blog be? Would it have crappy advice? Or would it be something where it isn't just, like bad pictures, bad writing?**

**Bahiya** – If I look at it and the first thing I see is real basic, I'll just automatically go to the next website. Not personalized, needs color or something.

**Marlowe** – And also I think it's interesting. I don't know, in my opinion, certain things kind of just get constantly talked about. Like if it's something really obvious, like this is boring. I think when blogs have maybe more original content or specific things that maybe that person has discovered that are more interesting than just I don't know, the usual sort of thing I guess I find that more worth following 'cause it's more unique perspective.

**Timeka – And what about blogs or sites that have some kind of official sponsor? Like Essence or (?) Magazine or something like that? Verses blogs that people start on their own so you sort of get this sort of snapshot of their life pretty much and they're going on daily or every other day? Which would you prefer or do you find yourself going to more often?**

**Marlowe** – I prefer the latter, the more less sponsored sort of thing. But at the same time, the majority of blogs that do have the sponsorship started off without having the sponsorship. ‘Cause they gain momentum and viewers and then people want to start sponsoring them, so. Which is fine, I mean I’m not – some people are really anti-that I know.

**Dora** – **Do you ever feel like there are certain blogs that kind of exclude you more than others? Or are there blogs that you fit in with better than other blogs about hair or black beauty? Like one thing I’ve noticed is, I mean obviously within the black beauty blogosphere and among black women in general there’s so many different hair textures. So one of the good things about blogs is they help people address their texture, but at the same time, sometimes, I mean, if there’s a blogger with a particular hair texture and their talking about (?) verses another hair texture, it could make some people feel like well, would that look good on me? Or would that work for me? Or feel like well, I’m not natural, or I’m thinking about going natural, so maybe it doesn’t apply to me or something like that. So I guess I’m asking do you feel that blogs exclude some black women more than others depending on textures or whether you’re relaxed or not?**

**Bahiya** – Yeah I do think they do that from time to time. I know I’ve had discussions with my friends about this too...some specific blogs it’ll be like curly hair and beauty so not every texture of black hair is gonna be curly so that kind of excludes you out of it. It seems like sort of a hierarchy within the natural hair, like the curly slick or less frizzy tends to be prettier in some ways in people’s minds, which I don’t think I like that. I like to have a mixture and just black beauty in general. ‘Cause I don’t feel like it’s one thing that’s beautiful or big fat curls that are just...

**Dora** – **Are there any I guess themes that you guys notice in these blogs of how they’re portraying black hair? Or certain textures of black hair? I guess like stereotypes attributed to certain textures? Do you think that these blogs have put framing black hair as a certain stereotype or attaching some kind of larger message onto black hair in general?**

**Marlowe** – I think sometimes, I know that there’s tension between people that, you know, relaxed or have straightened hair verses people who braid their hair naturally. So I can see some bloggers maybe perpetuating into that kind of what they do or don’t say about, I don’t know. I can’t really think of an example but I’ve definitely gotten that sort of vibe I suppose. Or who feel kind of holier than thou or that sort of thing.

**Dora** – **Okay well I’ve kind of come up with a list of different themes that I’ve noticed. So I’m just going to throw them at you and you can react to them. So one of the things I noticed is the idea of natural hair as more authentic or naturally black or more black than relaxed hair. I was reading one blog – it was an entry on Black Girl Long Hair dot com, which I’m sure most of you know about, and she questions, “what do we mean when we say we’re one hundred percent black? I’ve been natural since 2004 I became a follower of**

**natural hair blogs over the last couple years. The information I've learned from these blogs have been invaluable however I've also observed the often heated debates that occur about natural hair. One that stands out in particular has been about individuals who have grown long natural hair. They often ask are you mixed. You're mixed with something right?" So she's kind of arguing about the idea of you know, good hair is mixed hair, long hair is mixed hair. And she's also speaking to the idea that natural hair is viewed as authentic and more black than other textures. So what are your reactions to that idea? Or curlier hair or kinkier hair as being more black?**

**Bahiya:** I do understand what she's saying. Definitely. 'Cause I know, me personally, I get that all the time. Like what are you mixed with? Both my parents are black. All my grandparents are black so there's no trace of anything else in there so it kind of, it's almost like, 'cause they say your hair is so long, you have to be something else and there's also the connotation that black women can't have long hair. And I'm just like, no. It's not like that.

**Madison:** I agree with that. I'd get that a lot in middle school. Like oh why do you have long hair? And like black girls don't have long hair, like why is your hair so long? And it's like why do you have that assumption that black girls can't have long hair? And it's funny 'cause it came a lot from white males. And it's like, males in general typically don't have long hair, so your generalizing for girls and then for black girls. And I feel like they're so far removed from that, I don't understand why they would ask me that.

**Marlowe:** Likewise. I remember when I was little people would ask me if my hair was a wig and stuff like that. And it was just like, I don't know, that's a thing, but (laughs) I mean obviously there's not, what I will say is, I don't know if we've really addressed this really quite yet, but I feel like some of the more popular bloggers and vloggers and all that do tend to have longer hair and I feel like lots of people you see in comments and stuff are like oh I can't wait 'till my hair's longer. People always say that sort of thing. And so I guess maybe there is kind of a spectrum about whether your hair looks short if it's natural, verses if it's long and what's better, blah blah blah.

**Timeka:** So how does that, a few of you spoke about people trying to sort of call you on your blackness (laughs) I guess, 'cause you have long hair, how did that make you feel and what did you do afterwards? Did you go tell your mom or dad or did you talk to your friends about it and you know, getting that repeatedly, you know, what kind of impact does that have on you?

**Bahiya:** I think every time that question was asked to me, I always sit back like what are you talking about, like please, do not ask me that question 'cause it's such a hard thing to deal with. I just, I know that there were long, long lines down the line, probably during slavery or something, where some black woman was raped by some white master, and that's how we came out looking like this. But it's like, why, what is the need for you to ask me that every time you see me? You know why can't you just see Bahiya rather than you know, I guess what I look like on the outside. I just don't know everyone's fascination with knowing exactly what you are. So I guess

I just respond to it like what do you think I am? And then I just end it like that. And if they're uncomfortable with it...

**Madison:** I just remember the question that stuck out to me from childhood was why do you have long hair? Black girls don't have long hair. And so I would always just name a bunch of black girls like in school or from the neighborhood or in my family that had long hair and so like, is that true 'cause I just gave you this long list. I don't know, I just feel like 'cause where I grew up, it was so heavily Caucasian, I was just like, how can you say Black girls can't have long hair? You don't really know that many black girls. So where is this coming from?

**Bahiya:** It's funny 'cause I actually got a lot of it from black people, but, all the time, I'm from Detroit, so everybody would ask, all the time. Are you mixed with something else? And I'm just like no, just no mixing there.

**Marlowe:** I guess my problem with that, 'cause that happens to me as well is when you do say – I mean, I always just say yeah I'm black. My parents are black. I'm black. And people always want to question, like no! And it's kind of weird, because it's like I just answered your question, so I don't know why you are (laughs) trying to argue with me.

**Timeka:** **What about people who, have you, you know, interacted with people who sort of wear their long hair as sort of this badge of honor and to associate them with perhaps another race or with some type of mixed heritage. For example, there's a L'Oreal campaign where Beyonce was talking about her skin story, are you all aware of that, and I think she was like Indian and French and Creole and Black and just this sort of wonderful rainbow of beautiful people. So what do you all think about that? So people who don't sort of feel like, you feel your reaction is to say what a minute, what are you trying to say here? And to sort of reassert the beauty and the diversity of blackness and black women, well, what about people who sort of go the opposite way?**

**Marlowe:** I don't think there's anything wrong with it per se, I mean, if that's – I think her mom, they are, like that's what she is. You know what I mean? I think. I know people who are up in arms about that but I don't really necessarily think she's doing it in a malicious way. I think that she's simply answering the question.

**Madison:** The thing that fascinates me is I've been noticing on a lot of social media, especially things like Instagram 'cause it's straight pictures, is people will be like in their info what they are. Like, my friend who I've known since we were five, and I've looked at her page before and I just looked at it recently and I noticed something different that she put, you know, eighteen, from wherever, black and Italian. And it's like, why do you feel the need to explain yourself like off the bat in your bio? Because, I mean, obviously people are going to look at her and say like oh, she has really long pretty hair, she must be mixed with something. She must not be just black, but it's like why do you feel the need to broadcast that off the bat? And I feel like a lot of girls do that and I feel like it's a means of gaining attention kind of? Because people, like you said, are so fascinated with like, what are you mixed with?

**Jamie:** I guess on the other side of that, like if she is half Italian, I don't see anything wrong with necessarily being proud of being both of those things. Yes, your black, it's your race, but I think, I don't know, I don't necessarily think there's anything wrong with being proud of everything that you are.

**Madison:** I understand that. But it's not like she's half and half, it's like she might be this much Italian (pinches fingers) and like this much black. I've never met her dad, but her mom is full black and her grandparents are black so I don't know where this Italian is coming from. That's why I was so surprised that all of the sudden it's in her bio. It's like you've never claimed your Italian side in all the years that I've known you.

**Bahiya:** I think it's something that I just expect. It's just so normal for black women to do that now, or black people in general. Team light skin, team dark skin, team this, I mean, just like really ridiculous things and I don't think people really understand that black is basically, it's like the existence of all color. Like I don't think people really understand that black can pretty much make anything, and when I hear stuff like that it kind of breaks my heart. I mean, unless you're full blown biracial, I totally understand that. You should be able to identify as you chose to identity. But don't throw it at me and try to tell me something. 'Cause honestly I don't care. (Laughs) And you know, it's just not as important to put, that's the first thing that's in your bio.

**Timeka:** **And then, team light skin, team whatever, is that something that happens on Twitter or?**

**Marlowe:** It's mostly a Twitter thing.

**Timeka:** **Or is that a social media thing because it's like hash-tag team something?**

**Marlowe:** Actually that one hair line, Mixed Chicks, I don't know if you guys heard about this, did you hear about that? They had tweeted something to, team light skin was trending or something and then that company in order to get more exposure tweeted like team light skin check out our products or something like that (laughs) and you know, people were really mad 'cause it's like blah blah blah, and I mean plus they're falling into this awkward twitter battle. But I don't know. (laughs) It kind of implies light skin people are a demographic, look at our product.

**Dora:** **Relating that idea to hair, do you think there's like similar teams within hair textures? Where natural versus relaxed I guess you could say? Do you see tensions between those?**

**Madison:** I definitely think so. One of my best friends in high school, we were among the African Americans at our school, there were very few, but, in her head, we were the only two that had not had chemically relaxed hair. And she would always make it a point to tell people that because they would comment on our long hair and how it was straight all of the time, and she'd be like, yeah and we've never had perms either. We're the only ones. And I mean, I just don't understand why she always made it a point to tell people that. I mean it doesn't really matter if someone's hair is straight because it's permed or it's straight just because they can get it

straight naturally. It doesn't make a difference. But it really bothered me that she would always broadcast that.

**Jamie:** For me particularly it was really weird because growing up, I don't even think, it was just natural for me to get a perm 'cause my mom has completely different texture hair than I do. So that wasn't anything me and my friends talked about, whether people had natural hair or permed hair, but coming to college, it was maybe one of the first conversations I had, someone asked me if I had a perm and why I did it and was I planning on going natural sometime soon (laughs from room) and I was really uncomfortable because I felt like, you know, they showed me these videos and I was just like, no. I felt like really uncomfortable. Almost as if I was, I was being judged, on my choice – well it wasn't really my choice, of having permed hair. So I think definitely in college I see those tensions a lot more than I see back home. And I don't know if it's just, whether the timing, the whole natural hair movement is a lot more popular in the news and on social media or if it's just something that's a lot more salient when you come to college.

**Timeka:** Do you feel, a lot of you have talked about how you, when you came to college or just before you came to college, how you were sort of developing your hair regimen, and deciding how you were going to style it. But it sounds like it's a little deeper than that, right, the person who you were just talking about sounds like they were trying to convert you to another religion (laughs in room) so do you feel that, you know, being in this time in college where you're learning so much stuff about yourself and being able to sort of develop yourself outside of parental supervision. Is there pressure that you sort of have to conform to a hair sect? Once your natural, you have to stay natural? Or does it feel liberating to be able to choose a path and maybe you like being natural for a while and then you try that and then when you want to straighten your hair you do that and then a year later you decide you want to relax it and you do that? What's your experience?

**Bahiya:** I think it's kind of both liberating and pressure but it depends on where I'm located at. Like back in the city, usually my hair is not in these braids, like huge. Big and crazy and in your face and I'm always getting crazy stares. But these women (?) would actually say why is your hair like that? Like this woman actually came up to me in the mall and was like what is wrong with you? You need to straighten your hair. And I was like, if you don't get out my face right now (laughs from room) (?) I was like just because I don't straighten my hair, there's nothing wrong with me. But here, you know, no one says anything. If anything they're just going to kind of look and then look away. But it was definitely pressure at home, but then my mom it took her a minute to really register what was going on because she was like why aren't you straightening your hair anymore? And I was like I don't want to straighten my hair. I don't like my hair straight. It's just me personally. I don't like the way it looks on my face. The contours. Whatever. I was like I don't like it. But then I got really good feedback from my father. 'Cause my father, he's natural. He has locks. And he's just always had natural and he's always just trying to get me to get locks or keep my hair totally natural, like no shampooing no nothing. No perming. No straightening. Nothing. Anything like that. But there's definitely pressure back at home. Like women are constantly saying you're hair is so long, it's so pretty, people pay thousands of dollar in weave to get their hair like that, why would you wear it like that? And I'm just like, don't worry about me.



**Dora:** So I notice you guys are saying there's a lot of pressure on people who kind of have straight hair and pressure to have curly hair on the other side. And one of the themes I've noticed also is this idea of policing. You know, like the natural hair police that come out to try and convert you or tell you you're doing it wrong. It was interesting, not too long ago there was a reality show, what was it called, I don't watch TV so I don't know, but it was called, Fashion Queens. Have you guys heard of it? Yeah. And I guess Derek J, he's a celebrity hair stylist, he referred to naturals as the natural hair Nazis. And obviously people weren't happy about that (laughs). So what do you guys think? Do you notice this policing that goes on? That there's these hyper active naturalistas out there that are trying to convert people or do you think that's kind of a stereotype or you don't see that? What are your thoughts on that idea of natural hair Nazi?

**Madison:** I don't think it's that intense. I feel like there's kind of like a natural hair movement these days and people are embracing it more and it's becoming more respected and just normal.

**Liz:** I agree. I think obviously there are some people who are trying to convert people or who are, I don't want to say preach, but explain why you would go natural, like that whole popularity thing with it, but I wouldn't go as far to say Nazi, you know in general, a general term like that. I forgot actually what I was going to say.

**Marlowe:** I think that you kind of have that intense Nazi-like preaching I suppose, really because I feel like it became super trendy. It, being natural hair. Honestly, I don't know, I don't remember people even talking about this, even this discussion, you know what I mean, really like when I was growing up at all. And at least not to this extent and I also feel like I see more people that are going natural in real life and on the internet and stuff so I think as a product of that you do have those lawyer types that are really into it and stuff so.

**Dora:** It's kind of interesting, too, to think about natural hair as a trend, because when you say it's like a trend, it seems like it's this new concept, when really throughout history it's not new. It's just kind of reinventing itself and resurfacing in different formats, I guess. I guess, you know, you can go back to our parent's generations during the sixties and seventies and the afro meant something different than it means today. So I guess I just wanted to point out this idea of a trend or is it trendy? Is natural hair going to stay? Or ten years from now are all the girls on the blogs and video blogs and stuff that are natural are they going to go back to using chemical relaxers or treatments or weaves and wigs? So I guess, what are your thoughts on, how do you think natural hair has come to mean different things now than it might have meant maybe in the sixties and seventies?

**Marlowe:** I think its meaning is actually a bit similar. I know when I don't straighten my hair, I feel like I'm making more of a statement or something. Which I don't even know if, it's just how I sort of feel. It's not like I'm intending to, but I feel like I just automatically, because it's not conformed I suppose, you know, so in that way I think the statement that your hair can make if it's bigger, wilder, whatever, is more in line with what people had ideas about in the sixties seventies. But at the same time, because it is so much more popular, it is becoming more normalized I suppose at the same time.

**Madison:** I agree with what you said about making a statement. Because I mostly straighten my hair, the times where I do where it natural for a few days, I feel like I know I'm going to get comments, so I feel like I'm just out there, saying something with it. When I chose to not straighten it.

**Linda:** Yeah, I actually saw this cartoon a couple days ago. It was in a I think newspaper or something, and it was Michelle Obama and Barack and Michelle, her hair was natural and it was trying to portray her as I forgot what it's called, like back in the sixties.

**Marlowe: Militant?**

**Timeka: Black Panther?**

**Linda:** Yeah, yeah that (Black Panther). And they showed Barack in this Middle Eastern kind of outfit. I don't know I just thought that was crazy how people still just still have that mentality I guess about natural hair. I remember when I first started wearing my hair natural this semester, you know how you can tell when people look at you a little bit longer than usual? Like, I noticed that for at least two weeks. It was just really uncomfortable.

**Dora: I guess for those of you who are natural and who haven't been natural your whole lives, do you notice a difference in the way people treat you now that you are natural compared to before you went natural I guess? Like for me for example, I notice all the sudden people think I'm a vegetarian (Laughter from room) and I'm not. For example.**

**Bahiya:** I feel like people do. Like they do those stares and stuff. And just automatically assume. A lot. But then, they go further, they may assume after I tell them, after they ask me like how do you get your hair like that? Or what do you use in your hair? And then they automatically assume you're like vegan or vegetarian or you just love the Earth and (laughter from room) all this other stuff, which is fine, which I do, but (laughs).

**Linda:** I was watching a YouTube video I think two weeks ago and I just thought it was so funny 'cause this girl she said that guys they'll come up to her and they'll be like hey sistah (laughter from room) what kind of music do you listen to? (Laughs) And they tell her they think she's really open minded and stuff and I was talking to one of my other friends – she's been natural for a couple of years and she said that that happens to her too. I just thought that was so funny.

**Timeka: Yeah I think it's funny how people assume that if you're natural now that there was a point where you weren't natural. Sometimes very recently, and I've never had a relaxer, but I always straightened my hair before I got locks. I got locks in college and I remember going to the registrar's office for something and I'm handing the guy, this Black man, my ID and he's like oh yeah sistah your freeing yourself. (Laughter from room). And I was like actually I've always been free. And there seems to be this assumption that you've taken some personal journey that someone with straight hair has not taken. That you've had some type of conversion experience and that you're okay with people commenting about it. Like all the sudden your hair becomes up for discussion for anybody you meet.**

**The person who is supposed to be giving you your transcript, to the person at the mall. All the sudden people feel like they can come up and just say things to you where they, you know, nobody would come up to you and start talking to you about your feet. Or like, oh my gosh why do you, you know, have on those earrings? Why are your eyebrows like that? People don't do that. But hair sort of stands in for this different thing.**

**Marlowe:** Yeah, I agree. Sort of going off that, 'cause I've never had a relaxer. And, I don't know. It's just tough to – like in the Summer, I don't really straighten my hair. But other times in the year, I straighten it more. And that's just how it's always been, you know. And growing up I never straightened my hair until I was a bit older, so yeah, I guess. I don't know. You do become aware of other people's, maybe, perceptions of what different things mean. Even if you know, it's not even new to you. In my opinion I think, I mean, I think that comes from natural hair being, like I said, a bit more trendy now and more prominent. So I do think – and I don't mean trendy in a bad way. I'm just saying all the sudden everyone's talking about this and I think maybe that's also why people feel the need to comment more on hair.

**Timeka: Before we go too much farther maybe we should all say, and by we I mean you guys, maybe you should say what is natural to you? And what is relaxed or the opposite of that? So what does your own definition, not you know, one presented in the blogs or whatever, but your own personal definition. What does somebody have to sort of, what are the practices they have to follow to count as a natural hair person or count as something else?**

**Bahiya:** I was just having this discussion with my sister the other day and we got into a real heated argument (laughs) because I guess my, for me, my personal definition is literally the natural way that my hair grows out my head. Like no straightening, no perm, no nothing. Like the natural way it grows out my head. But then I know some people don't consider it natural if it's colored. Like I (????? Dye? Colors stain?) the tips of my hair (?) not natural? Or, I just think it's a lot of different things. But for me personally, 'cause I don't like to pass judgment on other people's hair 'cause it's really, not that important, for me (laughs). But, for me, it's literally the natural way that it grows. No, nothing else, but how it comes out.

**Linda:** I guess, just don't get perms. Yeah, I don't really, yeah. I think that's just kind of how I define that.

**Marlowe:** Likewise. But I will say at the same time, I mean referring to your comment, at the same time, I know personally, I never even thought of myself as natural until in college and everyone's talking about natural hair. Just because I didn't realize, like oh yeah I guess I never have had a relaxer. So at the same time, I never considered myself like I'm natural, 'cause I do wear my hair straight eighty percent of the time. But I'm not, at the same time, I don't think I'm not natural. I don't know. 'Cause I don't have a – you know what I mean? It's kind of like a spectrum maybe? I don't know.

**Madison:** I feel the same way. I always thought of natural hair as not chemically processed, because then it's altered, but I guess, I don't know, coming to college, and even in high school, I kind of realized that straightening it is kind of altering it as well, even though it's not in the same

way. It's more like physical than chemical. So I feel like it's still natural, but, with people talking about natural hair as a movement and going natural and converting from having had a perm, I feel like it's people that wear their hair the way it grows naturally out of your head on a constant basis. And I kind of feel in between. Like, I mostly wear it straight, but sometimes wear it natural, I still consider that natural.

**Jamie:** Yeah, I just see it as not chemically altered in anyway.

**Dora:** I guess it also would depend maybe on, I guess, what conversation you're coming from. If you're coming from the idea of natural hair for healthy hair, then maybe straightening it with a flat iron wouldn't matter as much if you go natural to grow your hair, for example. If you notice that when you're chemically relaxing your hair it doesn't grow as much or something. Verses someone that's arguing going natural as an act to embrace the kinkier texture and wear their hair textured like that and arguing that this is something like an image of blackness that's missing from the norms. So I guess that's maybe a factor in all these different definitions of natural. Like why some people might argue that color dying my hair doesn't matter because it's still the same texture. Which is their, what they consider most important about natural hair. Verses someone else, what they consider most important about natural hair might be the health, so for them it wouldn't matter that it's straight because it's healthy. So for them it wouldn't matter. So I guess what I'm saying is, depending on what about natural hair is important to you would impact how you would define it, maybe. Is there anything else anyone wanted to add?

**Timeka:** Is there anything you expected we might talk about today that we haven't?

**Dora:** I guess one thing I wanted to mention is what do you think the purpose is of black beauty blogs, and what blogs do for black women?

**Marlowe:** I'd say a big thing is tips. People constantly seem to want tips. Whether it be through styling or products and things like that, so. I think it's kind of like a main resource for a lot of people for tips.

**Jamie:** And I also think for those that are maybe going through that transition from not being natural to going to whatever form of natural they want to be. I think it serves as also kind of like a guide or companion in a way, because they know someone else has gone through it and they've written about it and kind of like a tour guide of sorts.

**Marlowe:** Or inspirational maybe?

**Linda:** Yeah, I actually think that last semester if I hadn't started watching YouTube videos then I would have ended up probably getting a perm because it was just rough trying to go through that.

**Dora:** Do any of you find that these blogs serve as kind of like a support system or as a therapy function kind of on these blogs? Or do you ever go to these blogs expecting some kind of catharsis or relief or mental stability in some sense?

**Bahiya:** I would say yeah, I do. I very much look forward to looking at people of color on my blog or popping up on my dash board 'cause I just feel like it's not enough in mainstream media or at least, like even the beauty products, even the stuff that we use, it's a lot of, well the mainstream things, it's very white hair based. It's just not stuff specifically for black hair. And I mean, now it's becoming more popular like the Shea Moisture and Miss Jessie's and stuff like that but when I look at my blog I can depend on my followers and the people that I'm following to really perpetuate that black beauty is there. 'Cause I don't see on TV. I don't see it in front of me a lot of times (laughs). I mean I do, on rare occasions, on campus and stuff.

**Madison:** Just to build off of that kind of, I've noticed that, too. Like I'll be watching commercials and it'll talk about some hair treatment product and I'll be like man, that sounds like it would really work and then I stop and say well, it's for white women. There's only white women in the commercial. It's white women that they did the little transformation from before and after to, so my hair probably wouldn't turn out like that. And it seems like most of the advertisements that they have for black women are for relaxed hair and I've never had a relaxer. So I just feel like there's nothing really out there for me. So I feel like I'm constantly at the store trying every new product that I see, 'cause I'm always like well maybe this one will work.

**Timeka:** **Do you all feel comfortable with creating your own – somebody talked about remedies earlier – creating your own personal products using the things that you have in your house? I know that was something that my mom, I feel like when my mom had me everybody in the family was like oh my goodness, that poor girl, because my mom is not good with hair and I had a lot of hair growing up and so I always went to the beauty shop from a very, very young age so I was always very hesitant to do anything to my hair. It was like oh I can't do it, because somebody else who has training in this has to handle it. But when I got locks, I started cutting my hair myself (laughs) doing all kinds of things to it because I felt all the sudden like it was mine and I could sort of mess it up if I wanted to and start all over or whatever, and so I do use shampoo still but I do have an apple cider vinegar rinse thing that I will do, and that's very recent. So do you all feel the same way? Do you feel like oh no this is sort of a sacred thing, or this expert scientific thing that I need a professional to work with or do you feel free to work with your hair yourself and use your own stuff?**

**Bahiya:** I feel really free to do anything. Like I actually just converted from not using shampoo anymore and just doing apple cider vinegar rinses. It's just through trial and error, but I feel as long as it's natural, I'm just gonna put it in my hair (laughs). Like my mom had bought me this, do you guys all know what the Magic Bullet is? The blender. I was like, I'm just gonna make all types of hair smoothies in this. I was mixing avocado and coconut oil, olive oil, honey. I was just mixing it all in there and I was like I'm just gonna put it in my hair and see what happens. And it actually ended up working, 'cause I really wanted to get out of having to use products from the store 'cause of the shelf life, the chemicals, the whatever. I would like to just be able to use something where I know all the names (?) So I definitely, I feel very comfortable with it. Now, yesterday I actually did a, I did an apple cider vinegar rinse, but I detangled my hair with coconut oil and so the apple cider vinegar rinse got on my skin and I just got red. So I got really, really scared. I was like am I having an allergic reaction to this? I don't know what to do. I'm calling

my mom . But actually, I put some coconut oil on my skin and then it went down. So, it did clean my hair really, really well, but, that was the only scary thing.

**Marlowe:** I love playing around with things like that, but I mean, I'm really into makeup and stuff like that and face masks and the whole nine yards. I don't know, I don't see really why you'd be scared. Right? I mean, what bad can an avocado do? (Laughs) It's like, I don't know. You know, think about it. You go and you buy Herbal Essence or something and there's loads of chemicals in that, I'm sure an avocado won't do any harm. I don't know. I have an interest when it comes to that sort of thing. She (Dora) and I have done loads of scrubs and we do it all. So it's fun.

**Liz:** I guess, I'm on the way opposite spectrum. I don't (laughter from room). I mean, guess I always grown up in a hair salon so my hair, this, was an issue. So I generally like to have people do my hair. And makeup and stuff like that, I'm not super into it, but I'd rather have someone else do it for me. Then, I'm sure with me, the avocado would do harm (laughter from room). So I just generally don't like to get too creative.

**Dora:** So I guess one final wrap up question would be what do you like best about your hair? Whether it's natural or relaxed? Or maybe your hair experience, what do you like best about that?

**Timeka:** I'll start. I like that I can sort of get up and go. I probably should do stuff to it more regularly. But I can do this myself. I don't have to wait in line at a salon for eight hours if I don't want to. Even though I do miss the beauty shop and beauty shop talk and stuff like that, but, I can just get up and go. You know I'm pretty lazy and not really that good with anything that requires you to be crafty, so that's the best thing. And I get lots of, I got more positive reactions from black men. When I got, like the day I got locks, 'cause I started from, the person who was doing my hair said you're gonna get a different response from men. I was like oh whatever. And, I kid you not, I was driving home. This guy in the car flagged me down. I thought he needed directions or something and I'm like yeah? You know, could I help you? Your hair is just beautiful, are you married? And I thought, oh my gosh. What is going on here, did you put some kind of spell on me or what? I guess that's kind of neat but kind of weird.

**Bahiya:** I guess I just really like being able to look in the mirror and just really love the hair that I have on my head. 'Cause you know it took me a really long time to get like that. 'Cause at first when I was in high school or whatever, I started going natural I was like, I wanted to be natural, but I wanted to be that silky natural. And I was like your hair is never gonna get like that because your hair is not like that. It's big. It's puffy. It's frizzy. It's crazy. But now, it's like, I kind of embrace it. I really like big hair. I'm happy I don't have to go to the salon no more. I can drop ten dollars on some Shea Moisture instead of fifty dollars to get my hair done one time. And I can use Shea Moisture more times. I can get caught in the rain and I 'aint got to run (laughs). I could just slowly take my time.

**Linda:** I guess I don't have to spend as much time on my hair anymore. 'Cause I used to straighten my hair way too often. And that just took forever. And also, it might sound kind of weird, but when I was younger I used to think, at least when I used to have perms, I used to think

I would never live in a really warm place because the humidity and that would just ruin my hair all the time. But ever since I've gone natural it's like, oh maybe I will live somewhere warm. 'Cause it won't ever matter.

**Marlowe:** For me, I find it easier on a day to day basis when my hair is straight, verses when I don't straighten it. I think I'm just, it's just easier for me. I know some people have the opposite, so I like that (laughs). And then on the other side of the spectrum, I do like when my hair isn't straight. You know weather, isn't an issue. That's cool.

**Madison:** I like when my hair is straight just 'cause it gets really poofy and then I have to deal with like, I can't fit a hat on my head or like, I can't get it into a pony tail anymore. It's just too much for me. But I, I don't know. I just like the process of doing my hair, you know, people ask me how long it takes and I'm like you know it takes like two hours sometimes, but I just love doing it. I don't know why. I just like the experience of playing around with it, crimping it all different types of ways, braiding it all different types of ways, I just like being creative.

**Jamie:** I guess I'm still under my journey but I, I don't know, I'm pretty low maintenance-ish so I really don't like to do much. So I like that my hair is, I don't know, I don't really have to work too hard to get it to look the way I want it to look.

**Dora:** Cool. So I guess that sums it up for me. Unless anyone had anything they wanted to add.

**Timeka:** So we just need you to choose a fake name that we can use to identify you. Anything you want. Have lots of fun. Just to keep everything nice and confidential so that no one can trace you.