

An Investigation of How Social Media Use Impacts Strong Black Woman Embodiment &  
Mental Health

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the link between Black women's Strong Black Woman (SBW) embodiment and awareness and their mental health and self-esteem. Also, it examined contributions of social media use to Black women's endorsement in the SBW stereotype, in order to further explore the relationship between positive social media and hashtag use and Black women's mental health and self-esteem. Participants ( $N=412$ ) completed measures assessing social media involvement and active use, progressive blog and positive hashtag use, endorsement of stereotypes about Black women, mental health, and self-esteem. Correlational and regression analyses revealed support for the hypothesis pertaining to the relationship between SBW embodiment with mental health and self-esteem; higher levels of SBW embodiment was associated with adverse mental health and lower self-esteem. The findings highlight the importance of better understanding the ways in which Black women use social media, as well as how their social media use can influence their embodiment of the culturally-specific SBW schema, and, ultimately, affect their mental health and self-esteem.

*Keywords:* social media, black women, stereotypes, self-esteem, mental health

## An Investigation of How Social Media Use Impacts Strong Black Woman Embodiment & Mental Health

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) ideal is a complex, culturally grounded schema that can be helpful for Black women's survival and self-efficacy, but detrimental to their self-care behaviors (Watson & Hunter, 2015). It is inextricably linked to the three foundational stereotypes about Black women (Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire) as outlined by Patricia Hill Collins (1990). Many scholars (e.g. Thomas, Speight, & Witherspoon, 2004) have begun exploring the ways in which SBW and other stereotypes affect Black women's development and shape their ideas about "Black womanhood." However, Black women are creating new cultural narratives, images, and definitions of "Black womanhood." In new media research, it has often been noted that social media outlets provide young people with the opportunity to control their self-presentations as well as receive and provide reciprocal exchanges of support for these presentations (Livingstone, 2008). Through the use of hashtags such as: #blackgirlmagic, #blackgirlsrock, and #carefreeblackgirl on various social media platforms (i.e., Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram), Black women are aiming to self-empower, provide support to one another, and challenge oppressive, stereotypic media portrayals.

Many studies have investigated the effects of SBW embodiment on Black women's mental health and self-esteem. However, few studies have examined effects of Black women's social media use on their mental health, and consequently, whether the contributions of Black women's social media use can moderate the relationship between SBW embodiment and adverse mental health. This study further investigates SBW and its connection to Black women's mental health, and explores the ways in which participating in positive social media movements such as the Carefree Black Girl Movement moderates this association. In doing so, we evaluate which demographic and social media variables contribute most to Black women's adverse mental health

outcomes and self-esteem. Also, we explore, more broadly, the role of Black women's positive hashtag and blog use in potentially diminishing the adverse mental health effects associated with SBW embodiment.

### **Strong Black Woman Ideal**

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) construct is a salient gendered ideology for Black American women (Thomas, 2009). It serves as a central aspect of Black womanhood (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008; Watson & Hunter, 2015) and is characterized by perceived obligations to suppress fear and weakness, showcase strength, resist being vulnerable or dependent, and to constantly put others before yourself (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014). During the past 30 years, Black feminist thinkers have changed the way in which SBW is viewed by Black women (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Their critiques have shed light upon the limitations of SBW as a controlling image in the lives of Black women. Historically, SBW embodiment has been viewed, by Black women and the larger society, as a positive alternative to foundational, denigrating tropes such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. This perspective is grounded in the sociohistorical contexts and historical reality of Black women's enslavement, as well as their continuing economic and political marginalization (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Specifically, Black women's access to "strength" is often perceived as a defining characteristic of their womanhood, and furthermore, a means for survival (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Strong Black Woman embodiment is a concept that has been studied theoretically and empirically as a script (Black & Peacock, 2011; Watson & Hunter, 2015), ideology (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010), and a mask (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Watson & Hunter, 2015). Most consistently, it has been described as a schema that holds Black women to limiting, prescriptive behavioral and cognitive expectations (Beaufoeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Settles et al., 2008; Watson & Hunter, 2015; Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Why might Black women embrace a self-silencing ideal that requires them to be stoic and emotionless? Many argue that endorsement of the SBW image provides some benefits, including serving as a positive coping mechanism in response to oppression and adversity (Shorter-Gooden, 2004); mediating trauma recovery (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010); and helping to preserve one's self and familial image in the context of the greater Black community (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). SBW is a cultural ideal that can serve as a successful mechanism because, in addition to promoting coping for gender and racial marginalization, it facilitates and reasserts Black women's independence (Baker et al., 2015).

At the same time, however, endorsing this ideal has been connected to negative physical and mental health outcomes for Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Giscombé & Lobel, 2008; Harrington et al., 2010; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Romero, 2000; Watson & Hunter, 2015; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). For example, Black women high in SBW endorsement are more likely to be obese (Wang & Beydoun, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), report more emotional avoidance or suppression, engage in binge eating (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010), and experience disproportionate rates of cardiovascular disease (Thom et al., 2006). Qualitative research also finds that Black women who are more accepting of the SBW ideal are at a greater risk for depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Donovan and West (2015) further examined the relation between SBW and mental health, illustrating that SBW moderates the relation between stress and depressive symptoms such that at moderate and high levels of SBW endorsement, the link between stress and depression was stronger. The intergenerational expectations, as well as the psychological distress often associated with embodying SBW ideals are both illustrated in the following excerpt from Josie Picken's (2014) article in *Ebony* Magazine entitled "Depression and the Black Superwoman Syndrome:"

I honestly believe we're so accustomed to delivering the strong Black woman speech to ourselves and everyone else that we lose our ability to connect to our humanness, and thus our frailty. We become afraid to admit that we are hurting and struggling, because we fear that we will be seen as weak. And we can't be weak. We've spent our lives witnessing our mothers and their mothers be strong and sturdy, like rocks. We want to be rocks. (p. 4)

Interestingly, Watson and Hunter (2015) explore the ways in which the SBW ideal is a reflection of a racial gender schema, which serves to complicate the binary conclusions that are often associated with its embodiment. In this way, Black women must reconcile tensions—both liabilities and benefits--within the SBW schema (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1963; Jamieson, 1995). For example, a perceived cultural benefit of SBW embodiment may be related to Black women's positions at the forefront of their families and communities. However, this perceived benefit may be offset by the liabilities associated with Black women's feeling as if they have to be self-sacrificing, and ultimately deprioritizing their own self-care (Watson & Hunter, 2015).

Many studies discuss the importance placed on Black women to negotiate the SBW schema, as well as mention the critical role self-care must play in combating the adverse mental health effects associated with its embodiment. However, few studies have illustrated what self-care may look like for Black women who are engaging in and/or feel pressure to participate in such a multidimensional, race gender schema. To better understand Black women's collective standpoint in relation to this schema, it is beneficial to look at how the SBW ideal is negotiated along with other stereotypes and controlling images against Black women (Collins, 1996).

The multidimensional SBW ideal can be related to Wade Nobles' African concept of self (Nobles, 1973). As a racial identity scholar and theorist, Nobles (1973) defines the "self" as a

result of two simultaneous processes—apposition and/or opposition. This duality is explained through Nobles’ (1973) use of the following Ubuntu African proverb: “I am because *we* are and because *we* are, therefore, I am.” Thus, one’s self-identity is always composed of an “I” (the individual identity of the self) and a “We” (the collective identity of one’s people). In many ways, SBW—as a culturally rooted construct—is an example of how Black women’s self-identity is always an extended self. The SBW ideal is not solely an isolated experience for individual Black women. It is both an individual and collective embodiment of Black womanhood. Often, Black women discuss the salience of the SBW ideal, not only through their individual experiences, but also through the lives and bodies of the Black women who have raised them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Essentially, their conceptualizations of the SBW ideal are rooted in the narratives of prominent Black women in their lives and communities, most notably, their Black mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. This conceptualization can help to explain why many Black women report experiencing shame, silence, and stigma when speaking out against the pressures of the SBW ideal (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). In order to fully understand the ways in which SBW embodiment is a performance and expectation of culturally mandated strength (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007), it is important to recognize the connection between Black women’s individual and collective selves. This understanding highlights the unique pressures Black women face when confronting the SBW ideal, while also speaking to the depths of what they stand to lose when they fail to be a Strong Black Woman. Thus, what does it mean for a Black woman’s failure of embodying “strength” to not only be a negative reflection of her “self,” but also an indication of the ways in which she has failed her race?

The SBW schema is a culturally rooted ideal that is simultaneously embraced by the Black community and critiqued by many Black feminist theorists (Wallace, 1990). This dichotomous relationship is a compelling juncture at which to think about the ways in which the

SBW ideal is related to other stereotypes about Black women. Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2004) suggest that the SBW ideal is about Black women putting on a “façade of strength.” They examine how this “superwoman” schema is both an isolated, pervasive pressure, and a manifestation of the negative internalization of stereotypes about Black women.

### **Stereotypes About Black Women**

One explanation offered for both the origins and pervasiveness of the SBW ideal is that it emerged in opposition to more negative images of Black women in American culture. However, it’s important to note that its origins are rooted within slavery. It was a construct created to benefit white slaveowners by justifying their maltreatment, abuse, and sexual violence against Black women (Morgan, 1999; Wyatt, 2008). In the 1960s, in the midst of the Moynihan report (1965), the SBW morphed into the Black matriarch. Once again, it served as a construct created by and utilized by White America. However, its purpose had shifted from justification of mistreating Black women, to directly blaming Black mothers’ overly aggressive and emasculating nature for the supposed pathology of the Black family (Wyatt, 2008).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, due to some Black Nationalists’ response to the Moynihan report, the SBW ideal became a focus of power struggle between Black men and women. In opposition to the Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s degradation of the Black matriarch, many Black Nationalists called for a return to a patriarchal family structure (Wyatt, 2008). Thus, as Radford-Hill (2002) and Wyatt (2008) note, the SBW ideal became symbolic of the expectations White men and women as well as Black men placed upon Black women to “Tolerate sexism and racism and still render service” (p. 1086). Through its complex historicization and contextualization, Morgan (1999) and Chambers (1996) shed light upon Black women’s unique and multidimensional understandings of the SBW ideal. They discuss SBW’s evolution through time as being represented, currently, by Black mothers’ imposition of the SBW ideal onto their



daughters (Chambers, 1996; Morgan, 1999). Thus, the Black mothers' internalization of SBW is due to their experiences with racism and sexism; their imposition onto their daughters serves as a form of their own resistance to intersecting, oppressive systems, as well as a way for their daughters to build and maintain a sense of "self" (Radford-Hill, 2002). In this way, the SBW ideal has become both an internalized embodiment and, an ever-shifting political construct, which is reflective of the ways in which SBW is a culturally embedded stereotype (Collins, 2004).

Throughout Black American history, stereotypical images of Black women as a Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire have been used to justify and normalize systems of oppressions (Collins, 2000; Herd, 2015). The Mammy is described as an obese, darker skinned, asexual servant to the White family (Bogle, 2002; Stevens & Phillips, 2003; Tyree, 2011). Her image and presence symbolized Black women's subordination, their expected nurturance, and constant sacrifice (West, 1995). The Jezebel is an image of a hypersexualized, promiscuous, lighter skinned (sometimes referred to as being mixed race with more Eurocentric features) Black woman, who served as a justification for White slave owners' control over Black women's sexuality and reproduction (Tyree, 2011; West, 1995). The Angry Black Woman stems from the Sapphire stereotype, which originated with the Sapphire Stevens character on the radio and television show "Amos 'n Andy" who was depicted as being overly aggressive, hostile, nagging, and emasculating (Walley-Jean, 2009; West, 1995; West 2008). The Angry Black Woman is also related to the image of the matriarch, created during slavery, and still perpetuated today by discriminatory social and economic inequalities (Walley-Jean, 2009).

Recently, attention has been given to the Sapphire or Angry Black Woman stereotype, which has emerged as an archetype of Black women perpetuated in mass media. Past literature has indicated that there is a correlation between low self-esteem and internalization of the

Sapphire stereotype (Ashley, 2014; Thomas et al., 2004). Also, similar to the SBW ideal, this stereotype prevents Black women from being able to fully express emotions negatively associated with the label “Angry Black Woman.” However, it differs from SBW in that Black women’s emotional suppression stems from a fear of being labeled and confirming the stereotype. Thus, this fear may lead to Black women’s unhealthily suppressing of feelings of anger and frustration and minimizing the role they play within certain areas of their life (Ashley, 2014). Similar to some of the adverse effects of the SBW schema, Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2004) found that Black women who endorse historicized, negative stereotypes had lower self-esteem (Cole & Zucker, 2007). This reinforces the importance of discerning between negative stereotypes about Black women, as well as better understanding the implications for Black women’s internalization of these tropes.

### **Media and Stereotypes of Black Women**

One source that may expose Black women to cultural stereotypes about their group are the media. The mainstream media are believed to offer critical insight into societal perceptions of marginalized groups (Ward, 2014). American youth watch an average of 3-4 hours of television per day. However, these rates are even higher amongst Black and Latino youth (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005; Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2012). Black youth spend more time per day (5 hours: 53 minutes) with screen media such as television, videos, and DVDs compared to their Latino and White counterparts (Ward, Rivadeneyra, Thomas, Day, & Epstein, 2012). Overall, media consumption levels for Black youth are higher than their white peers (Rideout, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2011). This disparity in viewing could be explained by the potential differences in Black youth’s media diets. Not only are they watching mainstream television, but may also be viewing “Black oriented media” content. Black oriented media are often described as media that are targeted toward Black audiences and,

notably, have predominately Black casts (Dal Cin et al., 2013; Ellithorpe & Bleakley, 2016). Nevertheless, the media serve as tools of socialization for Black youth. There are different theories that can help us think about how Black youth are understanding and using media. According to cultivation theory, repeated exposure, over time, to consistent media messages, will gradually lead to viewers' accepting the messages and portrayals as reality (Gerbner et al., 2002) and to higher internalization of the images (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014). On the other hand, the media practice model (Brown, 2002; Herd, 2015) highlights adolescents' agency and autonomy in interacting with media messages based on their own self-identities (Herd, 2015). In this way, adolescents' control over their engagement with media serves as a form of self-socialization that differs from other forms of socialization such as school, family, and the community (Arnett, 1995; Herd, 2015).

If media are vessels through which Black youth shape their identity and self-concept, it is important to examine the types and frequency of the images that are being displayed. Traditionally, Black people have been underrepresented in the mainstream media. Although the percentage of Black characters on television has slightly increased over the years, they are still often relegated to sidekick roles and shorter, half-hour situation comedies rather than primetime shows (Ward, 2004). When discussing media, Clark examines "the issue of respect," referring to the degree to which members of a group are depicted positively and as human beings (Clark, 1972; Ward, 2004). Historically, the mainstream media have further perpetuated negative stereotypic and demeaning ideals for marginalized groups (Ward, 2004). Through mainstream media, stereotypes develop over time, appearing repetitiously, and reinforcing social hierarchies (Hall, 1997; Tyree, 2011). Recurring exposure to negative media stereotypes has been linked to lower self-esteem in Black viewers (Tyree, 2011).

Siobhan Smith (2013) discusses the ways in which negative stereotypes about Black

women can, essentially, get under the skin. Black women may fear living up to the stereotypes that are pervasive in the mass media (Martin, 2008; Tyree, 2011). This fear can be further examined using Claude Steele's theory, stereotype threat, to discuss how Black women can begin to see themselves through the lens of the negative stereotype (Smith, 2013; Steele, 1999).

Stereotype threat theory is a social psychological framework through which we can examine the potential effects of dominant narratives about Black women's sexuality in the lives of Black women. It is a situational experience of anxiety that is associated with the prospect of being judged as a result of one's membership in a group about whom a negative stereotype exists (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997). Following stereotype threat theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995), if a Black woman fears that she will confirm a negative stereotype about her group, she will engage in behaviors that refute the stereotype. Stereotype threat is destructive, and is often studied in relation to academic achievement and emotional distress (Martin, 2008; Tyree, 2011). Smith (2013) and Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) describe how stereotype threat can result in Black women's developing SBW complexes that cause them to feel pressured to be self-reliant in the face of few personal, social, and economic resources.

### **Social Media: A Source of Empowerment?**

Although traditional media such as television, movies, and magazines are argued to promote stereotypical images of Black women (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015), it is possible that social media, which are self-generated, could be a place where these stereotypes are confronted and even refuted. Current research has begun to investigate the ways in which people are using social media in both positive and negative ways.

Often, new media research has looked at the ways in which people are using, forming identity, and connecting with others through Social Networking Sites (SNS). SNS are web-based social network services that include some of the following features: profile viewing and

navigation, lists of social connections, as well as user-generated content (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Brock, 2012). Research has presented mixed results regarding the effect of using SNS on mental health and self-esteem (Vogel, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014); through examining the new media literature on Facebook and Twitter, we will be able to further explore the connections between social media use and mental health.

Facebook is the largest social networking site (Lee, 2012) and has represented a shift in the ways in which people communicate with each other—online versus face-to-face (Wu, Chang, & Yuan, 2014; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Many studies have sought to examine the relationship between Facebook use and self-esteem. Interestingly, there have been mixed results regarding the relation between actively participating on Facebook and one's level of self-esteem. For example, Vogel, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) found that Facebook use was associated with decreased self-esteem, whereas Gonzales and Hancock (2011) found that Facebook use was associated with increased levels of self-esteem. Vogel, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) explain how these differences could be due, in part, to the ways in which participants were assessing their own level of self-esteem based upon either upward or downward comparison information. Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) complicated the relationship between Facebook use and self-esteem by examining different aspects of a person's social development such as their age. Their findings demonstrated that first-year college students who have more Facebook friends and spend more time on Facebook, tend to have lower self-esteem. However, this association becomes more positive in students' later college years. Additionally, some studies have reported that higher Facebook use is associated with more depressive symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2013; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014) and psychological distress (Wenhong & Kye-Hyoung, 2013), whereas others are unable to discern an association between Facebook use and mental health.

Amidst these mixed results, SNS such as Facebook, still serve as a means for better understanding self-esteem and personality through the act of self-presentation (Lee, 2012; Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011). Byrne (2007) conducted one of the first studies examining a Black social networking site (SNS), and along with Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao (2009), further explored how Facebook could be a medium through which Black college students could both explore and enhance their understanding of racial self and identification (Lee, 2012). Through Facebook posts and profile pictures, Black users are able to create individualized social and cultural identities (Lee, 2012). Often, Facebook users are aware of the impressions evoked by the images they select (as profile pictures), and thus select images to convey a particular message to potential viewers (Wu, Chang, & Yuan, 2014).

Similar to Facebook, Twitter is an interesting medium to examine in relation to mental health. However, it provides a insightful new media perspective due to its user demographics. Interestingly, it was designed for a mostly White, technologically proficient users. However, Twitter has provided a platform for Black internet usage to become increasingly visible (Brock, 2012). According to Smith (2011) and Brock (2012), 25% of Black people who are online use Twitter as compared to 9% of White people. Brock (2012) uses critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to analyze the ways through which culture shapes technologies—specifically, how Black people have framed “Twitter as a social public.” Black Twitter was coined by Chire Sicha’s (2009) article entitled “What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night” (Brock, 2012; Manjoo, 2010), and identified as having three elements of “Black discursive style:” (1) cultural specificity; (2) homophily--network participation via a comment or a retweet; and (3) propagation—viral spread to reach “trending topic” status. Black Twitter gained prominence through the use of hashtags. Thus, it serves as a medium through which relevant cultural issues are communicated online (Brock, 2012).

Amongst the three discursive elements of Twitter, we are interested in studying cultural specificity across differing social media platforms. Specifically, in this study we are examining cultural specificity through the use of positive hashtag and empowering blog use. Originally, hashtags were created to topically categorize Twitter conversations, but have since become a symbolic “call and response” practice within Black Twitter discourse (Brock, 2012; Smitherman, 1977) that often serves to create an affirming and empowering online community of Blackness.

In order to further examine the connections between Black women’s social media use and their mental health, we sought to analyze the ways in which Black women were engaging in these empowering online communities—specifically, we investigated Black women’s engagement with the following hashtags: #carefreeblackgirl, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackgirlsrock. Notably, we focused on the ways in which #carefreeblackgirl is related to SBW and mental health. This focus stemmed from the origins of the #carefreeblackgirl hashtag, as well as the ways in which Black women have written about its endorsement as being in opposition to negative stereotypes that are perpetuated in the media.

The Carefree Black Girl Movement has emerged as an empowering act of self-care. It began as a virtual space for Black women to present carefree expressions of themselves, and has since evolved into a hashtag movement on Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram. Diamond Sharp highlights the importance and relevance of this movement, created in 2014, in the times of #sayhername and #BlackLivesMatter. She explains that #carefreeblackgirl serves as a radical statement, asserting that Black women are more than tropes and tragic stories. This movement has a powerful social media presence, due in part to celebrity support and representation from the likes of Solange, Willow Smith, Amandla Stenberg, Lupita Nyong’o, Janelle Monáe, and Zoë Kravitz, as well as many others. As Patricia Ekpo explains, “The Carefree Black Girl movement is comprised of “slice of life” photos and selfies showcasing new hair and beauty choices as well

as Black women doing things such as riding a bike or dancing in the street. An important aspect of the movement is motion. This movement is un-choreographed, unmitigated, exuberant, sometimes languid, but always full of life and positivity.” Ekpo and other bloggers emphasize the importance of Black women using the hashtag as a direct negation of traditional stereotypes and caricatures, further allowing them to exist as “girls,” freely showcasing and reclaiming a range of positive states, emotions, and feelings.

### **Exploring Individual Difference Factors**

It is important to note that not all Black women are affected by societal stereotypes and by social media use in the same ways. There are multiple factors that contribute to how much their mental health and self-esteem are affected by these forces. Thus, we seek to control for several of these relevant factors, including religiosity, skin tone, and socioeconomic status.

Religiosity has often been described as an invaluable form of social support that can buffer against the effects of life stressors and be a source of self-esteem (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Hill 2008). Taylor and Chatters’ work (1988) highlights the role of religion in the Black community; two out of three respondents from the National Survey of Black American Life indicated that they received support from fellow church members. This is an interesting revelation, when further examining the ways in which religious support has been associated with lower levels of depression and higher life satisfaction (Fiala, Bjorck, & Goruch, 2002; Hill, 2008; Krause, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998).

Colorism, a term coined by Alice Walker in 1983, stems from institutions of colonialism and slavery, and has since created stratifications within the Black community. It is contingent upon upholding white supremacist and racist ideologies through the devaluing of Blackness. Specifically, it refers to the privileging of lighter skin, European features, and “good hair,” amongst Black people (Wilder, 2010). Colorism influences many different aspects of life



including social class and educational achievement (Gullickson, 2005; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991; Seltzer & Smith, 1991; Wilder, 2010) dating and mate selection (Coard et al., 2001; Robinson & Ward, 1995; Wilder, 2010), and physical attractiveness and self-esteem (Harvey, 1995; Thompson & Keith, 2001; Wade, 1996; Wilder, 2010).

Colorism disproportionately affects Black women in the areas of beauty, mate selection, and self-esteem (Wilder, 2010). Thompson and Keith (2001) used data from the National Survey of Black Americans to illustrate the ways in which gender socially constructs the importance of skin tone for participants' perceptions of their self-worth and self-competence. They found that skin color is an important predictor of self-esteem for Black women. Interestingly, this finding is not the same across all Black women. The role of skin tone on self-esteem is much weaker for Black women of a higher socioeconomic status, whereas working class darker-skinned women experience lower self-esteem (Thompson & Keith, 2001).

Consistently, various socioeconomic status (SES) indicators such as education, income, and occupation, have been inversely correlated with mental illness. Thus, the lower an individual's SES, the higher their risk of mental illness (Hudson, 2005). Link, Lennon, and Dohrenwend (1993) found that higher status occupations were associated with a lower risk for depression (Hudson, 2005). Women who experience economic hardships and live within strained financial circumstances (Belle, 1990; Brown, Bhrolchain, & Harris, 1975; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Radloff, 1975), experience chronic stressful conditions have higher levels of depressive symptoms (Belle, 1982; Belle, 1990; Brown et al., 1975; Makosky, 1982). Given these findings, we control for contributions of religiosity, skin color, and SES as predictors of Black women's mental health.

### **The Present Study**

The SBW schema is a cultural ideal that is often viewed as being important for Black

women's survival, but also detrimental to their health (Watson & Hunter, 2015). SBW ideals are laden with expectations for Black women to be self-reliant, resilient, and self-sacrificing, which can lead to more depressive symptoms and higher anxiety (Watson & Hunter, 2015). Although social media use, among predominantly White samples, has been linked to diminished well-being (Chen & Lee, 2013; Chou & Edge, 2012; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Kross et al., 2013), few studies have examined contributions of Black women's social media use to SBW embodiment and mental health. The present study aimed to examine if and how Black women are using social media to self-empower and create cultural narratives in opposition to mainstream media's negative, stereotypic portrayals. I drew upon Black feminist thought, communication, social, and media psychology theories to help formulate the following research questions and hypotheses:

### **How Are Carefree Black Girl Images Perceived?**

Currently, there is no literature on how positive hashtags such as #carefreeblackgirl, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackgirlsrock are being used and perceived. I imagine that one of the ways in which Black women are being exposed to these hashtags is through images on social media that are tagged with these hashtags, as well as potentially captioning their own photos with these hashtags. Thus, I envision that Carefree Black Girl images are empowering, and represent a contrast to culturally embedded stereotypes such as that of the SBW and of the Angry Black woman. In this study, my first aim is to see how these Carefree Black Girl images are being perceived by Black women.

H1. I anticipated, based on mean comparisons, that Carefree Black Girl adjectives would be the highest when rating the Carefree Black Girl Images.

H2. I anticipated, based on correlational analyses, that Carefree Black Girl adjectives would be correlated negatively with the Strong Black Woman adjectives.

H3. I anticipated, based on correlational analyses, that Carefree Black Girl adjectives would be correlated negatively with the Sapphire adjectives.

#### **SBW Embodiment/Endorsement & Mental Health**

Drawing on existing findings concerning the negative mental health consequences of embracing the SBW ideal:

H4. I anticipated, based on correlational analyses, that higher levels of SBW embodiment would be associated with adverse mental health.

H5. I anticipated, based on correlational analyses, that higher levels of SBW endorsement/awareness would be associated with adverse mental health.

#### **SBW Embodiment/Endorsement, Mental Health, and Media Use**

Research has provided mixed results regarding the relationship between Facebook use and mental health. For example, Gonzales and Hancock (2011) found that participants' increased self-awareness when using Facebook, was associated with higher levels of self esteem. However, Vogel, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) had contrasting findings; participants' Facebook usage was associated with decreased self-esteem. Building upon these findings, studies have also shown that the frequency of Facebook use increases depressive symptoms and psychological distress (Feinstein et al., 2013; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014). Drawing on existing findings, concerning the effects of using Facebook on mental health and self-esteem, we were interested in looking at the relation between other forms of social media and mental health. Also, we wanted to introduce the notion of "positive social media use," which is composed of "positive hashtag use," and "progressive blog use."

H6. I anticipated, based on correlational analyses, that higher levels of regular social media use will be linked to adverse mental health, whereas positive social media use will be linked to less adverse mental health.

RQ1. Based on regression analyses, do SBW variables contribute to Black women's adverse mental health outcomes and lower self-esteem once demographic factors are controlled?

RQ2. Based on regression analyses, which social media variables contribute most to Black women's adverse mental health outcomes and lower self-esteem, once demographic factors are controlled?

RQ3. Will positive hashtag use and progressive blog use moderate the relation between SBW embodiment and mental health/self-esteem?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 412 self-identified Black or African-American women aged 18-30 ( $M = 24.25$ ); 224 were gathered from MTurk (a crowdsourcing site), whereas, the remaining 176 were undergraduate and graduate students attending a large Mid-western university. Of the 412 women, 3.6% identified as biracial or multiracial.

### Measures

**Social Media Exposure.** Two sets of measures were used to assess participants' social media exposure. One set of measures assessed their use of mainstream social media sites. Participants were asked to indicate how often they use ten social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram), with response options ranging from "never or almost never" to "several times a day." Participants were then asked to indicate which social networking site they use the most, and were asked to indicate how many minutes per day they spent engaged with this social networking site. Response options ranged from "less than 10 minutes" to "more than 3 hours." The remaining questions in this section addressed participants' active use of their most

used social networking site, which reflects the extent to which they actively post and upload personal information. To assess this construct we used a scale developed by Manago et al. (2015), in which participants received the following prompt, “*How frequently do you:*” followed by eight items such as, “*post pictures?*” “*update your status?*” “*change your profile picture?*” Response options included “never, rarely, few times/year, few times/month, almost every day, and several times a day.” A mean score was computed across the items, which were scored 0-5.

The second set of measures assessed how often participants viewed and/or read seven empowering, and Black oriented blogs/websites such as *The Root*, *For Harriet*, and *Crunk Feminist Collective*. Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert-type response scale that included the following options: 1=Never, 2=Once a month or less, 3=few times a month, 4=Once a week, 5=Daily. A mean score was computed across the seven items. Participants were then asked whether or not they had ever used the following positive hashtags: #carefreeblackgirl, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackgirlsrock. If participants had used any of the hashtags, they received a score of “1” (versus a score of “0” for not having used any of the 3 positive hashtags). A sum score of positive hashtag use was created.

**SBW Embodiment/Stereotypes about Black Women (See Appendix A & B).** Strong Black Woman Embodiment was measured with the embodiment subscale of K. Thomas’ (2006) Strong Black Woman Scale. This subscale assesses the extent to which Black women, in their own lives, enact SBW principles, such as sacrificing their own needs for family and loved ones, and withstanding hardships without complaint. A sample item includes: “*I view making mistakes as a sign of my own personal failure.*” Responses were made on a 5-point scale anchored by “strongly disagree” at 1 and “strongly agree” at 5. A mean score was computed across the items ( $\alpha=.90$ ), such that higher scores indicate greater personal embodiment of the notion of the

Strong Black Woman.

As a measure of their awareness of societal stereotypes about Black women, participants completed revised subscales of the Stereotypic Roles for Black Women Scale (Thomas, 2004). We used the Sapphire and Jezebel subscales to assess beliefs about Black women as aggressive, emasculating, angry, vain, and hypersexual. The initial measure contained an 8-item Jezebel subscale and a 10-item Sapphire subscale; originally, these subscales included “I” statements. It’s important to note that eight items were eliminated from the initial measure (four from each scale that contained “I” statements, or didn’t directly address Black women), and replaced with two related statements, which comprised the modified measure. The final variables produced for our analyses were a 12-item Jezebel Scale ( $\alpha = .96$ ; e.g., “Black women always want to have sex”) and a 12-item Sapphire scale ( $\alpha = .97$ ; e.g., “Black women are argumentative”).

**Mental Health (see Appendix C).** Three measures were used to assess participants’ mental health. One measure, the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), assessed participants’ feelings about themselves. After readings the instructions, participants responded to the 10-item scale using a 4-point Likert-type response scale anchored by “Strongly Disagree” at 1 and “Strongly Agree” at 4. A sample item from this scale is as follows: “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” A mean score was computed such that a higher score indicates higher self-esteem.

The second measure focused on participants’ self-reported depression symptoms. Using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Ratloff, 1997), participants were asked to indicate how they felt or behaved during the past week. They responded to all 20 items via response options that ranged from “Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)” to “All of the time (5-7 days).” Sample items include: “I felt depressed” and “I thought my life had been a failure.” A mean score was computed across the items, which were scored from 0-4, such that

higher scores indicate more depressive symptoms.

The final measure assessed mental health symptoms using three subscales from the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). The three subscales selected included a 6-item index of anxiety, a 5-item index of hostility, and a 4-item index of sensitivity. Participants were asked to respond to how distressed or bothered they felt by each statement during the past seven days. Response options (scored 0-4) ranged from “Not at all” to “Extremely.” Mean scores were computed across each subscale such that higher scores indicate greater experience of symptoms of anxiety, hostility, or hyper-sensitivity.

**Ratings of the Carefree Black Girl Images (See Appendix D).** Three Carefree Black Girl images were presented to assess participants’ perceptions of the Black women in the images. All three of the images were found on Instagram after specifically searching for the Carefree Black Girl hashtag (#carefreeblackgirl). This means that each of the photos were posted by Instagram users and the hashtag, #carefreeblackgirl, was explicitly used in the caption describing the image. Participants were asked to rate each of the three women on 16 adjectives. The 16 adjectives were categorized into the following four different adjective dimensions based on the selection of adjectives used the most when reading literature about each construct. Adjectives were narrowed down after presenting the images and corresponding adjectives to a mixed gender and race group of 15 undergraduate and graduate students. The four different adjective dimensions are as follows: (1) SBW; (2) carefree; (3) competence; and (4) Sapphire/Angry Black Woman. The SBW subgroup consisted of the following adjectives: strong, stoic, self-sacrificing, independent, and steady. The carefree subgroup consisted of the following adjectives: carefree, natural, playful, youthful, and joyful. The competence subgroup consisted of the following adjectives: competent, intelligent, and responsible. The Sapphire/Angry Black Woman subgroup consisted of the following adjectives: aggressive, angry, and feisty. Participants rated the women

in the photos on a 10-point slider scale anchored by “not at all” at 0 and “very” at 9.

**Measures of Demographic Variables.** The demographic questions were asked to assess participants’ religious beliefs. The questions were as follows: (1) how religious are you; (2) how often do you attend religious services; and (3) how often do you pray. Participants used a 5-point scale anchored by “not at all” at 1 and “very” at 5 to indicate their perceptions of their level of religiosity. In response to the second and third questions, participants used a 5-point scale anchored by “never” at 1 and “very regularly, usually once a week” at 5. A mean score was computed across the items such that higher scores indicated greater religiosity.

To assess skin tone, participants were asked to indicate what skin color they believe they have in comparison to most Black people. Participants used a 6-point scale anchored by “very dark brown” at 1 and “very light brown” at 5.

Two measures assessed participants’ socioeconomic status (SES). The first measure, Subjective SES (Adler et al., 2000), assessed where participants would place themselves, in comparison to other people in the U.S. Participants viewed an image of a ladder, and were asked to indicate their numerical position using a 10-point scale anchored by “1” (best off) and “10” (worst off). As a second measure of SES, participants were asked to indicate their best estimate of their household’s total income. Participants used a 12-point scale anchored by “below \$4,999) at 1 and “\$105,000 and above” at 12.

## **Procedure**

Data were collected over a 2.5 month period from mid-October 2015 through mid-January 2016. With permission of the Institutional Review Board, two recruitment strategies were used: (1) Amazon Mechanical Turk; and (2) the University’s Office of Registrar. MTurk is an online crowdsourcing website that aggregates task creation, labor recruitment, data collection, and compensation (Burkmaster, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Using MTurk, the ~30 minute survey



was administered electronically, through Qualtrics. Inclusion criteria for the study were that participants had to be a self-identified Black/African American woman between the ages of 18-30. All participants who completed the survey received \$2. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine Black women's media use. Specifically, it was explained that participants would be asked anonymous questions about their individual characteristics, rate three pictures using various adjectives, and complete measures assessing their personal perceptions, evaluations, and beliefs about the ways in which they engage in social media.

For the second recruitment strategy, registered undergraduate and graduate students who had identified as Black or African American received an email from the registrar inviting them to participate in a survey being conducted by a University of Michigan Honors student. The email described the study as a survey assessing Black women's media use, and provided a link to the online, self-administered survey. Participants who completed the survey received a chance to win 1 out of 4 \$100 Visa gift cards.

## **Results**

### **Analysis Plan**

To examine our first hypothesis, regarding mean comparisons of the four different adjective dimensions, we conducted a paired samples T-test. To examine our second and third hypotheses, which argued that higher use of the Carefree Black Girl adjectives would be associated with lower use of the Strong Black Woman and Sapphire adjectives when rating the Carefree Black Girl images, we examined associations using partial correlations. To examine our fourth and fifth hypotheses, which argued that higher levels of SBW embodiment and endorsement/awareness would be associated with adverse mental health, we examined associations using partial correlations. To examine the first exploratory research question regarding how social media and mental health correlate, we conducted a step-wise regression.

Finally, to examine the final exploratory research question regarding which social media variables contribute most to Black women's adverse mental health and lower self-esteem, we conducted a step-wise regression.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Descriptive statistics for the social media use, SBW, and mental health variables are provided in Table 1. Participants reported moderate levels of awareness and embodiment of the SBW ideal. They used Facebook and Instagram the most, on average and blogged the least. Also, preliminary analyses examined if participants had ever used any of the three positive hashtags, which were listed as follows: #carefreeblackgirl, #blackgirlmagic, or #blackgirlsrock. Findings indicate that 10.2% of participants had ever used any of the three positive hashtags, whereas 89.8% of participants had never used any of the three positive hashtags. Specifically, 3.6% of participants had, at some point in time, used #carefreeblackgirl, 5.3% had used #blackgirlmagic, and 8.5% had used #blackgirlsrock. Overall, participants engaged in very little progressive blog and positive hashtag use.

The first set of preliminary analyses tested whether the two samples differed on the social media use, SBW, and mental health variables. A series of one-way ANOVA's was conducted comparing scores of the MTurk participants to those of the UMich participants. Sub-sample means and statistics are provided in the final columns of Table 1. When examining media use, the MTurk sample engaged in higher levels of blogging, active social media use, and progressive blog use, whereas the UMich sample engaged in higher levels of positive hashtag use. The MTurk sample displayed higher levels of SBW awareness and SBW embodiment. The UMich sample reported higher levels of depression and anxiety, whereas the MTurk sample reported higher levels of self-esteem and sensitivity.

The second set of preliminary analyses investigated whether participant demographics

and background factors contributed to their scores on the following mental health outcome variables: self-esteem, depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity. A series of zero-order correlations was run between the five mental health variables and the following demographic variables: religiosity, college member (“1” signifies the participant is currently in college), coupled (“0” signifies being single), skin tone, age, mother’s education, father’s education, subjective SES, and income. Results are provided in Table 2.

### **Testing the Main Hypotheses and Research Questions**

To test the first hypothesis, concerning ratings of the Carefree Black Girl images, we ran a paired-samples T-test examining mean comparisons between the four adjective dimensions: Carefree, SBW, Competent, Sapphire. Results are provided in Table 3. There was a significant difference in the SBW dimension adjective ratings ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) and the Carefree dimension adjective ratings ( $M = 7.64$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ );  $t(375) = -34.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results suggest that participants were rating the Carefree Black Girl images with more Carefree dimension adjectives compared to SBW dimension adjectives. There was a significant difference in the Competence dimension adjective ratings ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ) and the Carefree dimension adjective ratings ( $M = 7.64$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ );  $t(374) = 18.99$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results suggest that participants were rating the Carefree Black Girl images with more Carefree dimension adjectives compared to Competence dimension adjectives. Lastly, there was a significant difference in the Sapphire dimension adjective ratings ( $M = 1.61$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) and the Carefree dimension adjective ratings ( $M = 7.64$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ );  $t(369) = 53.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results suggest that participants were rating the Carefree Black Girl images with more Carefree dimension adjectives compared to Sapphire dimension adjectives.

To test the second and third hypotheses, concerning associations between adjective dimensions for rating Carefree Black Girl images, we ran zero-order correlations between the

Carefree Black Girl dimension adjectives and the SBW dimension adjectives,  $r = .30$ ,  $n = 376$ ,  $p < .001$ , as well as the Sapphire dimension adjectives,  $r = -.20$ ,  $n = 370$ ,  $p < .001$ . According to the analyses, Carefree adjectives are positively correlated with SBW adjectives and negatively correlated with Sapphire adjectives. Also, we were interested in examining which individual photo adjectives were rated the highest across all three photos. Overall, the Carefree adjectives had the highest means; Joyful had the highest mean ( $M = 8.00$ ) and Playful ( $M = 7.78$ ) and Youthful ( $M = 7.57$ ). Two of the adjectives in the Sapphire/Angry Black Woman dimension had the lowest means. They were as follows: Aggressive ( $M = .97$ ) and Angry ( $M = .52$ ).

To test the fourth, fifth, and sixth hypotheses, concerning the associations between (1) SBW embodiment and endorsement/awareness and adverse mental health; (2) associations between regular social media use and mental health; and (3) associations between positive social media use and mental health, we ran zero-order correlations between the five mental health variables, two SBW variables, and ten social media variables. Results are provided in Table 5. SBW embodiment is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity, as well as negatively correlated with self-esteem. Thus, participants' higher SBW embodiment is associated with adverse mental health symptoms and lower self-esteem. Similarly, SBW awareness is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity, which indicates that participants' higher SBW awareness is associated with adverse mental health symptoms. When examining the social media variables, Table 5 illustrates that Tumblr and Social Media Active Use are positively correlated with depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity, as well as negatively correlated with self-esteem. Thus, both of these social media variables are associated with participants' adverse mental health symptoms and lower self-esteem. Progressive Blog Use is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and hostility, whereas, Social Media Involvement is positively correlated with hostility, and Social Media

Passive Use is positively correlated with hostility.

**Exploring the relationship between SBW, social media, and mental health.** The first research question centered on examining which SBW variables contribute to Black women's adverse mental health and lower self-esteem. The second question explored which social media variables contribute most to Black women's adverse mental health and lower self-esteem. To test these questions, we conducted a step-wise regression analysis with the five mental health variables serving as dependent variables, the significant demographic correlates (coupled, age, college member, skin tone, and subjective SES) entered as controls on the first step, the SBW variables entered on the second step, and the all of the social media variables of interest entered on the third step. Results are provided in Table 6. The first step of the regression illustrated that being in college predicts that participants will experience more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and hostility, as well as lower self-esteem. Skin tone is negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity. Thus, having a lighter skin tone predicts that participants will experience less adverse mental health. At the second step, when demographic variables are controlled for, SBW embodiment predicts more symptoms of depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity, as well as lower self-esteem. Once the social media variables are added in, on the third step, it is interesting to note that SBW embodiment is still predicting more adverse mental health and lower self-esteem. At this step, Tumblr use is predicting more symptoms of depression, hostility, sensitivity, and lower self-esteem, whereas Progressive Blog Use is predicting more symptoms of depression and anxiety.

**Exploring the relationship between positive hashtag/progressive blog use, SBW, and mental health.** I used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012) to test whether Positive Hashtag Use moderates the relation between SBW and mental health/self-esteem. The interaction terms were not significant. See Table 7. We conclude that positive hashtag and progressive blog use does

not buffer against the relation between SBW and mental health/self-esteem.

### **Discussion**

Black women often feel as if their survival and self-worth are connected to embodying culturally-rooted SBW ideals. The literature discusses both positive coping (Baker et al., 2015) benefits to SBW endorsement, as well as highlights the adverse mental health outcomes associated with the expectations Black women face to constantly live up to this ideal (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). The relationship between SBW embodiment and mental health have been clearly outlined, however, we were interested in examining SBW embodiment in relation to the ways in which Black women are depicted in the media, and thus, the way in which they may create new cultural narratives about Black womanhood through social media—specifically, positive hashtag and progressive blog use. Contemporary media often depict negative stereotypical images of Black women, and since Black women and men consume high levels of media content, they may be more influenced by the negative portrayals, and thus, experience more adverse mental health. Understanding the connection between SBW embodiment and the perpetuation of negative tropes through the media, such as the SBW ideal, is immensely important. It is vital to examining the ways in which Black women may be using social media as a space in which they can control their self-presentation (Livingstone, 2008) by existing in opposition to controlling images such as SBW, Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire/Angry Black Woman. Thus, our goal was to embark upon innovative work, exploring Black women's social media use, and better understanding the ways in which their social media use was potentially connected to their creation of positive narratives of Black womanhood, which in turn could link to their mental health and self-esteem. Notably, we were intrigued by three popular hashtags, #carefreeblackgirl, #blackgirlmagic, and #blackgirlsrock that Black women often use to empower themselves and others on social media.

We focused on the Carefree Black Girl movement due to its popularity amongst various social media platforms, as well as because its origins, as a hashtag, are rooted in it being used directly in opposition to restrictive social images of Black women. In support of our first hypothesis, Black women used Carefree adjectives the most when describing the woman in the each of the three photos. Our second hypothesis was not supported because Carefree adjectives were correlated positively with SBW adjectives, and the third hypothesis was supported because Carefree adjectives were correlated negatively with Sapphire/Angry Black Woman adjectives. These results highlight that Black women are identifying the women in the Carefree Black Girl photos as representations of the defining characteristics of the movement. Also, the correlational analyses suggest that Black women may be viewing the Carefree Black Girl movement as, potentially being, in greater opposition to the Sapphire/Angry Black Woman trope instead of in opposition to the SBW ideal.

Our second group of hypotheses were examining the link between SBW embodiment and mental health. Since SBW embodiment was associated with adverse mental health and lower self-esteem, our fourth hypothesis was supported. Similarly, SBW endorsement/awareness was associated with adverse mental health, however, self-esteem was not significant. Therefore, our fifth hypothesis was partially supported. These results reflect the potential danger of identifying with the SBW schemas, as well as echo the qualitative research that finds that Black women who are more accepting of the SBW ideal are at a greater risk for depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). The research questions are related to the second group of hypotheses, because they build off of each other. A regression analysis illustrated that the SBW variables do contribute to Black women's adverse mental health outcomes and self-esteem; specifically, SBW embodiment continued to predict more adverse mental health symptoms and lower self-esteem even when the demographic variables were controlled for, and all of the social media variables were included in

the regression analysis. Interestingly, Tumblr was the SNS that predicted the most adverse mental health outcomes and lower self-esteem. This finding was surprising because we did not conceptualize Tumblr as being a SNS that would be widely used—as compared to Twitter and Facebook--and predicting the most adverse mental health outcomes. Originally, it seemed as if Twitter would be the most salient medium for Black women to engage in social media use because of its popularity and affirming “Black Twitter” spaces (Brock, 2012). However, Twitter was not a significant predictor of any mental health symptoms or self-esteem. We were surprised by some of the regression findings as well as the results from the moderation analyses because, not only was progressive blog use predicting depression and anxiety symptoms, but also, positive hashtag and progressive blog use did not buffer against the relation between SBW embodiment, self-esteem, and all of the mental health outcomes.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the sample only included 18-30 year olds. This limited age range does not allow for us to examine associations in older populations, which could be limiting because often cultural narratives of the SBW ideal focus on Black women who have children and/or are caretakers. Watson and Hunter (2015) noted that women with children often described themselves as having fully obtained the SBW schema, whereas, women without children (who were primarily college students) viewed themselves as being “SBWs in training.” Often students described their experiences of SBW embodiment in the context of school, and as a response to academic stressors. This perspective is contrasted to the perceptions of the women with children. They viewed their SBW embodiment existing within the context of financial and caretaking stressors. Even though it has been illustrated that Black women of varying ages define the contexts of their SBW embodiment differently, they continuously express similar meanings and tensions within their definitions (Watson & Hunter,



2015).

Second, many participants were either unfamiliar with the hashtags or did not report using them often. Preliminary analyses indicated that 10.2% of participants had ever used any of the three positive hashtags, whereas 89.8% of participants had never used any of the three positive hashtags. Specifically, 3.6% of participants had, at some point in time, used #carefreeblackgirl, 5.3% had used #blackgirlmagic, and 8.5% had used #blackgirlsrock.

A third limitation is the way that we looked at participants' positive hashtag use. We wonder if hashtags could be a state versus a trait. A state refers to something that happens in the moment that can greatly, whereas a trait is stable most of the time. Hashtags could be a small state-like temporary boost, but not necessarily long-lasting. Thus, it could be beneficial to measure Black women's hashtag use longitudinally and experimentally. Also, our correlational analyses do not indicate the direction in which positive hashtag use could be associated with mental health, and further research should aim to discern whether a bidirectional relationship may exist. It could be helpful to think about feminist identity literature when reflecting upon the unknown directionality of the relationship between positive hashtag use and mental health. Black women's exposure to progressive blogs or positive hashtags could be similar to the "revelation" stage of feminist identity. In this stage of identity, women often experience psychological distress, depression, and anxiety due to a hyperawareness of the oppressions they face (Peterson et al., 2008). A great example of this could be when students come to college and experience their first Women's Studies Course, and feel as if they are beginning to grapple with an emerging feminist identity. Often, students will go through exploratory phases, seeking out information pertaining to their new identity. However, they may feel also be feeling overwhelmed and overloaded by the new lens through which they view themselves and others. This would lead students to experience the adverse mental health effects of being within the

“revelation” stage of their feminist identity. This example demonstrates how it may be beneficial to more critically think about the ways in which Black women who are seeking out progressive blogs, as well as using positive hashtags, may be experiencing a new social justice consciousness or lens through which to view their identity, and, ultimately, question how this may affect their mental health and self-esteem.

In the future it would be interesting to further explore the mental health outcomes that are potentially linked to the Sapphire/Angry Black Woman stereotype, and thus, seek to examine if endorsing in the Carefree Black Girl movement would serve as a moderator for this relationship. The findings supporting hypothesis three suggest that, since Carefree Black Girl adjectives are negatively correlated with the Sapphire adjectives, there may participating in the Carefree Black Girl movement may be in direct opposition to the Angry Black Woman trope instead of the SBW ideal.

### **Conclusion**

This study expands our knowledge of the ways in which Black women’s embodiment of SBW ideals can be a determinant of adverse mental health effects. It further explores Black women’s mental health as it relates to those who actively engage in social media--specifically, by examining their blogging and hashtag use. Given the accessibility of social media, it often serves as an important forum for activism, as well as a place for Black women to self-empower, provide support to one another, and challenge oppressive, stereotypic media portrayals. Thus, it is critical for research to further examine how Black women are using social media in relation to their mental health.

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Table 1

*Descriptives of Social Media Use, SBW, and Mental Health Variables*

<i>Media Use</i>	M	SD	UMich Mean	MTurk Mean	F
Facebook	4.47	1.59	4.41	4.50	.24
Instagram	3.33	1.86	3.57	3.19	3.10
Blogging	1.29	.77	1.16	1.36	<b>5.34*</b>
Tumblr	1.85	1.32	1.83	1.86	.03
Twitter	2.72	1.73	2.74	2.71	.03
SNS (minutes per day)	3.45	1.40	3.41	3.48	.17
SM Active Use	3.07	1.04	2.65	3.31	<b>34.20***</b>
Progressive Blog Use	1.51	.63	1.00	1.46	<b>31.01***</b>
Positive Hashtag Use	.10	.30	.18	.04	<b>21.42***</b>
<b><i>SBW</i></b>					
SBW Awareness	3.31	.86	1.04	3.11	<b>31.02***</b>
SBW Embodiment	2.99	.92	1.75	2.88	<b>7.98**</b>
<b><i>Mental Health</i></b>					
Self Esteem	3.24	.66	3.13	3.32	<b>7.49**</b>
Depression	1.75	.63	2.45	1.65	<b>14.03***</b>
Anxiety	.68	.85	.83	.58	<b>6.94**</b>
Hostility	.60	.73	2.45	.56	1.99
Sensitivity	.92	1.05	.60	.72	<b>21.86***</b>

Note. \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001.



Table 2

*Significant Demographic Correlates of Mental Health*

	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Sensitivity	Self-Esteem
Religiosity	.00	.03	.02	.02	.08
College Member	<b>.22***</b>	<b>.16**</b>	<b>.12*</b>	<b>.22***</b>	<b>-.19***</b>
Coupled	<b>-.13*</b>	-.10	-.08	<b>-.11*</b>	<b>.17**</b>
Skin Tone	<b>-.16**</b>	<b>-.16**</b>	<b>-.14*</b>	<b>-.14**</b>	.05
Age	<b>-.19***</b>	-.08	<b>-.14*</b>	<b>-.19**</b>	<b>.17**</b>
Dataset	<b>.20***</b>	<b>.14**</b>	.08	<b>.25***</b>	<b>-.14**</b>
Mother's Education	.07	.02	.00	<b>.13*</b>	-.05
Father's Education	.07	.04	.03	<b>.14*</b>	<b>-.10*</b>
Subjective SES	<b>-.11*</b>	<b>-.13*</b>	-.08	-.09	<b>.14**</b>
Income	-.10	-.10	-.01	-.04	<b>.11*</b>

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Note. The "College Member" variable refers to whether or not participants are in college. They were given a score of "0" or "1." The "Skin Tone" variable refers to participants' self-ratings of their skin tone; they were given 5 options (from "Very dark brown" to "Very light brown"). The "Dataset" variable refers to the two different samples (MTurk sample versus the UMich sample).

Table 3

*Descriptives of Photo Adjective Dimensions*

	N	M	SD	Range
Strong Black Woman	376	4.38	1.80	0.00-9.00
Carefree	376	7.64	1.27	0.00-9.00
Competence	375	5.51	2.33	0.00-9.00
Sapphire	370	1.61	1.50	0.00-8.78

Table 4

*Descriptives of Individual Photo Adjectives*

<i>Media Use</i>	N	M	SD	Range
Strong	375	5.91	2.31	0.00-9.00
Stoic	366	1.89	2.35	0.00-9.00
Self-Sacrificing	368	2.88	2.52	0.00-9.00
Independent	375	6.35	2.19	0.00-9.00
Steady	371	4.67	2.47	0.00-9.00
Carefree	376	7.69	1.49	0.00-9.00
Natural	376	7.17	1.81	0.00-9.00
Playful	376	7.78	1.38	0.00-9.00
Youthful	376	7.57	1.49	0.00-9.00
Joyful	375	8.00	1.39	0.00-9.00
Competent	374	5.76	2.49	0.00-9.00
Intelligent	374	5.87	2.52	0.00-9.00
Responsible	373	4.90	2.54	0.00-9.00
Aggressive	364	.97	1.64	0.00-9.00
Angry	361	.52	1.24	0.00-8.67
Feisty	368	3.26	2.63	0.00-9.00

Table 5

*Significant Correlates of Mental Health*

	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Sensitivity	Self-Esteem
<b>Strong Black Woman</b>					
SBW Embodiment	<b>.62***</b>	<b>.52***</b>	<b>.46***</b>	<b>.55***</b>	<b>-.48***</b>
SBW Awareness	<b>.25***</b>	<b>.22***</b>	<b>.13*</b>	<b>.23***</b>	-.10
<b>Social Media</b>					
Facebook	.01	.00	.03	.04	-.04
Instagram	.00	.01	.03	-.04	.01
Tumblr	<b>.24***</b>	<b>.19**</b>	<b>.27***</b>	<b>.24***</b>	<b>-.24***</b>
Twitter	.05	.07	<b>.11*</b>	.02	-.01
Social Networking Sites (minutes per day)	.07	.02	-.01	.08	.01
Social Media Involvement	.00	-.01	-.04	.06	-.04
Social Media Passive Use	.08	.07	<b>.12*</b>	.09	.01
Social Media Active Use	.03	.05	<b>.12*</b>	.01	.01
Progressive Blog Use	<b>.23***</b>	<b>.24***</b>	<b>.21***</b>	<b>.22***</b>	<b>-.14*</b>
Positive Hashtag Use	<b>.11*</b>	<b>.20***</b>	.07	<b>.16**</b>	-.02

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 6

*Regression Analyses Testing Which Media Variables Best Predict Gender Ideologies*

	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Sensitivity	Self-Esteem
<b>Step 1. Demographics</b>					
Coupled	-.03	-.06	-.02	-.01	.11
Age	-.08	.03	-.12	-.08	.02
College Member	<b>.15*</b>	<b>.17*</b>	.05	<b>.16*</b>	<b>-.14*</b>
Skin Tone	<b>-.16**</b>	<b>-.16**</b>	<b>-.14*</b>	<b>-.13*</b>	.04
Subjective SES	-.07	-.08	-.03	-.07	.09
<i>Step One Adj. R2</i>	.070	.051	.028	.060	.045
<b>Step 2. SBW</b>					
SBW Awareness	.05	.06	-.03	.05	.07
SBW Embodiment	<b>.57***</b>	<b>.46***</b>	<b>.45***</b>	<b>.50***</b>	<b>-.47***</b>
<i>Step Two Adjusted R2</i>	.396	.271	.208	.315	.240
<i>Change in Adj. R2</i>	<b>+.326***</b>	<b>+.22***</b>	<b>+.18***</b>	<b>+.255***</b>	<b>+.195***</b>
<b>Step 3. Soc. Media Use</b>					
SBW Awareness	.04	.04	-.04	.02	.06
SBW Embodiment	<b>.54***</b>	<b>.42***</b>	<b>.41***</b>	<b>.46***</b>	<b>-.44***</b>
Facebook	-.05	-.06	-.06	.02	-.04
Instagram	-.06	-.05	-.08	<b>-.13*</b>	.06
Tumblr	<b>.12*</b>	.09	<b>.18***</b>	<b>.16**</b>	<b>-.16**</b>
Twitter	-.04	-.00	.02	-.05	.05
SNS minutes per day	.01	-.04	-.06	.03	.04
Social Media Active Use	<b>.11*</b>	.11	<b>.18**</b>	.08	-.04
Progressive Blog Use	<b>.10*</b>	<b>.11*</b>	.10	.08	-.04
Positive Hashtag Use	-.02	.08	-.03	.07	.07
<i>Step Three Adjusted R2</i>	.421	.298	.270	.356	.262
<i>Change in Adj. R2</i>	<b>+.025**</b>	<b>+.027*</b>	<b>+.062***</b>	<b>+.041**</b>	<b>+.022*</b>
<i>Final Equation F</i>	<b>16.678***</b>	<b>10.141***</b>	<b>8.891***</b>	<b>12.812***</b>	<b>8.640***</b>

Note. Betas from each unique step reported. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . Bolded betas indicate that the variable made a significant, individual contribution.

Table 7

*Moderated Regression Analysis Results for Positive Hashtag Use and Progressive Blog Use as Potential Moderators of the Relation between SBW embodiment and Mental Health/Self Esteem*

	Mental Health Outcome	$\beta$	$p$
Positive Hashtag Use	Depression	.03	.76
Positive Hashtag Use	Anxiety	.23	.14
Positive Hashtag Use	Hostility	-.04	.80
Positive Hashtag Use	Sensitivity	.31	.08
Positive Hashtag Use	Self-Esteem	.00	.97
Progressive Blog Use	Depression	-.01	.81
Progressive Blog Use	Anxiety	.07	.27
Progressive Blog Use	Hostility	.07	.22
Progressive Blog Use	Sensitivity	.09	.29
Progressive Blog Use	Self-Esteem	.01	.82

**Appendix A**

## Strong Black Woman Embodiment

(K. Thomas, 2006)

**Directions:** Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.

**Response Options:**

1=Strongly Disagree

2=Disagree

3=Both Agree and Disagree

4=Agree

5=Strongly Agree

x=Decline to Answer

**Survey Questions/Items:**

1. As a Black woman, it is important that I never show vulnerability or cry when I feel hurt.
  2. Even though I may appear to have it all together, I often feel anxious or depressed.
  3. It is difficult for me to ask for help, even when I need it.
  4. I often assume more responsibilities than I can realistically handle, personally or professionally.
  5. I avoid letting people know what I am really feeling, particularly when I am angry or hurt.
  6. I view making mistakes as a sign of my own personal failure.
-

7. I find it difficult to admit that having excessive responsibilities may affect my health.
  8. I often find myself in relationships with men who are having personal problems or who are “down on their luck.”
  9. I don’t feel comfortable letting a man take care of me.
-



**Appendix B**

## Stereotypes About Black Women

(SRBWS; Thomas, Witherspoon, &amp; Speight, 2004)

**Directions:** How much do you think people believe that Black women...**Response Options:**

1=Strongly Disagree

2=Disagree

3=Both Agree and Disagree

4=Agree

5=Strongly Agree

x=Decline to Answer

**Survey Questions/Items:**

1. Are reluctant to ask for help.
  2. Are emotionally stronger than other women.
  3. Place the survival of their family and community above their own needs.
  4. Are reluctant to show personal weakness to others.
  5. Are reluctant to complain about the circumstances they face in life.
  6. Always find a way for their families to survive.
  7. The survival of the Black family and community is due to the strength of the Black woman.
  8. Feel uncomfortable letting others take care of them.
-

9. Are uncomfortable being dependent on others.
  10. Are selfless and sacrificial.
  11. See struggling against all odds in order to achieve as just part of a Black woman's life.
-

## Appendix C

### Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale

(CESD; Ratloff, 1997)

**Directions:** Next, we are going to ask you some questions about how you have been feeling lately. Below is a list of some of the ways you may have felt or behaved in the past week. Please respond to all items, indicating how often you've felt this way during the past week (7 days).

#### **Response Options:**

1=Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)

2=Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)

3=Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)

4=All of the time (5-7 days)

#### **Survey Questions/Items:**

1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.
  2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.
  3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with the help from my family.
  4. I felt that I was just as good as other people.
  5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.
  6. I felt depressed.
  7. I felt that everything I did was an effort.
  8. I felt hopeful about the future.
-

9. I thought my life had been a failure.
  10. I felt fearful.
  11. My sleep was restless.
  12. I was happy.
  13. I talked less than usual.
  14. I felt lonely.
  15. People were unfriendly.
  16. I enjoyed life.
  17. I had crying spells.
  18. I felt sad.
  19. I felt that people disliked me.
  20. I could not get going
- 

Brief Symptom Inventory

Anxiety Subscale

(Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983)

**Directions:** Please indicate the level to which you were distressed by each of the following, during the past week (7 days).

**Response Options:**

1=Not at all

2=A little

3=Somewhat

4=A lot

5=Extremely

**Survey Questions/Items:**

1. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by nervousness or shakiness inside?
  2. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by being suddenly scared for no reason?
  3. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling fearful?
  4. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling tense or keyed up?
  5. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by spells of terror or panic?
  6. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling so restless you couldn't sit still?
- 

Brief Symptom Inventory

Hostility Subscale

(Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983)

**Directions:** Please indicate the level to which you were distressed by each of the following, during the past week (7 days).

**Response Options:**

1=Not at all

2=A little

3=Somewhat

4=A lot

5=Extremely

**Survey Questions/Items:**

1. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling easily annoyed or irritated?
2. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by temper outbursts that you could not control?
3. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by having urges to beat, injure, or harm someone?
4. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by having urges to break or smash things?
5. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by getting into frequent arguments?

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Brief Symptom Inventory

Sensitivity Subscale

(Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983)

**Directions:** Please indicate the level to which you were distressed by each of the following, during the past week (7 days).

**Response Options:**

1=Not at all

2=A little

3=Somewhat

4=A lot

5=Extremely

**Survey Questions/Items:**

1. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by your feelings being easily hurt?
  2. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling that people are unfriendly or dislike you?
  3. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling inferior to others?
  4. During the past 7 days, how much were you distressed by feeling very self-conscious with others?
-

## Appendix D

### Carefree Black Girl Images

**Directions: On a scale from 0 to 9, how well do the following adjectives describe the woman in this photo?** To indicate your answer, click and drag the slider handle or click directly under your answer choice. For example, to select zero as your answer choice, click under zero. Your answer choice will be displayed at the end of the slider bar.

#### Response Options:

0=Not at all

3=A little

6=Somewhat

9=Very

#### Images:







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