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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Glowing up ain't easy'

How #BlackGirlMagic Created an Innovative Narrative for Black Beauty Through Instagram

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Abstract

Within a patriarchal and racist society, Western standards of beauty are detrimental to all women. However, in a society where the White male gaze has been able to determine what is beautiful, possessing features that are similar to White women has become the standard to embody. These beauty ideals are reinforced by family, peers, mainstream media, and can have adverse impacts on the lives of women. Black women are particularly impacted because their phenotypical features are often furthest from those of White women. As a result, a significant number of Black women suffer from self-hatred and internalised racism because they can never truly embody White women's standards of beauty. However, within our technologically driven era, social media provides a platform for self-expression and empowerment. Through social media applications such as Instagram, Black women are now provided with a platform to navigate the intersections of popular media and beauty standards. This paper focuses on the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic that contributed to the creation of an innovative narrative to Black beauty and counternarrative to White beauty standards within Instagram. The paper draws from the study that utilised a qualitative method, namely a content analysis of specific content from Instagram that used the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. The content comprised of four themes: hair, complexion, body image, and self-affirmation. By highlighting the space that Black women have created for themselves, this study offers an analysis of images and captions that are intersectional, transnational, and non-hierarchical. The ultimate aim of the study is to join other Black feminist work that encourages Black women to dissect the convoluted images that do not match their image of Black femininity.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Black Feminist Theory, Digital Activism, #BlackGirlMagic, Beauty Standards

Introduction

For years mainstream media has constructed unrealistic beauty ideals by which all women's beauty is measured. Within this paradigm, various women of colour (WOC) have been excluded from mainstream media, especially Black women. When they have been present in the media, they have been subjected to negative stereotypes that are linked to slavery, colonialisation and the features that Black women possess.

Due to the silencing of the voices and the erasure of Black women for decades, they have had to pursue other outlets to become heard and visible on their terms. The research study this paper focuses on is the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic on Instagram and the avenue this platform provides by prefacing self-presentation and user-generated content, as opposed to the mainstream media depictions (Harvey, 2014, cited in Harris, 2015). #BlackGirlMagic reveals how Black women showcase positive images to uplift themselves while resisting the negativity that has been associated, for years, with their hair texture, complexion and body image.

The opportunity for self-presentation is perhaps pivotal in Black women's participation on the platform and their use of #BlackGirlMagic creates a tool of knowledge for gathering and sharing. It has been argued that #BlackGirlMagic has become:

> 'A tool that black women use globally to explain the ways in which recognition of black merit intersects with social justice, promotes positive acknowledgement and celebrates the physical beauty of black women in a world that otherwise objectify and invisibilise the black and brown female body and mind.' (Mahali, 2017: 30).

Two major themes employed were: (1) What are the impacts of Western standards of beauty on Black women? and (2) How has digital activism been used to create an innovative narrative to counter Western standards of beauty for Black women? The data was collected on Instagram within a seven-day period, totalling 80 images that used the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. The themes selected examine the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and beauty that Black women encounter within Western beauty standards that negatively impact their lives.

Whilst the Internet may be a new tool for social protest, the issues raised by online communities (OC) are not, and it is therefore beneficial to examine the outcomes of marginalised groups who utilised this method. One argument for the positive benefits is the idea that technology is socially constructed and it means that 'users construct the value and meaning of technology by how they use [it]' (Kirkpatrick 2008, cited in Sivitanides & Shah, 2011: 4) thereby allowing the user to share their alternative views in the hope of empowering change.

Literature review

By investigating the intersections of race, gender, beauty, and media, the goal was to examine the ways that Black feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism present an avenue to explore popular media representations and their relationship to Black women.

Western Standards of Beauty

In the context of western countries, often referred to as Europe, the Americas and Canada, this article will focus solely on the United States. In Western cultures, appearance is crucial to self-definition, especially for many young girls and women (Akram & Borland, 2007, cited in Loeto, 2014). This emphasis on appearance has evolved over time, and virtually by consensus, has cultivated the standard of beauty to be white, young, slim, straight-haired, slender-nosed and able-bodied (Patton, 2006). These hegemonically defined Western beauty standards reject women of different races, classes, ages and those who are differently abled. Western beauty standards are also reiterated in the high cost of maintaining this preconceived notion of beauty that consists of cosmetics, plastic surgery, hair perms, and expensive clothes, disproportionately marginalising poor women who often tend to be WOC (Patton, 2006). It is also problematic that the images of beauty portrayed are flawless women who have been digitally altered to present the notion of 'perfection'. This is extremely damaging to all women because the notion of 'perfection' is unattainable, and instead puts women on a lifelong unobtainable, damaging quest for a façade that is presented to make women feel inadequate, in addition to maximising the profitability of the associated industries that promote this quest for perfection.

Patriarchy, Gender and the Body

bell hooks describes patriarchy as:

> 'A political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence' (Hooks, 2004: 1).

The patriarchal system has a significant influence on how women view themselves because men determine what is beautiful and inherently reward and punish women based on the standards they have created (Jackson-Lowman, 2014). This results in most women subconsciously adhering to a male voice that constantly places them in the gaze of men and under their judgment, with the notion that every beauty regime is for the purpose of male acceptance (Bartky, 2013). Furthermore, in a patriarchal and capitalist society, physical beauty and the objectification of women are promoted as a vital form of social capital for women (Hunter, 2005, cited in Jackson-Lowman, 2014).

Women's bodies are gendered through gestures, posture, and movement, restricting women's bodies in comparison to men (Bartky, 2013). Black women must not only conform to gendered movements but also racial ones, in which they are cornered into a tedious psychological process entitled 'shifting' (West, 2017). Shifting describes when Black women 'change or alter various parts of themselves such as their speech or dress, in order to placate both mainstream society and their own communities of colour' (Johnson, et al., 2016: 15).

Women's Representation in the Media

Laura Mulvey (1975) coined the term 'male gaze' and argued that women were viewed from the perspective of a heterosexual male. Mulvey states, 'the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female

figure which is styled accordingly' (Mulvey, 1999: 837) rendering women to the status of 'object' in which men narrate how women should be seen. hooks also argues that when Black women were finally present in film 'our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze' (hooks, 1992: 119).

The notion of the male gaze can be carried out in various forms of media, and with the introduction of social networks and online forums, advertisers can now spread their idea of beauty even further. The idea that only specific women are beautiful enough to be used for these products creates what Lorde describes as 'an institutionalised rejection of difference' (Lorde, 2004: 845). This practice cultivates a need for outsiders to imitate the dominant representation of beauty, which is continuously showcased, and ultimately economically beneficial for those who create the products and advertisements.

Representation of Black women

Due to the negative portrayal of Black women in mainstream media, it is crucial for Black feminist thought to challenge these images in order for Black women to create their own narrative. Throughout history, images of Black women in the media have been associated with negative stereotypes, such as mammies, oversexed jezebels, tragic mulattos, hot mammies and welfare recipients (Collins, 2000). Stereotypes such as Mammies[1], Sapphires[2] and Jezebels[3] would have originated during the American slavery era and continued to be used against Black women in the postmodern era (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Over the years these images have not changed, some have even manifested into the Strong Black Woman, the Angry Black Woman and the Video Vixen (West, 2017). The images represented intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality and class that Black women have to endure (Collins, 2000).

Within mainstream media, the curvy physique of the Black female body tends to be objectified and hypersexualised, thereby resulting in the portrayal of Black women as overly sexual beings, ultimately defining Black women culture. Crenshaw has classified this depiction as 'representational intersectionality' as these images are created through the dominant narratives of race and gender, and how modern critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalised WOC (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, within Bartky's analysis, Black women defy the dominant emphasis on thinness by possessing curvy bodies that grant them admiration from Black men. However, Black men's praise still reduces their body parts to a physical object for their sexual desire.

Black women who are visible in the media often face the burden of being 'whitewashed', because they are portrayed with lighter skin, thinner figures or straighter hair to resemble Western features. Black actresses and models are regularly shown with chemically straightened hair, wigs or flat-ironed hair, which presents the idea of 'natural hair' as unnatural (Kuo, 2018). Only by removing or altering their phenotypical features can they be considered "beautiful". Despite this, there is growing acceptance of Black women's features on White women. For instance, many White women alter their lips, their 'bottom' or hairstyles to emulate

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[1] Mammy: 'used to describe a role and a person within the plantation household who served as a baby nurse, cook, and general domestic worker.' (Park, 2010, cited in West, 2017: 141)

[2] Sapphire: 'this is the image of Black women as stubborn, bitchy, bossy and hateful.' (Ladson-Billings, 2009: 89)

[3] Jezebel: 'is synonymous with promiscuity, an insatiable sexual appetite, and someone who uses sex to manipulate men' (Ladson-Billings, 2009: 89)

Black women's features yet they are still depicted in mainstream media. This means Black women are often eschewed in the media for the very attributes that are 'trendy' on White women. The 'whitewashing' of Black women has resulted in what hooks described as the 'imperial gaze', which seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonise (hooks, 1992).

Impacts on Black women

Black women run the risk of severe health complications in the quest to achieve Western standards of beauty. This pursuit may involve lightening their skin, using coloured contacts, damaging their hair, wearing weaves, or having cosmetic surgery to achieve Western features.

These beauty standards also influence the outcomes of Black women in education, occupation, income, romantic relationships, and mental and physical health (Jackson-Lowman, 2014). The assimilation of Western beauty standards is often a more reliable way to be accepted into society than professional status or higher education (Wallace, 1979, cited in Patton, 2006). Therefore, in a world that conflates worth with beauty and only embraces a particular standard, Black women who then conform to these beauty standards have access to more upwardly mobile careers and ultimately make more money (Pierre-Louis, 2017).

Many Black women can also experience long-term mental health issues, such as depression, distorted body image and eating disorders (Hall, 1995, cited in Bryant, 2013). Negative portrayals indicate that Black women 'have been reduced to their butts, historically and in the media, they are frequently the targets of harassment, sexual assault, degrading comments and general sexual objectification' (Watson *et al*., 2012 cited in West, 2017: 152). This has cultivated a world in which many Black women possess great self-hatred of their appearance throughout their lives (hooks, 1992).

Colourism

Alice Walker first coined the term colourism in 1982, and it is defined as the 'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their colour' (Norwood, 2015: 586). Colourism within the African community can be associated with the value and privilege placed on people that possess Caucasian features. As a result, lighter-skin Black women were better represented within mainstream media, and the lack of dark-skinned Black women perpetuated the notion that dark skin was not beautiful.

Digital Activism

Digital activism is described as

> 'activities or practices that are both in-depth and exclusive. In-depth in that it encompasses all social and political campaigning practice[s] that use digital network infrastructure; and it excludes practices that are not examples of this type of practice.' (Joyce, 2010 cited in Sivitanides & Shah, 2011: 2).

As technology advances, digital media invites beauty standards into our computers, tablets and phones, resulting in digital and social media becoming significant areas for engaging in sexual, racial, and gender ideologies (Lindsey, 2012). Baer (2016) explains how digital activism is particularly beneficial for feminism 'to make visible the global scale of gender oppression and to link feminist protest movements across national borders' (Baer, 2016: 18). Therefore, in the digital realm by showcasing self-love and

creating self-definitions of Black beauty, this new digital activism can aid in resisting the negative controlling images of Black women.

The hash symbol is one method of digital activism utilised to share the necessary imagery and information. A hashtag is a collection of words or a keyword assigned to information or topic designated by a 'hash' symbol (#) (Small, 2011). The role of a hashtag is to 'organize discussion around specific topics or events' (Fitton *et al.* 2009: 127, cited in Small 2011). The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic can be seen as a form of hashtag feminism. This type of digital activism is perceived as a useful tool for fighting gender inequities around the world, by utilising personal expressions to create a space in an area previously ignored (Clark, 2016).

In a world where women's issues and stories are often told by others, within social media Black women can activate audience participation that can lead to tangible change in communities instead of passive consumption (Kreiss *et al* 2014, cited in Clark ,2016).

Despite the benefits of empowerment and support that hashtag feminism provides, it is also important to acknowledge the risks and limitations associated with such a new form of activism. For example, the Internet is public domain and invites not only support, but also invites hate speech and threats from 'misogynist trolls' (Cole, 2015, cited in Clark, 2016). For Black women, this hate does not only originate from males, but can also come from White women who believe that they are not able to objectively relate to Black women by way of living different experiences due to race.

#BlackGirlMagic

CaShawn Thompson is credited with having coined the phrase in 2013 when she first began to use the hashtag #BlackGirlsAreMagic (Thomas, 2015). Thompson described the hashtag saying, 'Black Girl Magic tries to counteract the negativity that we sometimes hold within ourselves and is sometimes placed on us by the outside world.' (BBC, 2016). The key themes of #BlackGirlMagic are identified as 'sisterhood, self-love and positive affirmation from the voices of and about Black women and girls' (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017: 464). The hashtag has been used on numerous social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook to celebrate and showcase the beauty or accomplishments of Black women. Often shortened to #BlackGirlMagic the hashtag can be seen as a grassroots movement that utilises social media to have a positive impact on this generation and future generations.

An Innovative Narrative

Hashtag activism such as #BlackGirlMagic has a distinctly narrative character. In the digital realm, when numerous comments, images or retweets appear in response to a hashtagged word, phrase, or sentence, they are complemented by several personal stories, ultimately assuming a narrative form (Yang, 2016). Personal stories and broader social issues can then be shared with the public, opening space for a critical discussion and cultivating a communal and collective perspective of hashtag activism (Yang, 2016). Clark (2016) argues that the most influential cases of hashtag activism possess a recognisable narrative form that include a creation, a conflict, and a conclusion. The creation of #BlackGirlMagic has been addressed above; the

conflict is the disrespect and disregard for Black women and the end would result in a world where previously constructed damaging ideas of Black beauty no longer existed.

The hashtag celebrates all women of African descent showcasing the diversity of ethnicity, class, and religion, revealing the truth that Black women are not a monolithic group and that beauty comes in all shapes, sizes, and shades (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). This new narrative is a journey towards empowerment for all Black women and girls who promote Black beauty that is not often seen in mainstream media, leading and daring Black women to love themselves in a world that tells them otherwise.

Significance of the Study

Within societies that are structured by gender, there is clear inequality and heterosexism (Craig, 2006). The racist and sexist beauty regime that has been constructed disciplines and grades women, and for Black women, positions them at the bottom (Craig, 2006). And so Black women created a space in which they could boldly express Black beauty. This is because:

> 'These stereotypes and the culture that sustains them exist to define the social position of black women as subordinate, on the basis of gender, to all men, regardless of color[4], and on the basis of race to all other women. These negative images also are indispensable to the maintenance of an interlocking system of oppression based on race and gender that operates to the detriment of all women and all blacks.' (Caldwell, 2000: 280 cited in Patton, 2006: 45-46)

As the 'Black is Beautiful' movement provided a space for Black women to combat the dominant Western standards of beauty, so too can this OC. Even if this was not the intention of #BlackGirlMagic, it could be used to aid in the Black beauty campaign by highlighting the beauty issues that affect Black women, such as their hair, complexion and body image. As Instagram showcases real people with beautiful diversity, it provides a platform to resist the baggage of perfection associated with Western standards of beauty (Harris, 2015). Also, Black women can use Instagram to convey the 'narrative imagery of our sometimes silenced, or ignored voices' (Harris, 2015: 141).

This study was also useful because there is limited research that presents a different narrative wherein Black women and girls challenge mainstream media representation and resist stereotypes that do not match their lived reality of Black femininity.

Methodology

Black Feminist Epistemology

Black feminist epistemology 'decentres the Eurocentric discourse of the rationalist, masculinist subject of modernist philosophy' (Brah, 2001: 5492). Black feminist thought is a crucial framework for analysing the lived experiences of Black women as it primarily relies on the framework of those who have similar experiences and not on interpretations from those in power or educated middle-class white women. Collins argues 'because elite white males control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interest

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[4] Quotations from American authors use American English.

pervades the themes, paradigms and epistemologies of traditional scholarship' (Collins, 2000: 251). This dynamic has resulted in the experiences of Black women from the United States (US) and women of African descent transnationally being discredited within or excluded from what counts as knowledge (Collins, 2000), ultimately promoting Black women's subordination. Black feminist thought does not only provide subordinate groups with new knowledge about their experiences, but reveals new ways of knowing, allowing these very groups to define their reality, thereby rejecting the subordination (Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality when she explained that the struggles of WOC were grossly ignored within feminist and antiracist theories and politics (Carbado, *et al*., 2013). Intersectionality is 'the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (McCall, 2005: 1771). Intersectionality is useful because within systems of oppression, race, gender, and beauty interlock under one overarching structure of domination. As noted, Black women are impacted differently because of these intersections. Intersectionality acknowledges that social relations are complex, multifaceted, and intersected. It is therefore also beneficial to examine how race, gender, and beauty have been socially constructed to bring the lived experience to the research.

Social Constructionism

This research involved an ontological position of constructionism, which 'assumes that reality is the product of social process' (Neuman, 2003, cited in Tuli, 2010: 101). A social constructionist framework is necessary to investigate the idea 'that people construct and negotiate identities for themselves and others through their everyday social interactions with each other' (Burr, 2015: 222). Therefore, what have been cultivated as everyday standards have been created by society, particularly those in power. A fundamental principle of social constructionism is that 'our knowledge of the world, including our understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought rather than grounded in an observable, external reality' (Burr, 2015: 222). Social constructionism challenges rigidly defined categories such as race, gender and beauty standards that have been classified as the 'norm'. For example, race is 'a social creation—a fiction that divides and categorizes individuals by phenotypic markers, such as skin color, that supposedly signify underlying differences' (Glenn, 2000: 6).

Data Sources and Collection

The content analysis explored a limited amount of content from Instagram that used the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. This content comprised of images that have been tagged with the hashtag and examined how Black beauty is expressed and associated with #BlackGirlMagic. A content analysis ensures that all units of study receive equal treatment 'whether they are entered at the beginning or the end of analysis but also that the process is objective in that it does not matter who performs the analysis or where and when' (Krippendorff, 1989: 404).

Instagram is a social networking application launched in 2010, with an age demographic between 18-29 years of which 50.7 % being female and 49.3% being male (Lee *et al*., 2015). Within the United States amongst the 18-29 age group, 53% of persons use the app, and of the 300 million monthly active users, the majority of them are outside of the United States (Lee *et al*., 2015). Instagram permits users to upload photos and videos, which can be edited with filters, organised hashtags, and location information. The

content uploaded can also be captioned or hashtagged. A user can create an account to be shared publicly or privately and can browse the public content of others by hashtags and locations and can then 'like' or comment on the photos. Hashtags help categorise photos and video content, which aids in the process of content discovery and connection of users. In 2017, Instagram introduced the ability to follow hashtags just like following a friend, as the user will see top posts from the hashtag in their feed. Many of these hashtags are 'community hashtags' which connect like-minded users to a particular subject.

To adequately collect data, every day at 9 p.m. from Tuesday, 12th June 2018 to Tuesday, 19th June 2018, the researcher examined the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic on Instagram. During this time, the researcher was a participant observer as a personal account was utilised. The first twenty images from the 'Top' category and 'Recent' category were collected; however, videos and promotional content were excluded. Of the total of 280 images collected, only the first five images from both categories were analysed for this research, providing the researcher with a total of 80 images. As the researcher accessed Instagram through a personal account, during this period no photos were liked or comments made on photos as the goal was only for qualitative data collection.

Hashtags are broken down into two categories: 'Top' and 'Recent'. Top posts show the most popular images that were tagged with the hashtag. In this section, everyone is seeing the same 'Top' posts rather than material based on a user's interests. The images that have reached the 'Top' post section is chosen by an algorithm that identifies images, based on a high count likes and comments, and based on how quickly the posts have received that engagement. Whereas the 'Recent' section is a time feature in which users have recently uploaded an image and once their accounts are set to public, then any user can view the image tagged with the hashtag. The data collected was examined through a content analysis to answer the main research question.

Findings and Discussion

Four major themes emerged when analysing the data collected from Instagram: hair texture, complexion, body image, and self-affirmation. The themes selected explored the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and beauty that Black women encounter within Western beauty standards.

What are the impacts of Western standards of beauty on Black women?

Hair Texture

Many of the images collected showcased the diverse ways in which Black women style their hair ranging from braids, to weaves, to natural hairstyles. Twenty-three images utilised the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic to showcase hair, fifteen images showcased the different curl patterns of Black women's natural hair, five showed the different styles and colours of braided hair, and two showed the different styles and colours of weaves. Many of the images used similar hashtags such as #naturalhair, #naturallycurly, #braids, or #afro, to describe the style of hair and to link the image with others that used the same hashtags.

Numerous images that showed natural hair utilised hashtags such as #naturalhair, #afrohairdontcare, #teamnatural or #afrocurly. However, it should be noted that the most frequent curl pattern was 3C[5] which is generally associated with Black women who possess a lighter complexion. Black women who possess a dark complexion and produce 4C or 4B[6] curl patterns were less visible. This is mainly exhibited within the Instagram pages that collected images associated with hair and #BlackGirlMagic.

Black women have encountered years of oppressive ideas, laws, and customs that regulated how they could wear or adorn[7] their hair. Society has now cultivated unwritten rules about 'grooming' that perpetuate beauty standards. These rules have regulated how Black women and girls are meant to style their hair for school or work.

This particular relationship of hair to beauty intersects with race and gender, positioning a unique burden on Black women whose natural hair textures fall low on the beauty totem pole (Robinson, 2011). This combination of 'hair as race with hair as beauty is an example of how intersectionality is essential to understand[ing] subject matters specific to Black females' (Robinson, 2011: 361). Hair is biologically determined and has been used as a racial identifier.

The data collected from Instagram revealed diverse hairstyles, where many of the images that received the most likes were for a looser curl pattern, revealing that while the OC is accepting of different hair types, it lacks representation of *all* types.

This social media era has also given Black women and girls more access to natural hair bloggers who utilise the digital world to show how to style and take care of natural hair. The increase in bloggers not only encourages Black women to wear their hair naturally, but it also suggests new standards and negotiations of beauty which are more accessible to Black women (Sobze, 2013).

Complexion

Twenty-six images fell under this category, nineteen of which were self-portraits or 'selfies.' When analysing skin colour within the hashtag, many of the images of women who were dark-skinned not only used an additional hashtag that focused on their melanin but highlighted the positive in their skin colour. Five images were of groups of Black women and girls showcasing the different shades of Blackness, but all utilised hashtags or captions that emphasised the melanin in their skin. There were also Instagram pages that were dedicated to showcasing the various shades of Black women with positive messages regarding their complexion. Pages such as 'melanin.touch' and 'themelaninshadesroom' all take publicly posted images to share on their pages that utilised any hashtags affiliated with melanin.

Within Western culture, complexion has always been a focal point for discrimination and valuation. The various shades of Blackness are placed in a hierarchy; shades closest to white have more significant value. The unattractive stereotypes of dark-skinned women such as the 'sexless Black mammy' have been constant

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[5] Curl pattern in appendix.

[6] Curl pattern in appendix.

[7] For instance, the Tignon Laws which forced Creole women of color 'to wear a tignon (scarf or handkerchief) over their hair to show that they belonged to the slave class, whether they were enslaved or not.' (Nasheed, 2018)

and harmful to the self-esteem of Black women. More importantly, this 'association of dark skin and ugliness transcends geographical boundaries, nationalities and ethnicities' (Norwood, 2017: 5).

Colourism is not limited to a particular race, nor geographical location, and the digital realm is another area in which these damaging ideas are expressed. Within social media colourism has been recycled. Black women of various complexions generally used harmful hashtags such as, #TeamLightSkin or #TeamDarkSkin, to reinforce the divide, which exposed the pain and judgment Black women inflict on one another. Nevertheless, the data collected revealed the use of other hashtags that were focused on countering this narrative and uplifting the different shades of Black women.

Body image

Body image is defined as 'one's perception of, affective reaction to, and cognitive appraisal of one's body' (Smolak & Murnen, 2007: 236). Even if some Black women do not fall prey to the idea of a 'perfect' body image, they are still ostracised for their body type, but in the digital realm many display their bodies however they wish.

Six of the images collected fell into the 'body image' category. These images showed various body types modelling, in stylish wear, activewear and even partial nudity. Many of the images were captioned with body-positive messages or hashtags such as #curvy, #effyourbodystandards and #selflove. The content illustrated a diverse set of body types which are primarily 'othered' from mainstream media. Even though these women are proudly displaying their bodies how they wish, the users are somewhat aware of the risks associated with showcasing their bodies to be judged by the public.

Within Black culture there was more of an emphasis on being shapely and curvaceous. Regardless of the cultural aspect of body image, the negative portrayal, or stereotypes attached to Black women's bodies, has had adverse implications on how the world views them and ultimately how they view themselves. Despite the harsh scrutiny that Black women's bodies are subjected to, they have still tried to claim beauty where others only see sexuality. Additionally, the digital realm was still able to create room for the exhibition of new feminine sexualities that are not merely responses to male desires, but rather self-definition of what is beautiful (White, 2013).

How has digital activism been used to create an innovative narrative?

Self-affirmation

The Oxford online dictionary defines self-affirmation as 'the recognition and assertion of the existence and value of one's individual self' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018).

Twenty-six images fell under the category of 'self-affirmation'. Here, a greater number of the images came from the 'Recent' section where more personal accounts were used rather than Instagram pages that collected images that used #BlackGirlMagic. Many of the images were self-portraits and assigned captions such as 'Goddess', 'Pretty' or hashtags such as #blackbeauties, #selflove, and #feelingmyself or even longer captions that emphasised self-love. Many, if not all of the women in this category wore makeup, had their hair done, and were dressed to present the best physically appealing version of themselves.

For decades Black women have found ways to express themselves, however small, and this has been crucial for Black women's resistance. Arguably, #BlackGirlMagic has become another 'safe' space for Black women to not only examine issues that concern them, but to express themselves honestly. #BlackGirlMagic grants Black women and girls a unified space within the digital realm to fight against mainstream media's representation of beauty by uplifting and empowering themselves. Even if it is not evident, by sharing their individual struggles about the rejection of Black beauty and linking them to #BlackGirlMagic, Black women have proven they can control and ultimately change their representation.

The movement attached to #BlackGirlMagic has reached millions of people around the globe through all social communities promoting the various hairstyles, complexions and body types of Black women. However, not everyone has access to digital technologies, and this is the most significant limitation to the idea of #BlackGirlMagic being an innovative narrative for all. A researcher needs to be aware of the classism and ableism associated with access to digital media devices, and this is an evident shortcoming within the digital realm.

Additionally, despite the hashtag originating in the U.S., Western standards of beauty impact Black women all over the world. The hashtag assisted towards creating a space to promote Black women and girls who are not often seen in mainstream media and to promote images that Black women want to see on social media globally. Finally, it allows Black women to define beauty on their terms rather than living out someone else's narrative.

Conclusion

This research has been an exploration of Western standards of beauty, the impacts on Black women and #BlackGirlMagic. This study aims to be added to Black feminist bodies of work that investigate the intersections of gender, race, and beauty in the lives of Black women. This study focused exclusively on the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic on the social media app Instagram. It highlighted how Black women connect all over the world, exposing their shared experience in a society that disparages women of African descent irrespective of differences such as social class or sexual orientation.

This analysis primarily involved a Black feminist framework, and a crucial aspect of Black feminism is to identify Black women as collaborators in their empowerment, and to honestly believe that they are capable of enacting agency in their own lives on their terms. This is precisely what #BlackGirlMagic can be argued as doing for Black women. Although social media may not appear to be of significance or represent progress, for women who do not generally see images that reflect their own, having that space can still be ground-breaking. For it is those that are misrepresented and marginalised that have turned to digital activism to allow their voices and stories to be heard. Social media can, therefore, be a powerful tool for voices, stories, and images which have been left behind, forgotten, or removed from mainstream media.

As a researcher, it is evident that a hashtag cannot remove centuries of oppressive ideas about Black women and their beauty. However, with the creation of a space for Black women by Black women, they are representing themselves when and where no one else will. #BlackGirlMagic offers a platform for a meaningful conversation and for Black women to freely express themselves and connect with other Black women globally. Ultimately this can provide exposure and promote discussions which can be useful steps

towards empowerment and combating inequalities. Hopefully this will also contribute to creating a future that has a new meaning for Black beauty.

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Appendix 1: Hair texture:
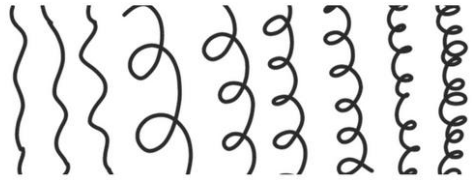
About the author:

I was born in Barbados in 1989, and have lived here my entire life. From 2007 to 2011 I attended the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados to study History and Literature. After leaving UWI, I pursued further education at the National University of Ireland, Galway, where I graduated with MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights, 2018.

Since then, I have returned to Barbados where I intend to take the valuable knowledge learned abroad and work with organisations that aim to improve the lives of women and girls. I am currently a member of the National Organisation of Women (NOW) and have had the opportunity to sit in on board meetings and marches that strive to progress the lives of marginalised persons. My principal current research projects focus on digital activism, Black Feminist theory and beauty standards.