Literature Review

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Hair has always been a subject of great importance in the African American community. Whether it’s long, wavy, kinky, or straight, it just never seems to be good enough. I can remember when I was a child and wishing my hair looked more like my friend’s long, straight hair instead of my nappy braids my mom did last Sunday. It wasn’t until I was well into my undergraduate studies that I realized the money and time spent to keep my hair straight, when it was exactly the opposite of what it wanted to be, was no longer worth it. To be honest, I didn’t start wearing my hair natural to make a political statement. It was just more of a convenience. It was too expensive and frankly unrealistic to try and maintain straight hair. To truly understand why hair is such a touchy subject amongst African Americans, it is important to know the historical significance of black hair and hair and how it has changed over the years.

History of the stigma around natural black hair dates back to the slave days. In Africa, hair is seen as a symbol of pride and when they were forcibly brought to America, it was this symbol of pride and beauty that was degraded and called ugly. It became better for their survival to try and look as white as possible. Most people won’t know this but black people come in many different shades, some even as light as a white man.  Fast forward to the 1960s where slavery has long been abolished at this time but African Americans are just now beginning their struggle for equal civil rights. This is a time in history where it was even more important to not be ashamed of who you are and to wear your black skin and black hair proudly. Afros became seen as a sign of black power and revolution.

Today, weaves and extensions are the norm in America. This is true for more than just African American Women. But it is only the African American women who are berated for wearing them. However, there is a growing natural hair community that is taking over in the United States where black women, usually in their 20s, are trying to embrace their natural state of hair. I am aware that it is not only African American women who have incredibly kinky hair which is why this information will be useful for women of any race or ethnicity who finds themselves with incredibly kinky hair and would like a tutorial on a braid out. The tutorial is for women who are now embracing their natural state of hair and are at a loss of what styles will work for them but it is important to understand the relevance and demand for a tutorial such as itself.

In Whitney Bellinger’s article, *Why African American Women try to Obtain ‘Good Hair’,* she first asks the question we are all wondering, why are African American women raised to change their hair from its natural state? In her article, Bellinger interviewed fifteen young African American women about their thoughts on their hair. To begin, Bellinger defines “good hair” as straighter and softer than traditional African American Hair. This term dates back to slavery when certain slaves were given more privileges because they looked more white according to their masters. The women in the surveys understood that from a young age “some girls [can] feel in adequate because their hair is not the way others want it to be” (Bellinger, 2007). Unfortunately this attitude can even be brought on by the child’s parents. She is taught that her hair is okay for playing in the yard, but when the family needs to go to church or to Christmas dinner, it needs to be altered. Bellinger also suggests that “chemically altering their hair seems to be a matter of fitting in, convenience, and available funds (2007).

Fifteen women were used to conduct research by answering an open ended survey. All of the fifteen women were African American and then Bellinger also used a few Chinese, Philipino, and Indian women to give their perspective on why African American women change their hair. The research showed that “the primary reason African American teenage girls chemically change their hair is to make it “good hair” (2007). A few of the responses showed that the girls understand that this idea of good hair meaning straight and long hair was definitely influenced on them by a predominantly white society. The responses also showed that although they were of aware of the influences on their hair, they didn’t find it fair that Caucasian hair is considered good hair. They also don’t even agree with the idea of good hair or bad hair, it’s just what society keeps trying to tell them.

One of the responses from one of the girls who does wear her hair in a natural state stated that the only reason she does this is because it is easier to manage. She says that her natural hair is extremely thick and she never knows what to do with it in that state. This statement right here alone is exactly why I intend to create this tutorial. There are too many young girls who think that the only way to do their hair is to straighten it when there are hundreds of styles they can do without causing permanent damage to their hair. Bellinger’s article as a whole was to discover the reasons why young African American girls do or do not wear their hair in natural hairstyles.

Another article delves into the reasons African American women specifically feel pressured to wear their hair in a more European way and when they don’t they are considered to be making a bigger statement than just the way they wear their hair. Shauntae White discusses the caste system that has been in place since slavery. This system says black people who look the least black are higher up in society and in beauty standards and that the “system has been and continues to be reinforced by all forms of media” (White, 2005).

White also makes a very good argument when she points out that even in black media, African American women that are darker or have kinkier hair are not shown as much. She uses the example of Essence and Ebony magazines and how they will feature lighter skinned models who have a looser hair texture and that sends the message to darker skinned, kinkier hair women that they aren’t beautiful or desirable even in their own community. White recounts the stories of African American women who have chosen to wear their hair in natural hairstyles. Most were taught from a young age that their hair was acceptable and needed to be altered and even faced backlash when they were older and made the decision not continue to straighten their hair. White describes this as the women conveying that they are powerful and defiant and those are two things that society hates to see a woman become; especially an African American woman.

The article shows how common it was for the African American women with natural hair to be accepted by their own community. First off, it is extremely hard even to this day to find a salon who knows how to do black hair without first making it straight. These women were receiving comments such as “why would you do that to yourself?” and “you’re far too pretty to wear your hair like that” (2005). I always find these comments interesting because the people who are making them have the exact same type of hair growing out of their head as well. They try and act puzzled and confused how they even managed to get their hair into these elaborate styles when these women prodding can achieve the same looks themselves.

The women in this study claimed that they felt a sense of freedom and pride when they made the conscious choice to go against the so engrained ideals of European beauty standards. Everyday more and more women are making this choice and unfortunately some feel that they don’t have enough information out there to learn how to properly care for their hair. It’s easy to say all you want that you’ll stop straightening your hair, but now they have to deal with the reality of relearning how to love and maintain their natural hair in a healthy way.

After discussing why a tutorial about a natural hair braidout is needed, it is next important to discuss how an online video tutorial will be beneficial. Concannon, Flynn, and Campbell discuss in an article whether or not e-learning tutorials are as beneficial to learning as we like to think they are. They conducted a study that was done in Irish universities. The study involved using 600 undergraduate studies and taking them through an e-learning course. For all of the students, this was their first time using any e-learning. The students were taught the lesson through online course content.

The results showed that none of the students in the study had any difficulty with accessing the class information or taking tests online. Their previous knowledge of computers did help and that is an important factor to remember. Online tutorials are really only beneficial to learners if these learners already have a certain amount of experience with computers and the internet. There were many extra help forums for the students to utilize but a number of them didn’t, claiming that they didn’t use computers that much and it was too complicated. With this information, the researchers realized that it was better to “suggest that using techniques to encourage students to locate and use online resources are more relevant than general computer training, even for novice computer users” (Concannon, Flynn & Campbell, 2005).

It was also noted that instructor enthusiasm played a role in how well the learners picked up and were willing to learn the information. The more active they were on the discussion boards and interactive the more the students were willing to be involved in extra assignments. I also find this true when I look at online tutorials posted on the website YouTube. If a person creates a YouTube channel and is active on it at least three times per week, their audience is more likely to engage and participate.

Now that this paper has discussed the need for natural hair tutorials and whether or not they are effective, it is time to explore its convenience to the learner. Does it make it easier being on the internet? According to Shaltry, Henriksen, Wu, & Dickson, making the move to social media with their online courses was not only convenient but it was also completely justified considering “that nearly 100% of students enrolled in the course already had actively used a [social media] account” (2013).

Using the internet and more specifically social media to help emphasis learning is a smart choice in today’s society. My target audience would be women in their 20’s and research shows that “anywhere between 85 and 99% of college students use Facebook” (Junco, 2012). This means that the target audience should already be well acquainted with the internet and how to use social media sites. When learners have to actively seek out something they need to learn, they will most likely go to websites and locations that they know how to operate instead of foreign ones, even if they may seem more professional.

YouTube itself was examined because it is a social media site where the learners not only watch videos, but can also interact with one another and the people posting the videos. In an article discussing support through YouTube for individuals with severe illnesses, the researchers stressed how this forum can be seen as not only a place to share your story but also a place to gather and share support for one another.

The research is there and clearly shows that there is a need for more information out there for learners with natural hair and that and online tutorial is not only convenient but it also provides a support system for individuals who are going through a difficult time on their new natural hair journey. There are a number of blogs of the internet that deal with this very issue however, an actual video or stills of a video can give a step by step instruction to the learner and create much less confusion on the subject. Key factors that need to be addressed in developing this project would be to keep the steps as simple as possible and make sure that there is a way for the learners and viewers to interact with one another and with me as well. Online support is helpful especially when the learner doesn’t have support in their daily life.

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