

Consistently #TeamNatural: How Natural Hair Brands Intersect Natural Hair, Black Culture, and Community-Building Using Social Media

By

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Abstract

Black natural hair brands are an important aspect of the online natural hair community and have a strong presence in the lives of black women. Therefore, it is critical to better understand the way that black natural hair brands market themselves to their consumers on social media once their reach has expanded beyond their core target audience, and they have become mainstream. While black women often reject Eurocentric beauty ideals today, there is a long history of colorism and texturism that still presents itself in the way that beauty is presented by companies, including black natural hair brands. A grounded theory approach along with open and axial coding allowed data collection that encouraged the formation of recurring patterns and concepts. Based on the findings, this analysis argues that black natural hair brands use Twitter to validate natural hair, bond with blackness, and promote their products and the brand. Interwoven in these three themes are the presence of a reliance on black cultural references, the use of hashtags, and the use of images in order to further connect with consumers and enjoy the affordances of social media. Transitioning from pre-mainstream to post-mainstream, brands expanded on their marketing tactics mainly through the use of influencers. Even after becoming mainstream, the black natural hair brands consistently present beauty in a way that rejects Eurocentric beauty ideals and instead highlights the variance of black women's hairtypes and complexions.

Introduction

As the current natural hair movement has progressed from the late 1990s up until now, black natural hair brands such as Miss Jessie's, Carol's Daughter, and Shea Moisture have become widely-known. In some instances, brands once black-owned have been bought out by larger white companies, commenting on the reach and appeal of natural hair products to those outside of the black community. Brands that were once only familiar amongst the black community, are now seen in large department and beauty stores and reach a much wider demographic, essentially becoming mainstream. In the context of this research, "mainstream" refers to when a company's products are sold by big box retailers. Black natural hair brands are referred to simply as natural hair brands since their core audience is black women.

Recently, there have been instances where this exposure to mainstream audiences has led natural hair brands to market themselves differently to consumers. Specifically, brands that once focused on black women are branching out to reach a broader target audience that includes white women. A recent example of this is an online video campaign done by Shea Moisture in the summer of 2017. Shea Moisture, a natural hair company founded in 1991, is popular amongst black women and in the past has aligned itself with predominantly natural-haired¹ black women. Within the past decade they have become mainstream, their products being sold in stores such as Target, Walgreens, and Ulta, and their commercials being aired on television.

With this new expansion, their marketing shifted. The 2017 campaign was meant to target women with curly hair and encourage women to "Break Free from Hair Hate," consequently commenting on the difficult relationship that women with curls have with their hair

¹ While natural hair has varying definitions, it most commonly refers to when hair has not been chemically processed. Some people in the natural hair community may also define natural hair as hair that has not had heat applied to it.

because of beauty norms. But, the advertisement included several white women with straight hair and one multiracial woman with loose curls, completely leaving out black women with tighter curls and kinkier hair (“Controversial Shea Moisture Product Commercial,” 2017). Shea Moisture faced enormous backlash from consumers online, especially black women, that argued that Shea Moisture had become insensitive to their original core audience. As a result, the advertisement was pulled down from Shea Moisture’s social media and the CEO released a statement apologizing. Still, black women are weary of the support and representation that Shea Moisture provides for them.

This “Break Free from Hair Hate” campaign differs immensely from a Shea Moisture commercial from just a year prior. In 2016, Shea Moisture released a commercial titled “What’s Normal?” that called out beauty departments for the way that haircare products targeting black hair is ostracized by falling under a broad “ethnic” umbrella (“Shea Moisture: What’s Normal?”, 2016). “What’s Normal?” seemed to clearly align the brand with black women and natural hair. While “What’s Normal?” also included white women, there was a greater presence of black women with varying hair types. So, what happened from 2016 to 2017? Arguably, the “What’s Normal?” campaign was a tactical step towards expanding their target audience while still including black women, and a foreshadowing of the “Break Free from Hair Hate” advertisement.

Thus, I am interested in seeing if Shea Moisture’s 2017 incident and their gradual transition in marketing is a trend amongst black hair brands that become mainstream, or an anomaly. To accomplish this, I explore if and how the marketing strategies of black natural hair companies shifts once they become considered mainstream hair brands, and how the brands market both themselves and beauty ideals to their consumers in present day. Potential examples of shifts in marketing strategies include a change in the common race, complexion, or hair

texture that is presented in the advertisements. I explore the research questions by conducting a qualitative content analysis of the social media marketing strategies of three black natural hair brands pre and post-mainstream status: Shea Moisture, Thank God it's Natural (tgin), and Oyin Handmade. The study also employs a grounded theory approach in order to find patterns and reach conclusions based off of the social media posts and marketing tactics of the three brands.

The relationship that black women have with their hair is one that is personal and central to identity-making. As the backlash towards the 2017 Shea Moisture commercial illustrates, black women feel strongly towards the brands that are meant to represent them in an uplifting way, particularly when the majority of the haircare and beauty industry is catered to upholding Eurocentric beauty ideals. Since these brands were originally created for the needs of black women in mind, it is significant to see if they still incorporate black women into their marketing and branding techniques after becoming mainstream, as well as potential implications for these marketing tactics. For the communication studies space, this research gives a deeper look into an intersection of beauty and race, specifically in the haircare industry. This research is also applicable to future studies within feminist theoretical frameworks and black hair theory. For marketing research, my findings are beneficial in adding insight into the marketing practices of a specific field (the haircare industry) using a specific medium (social media), as well as the employment of marketing tactics to reach particular demographics.

Literature Review

History of Natural Hair

To understand the way that the current natural hair movement has formed, it is imperative to understand the historical roots of natural hair for black women. Throughout the 1950s and

early 1960s, straightened hair was considered the normal and respectable hair style for black women, regardless of class or geographic location (Walker, 2000, p. 539). Susannah Walker's "Black is Profitable: The Commodification of the Afro" walks the reader through the transition of the afro from a political statement to a fashion statement. Although few and far between, black women with natural hair were present as early as the late 1950s (Walker, 2000). According to Walker (2000), these women could be classified as "avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and elite urban trendsetters" (p. 538). These women were not the norm, most black women straightened their hair into a press and curl style. It was not until the Black Power Movement in the 1960s that black women wearing natural hair became slightly more prominent, although still not the norm by any means. At this time, the afro was used as a political statement; women wore their natural hair as a way to convey black pride and reject the prevalent Eurocentric beauty standards (Walker, 2000). Still, with straightened hair commonly associated with attractiveness, it was continuously difficult for these women to grapple with their beauty while wearing their natural hair. But, while the afro was politicized in the early 1960s, by the late 1960s and early 1970s the afro had become separated from its political roots and was worn more widely. Around the same time in the 1960s and 1970s, the "Black is Beautiful Movement" encouraged black people to embrace their physical features, such as the natural texture of their hair as well as darker complexions. Thus, the commodification and the acceptance of natural hair for black women partly shifted the way that beauty was conceptualized for black women. According to Walker (2000):

The African American beauty industry, along with many black women, embraced the "natural" look, but they did not completely reject hair straightening, nor did they explicitly recognize that hair could be political. Nevertheless, the popularity of the Afro

and the commercial response to that popularity contributed to a redefinition of black female beauty in the United States. (p. 537)

While the afro and natural hair moved away from politics, its acceptance by black women and the beauty industry still had a revolutionary impact on the way that black women conveyed their beauty. This background information provides a historical foundation of what lead up to the current natural hair movement today. The current natural hair movement has roots from the 50s and 60s, and the success of current natural hair brands exemplifies how the conceptualizing of beauty has shifted, and how the brands build upon this in their advertisements.

Current Natural Hair Movement & Black Hair Companies

In “(De) Tangled: An Exploration of the Hierarchies in the Natural Hair Community,” Schillica Howard (2015) explored the satisfaction that natural-haired black women have with their hair through interviews and a focus group with seven participants. As background to her study, Howard gave insight into the ways in which the natural hair movement is conceptualized today. As defined by Howard (2015), the current natural hair movement is:

the recent push for Black women to wear their natural hair textures...the current Natural Hair Movement is a shift away from ideological stances that manifested themselves with natural hair; instead, the current movement is community formed based solely on having natural hair. The Movement encompasses academic work on Black hair, exploring the versatility of Black hair, connecting with other Black women with natural hair, removing the stigma of natural hair in the workplace (p. 6)

When referring to the current natural hair movement throughout my research, this is partly the definition that is used, especially emphasizing the communal aspect of the movement. I expand on Howard’s definition as well. The natural hair community that forms consists of not just

individuals wearing their natural hair, but also brands and other large entities that work to represent and encourage black women that wear natural hair. The current natural hair movement also has a strong presence online, and Howard went on to explain that the current natural hair movement is deeply rooted in digital spaces, especially as a way for black women who self-identify as members of the movement to connect with one another (2015). The centrality that the current natural hair movement has in online spaces gives further insight into the benefits of researching the way that social media platforms act as a form of self-promotion and marketing for black hair. As a result of its basis in digital spaces and my own emphasis on natural hair brands using social media platform, I conceptualize the current natural hair movement as an online natural hair movement through this study. I refer to the movement throughout this study as the online natural hair movement, yet still recognize that there are aspects of this movement in non-digital spaces.

According to previous research, the current natural hair movement began in online spaces as early as 2008 or 2009 (Tate, 2016, p. 20). A study done by Candis Tate titled “Loving Blackness: Black Women Digital Content Creators and The Transformative Healing Powers of The Contemporary Natural Hair Movement” studied how black female digital content creators provide a space for black women to embrace and love their natural hair. Online spaces, including social media sites, YouTube, blog pages, etc. became an epicenter where black women could “discuss products, perform tutorials, trade pictures, suggestions, and provide encouragement” (Tate, 2016, p. 19). The safe space that online creates for black women to counter the widespread beliefs of Eurocentric beauty ideals was referred to as a “counter-public” by Tate (2016). Outside of the online natural hair community, a counter-public is when a

subordinate group creates and shares counter-discourses to refute the way that their identity is conceptualized by the group in power (Tate, 2016, p. 25).

Tate also discussed the concept of a “homespace,” and her own term of the “recreated homespace.” The homespace represents a private space that allows for freedom and opportunity for creativity (Tate, 2016, p. 26). Since haircare (especially black haircare) is discussed and nurtured in the private sphere of someone’s home, the homespace is relevant to the conversation surrounding the online natural hair movement. Tate created the concept of the recreated homespace to deal with the relationship between privacy and intimacy in a public space such as online. The recreated homespace also overlaps with the counter-public, especially dealing with natural hair when conversations often are not had to uplift its beauty. According to Tate, “Black women digital content creators are aware of the necessity of re-creating the homespace and spreading counter-rhetoric that educates, encourages, and inspires Black women with natural hair” (2016, p. 35). Tate used the theoretical framework of the counter-public, homespace, and re-created homespace to make sense of the importance of the digital space for the online natural hair movement. This theoretical framework is useful for my own study since I am furthering the understanding of how black natural hair brands use online spaces to market and connect with their audience members.

Social media and the digital space provides affordances that allow members of the online natural hair community to interact with one another. While definitions of affordances are often contested, technological affordances generally refer to the abilities that a technology provides. Social affordances, the ability to interact with others and form social structure, can stem from technological affordances (Butcher & Helmond, 2016). An example of such an affordance is hashtags. Black women often use hashtags as a way to unite with one another in the natural hair

community, a common hashtag being “#teamnatural.” (Tate, 2016). It has become common for natural hair brands to use similar hashtags as a way to connect themselves with this online natural hair community full of black women. Thus, with black women often going to online spaces to discuss their natural hair, brands consequently must interact with potential customers and portray their identified brand ideals through advertisements, hashtags, posts, and comments. Consequently, paying close attention to the use of hashtags was a central part of the open coding process used throughout my analysis of Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade. The online natural hair movement, black hair brands, and social media intertwine and influence one another.

Beauty Standards for Black Women

Historically, Eurocentric beauty standards were also the standards that black women abided by. Throughout the 20th century, long hair that was straight or wavy constituted “good” hair and hair with tighter curl patterns was often categorized as “bad” hair (Walker, 2000). Even with the current online natural hair movement today, this idea still prevails, especially through the usage of hair typing. Although there are several different systems for hair typing, the Andre Walker hair typing system is the one most commonly used amongst those within the online natural hair community. Hair typing is the process of categorizing hair based on its curl pattern, texture, density, and porosity. The Andre Walker system places an emphasis on deciphering one’s curl pattern, which is broken up in terms of numbers and letters. There are four types of hair: Type 1 is straight hair, Type 2 is wavy hair, Type 3 is curly hair, and Type 4 is kinky hair.² Each of these four hair types are further broken down into sub-categories, ranging from A-C for Type 1 and 2 hair, and A-B for Type 3 and 4 hair (“African American & Kinky Hair Types,”

² Kinky hair is hair that is very tightly curled.

n.d). Most black women fall into either Type 3 or Type 4, and there has been criticism of the Andre Walker typing system for ostracizing black women's hair by making Type 4 hair seem the least appealing out of the four types ("The Only Hair Typing System," 2011). Two hair types, 3C and 4C were not originally in Andre Walker's hair typing system but were added to the system by members within the online natural hair community that felt like the original hair system excluded these hair types ("The Only Hair Typing System," 2011).

Hair typing is often still used in the online natural hair community as women consult tutorial hair videos and must first decide their own hair type, and second if the tutorial is applicable to their hair. Online natural hair communities are also criticized for placing an emphasis on Type 3 hair and ignoring Type 4 hair types. Therefore, there is still a discrepancy between hair types in the natural hair community today, with types ranging from 1-3 favored and more widely advertised than Type 4. This discrepancy relates to texturism, a term used in the online natural hair community that discusses the favoritism of certain hair textures over others. Thus, online natural hair communities as well as natural hair brands are often ridiculed for disassociating beauty with tighter curl patterns like 4C. Therefore, throughout my open coding process, I paid close attention to the types of hair women were presented with in the images of the three natural hair brands.

Beauty is also conceptualized for black women through complexion. With lighter skin tones historically being deemed more beautiful or attractive than darker skin tones, colorism is at the epicenter of how beauty is conceived for black women still today. Colorism refers to a difference in treatment between people of color; light-skinned people of color are treated better and viewed as more desirable than dark-skinned people of color (Hunter, 2007, p. 237). The origin of colorism in the United States stems back to European colonialism and slavery, and the

systematic repercussions of colorism live on today through Eurocentric ideals and white supremacy (Hunter, 2007, p. 238 & 239). This presence of colorism impacts black women in a unique way. Since beauty is conflated with lighter complexions, black women with lighter complexions are often afforded a certain level of social capital that darker complexioned black women miss out on, resulting in better opportunities for dating and marriage (Hunter, 2007, p. 247). Brands and advertisements often reproduce stereotypes of what society constitutes as beauty, so through open coding and analyzing, I considered the complexion of the women most repeatedly presented on the Twitter pages of these three natural hair brands.

With Eurocentric beauty standards commonly at the forefront of what characteristics are considered beautiful, it is necessary to consider how this impacts black women, and how black women define beauty for themselves as a foundation for my research. Interestingly enough, some previous research shows that black women do not just passively accept the Eurocentric beauty ideals that are often broadcasted. A variety of studies found that black women resist Eurocentric beauty standards and instead align their beauty ideals with black cultural studies, and that black women do not passively accept the notion that lighter skin is automatically more attractive (Sekayi, 2003; Watson, Thorton, & Engelland, 2010). With regards to my study, this shows that black women looking to black natural hair brands for advertisements do not appreciate advertisements that do not present beauty in a diverse, culturally black manner.

Targeted Marketing and Advertising

Various studies and insights focused specifically on black consumers, their buying power, the way they react to targeted marketing, and the consequences of these reactions. Target marketing is when a brand breaks their marketing tactics into segments, including demographic

segmentation, and then focuses their marketing uniquely to that particular segment (Ward, 2017). In September of 2017, Nielsen released an insights report specifically on black women, titled “African American Women: Our Science, Her Magic.” This report was the second time that Nielsen focused specifically on black women consumers. Nielsen explained how black women lead the decision-making for the \$1.2 trillion in spending power that black people possess (2017). Nielsen ended their report by giving advice to marketers attempting to reach black women:

Understanding cultural nuance is important when attempting to build brand awareness and affinity with African-American consumers. As the U.S. population continues to shift toward diversity and a multicultural majority, brands cannot afford to ignore the unique preferences of African-Americans. To that end, African-American women are leaving an indelible imprint on America’s economy, social consciousness and cultural landscape, and they’re showing no signs of slowing as they become more and more aware of that influence (p. 55).

Thus, with the current large buying power of black people, and specifically black women, brands and companies often employ targeted marketing efforts in order to hail these potential black buyers. Specifically within the haircare industry, well known, white-owned brands create product lines specifically for black women separate from their main line of products, and also employ targeted marketing. In March of 2017, Pantene released on YouTube a commercial advertising their Pantene Gold Series, a series of haircare products catering to black women’s hair needs, exemplified by products such as co-washes and detanglers.³ The commercial was

³ Co-washing refers to only washing hair with conditioner and not using shampoo. Detanglers are products that make it easier to comb through one’s hair, and this is especially important for hair with tighter curls. Co-washes and detanglers are both popular products for those who wear their hair natural.

titled “Celebrating Strong, Beautiful African American Hair,” and presented black women of varying ages with differing hair styles and types, with the voice-over discussing that black hair is in no way less beautiful because it differs from Eurocentric beauty ideals (“Pantene Gold Series”).

A variety of studies regarding the role that race plays in marketing and advertising found that brands use blackness and multiracial representations in their advertisements in order to either brand their product as a cultural resource, to create a sense of similarity or difference between the viewer and the advertisement, or to create a homogenous identity (Crockett, 2008; DaCosta, 2006). These results were gathered through diverse methods, including a grounded theory approach, and discourse analyses of brands and advertisement archives. Both methodological approaches are related to my own research as I employed a grounded theory approach and analyzed archived advertisement posts on Twitter. Regarding my study, these research findings illustrate potential ways that black natural hair brands may use race to connect with their audience culturally and/or through identity formation.

While it is clear that advertisers are putting in effort to reach out to black and multiracial consumers, how are consumers responding to these marketing strategies? A study conducted by Yuvay Jeanine Meyers and Allison Janeice Morgan assessed targeted marketing, specifically looking at the marketing outcomes (such as purchase intent, attitude toward the brand, and attitude towards the product) stemming from a targeted advertisement. Specifically, the study sought to find out how advertising performance is impacted by targeted marketing usage amongst black millennial consumers in online spaces. Essentially, the study wanted to see if a race-specific website (Black Voices on Huffington Post) or race-specific models (a black model) would influence the consumers’ product perception, perception of the advertisement, and the

intent to purchase the product advertised. The researchers hypothesized that black consumers would respond positively to both race-specific websites and models in regards to online ads. By conducting an online survey amongst undergraduate students at a historically black college (HBCU), the researchers found that while race-specific models had a significant effect on marketing outcomes, a race-specific website did not (Meyers & Morgan, 2013). With regards to my study, the conclusions found by this research gives insight into how black consumers react to advertising that is meant to target them; the presence of black models has an influence on marketing outcomes. This insight is relevant to the marketing tactics employed by natural hair brands like Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade.

In correlation with marketing outcomes are the consumption habits of black consumers. A study conducted by Lamont and Molnár interviewed 7 black marketing specialists who work for black advertising agencies; the study found that black consumers purchase goods as a way to build status, as well as a form of self-expression (Lamont & Molnár, 2001). Theoretically, the study referred to group identification and social categorization as approaches that black consumers employ to affirm themselves and obtain affirmation from others (Lamont & Molnár, 2001). Group identification in particular can be applicable to my own research when uncovering the ways in which Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade attempt to reach their desired target audience. Group identification assesses the ways that a specific group uses product consumption as a way to broadcast their uniqueness and identify themselves as distinct from other groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2001).

The findings become even more relevant to my own research when they look specifically at advertisements that are placed within black hair magazines. A variety of studies addressed how black women categorize hair as a result of viewing magazine advertisements. These studies

found that advertisements present “good” hair as healthy and manageable (especially natural hair), that black hair magazines advertisements depict straight and long hair as the two most beautiful qualities for hair, and that hair advertisements do in fact impact the hair care choices of the women viewing the advertisements (Gilchrist & Thompson, 2012; Howard, 2015).

Regarding my study, the findings of these studies show the influential position that advertisements, and the brands that these advertisements represent, have over the way that black women define the quality of hair. My own research expanded upon these studies by transitioning away from traditional print advertisements and instead looking at marketing tactics on social media sites such as Twitter.

Based on the previous findings, it is clear that there is a gap in research surrounding black natural hair brands and their social media practices that this study sets out to fill. Currently, there is not much research on advertising and marketing tactics employed through social media sites targeting black women within the current natural hair movement. This research sought to fill that gap by looking explicitly at marketing and advertising strategies utilized by Shea Moisture, Thank God it’s Natural, and Oyin Handmade on their Twitter profiles. This research also assessed the ways in which these marketing and advertising strategies may have pivoted once the audience for the brands expanded beyond just black women.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do black natural hair brands currently use social media, specifically Twitter, as a way to market themselves to consumers?

RQ2: If and how does the marketing strategies of black natural hair brands shift on social media once they become mainstream?

Methods

In order to further explore the research questions, this study used a grounded theory methods approach. This allowed me to develop patterns that I found within the advertisements without basing my research on prior findings or assumptions, thus ensuring that the results of my analysis reflected the data. A grounded theory approach was also useful because the existing research on black hair brand advertising is slim, especially on social media platforms. Grounded theory allowed me to find themes and repeated concepts within the data, instead of approaching my data with theory beforehand.

I specifically looked at advertisements and brand building posts on Twitter promoting three different black natural hair brands. Although both are posted to social media platforms, I conceptualized advertisements and brand building posts differently. Advertisements included posts that referenced product availability, capability, and quality. Brand building posts included posts that did not directly relate to the brands' products but instead gave insight into brand ideals. A combination of advertisements and brand building posts were used within my data set, and collectively were referred to as brand posts.

The three brands I analyzed were Shea Moisture, Thank God it's Natural (tgin), and Oyin Handmade. Each brand was chosen for three reasons. First, all three of them are now mainstream brands, based off of their products being sold in big box retailers like Target. Second, all three brands were founded and then became mainstream within a different time frame, thus allowing for the opportunity to see how brand posts vary based on years, and the brand's positioning within that time frame. Specifically, Shea Moisture was founded in 1991, but became mainstream around the year 2010. Tgin was founded in 2013 and quickly became mainstream in 2015, and Oyin Handmade was founded in 2001 and became mainstream in 2014.

Third, each brand is or originated as black-owned, is popular amongst black consumers, and has a consistent, large following on their social media platforms, where they frequently promote themselves. Shea Moisture is the only brand out of the three no longer black owned. In November of 2017, it was announced that Unilever, a global consumer goods company, would acquire Shea Moisture (“Unilever to acquire Sundial Brands,” 2017). Despite this transition away from being black-owned, Shea Moisture still has roots within the online natural hair community, thus making the brand important to study.

The brand posts themselves were chosen and identified differently. I analyzed brand posts that came from the social media accounts, specifically Twitter, of the three brands. I chose Twitter as the social media platform to pull data for several reasons. First, Twitter is a platform that people often use to post images and short videos, and this can work well for brands attempting to convey a particular message through visual imagery. This is important since I focused on the visual representations of women by the three brands. Second, Twitter allowed me to search and find archived tweets, while in comparison a platform like Instagram (which also includes photos and videos) did not have this search mechanism. Third, Twitter demographically skews in favor of the target audience of consumers that black hair brands want to reach, especially with the popular concept of “Black Twitter.” Black twitter speaks to the virtual community rooted in black culture and illustrated through hashtags, humor, gifs, and social commentary (McDonald, 2014). Over 25% of black internet users are on Twitter. Brands often adapt their marketing towards Black Twitter to reach a more diverse demographic. Fourth, Twitter skews younger for age demographics, skews female, skews slightly higher for urban areas, is popular amongst minority populations, and relatively includes all income levels (Brenner & Smith, 2013). This makes it clear that the Twitter platform includes and emphasizes

the audience that black natural hair brands want to reach: black women. Fifth, people and brands often link their Instagram posts to their Twitter, which allowed me to include and analyze posts that were placed on both platforms and expand the amount of advertisements that I assessed.

In choosing which brand posts to analyze, I looked specifically for Twitter posts including images of women, and then employed a unitizing and categorizing process. Posts were pulled until a point of saturation was reached, that is until particular ideas and concepts were repeated within the data. Images were necessary in order to conduct visual analysis of the representations of hair and beauty, and women needed to be present in order to see how femininity played a role, especially because the natural hair brands mainly cater to women. I looked out for common and/or repeated concepts that could be categorized for my coding process, which included both open and axial coding. There were certain themes that I paid close attention to when looking at the various brand posts, such as the women presented (including their ethnicity and complexion) and the hair type of these women. By categorizing the concepts that I found, I was able to find patterns of interest amongst brand posts for Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade on their Twitter accounts. The captions of posts provided the opportunity for textual analysis. Since hashtags are often used on Twitter, I specifically coded for hashtags as well.

I also chose brand posts that fell within specific time frames based on when a brand transitioned into becoming mainstream. Shea Moisture joined Twitter in June of 2009 but did not begin posting images until November of 2011. So, posts pulled from June 2009-November 2011 were considered pre-mainstream, and posts pulled from December 2011-January 2018 were considered post-mainstream. Tgin was founded in 2013 but then became categorizable as mainstream in March 1st of 2015 when they began to be sold in-store at Target. Posts pulled

from the year range of January 2013-early March 2015 were considered pre-mainstream, and posts pulled from late March 2015-2018 were considered post-mainstream. Oyin Handmade joined Twitter in August of 2008 and became mainstream in April of 2014 when they also began to be sold in Target. Posts pulled from the year range of 2008-early 2014 were considered pre-mainstream, posts pulled from late 2014-2018 were considered post-mainstream. I pulled data for all three brands from Twitter in the beginning of January 2018, which is why the post-mainstream phase ended there.

Analysis

Throughout my coding process, three major themes developed across all three of the natural hair brands: (1) Validating Natural Hair, (2) Bonding with Blackness, and (3) Product and Brand Promotion. These themes represent the way that the brands use Twitter to interact with consumers and market themselves in a way that aligns with their brand ideals. The use of hashtags is crucial and prevalent across all three themes, speaking to the affordances of social media and how brands utilize these capabilities.

Validating Natural Hair

Natural Hair and Texturism

Natural hair is at the epicenter of the Twitter profiles of Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade. Even in posts that are not outwardly discussing natural hair, natural hair is subtly reinforced through the presence of women wearing natural hairstyles. The validation of natural hair comes not only from the presence alone of natural hair, but also the attitude presented in conjunction with the natural hairstyles. Repeatedly, the women posted by the brands are presented smiling or posing confidently, which illustrates natural hair in a positive light. As

discussed in the literature review, there is a hierarchy amongst natural hair regarding the typing system. Therefore, throughout my coding process I specifically accounted for the type of hair repeatedly presented and validated as acceptable natural hair across all three brands.

The texture of natural hair can alter between days, depending on the way that it is styled or the last time that it has been washed. Because of this, it can sometimes be difficult to distinctly categorize a person's hair texture as one versus another. But by being a black woman who identifies with the online natural hair community myself, I have experience with natural hairstyling and identifying hair types that someone outside of the community may struggle to comprehend. For example, I can more easily identify the difference between a braid-out and a twist-out⁴. I argue that without first-hand experience or frequent studying, it would be difficult for a person external from the online natural hair community to be able to make these distinctions.

I coded the post-mainstream images that included women with natural hair. I focused on post-mainstream posts because there was a higher quantity of these than pre-mainstream posts, and post-mainstream posts allowed me to see how the brands currently conceptualize beauty. I coded the images with natural hair into three main categories: Wavy (2a-2c), Curly (3a-3c), and Kinky (4a-4c). This way of categorizing hair stems from Andre Walker's well-known hair typing system that is often used within the online natural hair community. I also accounted for braided hair types (such as braid outs or twist outs), relaxed hair or weave, and heat-styled hair.⁵ Braids, dreads, and other hairstyles that require braiding or twisting to obtain the achieved look

⁴ A braid-out is when three strands of hair are used to braid the hair in however many braids desired, and then the braids are later taken down to create a distinct wave pattern. A twist-out is when only two strands of hair are used to create a twist, and then all the twists are later taken down to create a specific pattern that looks different than a braid-out.

⁵ Relaxed hair is hair that has been chemically processed. Weaves are a form of hair extensions. Heat-styled hair is hair that has been straightened or curled usually using a blow dryer, flat iron, or curling iron.

(ex: braid-outs or twist-outs) are present amongst all three brands, but are most prevalent within tgin. The presence of these hairstyles speaks to the expansiveness of natural hair. Relaxed hair and heat-styled hair are very uncommon. All three brands emphasize healthy hair, so it is not surprising that relaxed hair is not represented because relaxing one's hair with chemicals can be damaging to the hair's natural texture. But, some still consider heat-styled hair that has not been chemically treated as natural hair. In considering this, one could be surprised that the brands do not show healthy, heat-styled hair. Straight hair is only presented once in the form of a weave by Shea Moisture. This lack of representation of straight hair is especially surprising for Shea Moisture because they sell products specifically for women who apply heat to their hair. Braids and dreads, as well as hairstyles that require braiding or twisting to obtain the achieved look (ex: braid-outs or twist-outs) are present amongst all three brands but is most prevalent with tgin.

By using these three categories as a main basis, I was able to decide how often each hair type is presented by all three brands, and whether or not there is equal representation for each hair type. Across all three brands, wavy hair is represented the least. Oyin Handmade actually does not represent any women with wavy hair types. It is surprising that this representation is so limited because of the history of looser curls commonly being presented more frequently as the face of natural hair, and more often associated with beauty. While Shea Moisture and tgin do represent women with wavier hair types, wavy hair is not represented at the same rate as curly or kinky hair. While curly hair and braided styles are the hair types most commonly represented by tgin, Oyin Handmade represents kinky hair at the highest rate. Without representation of wavy hair and instead a high presence of kinky hair, Oyin Handmade most clearly refutes Eurocentric beauty ideals. Shea Moisture represents curly and kinky hair types at an almost even rate, with kinky hair being very slightly represented more often.

Thus, with no shortage of curly and kinky hair present in their Twitter posts, all three of these brands work to dismantle the idea or potential misconception that natural hair and its attractiveness should be associated with wavier or straight hair. Of course, one must remember that both curly and kinky hair has a range, and therefore there is variance regarding the tightness of curls even in these two categories. Still, the brands works to negate the idea that natural hair brands present monolithic representations of beauty that mirror Eurocentric beauty ideals once they reach mainstream status.

Complexions and Colorism

In addition to coding for hairstyles and hair types, I also coded for the complexions of the women illustrated in brand posts post-mainstream in order to be consistent with the hair types that I assessed. Beauty, especially within the black community, is conceptualized for women including both hair and complexion, one does not operate without the other. For example, beauty has historically been exemplified with the light skin and wavy or straight hair union. The same conceptualization of beauty does not stand for dark skin and wavy hair, or light skin and kinky hair. Therefore, it was necessary to code for complexion to better understand how beauty is represented by Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade.

Similar to hair types, an individual's complexion can change, especially when discussing photographs that are posted online. The use of filters, seeking out particular lighting, and even angles all contribute to how a person's complexion appears on the screen. With that in mind, I coded complexion in three main categories: Light, Medium, and Dark. Complexions of course come in all different shades, and these three categories are not exhaustive in the way that complexion can be separated. But for the sake of this research, complexion is looked at as a supplement to natural hair and texturism, and therefore these three categories are sufficient.

Surprisingly, women with lighter complexions are not represented significantly higher than women with medium or dark complexions amongst any of the three brands. There is a history of brands, including black-owned hair brands, to further the idea that light skin is more beautiful or that straight hair is more desirable. Despite this precedent, the three brands do not fall into this trap. Specifically for Shea Moisture, women with light complexions are represented less frequently than women with medium or dark complexions. This is interesting considering the backlash that Shea Moisture received in the summer of 2017 for their “Break Free from Hair Hate” advertisement. The images pulled for this research follows Shea Moisture’s advertising flop and disapproval from consumers. This could potentially explain why none of their recent brand posts on Twitter present white women, as well as why the black women presented are not a homogenous reproduction of historically common Eurocentric beauty ideals. Both tgin and Oyin Handmade echo this sentiment; both brands present medium complexioned women at a slightly higher rate, while still having a variance of light, medium, and dark complexions.

Also surprising, tgin is the only brand that includes a white woman in its Twitter posts. Since all three brands are sold in various mainstream stores, I expected them to attempt to reach a wider demographic audience by including white women on their Twitter page. But, this is not the case. The only time that the white woman appears is in two different consumer submitted posts that tgin reposts and refers to as #Shelfies.⁶ It is unclear how tgin usually decides which #Shelfies they repost to their page, which makes it more difficult to know their thought process behind posting this woman. It is also unclear whether this woman is the only white woman who posted on her personal Twitter page using the #Shelfie hashtag or tagged tgin in a post during the post-mainstream phase. If she is in fact the only white woman who used the hashtag and if tgin

⁶ #Shelfies are clearly defined and discussed within the Product and Brand Promotion section, specifically on page 42.

simply attempts to repost as many #Shelfies as possible, then her presence is based on availability and formality. But if there are other white women who posted #Shelfies, then the question becomes how did tgin go about choosing her post as one worthy enough to repost?

Natural Hair and Hashtags

Hashtags originated on Twitter and have now become a staple in the way that people communicate with others and brand themselves on social media sites. Hashtags can include any topic or idea that one chooses, and the use of hashtags have become popular and well-used within the online natural hair community. Hashtags directly discussing natural hair work to provide a space for the validation of natural hair by giving women the platform to showcase their hair for themselves and others. Two very popular hashtags used in the online natural hair community are #TeamNatural and #NaturalHair. These hashtags are used by the natural hair brands as well as the consumers. The phrasing itself of #TeamNatural, particularly emphasizing the use of the word team, illustrates the idea of being a part of a group that supports one another. Essentially, these hashtags demonstrate an affinity and allegiance to the wider online natural hair community.

The use of hashtags surrounding natural hair creates a sense of group identification for those that self-identify as members of the online natural hair community. As discussed in “How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape their Collective Identity,” black consumers rely on group identification to both affirm themselves and receive affirmations from others (Lamont & Molnár, 2001). The use of hashtags illustrates affirmation because women affirm themselves by proclaiming their ties to the community, and then others are responding and reacting to their use of the hashtag. These hashtags allow users to self-select themselves as a member of the online

natural hair community and make themselves available to a larger entity of anyone who searches these specific hashtags.

With “natural hair” often having varying definitions (ex: no heat vs. just no chemicals) depending on who you ask, the agency that women gain through the ability to place themselves within this larger group without a gatekeeper speaks further to the abilities of social media platforms. If one searches #TeamNatural or #NaturalHair in Twitter’s search bar, a laundry list of tweets pop up, illustrating black women documenting their process of becoming natural and debuting their latest natural hairstyle, amongst other conversations. Online spaces frequently allow black women within the online natural hair community to interact with one another in ways that would be difficult in non-digital environments. By employing commonly used hashtags, Twitter users are able to connect with other people who may self-identify as members of the online natural hair community.

Both Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade uses the hashtag “#TextureTuesday” when they repost Tweets made by their consumers. Oyin Handmade also uses the hashtag “#FroFriday” within the caption of their Tweets. Both hashtags are unique to the online natural hair community. #TextureTuesday refers to hair texture, a term commonly used within the online natural hair community. #FroFriday highlights afros, and afros are also crucial to the concept of natural hair. Thus, both examples offer another way that both brands and women within the online natural hair community can use hashtags to discuss their natural hair. Another key factor in the successful creation and use of hashtags is the actual phrasing itself. A strong hashtag that gains traction is usually short, catchy, and self-explanatory. Both #TextureTuesday and #FroFriday use alliteration, thus making the hashtags catchier. They are also short and to the

point, and to members active in the natural hair community, the hashtags are arguably easily understood.

Using recurring days of the week allows the brands to create a consistent interaction with their followers; a Shea Moisture or Oyin Handmade Twitter follower knows that on Tuesdays, these two brands feature posts of women highlighting the various textures of their hair. An Oyin Handmade Twitter follower knows that Fridays are dedicated to highlighting the beauty of afros. Simultaneously, the brands validate women's hair and creates a sense of community amongst consumers by providing a consistent space for consumers to broadcast their hairstyles. Hashtags such as #TextureTuesday and #FroFriday, as well as more encompassing ones like #TeamNatural, allow black women to showcase their natural hair for themselves and others also in the group, thus illustrating the ways in which group identification plays a role in the use of hashtags.

Bonding with Blackness

Outside of posts regarding natural hair, all three brands consciously make an effort to align themselves with blackness in a broader sense, including black culture, black celebrities, and black fashion. With blackness being such an expansive term that is multifaceted and varies in its meaning, it is critical to consider the type of blackness that is upheld, and what is ignored. It is also necessary to consider how the brands align with blackness pre-mainstream on Twitter, in comparison to post-mainstream. I analyzed each brand individually, while still providing comparisons to one another. Each brand takes their own approach towards bonding with blackness.

Shea Moisture

For Shea Moisture, aligning their brand with blackness is done pre-mainstream predominantly by reposting images of natural-haired black women who use their products. Reposting images can be two-fold: it either includes the brand taking and posting an image that a consumer originally posted on their personal social media, or the brand retweeting and then adding a comment to the consumer's original post. Commonly, the brands come across the consumer's posts because the consumers either tag the brand or use the brand's name in the caption of their post.

Post-mainstream, Shea Moisture creates an affinity to blackness broadly through their use of current popular culture references. Specifically, Shea Moisture uses emojis, phrases, and references to prominent figures in the black limelight to bond with blackness on Twitter. Unlike Oyin Handmade or tgin, Shea Moisture uses phrases such as “bae”⁷ and “Yas”⁸ in the captions of their posts. While phrases like these are widespread and used commonly in popular culture, they both originated within black culture and language before expanding to mainstream audiences. Arguably, the way that Shea Moisture employs these phrases feels more like an out of touch approach to connect with young, black millennials than Shea Moisture being naturally embedded in the community. This feeling stems from Shea Moisture's use of the phrases after they have already reached their peak. For example, “bae” became popular five years ago in 2013 (Steinmetz, 2014). While the phrase is still well known, rarely do you ever hear someone refer to their significant other as their “bae” anymore. Shea Moisture's continual use of phrases that have surpassed their peak makes the brand feel out of touch at times.

⁷ Although its exact meaning is still debated, bae commonly stands for Before Anything Else, and people use this phrase to reference their significant other

⁸ Although many people are unaware of its origin, “yas” stems from gay black communities in the 1980s, and is now commonly used as a phrase of support or affirmation, especially among young black women

Shea Moisture's use of popular culture references is comparable to their arguably excessive use of emojis. While the other brands also use emojis in their captions, Shea Moisture employs the strategy differently by placing the emojis within sentences in place of actual words, not just at the end of the caption as a visual supplement. For example, one caption advertising their African Black Soap Purification Masque begins with the phrase “#AfricanBlackSoap is key!” Key is pictured as the key emoji, not the actual word itself. The saying that “[blank] is key” has become prominent in popular culture and is related to saying that something is a “major key,” often in conjunction with the key emoji. This phrase became popular at the beginning of 2016 by DJ Khaled, a DJ and artist well known within the music world and the black community. When DJ Khaled says that something is a “major key,” it loosely means that the item or idea is necessary for success and growth. Now, across social media, various celebrities, brands, and everyday users declare what they consider to be major keys. In this particular Shea Moisture post, the brand uses a popular culture phrase in conjunction with an emoji to declare that African Black soap is necessary for growth regarding hair.

Thus, this example of a “major key” again goes back to popular culture references similar to “bae” and “yas” that often originate in black culture, specifically black culture in online spaces. By using phrases that are relatable especially to those within the black community, or even a younger age demographic, Shea Moisture bonds with a certain type of consumer. Therefore, Shea Moisture makes an obvious attempt to connect with the young black community through language. It is also important to consider that this language is being presented on Twitter, a platform that skews younger and more diverse. With these demographics, Shea Moisture believes that the target audience they want to reach will be able to connect with their brand through its use of language, popular phrases, and emojis.

Thank God It's Natural

Before reaching mainstream status, tgin expressed its relationship with the black community by showing appreciation to black magazines and black women celebrities. Highlighting black women rather than both black women and men is a way that tgin created a platform that advocates especially for black women, which still holds true regardless of their elevation to mainstream status. Prior to their Target launch in 2014, which was instrumental to their transition to mainstream, tgin used their platform to present black women celebrities, while rarely explicitly commenting on the women's race or features that are equated with blackness.

Instead, tgin focused on appearance in a broader sense. For example, in one post tgin quoted and commented on an image of Tia and Tamera Mowry on the cover of Ebony saying, "loving the color of these dresses!" The image was originally posted on Tamera's personal Twitter account. Tia and Tamera Mowry are twin actresses well known within the black community, especially for their 90s sitcom *Sister, Sister*. Choosing to quote an image of the sisters on Ebony was of course strategic; Ebony Magazine has been a top magazine highlighting black culture and is popular amongst black women. By quoting a tweet that includes a cover page of an Ebony issue, tgin created a relationship with their desired customer without ever mentioning race. As Crockett found in "Marketing blackness," brands often use representations of blackness to create a sense of similarity between the viewer and the advertisement (2008). Although the post of tgin quoting Tia and Tamera's cover photo was not a traditional advertisement for tgin products, it nonetheless acted as an advertisement for the brand and how it defines itself. With both Ebony and the Mowry sisters exemplifying a representation of blackness, tgin created a sense of similarity to their black consumers and those who may identify with black culture. In another post, tgin quoted an image of Rihanna and asked Twitter followers

what they “think of RiRi’s new look?” Neither the post about the Mowry twins or Rihanna discussed the women's blackness, but both instances illustrated celebrities known within and stemming from the black community. Done subtly, tgin bonded with blackness in one way by highlighting black women and popular black outlets (Ebony).

Post Mainstream, the majority of tgin posts are directly related to haircare and their products; their relationship with blackness beyond these two facets is limited to the conversation surrounding black women’s health, specifically breast cancer. The founder and CEO of tgin is a black woman, Chris-Tia Donaldson, and she is now a breast cancer survivor. This portion of her identity has become central to tgin’s branding; Tgin uses its platform to advocate for women taking action to protect their health. While the posts never mention black women explicitly, the images accompanied always solely feature black women. These images lead the viewer to make an association between the content regarding breast cancer awareness and black women.

Oyin Handmade

Oyin Handmade has a line of t-shirts separate of their haircare that has the slogan “Black Nerds Unite.” Attaching this slogan to their overall Oyin Handmade brand speaks to one facet of blackness that the brand wants to ensure feels accepted. A feeling of acceptance for one’s individuality and uniqueness is consistent for Oyin Handmade’s brand, beyond the “Black Nerds Unite” slogan. By and large, Oyin Handmade is the only brand out of the three that bluntly mentions self-love for black women and reiterates the concept throughout their brand posts in a way that conveys authenticity. While Shea Moisture makes references to self-care, which is related to self-love, their references appear to be strategically latching onto a concept that is popular in society today, and less about the act of self-care itself. Shea Moisture’s self-care references are presented in the context of using their products, while Oyin Handmade has brand

posts discussing self-love that in no way reference their products, and this adds genuineness.

This emphasis on self-love traces back to a guiding principle for Oyin Handmade's brand. Oyin is the Yoruba word for honey, and according to Oyin Handmade's website, honey "stands for the principles of sweetness, joy and love-elements we seek to inspire in our customers' daily acts of self-care through affirming marketing..." ("FAQS," n.d.). Thus, the ideals that the brand identifies on its website offers reasoning behind its emphasis on self-love and acceptance through marketing tactics.

With the knowledge that Oyin Handmade grounds itself in self-love and self-care, its relation to blackness through self-acceptance and self-love becomes evident through its brand posts on Twitter. The brand posts images calling for black women to embrace their individuality and uniqueness, including their physical features. One post-mainstream image gives a side view of a black woman's face with her holding her dreads off of her neck, and white text over her image reads "love your big lips, love your natural hair, love your broad nose, love your wide hips." Oyin Handmade captions the image with "#love yourself just the way you are!" This clearly exemplifies that Oyin Handmade wants to promote self-love amongst black women, but also leads to discussion surrounding the type of black women that are represented in a post such as this one. While the physical features that they mention in their post are features commonly associated with black women, there are no set of physical qualities that all black women possess and defines a woman's blackness. Therefore, while the post is strong in the way that it calls black women to love themselves, it is limiting in the type of physical blackness that is being upheld.

Oyin Handmade also promotes relationships within the black community. Their pre-mainstream brand posts illustrated black sisterhood through the representation of black women

smiling and in close vicinity to one another. Their post-mainstream brand posts illustrate other forms of relationships, specifically black motherhood and romantic relationships. With black motherhood, Oyin Handmade uses hair as a bonding force between mother and daughter, the mother is pictured doing the daughter's hair. Throughout childhood in black families, the styling of hair truly is a form of connection and relationship building between mother and daughter. From personal experience, I can remember countless times of sitting on the floor between my mom's legs as she combed and braided my hair on the weekend before school for the following week. Oyin Handmade connects with black women consumers who are familiar with this familial tradition in black communities, subsequently creating a sense of nostalgia to their childhood, or their own current relationships with their children. Romantic relationships are illustrated through the presentation of black men and women together in an image. In the brand posts exemplifying romantic relationships, both the men and women are shown smiling largely and physically in close proximity, even sometimes leaning into one another. The body language exudes closeness and happiness, and thus works to demonstrate positive romantic relationships and interactions within the black community.

More than Shea Moisture and tgin, Oyin Handmade's images in their brand posts exude regality and high fashion aesthetics. Since all of their images illustrate black people, and predominantly black women, this regality becomes associated with blackness, especially because of how the visuals are created in conjunction with features such as natural hair. Whereas the images posted currently by Shea Moisture and tgin display black women and their natural hair within their daily lives, Oyin Handmade presents images post-mainstream that stray away from the everydayness of natural hair, and instead steps into a world of natural hair as a display of art. Specifically for #FroFriday, black women are illustrated not just dawning their bare afros.

Instead, their afros are decorated with white flowers, creating a visually appealing contrast from the dark hue of the hair. The presence of colors like gold, green, and white add to the regal-ness of the images. This transition from everydayness to art form presents blackness and natural hair in a new light, one where blackness is elevated from mundane to enchanted illustrations.

Product and Brand Promotion

While Product and Brand Promotion serves as its own theme, the validation of natural hair and an allegiance with blackness still inevitably plays a role in this theme as well. Since the brands sell products catering to natural hair, it is impossible to separate their product and brand promotion from the online natural hair community and the black community.

Consumer Posts and Testimonials

All three brands use their Twitter accounts as a platform to promote their brand and specific products. There were specific ways that this practice was done across Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade during the pre-mainstream phase. As tgin began to gain traction in big box retailers like Target and online retailers such as Amazon, its brand promotion was focused on these endeavors. Tgin frequently posted count-downs to its upcoming Target launch (that was happening in March of 2015), educated consumers of its availability on Amazon, posted links to other social media accounts, and allowed followers to learn more about its CEO, Chris-Tia Donaldson.

Oyin Handmade and Shea Moisture relied heavily on consumer posts that acted as consumer testimonials as a way to validate the abilities of their products. In this context, consumer testimonials refer to product users posting an image of themselves on their personal social media accounts wearing their natural hair, and in the caption mentioning that they used a

specific product to reach their end hairstyle. Consumer testimonials alleviate some of the burden off of the brands to prove that their products work and are well received by consumers. While consumer testimonials are a practice that tgin uses today as a way to promote its products, this was not commonly done as the brand was expanding its following in 2015.

The posts by consumers intertwined with Oyin Handmade and Shea Moisture's Twitter pages pre-mainstream once both brands decided to actively interact with their consumers by reposting and commenting on the testimonials. Repeatedly, both Oyin Handmade and Shea Moisture quoted the consumer's tweet and commented with phrases such as "love it!" By doing this, these two brands illustrated that they noticed these particular consumers, as well as showing their approval towards the women's natural hair.

Lamont and Molnár's "How Blacks Use Consumption" study explains how black consumers purchase goods as a way to express themselves (2001). Consumer testimonials exemplify the consumers expressing themselves through the presentation of their natural hair online. Natural hair is often referred to as a form of self-expression because of the vast uniqueness in every individual's hair type, and it deviates from the norm of Eurocentric beauty standards. But equally important to the self-expression is the response from the brands that validates this self-expression of consumers. The validation further encourages similar self-expression from other consumers in the future. The consumer testimonials also provided Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade the opportunity to build a relationship with their customers and clearly illustrate that they were aware of those who used and endorsed their products.

Hashtags such as "#TeamNatural" and "#NaturalHair" often accompanied the consumer testimonials reposted by Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade. Like discussed within the theme of Validating Natural Hair, hashtags serve as a way to build community and allow for personal

branding within the online natural hair community. In this case, the association of the hashtags with the natural hair brands did more than illustrate that the consumers who used Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade products identify as members of the online natural hair community. It also showed that these online natural hair community members associate their placement within the community with certain products and brands such as Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade. This association adds legitimacy and authenticity to the brands themselves by demonstrating that members within the online natural hair community consider the brands' products to be valuable throughout their natural hair journey.

Reliance on Influencers-Shea Moisture

Post-mainstream, the way that the brands promote their products and themselves has shifted in some ways from pre-mainstream. In our social media-driven society today, the use of influencers as a way to promote a brand or product is popular amongst companies in various industries, including haircare. Influencers are people, including content creators, bloggers, and thought leaders, that are influential enough to impact the buying power of consumers because of their knowledge or relationship with their audience ("What is an Influencer," n.d.). Haircare companies use influencers as a way to illustrate how their products work, and to align themselves with a particular image. Shea Moisture is the brand out of the three that has the strongest reliance on influencers, tgin comes in at second.

In a broad sense, there are two main tiers of influencers: micro and macro influencers. A micro influencer usually has 100,000 or less followers usually constituting family and friends, content that is more focused within one topic area, and a higher engagement rate with followers (Wolfson, 2017). A macro influencer has more than 100,000 followers, which allows for a broader reach (Wolfson, 2017). In the black haircare industry, influencers are often black

women who have become known to post hair and beauty tutorials and have a platform where their followers value their content and insight. The brand may provide the influencer with free products so that the influencer can create tutorials and share how the products work for their hair. In some instances, a brand may prefer a micro-influencer that has less followers but a higher engagement rate, rather than an influencer with a large reach (lots of followers) but a low engagement rate. Often, companies will include a mix of micro and macro influencers for a strong combination of organic content, high interaction, and expanded reach.

Influencers are uniquely used by Shea Moisture; the brand refers to its influencers as “SheaBassadors,” a combination of the brand name and the idea of women being ambassadors for their products. An ambassador also has a different connotation than an influencer; an ambassador acts as a representative of the brand and feels as if she is a part of the brand, an influencer connotes someone meant to impact the viewpoint of others. Thus, an ambassador is more easily positioned as a member of the brand itself, while an influencer can feel like an outside entity. The phrasing of its influencers as ambassadors helps Shea Moisture to bring its influencers within the wider Shea Moisture community.

The uniqueness of SheaBassadors also comes from the fact that SheaBassadors for 2017 were chosen based off their submission of a video expressing their interest for being a 2017 SheaBassador; the SheaBassador program works on a yearly basis. Thus, instead of Shea Moisture seeking out these women in particular, these women initially conveyed an interest in working with Shea Moisture. After being chosen by Shea Moisture, the SheaBassadors are regularly sent boxes filled with Shea Moisture products, and then they use their social media platforms to share their use of the products with their followers.

By and large, the SheaBassadors are micro-influencers based on their number of followers on Twitter and Instagram, and their YouTube subscribers. Surprisingly, even though the posts picturing the SheaBassadors are featured on Shea Moisture's Twitter account, these ambassadors all have considerably low numbers of followers on their individual Twitter accounts. The highest follower count on Twitter is by the SheaBassador Havanna Blackwell, at 533 followers. Possibly, Twitter is not seen as the most valuable avenue for influencers and their content. A few of the SheaBassadors do not even have a Twitter account, which forces one to consider why these women were originally chosen to be ambassadors for the brand, and especially why their content is linked to Shea Moisture's Twitter.

A key portion of the content that influencers produce is usually image based, either photos or videos. While Twitter users do include images within their tweets, the use of videos are more common on Instagram and YouTube. Therefore, Twitter does not create the best space for influencers to advertise themselves and products. But, Shea Moisture includes posts from and about its influencers on Twitter for consistency of posts across social media platforms, as well as to reach the widest appeal of Shea Moisture consumers. Still, there is an inconsistency between the SheaBassadors' reach across YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter on their personal accounts. One SheaBassador, Endia Nicole, only has 5 subscribers on her YouTube page, yet has 2,704 followers on Instagram. While this discrepancy is one of the most drastic instances, having variances across platforms is not uncommon for these SheaBassadors. This leads one to believe that less important is the number of followers, and more important is the way that the SheaBassadors interact with their followers and the personal brand that they create.

The tier of the influencer is only one portion to consider, one must also assess the appearance of the influencer and the way that she (the influencers used in the brands are all

women) is positioned to the brand. Appearance is important regarding the hair types and complexions that are presented. Like stated previously, brands have historically operated in conjunction with the beauty hierarchy that favors light skin and either straight or loosely curled hair ranging from 2A-3C. While a portion of the SheaBassadors do have light skin and bigger, looser curls that would fall into this hierarchical pattern, there are also SheaBassadors representing other forms of beauty and natural hair. Overall, there are nine black women represented as SheaBassadors, including a woman that identifies as Afro-Latina and another that refers to herself as a “curly girl of Puerto Rican descent.” Despite the recent backlash that Shea Moisture has gotten for essentially white-washing their brand and advertising tactics, the SheaBassadors they posted on their Twitter during the time that I pulled data did not include any white women. While light skin women are represented at a higher rate specifically within the SheaBassadors, there are also black women with medium and dark complexions. While the darker complexions may have a lesser presence, they are still represented and not blatantly ignored. Still, Shea Moisture could arguably work towards an ever more equal representation of complexions. There are diverse representations of hair, both in hair type and hair styling. Women with both loose and tight curls are used to represent the Shea Moisture brand, as well as women using styling tactics such as braid outs and weaves.

By looking at each of the 2017 SheaBassadors’ personal social media profiles, it becomes clear that they all share a dedication to natural hair, in addition to other topics including wellness, beauty, and the progression of women. Both in their short profile biographies and sprinkled throughout their posts, the SheaBassadors reference their own natural hair journeys and experiences, and the desire to share their journey and insight with others within the online natural hair community. One SheaBassador even coins herself as a “bounceturlogist,” another

identifies as a “natural hair lover,” and another considers herself “country and curly.” These self-prescribed identifiers make it clear the affinity that the SheaBassadors have towards the online natural hair community, and also gives further insight into how Shea Moisture wants its brand to be conceptualized. Because the SheaBassadors’ personal brands reflect upon the brand of Shea Moisture at large, one can recognize that their dedication to natural hair, beauty, and black culture gives insight into why Shea Moisture chose these influencers.

Influencers, Testimonies and Shelfies-Tgin

Tgin also promotes themselves post-mainstream through the use of influencers and consumer testimonials, but their strategy of using influencers differs from Shea Moisture. While Shea Moisture uses the term “SheaBassadors” to easily categorize their influencers and create a sense of community, tgin does not organize their influencers in the same manner. A lack of an organizing force amongst tgin influencers makes it more difficult to distinguish when a post actually includes an influencer. Specifically, it is tough to know when tgin reposts an image of an everyday consumer using their product, or when the image reposted is in fact an influencer or ambassador for the brand. This difficulty also magnifies when the women in these particular posts have a high number of followers, and when their personal social media accounts exemplify a dedication to natural hair. This adds difficulty because a larger reach and an emphasis on a particular area of interest are two important facets of influencers and the content they create. That being said, it is possible that some of these women just genuinely like tgin products, and so they tag tgin in their personal social media posts as a way to personally connect with the brand, not because they have a formal relationship with tgin as an influencer. In some instances, influencers are more easily identifiable because they are wearing “tgin” shirts, but this is not consistent amongst all the images including influencers. Therefore, my process of deciphering

influencers from consumers consisted of analyzing how in depth the women went in their mentioning of tgin products. After analyzing the initial image that tgin posted to the brand's Twitter page, I went to the personal Twitter or Instagram account of the potential influencer to see their posts mentioning tgin. Do they create an entire tutorial surrounding tgin products specifically, or do they just mention a tgin product in a list that includes other natural hair products they use in their hair to create an achieved style? If it is the former, I consider this an act of an influencer because of the time and effort put forth.

In cases where an influencer is clearly present, there are commonalities between the type of influencers and their representations between tgin and Shea Moisture. One, tgin influencers are also classified as micro-influencers because they have less than 100,000 followers on their social media platforms. Second, again like SheaBassadors, there is a discrepancy between Twitter followers and Instagram followers for the tgin influencers; the influencers all have a higher amount of Instagram followers. This goes back to the idea that Instagram as a platform is more suitable and greater associated with influencer content. Third, tgin's influencers have an affinity to natural hair and blackness in their personal social media accounts. One influencer refers to herself as a "natural hair enthusiast," while another uses the term "afro latinado curl enthusiast." Both examples exemplify the relationship that the women have with the online natural hair community outside of their relationship with tgin. Lastly, while tgin has an increased representation of women with big, curly hair that frames the face similar to Shea Moisture, they do not exclude women with darker complexions or kinkier hair that would fall within the 4A-4C range.

A hashtag entitled #tginestimony, which encompasses both influencers and everyday TGIN users, is also a popular tactic by tgin for self-promotion and building awareness for their

products and brand post-mainstream. A #tgin testimony is tgin's unique spin on consumer testimonials; these are posts of women wearing their natural hair that has been styled using tgin products. Tgin reposts these images and classifies them using the hashtag #tgin testimony. Thus, the purpose of these posts is to show the abilities of tgin products. A testimony connotes a different meaning than a testimonial. A testimony, often used in religious settings, has roots especially in the black church. A testimonial does not have this same connotation, which forces one to consider why tgin chose the word testimony instead of testimonial for this hashtag. With tgin being a black owned and created brand, the reference to a black church serves as a way to connect with potential consumers. The black church is often central to the lives of many black people. Even those that are not deeply raised in the church can usually still identify and relate with concepts that are rooted within black church experiences. Although the use of "testimony" versus "testimonial" can appear insignificant on the surface, the difference is strategic. As Crockett found in "Marketing blackness," brands use representations of blackness in their advertising strategies as a way to position their product as a cultural resource (2008). With the black church being a large facet of black culture, tgin's subtle reference to the church serves as a way to brand itself and its products as culturally relevant within the black community, thus increasing consumers' desire to affiliate themselves with the brand.

Tgin also interacts with its consumers and promotes its products post-mainstream through the hashtag "#Shelfies." The term #Shelfie combines the two words selfie and shelf. #Shelfies are selfies that consumers post on social media that show them posing with a tgin product in a store next to a shelf of products. #Shelfies provide a space for consumers to interact with tgin both in physical space (the store itself) and digital space (through their Twitter account). Tgin often reposts #Shelfies when its products are being expanded into a new store or location.

#Shelfies allow tgin to simultaneously build momentum around products being sold in-stores and interact with consumers online. In #Shelfies, some women are seen without makeup and their hair is unstyled. A few women are presented in hats or scarves covering their hair, potentially implying that their hair is not done. Frequently in the black community, beauty supply stores and drugstores (places where #Shelfies are taken) are spaces where women feel more comfortable showing themselves without makeup and perfectly styled hair. The idea behind this comfortability is that the time spent in the beauty supply or drugstores will be quick, and it is unlikely that anyone of importance will see them or that they will be judged based on their appearance.

But in #Shelfies, black women embrace these intimate moments and share them online. The feeling of embrace is visually clear, as the women are smiling as they either point to the product on the shelves or hold a product bottle close to their faces. Less emphasis is placed on lighting, angles, or filters, which are factors that one usually considers important when posting a selfie online. There are also two instances where the #Shelfies are taken in pairs: one appears to be a mother and her son, another are two friends. What is it about #Shelfies that allow black women to feel comfortable broadcasting their bare faces and undone hair digitally, especially in a time where social media is thought to be the space where everyone attempts to only present their best selves?

The concept of group identification and a conversation surrounding public vs. private spaces partly provides a response to this, as well as the affinity that the women arguably must feel towards tgin's brand. Group identification includes interacting with others in a shared cultural or social community; individuals feel more comfortable interacting with others who are similar to them (Lamont & Molnár, 2001.) Tgin at large provides group identification for

women wearing their hair natural and who identify with the online natural hair community, #Shelfies in particular allow for the group to interact more intimately. Since the women feel a sense of comfort because they share this group identity and like the tgin brand and its products, the fear of presenting themselves in an imperfect light diminishes.

The idea of a private space adds upon group identification. Although beauty supply and drugstores are public spaces, they are often used as if they are a private space. Women feel comfortable being bare faced with their hair covered in hats or bonnets. One way that private spaces are conceptualized is the homespace, which is a private space that allows for freedom and a space for creativity (Tate, 2016). While the homespace usually refers to a physical space, the study “Loving Blackness” by Tate creates a new term for the homespace in digital spaces and specifically applies it to the online natural hair community: the recreated homespace (2016). In this case, digital spaces like tgin’s Twitter profile exemplify a recreated homespace because it is a platform where natural hair is not ridiculed, but instead embraced and given room to be seen and shared. By providing an atmosphere that promotes a sense of community as well as a space where natural hair is accepted, tgin users feel comfortable and connected with the brand, thus allowing them to be vulnerable.

Brand Building-Oyin Handmade

Out of the three brands, Oyin Handmade is the only one that does not depend on influencers as a means to promote their products and brand post-mainstream. Arguably, Oyin Handmade puts forth the least effort in promoting specific products and their abilities. Instead, Oyin Handmade uses Twitter to foster a brand identity centering black woman and the beauty and creativity of natural hair. The images of women that Oyin Handmade posts are often in no way affiliated with the brand. These posts include the hashtag #TagSource, meaning that Oyin

Handmade does not know where the photo originates from, or who is presented in the image. #TagSource means that Oyin Handmade is relying on followers who see the image to somehow know who is presented in the photo, and then tag that person so that Oyin Handmade can acknowledge them and give them due credit. These posts are also linked to Oyin Handmade's Instagram account, further illustrating the way that brands attempt to create their brand presence congruent across various social media platforms.

In the event that a brand post includes the #TagSource hashtag, Oyin Handmade is taking the agency to post images that the brand finds and thinks aligns with its messaging and ideals. These images illustrate tiny afros close to the scalp and full afros framing the entire face, light skinned black women with freckles and dark skinned black women, curls that are looser and curls that are kinkier. Women with varied hair texture, hair length and complexions are represented. Without the limitation of only posting images submitted by or related to actual product users, Oyin Handmade allows itself the freedom to choose any image that they want to embody the women they consider an accurate representation of its brand. As a result, Oyin Handmade actively takes a stance of multiplicity rather than oneness, ensuring not to be monolithic in its representation of natural haired-black women.

Interestingly enough, Oyin Handmade recently launched a new Brand Ambassador Program after the data was already pulled for this research, illustrating that they see the potential value in having influencers that represent the brand. Oyin Handmade's new program also suggests that Oyin Handmade is interested in continuing to build brand awareness using what they refer to as ambassadors. One element of criteria is that the potential ambassador has to have 5,000 or more followers on Instagram or Youtube. While 5,000 followers may be considered low in an influencer category, Oyin Handmade's phrasing of "ambassadors" may allow for a

different category separate from that of an influencer. The term ambassador is also used within Shea Moisture's SheaBassadors, which speaks to the way that these natural hair brands are commonly conceptualizing their programs of brand influencers.

Representation of the CEOs

Post-mainstream, all three brands post images that include their CEO and/or founder on their Twitter pages. This helps to further promote the brands by allowing Twitter followers and product consumers to feel like they have a better connection with the brand and the person behind its creation. The founder is often considered the face of a brand, so an understanding of their representation is necessary in order to better understand the brand itself. All three brands approach this in their own unique way. Shea Moisture creates a familial environment through hashtags, tgin creates transparency between the consumer and the CEO, and Oyin Handmade focuses less on their founders and more on the products.

Shea Moisture's founder is a black man named Richelieu Dennis. He is not only the founder and CEO of Shea Moisture, but the founder and CEO of Sundial Brands at large. Sundial Brands' portfolio includes Shea Moisture, Nubian Heritage, MCJW Beauty Culture, and Nyakio. All four of these companies create products within the beauty realm. With Sundial Brands being so expansive, it is clear how structurally Shea Moisture differs from both tgin and Oyin Handmade. Shea Moisture sells more than just haircare products. They also sell makeup, skin care, bath and body care, and products specifically for men and babies. With such a large product line, Shea Moisture's Twitter is not just dedicated to hair care because there are other types of products within the brand's line. That being said, natural hair still falls at the epicenter of posts that are advertising for products such as makeup or skin care. Even in a post advertising for lipstick, the woman presented is pictured with natural hair.

Richelieu Dennis appears in several posts on Shea Moisture's Twitter account. These posts serve as a way to further the concept of "SheaFam," a familial term that Shea Moisture uses to refer to employees, business partners, and consumers alike. Richelieu's posts show him in Kenya meeting with plant employees who create Shea Moisture product, new business partners, and distributors of product, all including the slogan SheaFam. SheaFam is also used as a form of greeting to those who are reading a particular post by beginning the tweet with "#SheaFam!" This exemplifies that consumers and Twitter followers are considered members of this family as well, and the exclamation point is used to connote excitement towards communicating with these members of the SheaFam. The use of the term discussing people in various levels of the Shea Moisture brand illustrates that the term is meant to be expansive and inviting. Richelieu's presence in various posts that includes the term clearly exemplifies his strong presence in the SheaFam. SheaFam is often presented as a hashtag in the captions of these posts, further exemplifying the function of hashtags to build community and create a sense of group pride.

The tgin founder, Chris-Tia, creates transparency between herself and consumers in one way by interacting with them similarly to how they themselves interact with the brand. For example, Chri-Tia posted an image of herself holding a container of tgin's Butter Cream Daily Moisturizer in the aisle of CVS, with a large smile on her face. The caption mentions Chris-Tia's CEO Twitter handle (@tginceo) and encourages consumers who find tgin products in CVS to "Go out, snap a pic, & use hashtag #tgin cvs." While the post's caption does not categorize this image as a #Shelfie, the act of posing with product within the store consequentially classifies this as a #Shelfie. Chris-Tia posting an image of herself that mirrors the countless other consumer-submitted #Shelfies acts as a way to unify herself with her consumers. Tgin is also the only

brand that often posted about their CEO during their pre-mainstream phase. Therefore, it makes sense that this pattern continues into present day, and illustrates that Chris-Tia's interaction with consumers on Twitter is at the core of the company's use of Twitter.

Chris-Tia is also a breast cancer survivor, and this aspect of her identity is presented deeply on tgin's Twitter; health and ways to detect and prevent breast cancer are embedded in tgin's twitter presence. In addition to posts ranging from links to blogs regarding how one's weight influences their chance of getting breast cancer to recap photos of events supporting breast cancer initiatives, breast cancer awareness structurally impacts tgin's products. Tgin's products were sold in pink bottle containers in October of 2017 for breast cancer awareness, differing from the usual black containers, and influencers were presented in posts wearing pink "tgin" shirts. This exemplifies a CEO advocating for a cause larger than just the product or brand itself. Chris-Tia's transparency towards breast cancer allows for consumers to see her as a woman that they can connect with on a more personal and emotional level, and not just a business owner. The concept of healthiness in regard to women taking care of their bodies and exercising also ties into tgin's mission as a product line for natural hair. Tgin strives to inspire women to "embrace healthier beauty practices" according to its website ("Our Founder," n.d.). Thus, healthiness as an overall lifestyle choice is important to tgin, and Chris-Tia works to advocate this.

Oyin Handmade's CEO and co-founder is a black woman named Jamyla Bennu. She founded Oyin Handmade with her husband Pierre, and today the company is still family owned and operated. The inception of Oyin Handmade leads back to the world of blogs, the brand became popular through its activeness and prevalence within the online natural hair blogosphere. While Pierre is not pictured in any of Oyin Handmade's Twitter posts within my data set, there

are two posts that include Jamyla. One post is an advertisement for its products in Rite Aid, and the other is a promotion for Small Business Saturday. These posts function differently than the CEO-affiliated images posted by tgin or Shea Moisture. In the case of Oyin Handmade, Jamyla is pictured in the posts just as another model would be. There is no reference in the captions or the images themselves that allow viewers to know that the woman illustrated is in fact Jamyla, the CEO. If one is not familiar with how Jamyla looks, they would not know that it is her in the posts. Arguably, Oyin Handmade must assume either that followers of its social media accounts are already somehow familiar with the CEOs (maybe they followed their blog history), or that the CEO's presence is not crucial to build brand awareness.

Therefore, these two images including Jamyla do not clearly act as a way for consumers to familiarize themselves and bond with the CEO of the brand. Oyin Handmade places the focus not on themselves as founders, but instead on the products and how consumers can get their hands on these products, as exemplified by the Rite Aid advertisement. But, Oyin Handmade does leverage itself as a small business as exemplified by the post promoting Small Business Saturday. While this does not allow consumers to get to know the founders, it does give insight into Oyin Handmade as a company and allow for another level of connection between brand and consumer. Small and family-owned businesses are viewed differently than larger, corporate-owned companies, and this categorization allows Oyin Handmade to uniquely position themselves in comparison to a large brand like Shea Moisture that is no longer family owned. Specifically, consumers tend to feel as if they have a more personal relationship with small businesses or family owned companies, and the level of trust and understanding between consumer and owner feels higher and more genuine. This is especially true within the black

community, where it is advocated that people support black-owned businesses, rather than and in addition to large, white-owned companies.

Discussion

Becoming mainstream did not result in the three natural hair brands becoming whitewashed and presenting limiting representations of black beauty. The analysis instead reveals quite the opposite, all three brands illustrate a representation of blackness that deviates away from the prominence of Eurocentric beauty ideals that favors light skin and wavy hair. The only place that Eurocentric beauty ideals slightly reveal themselves is with the influencers used by Shea Moisture and tgin. The first research question addresses how black natural hair brands use Twitter to market themselves and their products to consumers. While my analysis explores three overlapping themes, I also identify three concepts used by each brand as a way to connect with their core audience: (1) an emphasis on black culture, (2) the use of hashtags, and (3) the use of images.

An Emphasis on Black Culture

While all of the brands consistently focus on the representation of natural hair within their posts, the analysis also illustrates an underlying emphasis on black cultural experiences as a way to further connect with consumers. The brands' social media presence is not for the sole purpose of advocating for products that cater towards the online natural hair community, it also heavily serves the purpose of connecting with an audience by referencing black experiences. Since the online natural hair community largely consists of black women, it is understandable that Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade use black cultural references and discussions to build a deeper relationship with consumers, and continuously show their allegiance to the online natural hair community.

Connecting with the black community using shared experiences is crucial for brands, as “How Blacks Use Consumption” illustrates. Black consumers use group identification as a way to affirm themselves and receive affirmation from others, and the natural hair brands play directly into this by allowing consumers the space to broadcast their natural hair and then receive affirmation from other members within the group. Looking at consumption through a group lens rather than an individualistic lens is especially important for black people who use consumption as a way to build status in society and refute racist stereotypes, whereas other demographics may not feel this burden (Lamont & Molnár, 2001, p. 37).

As a group, the online natural hair community spends money on natural hair products not only to express affinity to the natural hair community, but also (either consciously or unconsciously) as a way to refute the stereotype that black hair is less beautiful or manageable in its natural state. The natural hair brands participate in this action by both providing natural hair products and brands that consumers can support, but also using their platforms to elevate natural hair and black culture simultaneously. In the sense of consumption, group identification for black people explains how blacks use product consumption as a way to express a “cultural distinctiveness by displaying commonness” that is distinct from other races and ethnicities (Lamont & Molnár, 2001, p. 42 & 43). As the analysis shows, within the online natural hair community specifically, natural hair brands and consumers alike participate in this “cultural distinctiveness” by referencing black culture including and expanding beyond natural hair.

The heavy emphasis on black culture and experiences still allows Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade to reach a wider consumer demographic that is aware of the brands because of their presence in big box retailers. Black culture (including language, music, hairstyles, and fashion) is often repackaged and then referred to as popular culture. Because non-black people

are immersed in popular culture all the time, especially through social media, they are also immersed within black culture whether they realize it or not. Therefore, even those who cannot directly relate to or personally understand the black cultural references enjoy products and experiences rooted in blackness. When natural hair brands reference black culture, non-black women are still interested because the women are used to an exposure and involvement with black culture repackaged as popular culture (even if they are not consciously aware of the repackaging process). Therefore, the natural hair brands are not alienating or ignoring their non-black consumers through their references to black culture because black culture is so closely intertwined with what is considered popular culture. The reliance on black cultural experiences then serves as both a way to create community for black consumers, but also interest potential consumers that do not first-handedly experience blackness.

The Presence of Hashtags

Consistent across all three themes in my analysis is the presence of hashtags, both directly discussing natural hair, and making references to the brands themselves. The use of hashtags serves three main purposes for tgin, Oyin Handmade, and Shea Moisture: (1) building community, (2) increasing visibility, and (3) allowing for intimacy.

Hashtags serve as a way to build community by being an epicenter for everyone within the online natural hair community, both physically and conceptually. Hashtags physically allow for a central gathering location that aggregates all of those using the hashtag. This centrality solidifies the sense of community by providing a concrete place where everyone in the community can see the posts made by others, as well as know who they are sharing their own posts with. Conceptually, the use of hashtags illustrates a common interest amongst varying entities. Hashtags such as #TeamNatural and #NaturalHair are used across all three natural hair

brands, as well as outside the platforms of the natural hair brands, illustrating the hashtags' prominence within the online natural hair community at large. Hashtags allow for both consumers and brands alike to show their involvement within the online natural hair community. Consumers use the hashtags to classify themselves as members within the online natural hair community. For the natural hair brands, using hashtags referencing natural hair especially works to show their consumers within the online natural hair community that they share similar values and interests, and this helps to build a sense of commonality between brand and consumer.

Community is also built through the idea of group identification. All the natural haired-women, as well as hair brands, that use hashtags referencing natural hair are sharing their common experience with one another, again exemplifying group identification. For example, the hashtags #FroFriday and #TextureTuesday are discussing hair in a manner that is special to natural hair, a "fro" is not discussed outside of terms regarding natural hair. Although everyone's natural hair journey is unique, certain experiences (like finding products that work best for your hair) are universal. Identifying and interacting with others experiencing a journey characteristically similar to your own allows for a sense of community to form.

The physical central gathering location that hashtags provide also increases the visibility of the hashtag itself, and consequently the brand. Through the search feature on Twitter, it is possible to search for particular hashtags. Thus, visibility is widened for the specific tweet and the hashtag in general because anyone who searches the particular hashtag is now able to see and interact with the tweet. With this ability, natural hair brands are able to expand their reach to those who may not follow their Twitter page or be very familiar with the brand, and position themselves as an integral part of the online natural hair community. Hashtags also provide the natural hair brands visibility in the sense that they can explicitly become visible within the online

natural hair movement and community. Because hashtags such as #TeamNatural are an interwoven aspect of how the natural hair community expresses itself online, the visibility of a brand using the hashtag more clearly shows its consistency and involvement within the movement and the community.

Arguably, one of the most valuable purposes of hashtags for the natural hair brands is the ability for intimacy to transpire. This intimacy is seen most evidently through tgin's use of the hashtag #Shelfies which allows for women to broadcast themselves with bare faces or minimal makeup, and their hair undone. Because hashtags create a sense of community where women are sharing common cultural journeys, community-building leads to intimacy. Just like in personal relationships, feeling a connection with someone makes it easier to open up with them. This idea of relationship building stands true through the use of hashtags. Twitter posts include hashtags that illustrate these natural-haired women in various stages of their natural hair journey. This illustration presents vulnerability that leads to intimacy because the women are allowing others to experience a journey that would otherwise be private in the confines of their home or immediate community of friends and family.

Like mentioned in the analysis, online spaces and the use of hashtags as a home base for the online natural hair community exemplifies the recreated homespace explored by Tate in "Loving Blackness." Tate also explores the idea of counter-publics, which are spaces that refute societal norms (2016). The use of hashtags allows women and brands to build intimate relationships with one another, and also serves as a counter-public where Eurocentric beauty ideals are disregarded and a range of hairtypes common for the natural hair of black women are instead represented and celebrated. Hashtags encourage vulnerability and increase intimacy between fellow black women as well as between black women and the natural hair brands by

providing a space where black women feel connected and comfortable sharing an intimate journey with others also in the same or similar position.

The affordances of social media, specifically hashtags, allow for people on the outskirts of normalized beliefs to create a community that serves their needs and encourages genuine relationship-building. Hashtags allows for the creation of counter-publics on social media that provide an opportunity for non-mainstream ideals to be voiced. Hashtags like #TeamNatural, #TextureTuesday, and #FroFriday exemplify the formation of communities that allow black women to advocate for themselves. Specifically for the online natural hair community, hashtags allow black women to create and interact within a community that advocates for hair types and textures that refute the societal norm of Eurocentric beauty ideals.

A Reliance on Images

Images on Twitter are the basis of my data for all three natural hair brands because social media relies heavily on the use of images to illustrate ideas. In the case of Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade, the images are more than just a support system for text. Instead, the use of images also serves three main purposes: (1) building community, (2) allowing for transparency, and (3) allowing for intimacy. The ability for images to be successful in fulfilling these purposes directly correlates with the use of hashtags, one would not be truly effective without the presence of the other.

Images add to the community that hashtags help to build by enlivening the collective group. Because social media is a digital space with limited face to face interaction, images help to add depth towards community and relationship building. While the hashtag #TeamNatural is effective in its mission of aggregating together members of the online natural hair community using that particular hashtag, adding an image in conjunction with the hashtag allows for a more

nuanced interaction. Images are prominent tactics in building community through consumer testimonials across all three brands, #tgin testimonials specifically for tgin, the use of influencers, and hashtag campaigns such as #Shelfies. Visibly seeing the images of women within the online natural hair community creates stronger relationships because others in the community can learn more about particular products, hairtypes, and women's hair progression all through the experiences that images capture. Images also allow for members within the group to affirm others. As the analysis illustrates within consumer testimonials, Oyin Handmade and Shea Moisture often commented and reposted images of women wearing their hair natural as a way to celebrate the natural hair. This level of comradery would be less frequent and valuable without images that visualize the natural hairstyle itself, and the members of the community at large.

Images also help the natural hair brands to be transparent with consumers and members of the online natural hair community. Both by the brands themselves and product consumers, images are used as a way to open up. Brands post images including their CEOs as a way to build familiarity with consumers and work towards transparency. Chris-Tia Donaldson posting a #Shelfie just as her consumers did exemplifies this, as well as Richelieu Dennis and the creation of the SheaFam to encourage inclusivity. Product consumers in return also posted images of themselves with minimal or no makeup, and their hair unstyled in tgin's #Shelfies. These posts especially illustrate transparency because they show women broadcasting themselves without makeup or their hair done during a time when perfectionism and flawlessness often overtakes selfies and other photos posted on social media. By being comfortable and confident enough to show oneself in a way that deviates from the norm, there is a clear level of trust and vulnerability that stems from this transparency on behalf of both the brand and the consumer.

Directly related to this transparency is the creation of intimacy. As a result of transparency and the willingness to show an authentic version of oneself (either on behalf of the brand or the consumer), an intimate relationship forms between the brand and the consumer itself or the online natural hair community at large. Intimacy is also encouraged through imagery by illustrating personal relationships that viewers can relate with. For example, Oyin Handmade posts several images illustrating mother-daughter relationships, a familial bond that women can relate with each in their own way. The relationship that a daughter has with her mother, and vice versa, is often considered an intimate relationship that has factors such as trust, dependency, and vulnerability at play. By referencing relationships such as these within images, Oyin Handmade encourages consumers to reflect upon their own intimate relationships, which in turn increases comfortability and intimacy towards the Oyin Handmade brand.

Overall, the combined efforts of hashtags and images allow the natural hair brands to build a stronger relationship with consumers and the online natural hair community at large. This relationship involves an escalated level of trust, as well as intimacy and transparency. By uniting the strengths of hashtags and images in the digital sphere, brands (especially brands serving populations that deviate away from mainstream norms) can form connections with users in a more fruitful manner that goes beyond simple product advertisements.

A New Approach Towards Brand Building

The second research question explores the ways in which the marketing strategies of the three natural hair brands shift on Twitter once they become mainstream. For Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade, the shift from pre-mainstream to post-mainstream mainly results in an expansion of consumer testimonials and new ways to create brand identity. Shea Moisture relies on the use of influencers to further build its brand, while Oyin Handmade relies on hashtags like

#TagSource to display the type of black beauty it associates with its ideals. For tgin, the shift from pre-mainstream to post-mainstream involves moving away from more traditional in-store product launches and an emphasis on building its allegiance with black women, to an emphasis on consumer testimonials and the use of influencers. While consumer testimonials were used pre-mainstream mainly for Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade, the concept expands to include influencers and brand ambassadors post-mainstream predominantly for Shea Moisture and tgin. Consumer testimonials also become conceptualized differently post-mainstream through the use of hashtags like #tginestimony, where the testimonial intersects with blackness at its core. But, the shift from pre-mainstream to post-mainstream has just as much to do with quantity as well as it does content. The brands rely on Twitter more during the post-mainstream phase as a way to promote themselves, so there is a higher quantity of content available compared to pre-mainstream. Thus, there is a shift in the creation and sharing of product promotion, as well as an increased use of Twitter to promote one's brand.

Overall, both in pre-mainstream and post-mainstream, there is a clear shift of the burden of product promotion falling on the brand itself, to its consumers instead (unbeknownst to them). All three brands, especially Shea Moisture and tgin, rely heavily on the testimonials of consumers as a way to prove that their products work and create satisfying results for women. The reliance on testimonials also means that the brands believe that their consumers will trust the opinions of other consumers. As a result of the sense of community that the brands participate in with their consumers, consumers feel more comfortable trusting the opinion of other consumers who advocate for a particular product or brand. Because of this, it becomes possible for the opinions or thoughts of one consumer to influence and encourage (or even discourage) another consumer or potential consumer to try a particular product.

But the increase of product users being able to broadcast themselves as the face of the brand does more than alleviate the jobs of the brands themselves, it allows for more diverse representation within the brands' platforms. Arguably, if the brands relied on professional models solely as the way to promote the functionality of their products, it may be easier to fall into the trap of Eurocentric beauty ideals as the face of beauty even within the natural hair world since Eurocentric beauty ideals saturate the beauty and hair market. While Eurocentric beauty ideals are prominent in our society, research shows (Sekayi, 2003) that black women frequently do not abide by these beliefs, they instead create their own definition of beauty. The online natural hair community, consisting of various hues and hair types, clearly illustrates this deviance away from Eurocentric beauty, and a construction of beauty separate from mainstream ideals. Therefore, with everyday consumers and even influencers with varying physicality collectively becoming the face of brands, there is an increase in the likelihood of women with a fuller range of hairtypes and complexions to be represented fairly. Still, the progression towards equal representation will take time, especially illustrated by Shea Moisture and tgin's use of influencers that skews towards lighter complexions and looser curls. But, by allowing the consumers to be an intricate piece within the branding initiatives, brands are able to work towards combating colorism and texturism within the online natural hair community and the advertising of natural hair brands.

A transition to everyday consumers as brand promoters also disrupts the role of the gatekeeper. Often discussed in affiliation with news reporting and media consumption, the gatekeeper is the entity deciding what information the viewer or consumer can access. Thus, the gatekeeper is considered the entity that holds the power. While brands still decide who they repost onto their platforms for consumer testimonials, they have limited influence over people

posting images of themselves and tagging the brands on their personal social media pages. In this sense, the brand loses a portion of its control in deciding exactly who can be a representative for the brand. The majority of the brand's power then lies in deciding which images of women to repost onto its Twitter (or other social media) platform. As the analysis shows, the brands Shea Moisture, tgin, and Oyin Handmade stray away from only representing black women who fit the criteria for Eurocentric beauty ideals. This may stem from an increased availability of black women present on social media using their products and/or involved within the online natural hair community, or it could stem from the brands' growth towards conceptualizing beauty. Digital spaces in conjunction with an expanded approach to brand building and advertising allows for the representation of people who otherwise would be minimized or nonexistent. Diverse representations of blackness and beauty are present when the brands prioritize their relationship with both black culture and the online natural hair community and allow consumers themselves to actively participate in brand building.

Conclusion

This research set out to better understand how black natural hair brands market themselves on social media, as well as how these marketing tactics may transition once the brands reach mainstream status. While Shea Moisture's "Break Free from Hair Hate" advertisement in 2017 points to an example of a natural hair brand catering their image to a white audience with Eurocentric beauty ideals once reaching mainstream status, my research does not support this idea beyond this particular instance. Instead, natural hair brands such as tgin and Oyin Handmade, as well as Shea Moisture, have shown a dedication to blackness on

their Twitter platforms, even once they reach mainstream status. Instead of distancing themselves from their core audience of black women, the brands instead lean into their audience and place emphasis on the beauty of black women and black hair.

Research Question 1 sought to discover how natural hair brands use social media for marketing purposes. My analysis illustrates that natural hair brands use social media, specifically Twitter, in three main ways to market themselves and build their brand: social media is used to validate natural hair, bond with blackness, and promote products. None of the themes operate in isolation, all three overlap and are in conversation with one another. Within each theme is the presence of black cultural references, the use of hashtags, and the use of images in order to further build a connection with the consumers and the online natural hair community. Research Question 2 focuses on the potential shift in marketing strategies during the transition from pre-mainstream to post-mainstream. There is a shift from relying mainly on consumer submitted posts and hashtags during pre-mainstream, to including a more varied approach for marketing and brand posts during post-mainstream, specifically influencer content.

Pulling data from Twitter allowed me to focus on a niche space where natural hair brands interact with consumers. Since Twitter is a social media platform that skews towards minorities, it is possible that brands express their allegiance to the black community at a higher rate than they would on another platform with different demographics. Therefore, I think the next step in this research is to look at the marketing strategies of black natural hair brands on another platform in order to see if my conclusions still apply. I also believe that it will be beneficial to expand the data to include videos and not just images. Videos will be important for future research because videos allow for analyzing content such as hair tutorials and product hauls, which are both prevalent and active parts of the online natural hair community. Black women

refer to hair tutorials and product hauls as a way to interact with others in the online natural hair community, as well as to educate themselves on their hair and products that will work well for them.

With the strong reliance on influencers and ambassadors by the brands, specifically Shea Moisture, future research can also look deeper into the relationship between brands and influencers, and how beauty and femininity is constructed throughout the partnership. Since influencers within the online natural hair community often create content such as hair tutorials and product hauls in order to illustrate a product's abilities, analyzing videos will be beneficial to this addition in the research. Majority of the influencers by both Shea Moisture and tgin have a personal brand that includes an intersection of natural hair and beauty, and this can give further insight into the online natural hair community, and the entities that operate within the community.

By expanding on previous research that discusses the current natural hair movement, targeted marketing strategies, digital spaces, group identification, and the idea of the recreated homepage, this research adds to conversation surrounding the relationship between black women, their natural hair, and black natural hair brands. This research adds more recent context into how black women who participate in the online natural hair community use social media and digital spaces as a way to express themselves and interact with others who are similar to them. Also, the research gives insight into how natural hair brands participate within this online natural hair community in order to connect with consumers. Since social media allows for more personal interaction between consumer and brand than traditional marketing and advertising (commercials and print advertisements, for example), brands can communicate with consumers by commenting, reposting, and mentioning consumers who use their products. Natural hair

brands can also use social media to show their allegiance to the online natural hair community, as their usage of hashtags and validation of natural hair exemplifies.

The relationship between black women and natural hair brands is one that is significant. Since Eurocentric beauty ideals dominate the mainstream beauty and hair industries, black women must have brands that support and validate them. Natural hair brands offer products catering specifically to the needs of black women's hair and use their platform to advocate for the beauty of black women and natural hair. Shea Moisture, Thank God it's Natural, and Oyin Handmade validate black beauty, avoid presenting Eurocentric versions of beauty, and allow their Twitter platforms to be a space where black women feel comfortable showing off something as personal as their natural hair journey. By participating in the online natural hair community, the natural hair brands position themselves as entities that are central to furthering the promotion of natural hair in the beauty industry.

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