THE MERGING OF THE PERSONAL AND THE COLLECTIVE:
REIMAGINING BLACK NATURAL HAIR CARE DIGITAL SPACES AS SITES OF
CRITICAL PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation in
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by

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ABSTRACT

Adults learn and develop in various contexts, which affect how they construct and reconstruct aspects of their identities. Such identity construction and reconstruction can occur through mediated or unmediated means. Within the context of this study, adult identity development through unmediated learning within digital spaces is analyzed. Specific to this study is Black natural hair care blogs (BNHCBs) that developed at the precipice of the “natural hair” movement, which inspires Black women to wear their hair in its natural (i.e., non-chemically process or straightened, kinky/curly) state. To this, Black feminists, such as bell hooks, argue that the natural hair movement is also a movement of resistance to maintain the status quo, especially Eurocentric standards of beauty. This counterhegemonic perspective can greatly impact one’s learning and identity development, specifically within the context of digital spaces, such as YouTube, Facebook, and various blogs that support dynamic, user-generated content. As such, this qualitative research study examines Black female identity development through the medium of blogging within the online learning communities of BNHCBs. In particular, this is a qualitative media content analysis (QMCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of blog posts and comments from BNHCBs. Additional sources of data are in-depth, semi-structured interviews with blog commenters (i.e., blog readers who post comments). The following questions guide this study: (1) What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?; (2) What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the bloggers’ practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?; and (3) How do the blog commenters’ online personalities align with their offline personalities?
The findings related to the first two research questions are organized in four principles related to the analyzed BNHCBs. First, is the politics of representation, which highlight the themes of: (a) the importance of Black affinity spaces; (b) the fetishizing of Black women’s bodies; and (c) the deconstruction of the angry Black woman trope. Second, is the critical analysis of popular culture and media that highlights: (a) the lack of self-ethnic reflectors of Black women and (b) deconstructs the commodification of natural hair. Third, is the BNHCBs as a journalistic sociopolitical intervention, which emphasizes: (a) Black women’s sense of agency; (b) the normalization of natural hair; and (c) critical reflection of media messages. Fourth, is the dialogic exchange of information on BNHCBs manifested in: (a) initiating and maintaining conversations and (b) positioning blog commenters as the experts. Moreover, the analysis of participant interviews and their recent blog posts attend to the third research question, and not only manifest the same four principles identified above but also demonstrate how closely the participants’ online and offline identities align.

The study ends with implications of the findings for theory and practice within the field of lifelong learning and adult education. It also outlines the limitations of the study and makes suggestions for future research.
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And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.
- Romans 8:28 NIV

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

[T]he digital revolution has unleashed more information than ever into the public realm. This has also allowed each of us the ability to limit or filter the information that we receive. In the new media epoch, digital media platforms also use algorithms to feed us news content that reinforces our pre-existing beliefs. Healthy and informed debates within an environment of political civility have been replaced by dogma and extremism. Journalists have been replaced by bloggers.


In his blog post on the impact of Internet disruption, Officer (2016) argues that the evolution of the World Wide Web has “reduced the world to the size of a keyboard” (para. 2). Now, we can connect with like-minded individuals via social media, which allows us to create, share, and exchange information, seemingly without bounds. Although, according to Officer, this kind of information appears to be dominated by extreme perspectives that reinforce rather than contest ideological assumptions. Yet, social media still has a place for those who wish to challenge dominate ideologies. Is the Web big enough for those who fight for social change? Will they prevail? Only time will tell.

The consequences of this technological disruption of new media has implications for the formation of social connections, the accessibility of information, and the utility of social media as a site of critical public pedagogy. As such, Giroux (2003b) and Burdick and Sandlin (2013) contend that public pedagogies are important sites for “interventionist educational practice” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 154) that reframes the notion of “political” beyond the ubiquity of political campaigns and government regulation protests to a much broader action that is progressive and “culturally political” but not necessarily “radically political” (Atton, 2014, p. 348). Thus, being culturally political is more concerned with appropriating the dominant
products within our society through activities that aid in identity development and the formation of communities (Atton, 2014).

Cultural jamming is one such progressive and culturally political act, as Sandlin and Milam (2008) view cultural jammers as producers and creators of culture who “actively resist, critique, appropriate, reuse, recreate, and alter cultural products and entertainment” (p. 331). Such forms of creative expression often are used to ignite emotional and relational reactions in the audience, as Sandlin and Milam further argue that these forms of popular culture “engage emotion to initiate action and interest amongst members of society,” which “stir up a sense of hope” that leads to a reconceptualized identity (pp. 334, 336). Thus, using such forms of emotionally-charged engagement in an online context calls for the audience to be able to critically analyze Web content not only for accuracy, but also for alternative perspectives that compete with mass media. One example of this utility of a creative cultural jam can be seen by comedian and natural hair enthusiast, Francesca Ramsey’s (2012b) controversial YouTube parody, “Shit White Girls Say…to Black Girls,” which has garnered more than 11 million views.

In an article on The Huffington Post, Ramsey (2012a) shares that she used the social media meme (i.e., catch phrases, advertisements that spread throughout a culture) “Shit Girls Say” (Humphrey & Sheppard, 2011) in her video to “make all people laugh while, hopefully, opening some eyes and encouraging some of my white friends and acquaintances to think twice before they treat their black friends and associates like petting zoo animals or expect us to be spokespeople for the entire race” (para. 4). Within this context, social media can be used as a platform for producing creative cultural images that challenge the dominant discourse.
Such a dominant discourse within Black womanhood often centers around the construction of beauty, of which hair is an extension. bell hooks (1989) articulates the intersectionality of hair and Black womanhood in her article, “Straightening Our Hair:”

On Saturday mornings we would gather in the kitchen to get our hair fixed, that is straightened…We did not go to the hairdresser. Mama fixed our hair. Six daughters—there was no way we could have afforded hairdressers. In those days, this process of straightening black women’s hair with a hot comb (invented by Madame C. J. Walker) was not connected in my mind with the effort to look white, to live out standards of beauty set by white supremacy. It was connected solely with rites of initiation into womanhood. To arrive at that point where one’s hair could be straightened was to move from being perceived as child (whose hair could be neatly combed and braided) to being almost a woman. It was this moment of transition my sisters and I longed for. (para. 1)

The beauty standards to which hooks (1989) illustrates, are deeply rooted in history and continue to dictate what society deems to be the essence of Black womanhood. Considering this personal narrative, Black women and the politics of their hair remain a source of contention in our society.

Consequently, as a Black woman who wears her hair in its natural, un-chemically treated state, I rely on this study to research the democratic potential of social media (Lovink, 2011; Maratea, 2008; Morozov, 2011). In particular, I focus my attention on blogs that foster personal and collective narratives as an alternative form of knowledge, where learners from marginalized groups can have their interests heard and valorized.

In essence, the purpose of this chapter is to provide the foundation for a qualitative media content analysis and critical discourse analysis research study within adult education, in which I examine Black female identity development through the medium of blogging within online
learning communities. Through this study, I argue that Black women create and utilize the blogging platform and online learning communities to resist dominant ideologies of Black womanhood; thereby, developing greater critical consciousness and identity development that may lead them to engage in cultural politics. Inclusive to this chapter is the background of the study, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, problem statement, purpose, and guiding research questions. I also provide an overview of the design and methodology, the significance of the study, definitions, assumptions, limitations and strengths of my research interest.

**Background to the Problem**

In providing background to this study, I explore Black women’s identity development as it relates to popular culture. Secondly, I discuss popular culture and its intersection with public pedagogy that impacts Black women’s identity through media representation. Thirdly, I shift my focus to a discussion on the utility of blogging and online learning communities in Web activism. Lastly, I will discuss online learning communities as a form of informal learning within the sphere of lifelong learning and adult education. These foci form the foundation of this study on the intersection of blogging, adult education, Black womanhood, critical consciousness, and the capacity for social action through the reciprocal learning of online learning communities.

**Black Women’s Identity Development within Popular Culture**

The Black female body and hair are read as cultural text; however, these physical attributes do not account for the multiplicity of their being (Gilley, 2005, Johnson, 2013). Such cultural text is rooted in the historical controlling images of Black women as the mammy, the Jezebel, and the tragic mulatto, which are the foundations of contemporary portrayals of Black women as unattractive, overworked servants, poor mothers, and hypersexualized beings (Givens & Monahan, 2005; Hudson, 2007; Campbell, Giannino, China, & Harris, 2008). These images,
which are manifested in advertising and popular media, are “central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (Collins, 2000, p. 73). Moreover, American popular culture and politics have perpetuated Black womanhood stereotypes by creating a binary distinction that positions Black women as negative and White women as positive (Giroux, 1994). Situated within culturally hegemonic images and representations, Giroux (1994) argues that popular culture “produces meanings mediated through claims to truth represented in images that circulate in an electronic, informational hyperspace which disassociates itself from history, context, and struggle” (p. 4). Today, these images have become an effective tool for how we learn and (un)learn our identities.

Regarding Black women, this learning can often be detrimental to their self-understanding, especially for women who have not fully developed their identities (Helms, 1990). For example, Thompson (2009) examined the issue of desired and perceived beauty among Black women and how their perceptions related to their hair grooming practices. Using the social comparison model, she found that Black women compared themselves with White beauty standards and straightened their hair to better blend in physically, since “Black hair in its natural state is often negatively marked for its difference” (p. 840). Additionally, Zukiswa, Coetzee, and Rau (2017) found in their study of young Black African women that their hair has everyday implications for how they feel about themselves and how they perceive others feel toward them. Additionally, Zukiswa et al. (2017) found, despite the desired norm of straight hair, their discourse on “good” versus “bad” hair differs from the American discourse of coarse hair to one that centers around healthy versus weak hair. Moreover, hairstyle choices were not tied to the women disavowing their African roots. However, Rooks (1996) foundational work argues that Black American women have had to claim a White standard of beauty through beauty
care regimens that subscribe to White norms of attractiveness. Such ideology of White beauty can also be seen within a historical context, as Gooden (2011) found Black publishing newspapers and magazines from 1915 to 1950 frequently printed skin bleaching ads to target the small population of middle-class Black women, which the author suggests was an inadvertent attempt for elite Black people, who were mostly men, to set beauty standards.

Moreover, Johnson’s (2013) work further expands this argument in her content analysis of the visual and written rhetoric of Black women’s hair care/styling products in the Black women’s magazines *Essence* and *Ebony* within five-year intervals from 1985 to 2010. Her results demonstrate that “the construction of desire in the chemical relaxer product has a direct correlation with hairstyle choices worn by Black females” (p. 49). Johnson suggests the advertisers connect their perceptions of Black women’s values and desire to the advertised message, which is limited to beauty and style. Likewise, Sandlin and Maudlin (2012) conducted an interpretive cultural textual analysis on current discourses about female consumers, particularly regarding Black women. Based on their analysis, they found that mainstream network commercials infrequently feature Black women, except for beauty commercials featuring light skin celebrities. Also, their social media discourse analysis found stereotypes of Black women as “welfare queens,” a contemporary controlling image that manifested from the mammy stereotype (Collins, 2000). Additionally, Jeffries and Jeffries (2015) employed a case study method to examine seven modern-day media texts to determine the portrayal of Black women’s bodies, voices, and images in the media. They concluded that the increased visibility of strong Black women is a welcomed counternarrative to traditionally stereotypical roles of Black women. However, they contest that the “complex, layered characterization” of Black
women in the media will be difficult for consumers to deconstruct; thereby, leading to perpetuating stereotypes due to distal views of Black women (p. 131).

When looking deeper into blogging, Hardy and Kukla (2015) discovered in their analysis of women’s online discourse surrounding their miscarriage experiences that discussion boards allow for more dialogic exchanges in real-time among a group of people who have equal authority. Specific to blogging and Black womanhood, Brock, Kvsasny, and Hales (2010) conducted a critical technocultural discourse analysis of three blog sites that discussed the concept of the Black woman. Based on their findings, Brock et al. (2010) concluded that the interactive capabilities of blogging allow Black women to correct misconceptions and expand opinions as a means of regaining control over their identities. Additionally, Reid-Brinkley (2007) conducted a conceptual analysis of online message boards on Essence, a Black women’s magazine, regarding a debate on sexism and misogyny in hip-hop. Reid-Brinkley concluded that online message boards provide a necessary space for Black women to discuss relevant issues and create a community of resistance. Likewise, Johnson (2013) asserts Black hair blogs and vlogs (i.e., video blogs) are popular among Black women because it creates a community of belonging, affirmation, and acceptance that resists ideological hair aesthetics.

Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Representation

The public pedagogy of popular culture is increasingly valued by critical educators as an important site of learning (Kincheloe, 2002; Guy, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Wright & Sandlin, 2017). Giroux (2000) argues that popular culture is a substantive and educational force “where identities are continually being transformed and power enacted” (p. 354). Thus, learning itself becomes the means not only for the acquisition of agency but for the concept of social change itself” (p. 354). In the same regard, Guy (2007) challenges
adult educators to critically view popular culture as “a vehicle for challenging structured inequalities and social injustices” (p. 15). As such, Wright and Sandlin (2017) view critical public pedagogies as “spaces of activism, teaching, and learning” that are meant to “interrupt and interrogate hegemonic, capitalist, ‘common-sense’ narratives” (p. 89). Therefore, it is important to examine Black women within popular culture, as situated within a historical context, to gain a critical understanding of its influence on their identity and representation.

In this regard, the work of cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, is key, since his work focuses on identity, media representation, and race relations within power structures that establish differences. Hall (2000) contests, “[H]ow we ‘see’ ourselves and our social relations matters, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices” (p. 272). He argues that representations in the media, “especially when dealing with ‘difference,’ … engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at a deeper level than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” (Hall, 1997, p. 226). Specifically, Hall’s (1997) focus is on popular culture’s portrayal of the Black subject. He argues that an analysis of images must go beyond the literal denoted meaning and include the connoted meaning, especially as it relates to racial identity. Likewise, he asserts that there can be many meanings present within a single image, but there is not one true meaning, as meaning is not static. Additionally, Hall (2009) contends that although power is restrictive and counteractive, it is also productive, as it produces new knowledge and discourses. Central to Hall’s (1997) argument is that media messages work in complex ways to shape our actions and identity. Such media are always connected with the circulation of power; however, this power can be challenged.
Blogging, Online Learning Communities, and Social Media Activism

The advent of social media has expanded online learning opportunities, but it has also become a source of hope for activists. In an effort to understand the full potential of social media for activism, two examples come to mind: former President Barack Obama’s political campaign, which relied heavily upon social networking applications to mobilize volunteers, and Iranian protestors who utilize YouTube and Twitter to show the true state of their government (Joyce, 2010). Although these examples depict social media as an innovative source of democracy, Lovink (2011) argues that these acts are far from citizens being regarded as decision makers. Instead, Lovink terms this phenomenon “detached engagement,” as he believes the promise of a politically disruptive social media has been defeated by the existing political and social structures (p. 2). Moreover, Wright and Sandlin (2017) argue that the variety of sources for online information tends to make people consume “that which supports their entrenched beliefs, rather than narratives that interrupt them” (p. 90). Additionally, Morozov (2011) contends these Western and Eastern examples of citizens fighting for democracy never fully materialize, as the “growing Western fatigue with the project of promoting democracy” and the “resilience of authoritarianism” in the East indicate the lack of solid strategizing in dealing with these structural issues (p. xi). Thus, the democratic potential of social media presents an irresistible charge to eradicate social injustice, but this call to action is met with the same oppressive forces as traditional forms of media.

Despite such negative forces, Denning’s (2000) analysis and Internet model of activism outline the methods activists use to work toward critical consciousness and social action: (a) collection and publication of information; (b) dialogue and community; and (c) coordinating actions and lobbying of decision makers. Such an analysis brings meaning to present day
activists who primarily use social media to collect and publish information. However, Brown and Adler (2008) regard social learning from the perspective that “our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about that content and through grounded interactions, especially with others, around problems or actions. The focus is not so much on what we are learning but on how we are learning” (p. 18). Thus, the learning focus shifts to human interactions and learning activities within a communal setting, where understanding is socially constructed. Thomas and Brown (2011) envision this type of social learning environment as a “collective” (p. 52), where “people learn through their interaction and participation with one another in fluid relationships that are the result of shared interests and opportunity” (p. 50). This type of learning community values experiences as relevant contributions to the larger group. Such online learning communities inform BNHCBs as sites of learning and shared interests. Moreover, Steele (2016) envisions Black blogs as an extension of the Black oral tradition, as she used critical technocultural discourse analysis to assess nine blogs authored by Black people to demonstrate “traditional Black rhetorical strategies” that “demonstrate solidarity and resistance and urge uplift” (p.13). Additionally, Steele found that bloggers employed certain language specific to their community and made Black popular culture references from the 1980s and 1990s to create a sense of community.

Online Learning Communities and Adult Education

This notion of an online learning community supports the context of this study, which situates the blogosphere (i.e., blogging community) as a site of informal online learning. In particular, I focus on BNHCBs as a subsection of this community, and I argue that these blogs were created to give voice to Black women who are often silenced. Therefore, this study is an attempt to utilize radical perspectives to address this development within lifelong learning and adult
education, as Sandlin, Wright, and Clark (2013) argue that “contrary to the ideas of traditional adult learning and development theories, individuals are embedded in cultural contexts that shape who they are and how they learn” (p. 17). Thus, adult identity development and learning can be shaped by social media engagement (Dennen, 2008; Kohls & Nagy, 2012; Birnbaum, 2013). However, during the process of my research, I did not uncover any studies that focused on the intersection of social media and adult identity development, particularly regarding online learning communities within blogs. Moreover, the studies I did find lacked a clear voice for Black women and resistance. To attempt to address these gaps, my study on Black women’s engagement with BNHCBs may very well add meaning to the notion of resistance within social media, as such a practice is not typically viewed as acting upon social injustices for social change but more broadly as an action or activity that is progressive and culturally political. Ultimately, this research is a counternarrative to the traditional analysis of adult learning and development (Sandlin et al., 2013; Wright & Sandlin, 2017), as it relies on a multidisciplinary research approach to “seek a better understanding of the ways human beings learn every day via interactions with the popular culture within which we are steeped” (Wright & Sandlin, 2017, p. 79). Thus, the utilization of critical public pedagogy and the importance of unmediated learning within digital spaces is an example of moving beyond traditional adult learning theories, which the Wright and Sandlin (2017) argue often neglect the cultural context of learning within cultural spaces. Specifically, I focus on the online learning community that develops from underrepresented groups of Black women bloggers and their roles in facilitating Black women’s identity development, levels of consciousness, and capacity for social action.
Statement of the Problem

With the advent of social media, informal online learning opportunities have expanded Web users’ opportunities to be both producers and consumers of media content; thus, educators must respond to these new forms of communication (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012). Sandlin et al. (2013b) contest that “individuals are embedded in cultural contexts that shape who they are and how they learn” (p. 17), so the blogging community is particularly deserving of analysis, since “bloggers have demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention” (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 91).

The notion of bloggers as technoactivists, imparts a sense of responsibility on bloggers who produce media content that values the underrepresented voice. This is especially important within the marginalized group of Black women, since societal practices continue to render them invisible. Of particular importance to this study’s foundation in Black women’s development and blogging, is Black women who wear their hair natural, since BNHCBs inspire Black women to wear their hair in its natural state. The development of such blogs centers on the natural hair social movement. Thus, from a critical public pedagogical perspective informed by Black feminist thought, BNHCBs can be considered a form of critical public pedagogy, a counterstory to the dominant narrative of female beauty. Within this context, Black natural hair care bloggers tell their stories from a Black female experience. They are no longer silenced, as their blogs can take the form of an online diary. Moreover, hooks (1994) cautions looking to people of color as the “native informant” (p. 43), as these bloggers’ narratives create new forms of knowledge that demonstrates the multidimensionality of the Black female experience (Berry, 2010). These narratives, argues White (2011), “demonstrate how the personal is both political and theoretical”
Thus, bloggers informed by these pedagogies must not be afraid to take risks in self-disclosure, as this level of intimacy encourages others to do the same (hooks, 1994; White, 2011). Ultimately, this can lead to self-actualization, as the individuals who engage with such blogs can become empowered through their production and dissemination of knowledge. However, little is known about the intersectionality of online learning communities and social action, particularly regarding Black women’s identity development.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of my study is to explore the role discursive practices and online learning communities within BNHCBs play in the construction of Black female identity and critical consciousness in both online and offline (i.e., real world) spaces, as they pertain to a form of resistance (i.e., cultural politics) from the readers’ perspectives. The research questions that guided my study are:

1. What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?
2. What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the blogger’s practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?
3. How do the blog commenters’ online identities align with their offline identities?

**Theoretical Framework**

Adult education began from a place of social action, specifically regarding teaching with multicultural competence, challenging power dynamics, and decoding a racialized discourse (Guy, 1999; Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010; Brookfield & Holst, 2011). This has implications for Black women’s identity development and diverse methods of
teaching and learning. As such, I will briefly discuss the theoretical framework of critical race theory, informed from a feminist perspective. I will also explore the conceptual framework of critical public pedagogy, especially as it relates to Black feminist thought.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is informed by the philosophical position of critical theory, which assumes social inequity is inherent in our society because dominant ideology miseducates the majority into believing inequity is normal. While the purpose of critical theory is to combat this hegemony with critical consciousness, critical race theory is more focused on issues of racism and the binary ideology of White supremacy.

In critical race theory, the primary objective is “to provide a more cogent analysis of ‘raced’ people and move discussions of race and racism from the margins of scholarly activity to the fore of educational discourse” (Isaac, Merriweather, & Rogers, 2010, p. 361). Additionally, critical race theory espouses five basic tenants, which are: (1) racism is pervasive in our society; (2) critical race theory is multidisciplinary; (3) civil rights law and educational theories do not focus enough on race-based issues; (4) commonly accepted ideas (e.g., color blindness) serve the interest of the majority; (5) the experiences of ethnically diverse groups in both a historical and social context should be valued (Isaac, Merriweather, & Rogers, 2010).

Based on the first assumption, Brookfield (2010) argues that racism’s overt expression is restricted by legal measures; therefore, it relies on racial microaggressions and aversive racism. Racial microaggressions are defined as “the subtle, daily expressions of racism embodied in speech, gestures, and actions such as who gets called on to contribute in discussions and how those contributions are interpreted;” whereas, aversive racism is “the racist behaviors that liberal Whites enact even as they profess sincerely to be free of racism” (Brookfield, 2010, p. 75). This
exposure to microaggressions and aversive racism, Howard-Hamilton (2003) argues, causes a significant amount of anxiety in people of color, which she equates to “racist psychological battering” (p. 23). According to Taylor (1998), such racism endures because of the myths of color blindness and meritocracy, which gravely ignores the societal construct of Whiteness and the systematic racism that continues to oppress people of color.

In order to resist these subtle forms of racism, critical race theory relies heavily on counter-storytelling, which encourages people of color to tell their personal experiences from their cultural perspective. Such a counternarrative challenges the colorblind ideology that we live in a post-racial society. However, Brookfield and Holst (2011) argue that counter-storytelling also challenges what is valued in terms of scholarship. Therefore, it is important for the creation of these counterstories to occur within a safe space, or counterspace, that allows people of color to examine the personal effects of racism. Such a space gives voice to those who are marginalized and often silenced, which provides a sense of solidarity and validation.

**Feminist Engagement with Critical Race Theory**

Although critical race theory gives voice to marginalized people of color, its power analysis centers around race. Therefore, a feminist perspective of critical race theory is warranted to bring to center gender-based inequalities and the ways they intersect with race and class oppression. The importance of the intersection of race, class, and gender within a feminist critical race theory perspective is specifically concerned with bringing women of color to voice. bell hooks (1989) asserts women of color coming to voice is a “revolutionary gesture...where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subject can we speak. As object, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others” (p. 12). Such an interpretation under the imperialist, White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, attempts to homogenize the experiences
of women of color. Although hooks acknowledges individual experiences, she speaks to the process of “self-recovery,” where Black women name their pain through a collective identity of an ancestral history that is often silenced (p. 12). Ultimately, a feminist perspective of critical race theory is not about equality with men but a dismantling of the entire practice of domination of the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

**Critical Public Pedagogy**

Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick (2010) identify public pedagogies as “spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools” (p. 1). These spaces and sites consist of institutions, such as museums, libraries, zoos, television, social media, grassroots organizations, town meetings, and art-based approaches (Sandlin, O’Malley, Burdick, 2011a; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011b). Since these spaces are just as significant to our understanding of identity development and social institutions than what is taught in the classroom, Burdick and Sandlin (2010) define critical public pedagogy as an approach to adult education that relies on “non institutional educational discourses and practices committed to cultural critique and activism” (p. 351). These sites are an important space for critical pedagogy, as it allows critical pedagogues to “utilize cultural learning as a basis for interventionist praxis” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 149). Based on this background information, I will briefly discuss the following assumptions relating to critical public pedagogy: (1) public pedagogies have a strong and unique educative and (mis)educative capacity for our understanding of development and institutional structures (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010) and (2) external forces (e.g., media, popular culture), which perpetuate ideological values, can be sources for “public intellectualism” (Sandlin et al., 2011a, p. 338).
Education and (mis)education in the public sphere. Learning in public spaces challenges what we consider pedagogy. Sandlin et al. (2011a) argue that “within these informal sites, learning often takes on a subtle, embodied mode, moving away from the cognitive rigor commonly associated with education and toward notions of affect, aesthetics, and presence” (p. 348). Such learning can open up new ways of “inquiry into how citizenship, identity, and cultural performances are taught and learned via public transmission” by critiquing the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality within popular culture, the media, and cultural institutions (Sandlin et al., 2011a, p. 352; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011b). This regulation and distribution provides the means by which individuals construct their identities, but it can also lead to (mis)education, as Sandlin et al. (2011a) argue, “the term public refers not to a physical site of educational phenomena but rather to an idealized outcome of educational activity: the production of a public aligned in terms of values and collective identity” (p. 342). These values and collective identity impact how we learn to relate to the world.

Counterhegemonic practices as public intellectualism. Although adults are capable of reaching levels of self-actualization through unmediated means (Wright, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009), Sandlin et al. (2011a) concluded that most of the literature on public pedagogy supports the use of educators as interlocutors for optimal learning in a public space. Brass (2014) defines these educators, or public intellectuals, as “academics whose work provide[s] the public with critical means to understand and resist dominant ideologies that undermine agency, resistance, and democratic politics” (Brass, 2014, p. 92). Brass further references the work of Foucault’s vision of the public intellectual as an educator who is not focused on “producing more truth or correcting untruth,” but is committed to using “political interventions” for “specific modes of problematization and resistance” (p. 97). Additionally, Giroux (2004b), a major
advocate of public intellectuals, urges adult educators to make their academic writing public in
an effort to educate the public on the hegemony within popular culture, connect with people’s
everyday lives, and increase their political agency.

Critical Public Pedagogy Informed by Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought brings the complexities of the Black women’s experience to
center and speaks to the matrix of domination, which examines Black women’s inherited struggle
with multiple oppression by analyzing the simultaneous interaction of race, class, and gender
thought is focused on the uplifting of the Black community, and in particular, Black women.
Collins calls this a “focused education,” which “demonstrates the significance of self, change,
and empowerment of Black women” (p. 216). In order to empower Black women, Black
feminist thought utilizes the multidimensionality of Black female narratives as counterstories to
the dominant discourse (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Berry, 2010). This counterstory to Western
traditions of exclusion promotes equality and multiple perspectives that speak to Black women’s
need to break their cultural silence and be recognized as legitimate and valid (White, 2011;
Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Omolade, 1987). Therefore, White (2011) argues for Black women
educators to engage in critical self-reflection, to be cognizant of their identities and physical
bodies, as these factors can impact the classroom dynamic.

Overview of Design and Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research study, which focuses on issues of meaning-
making and understanding a phenomenon from the perspective of those who know it best
(Patton, 2002). Qualitative research methods allow for quality data collection that provides the
best information to answer the questions set forth in this study (Merriam, 2002). Within my
study, the primary means of data collection are qualitative media content and critical discourse analyses of blog posts and comments. Secondly, blog commenter interviews and their recent blog comments help bring greater meaning to the blog post content analysis.

**Blog Content and Interview Data**

Initially, I analyze selected blog posts from Black natural hair care blogs, *Black Girl with Long Hair* (BGLH) and *CurlyNikki* (CN), and the subsequent comments for each post to uncover salient themes that are relevant to the topic of this study. The data I collect from this qualitative media content analysis and critical discourse analysis gain greater meaning through selected interviews of blog commenters who engage with BGLH and CN.

Seale et al. (2004) equate interviews to “social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings, and thoughts” (p. 16). As a registered user of Disqus (i.e., blog commenting host service), I am able to view the Disqus pages of BGLH and CN, which include links to their “Top Commenters” Disqus pages. This analytic tool allows me to view these blog commenters’ posting history, while also allowing me to either gain more contact information (i.e., link to personal blog) or solicit participation by replying to a previous comment the blog commenter submitted to a site other than BGLH or CN, as these two sites prohibit solicitation. My reply encouraged those who were interested in participating in an interview to email me for more information (see recruitment script in Appendix A). Based on this solicitation, I was able to interview ten women. I was then able to analyze the interview responses and group them into themes, which I cross-referenced with the themes that emerged from the blog post content analysis. The analysis of the findings helps me answer the questions guiding this study, and
therefore, contribute to the limited research on the intersection of blogs and adult education for critical consciousness, identity development, and resistance.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in the possibilities of blogging and informal online learning communities to provide new venues for adults to interact critically and develop positive identities through critical public pedagogy. Thus, this study addresses the paucity of research regarding the intersection of adult identity development with social media, particularly blogging, and how this media platform informs the construction of adult identity, especially Black female identity development. Moreover, this study has important implications not just for me personally but also for Black women’s identity development within the context of adult education mediated through social media.

As a marginalized and under-researched population, issues related to Black female identity development need to be explored further due to the uniqueness of this group’s engagement with social media (Payton & Kvasny, 2011). As such, this study raises questions about the role of adult education in fostering Black female identity development given the increasing recognition of social media in mediating identity. Based on this analysis, adult educators must explore venues of informal learning to engage learners in virtual dialogues that facilitate liberatory learning by teaching “without reinforcing existing systems of domination” (hooks, 1994, p. 18). Thus, this study views the blogging platform, in particular, as a safe, democratic space for learning by giving Black women a place to “voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why” (hooks, 1994, p. 38). Furthermore, this platform can “represent spaces of counterhegemonic practice” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010, p. 351), as
BNHCBs can be seen as a symbolic tactic used to raise public awareness about the ideological hegemony of beauty standards (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010).

Moreover, this study speaks to the need for further research with special interest in informal learning, particularly within social media, to analyze the phenomenon of adult development via social media. As such, the findings from this study can help to develop a model that addresses adult development within social media and informal online learning communities that foster social interaction. This model also needs to allow for opportunities for critical reflection on Black identity beliefs and assumptions. With such a model in place, adult identity development via social media, designed within the parameters of this model, has the potential to cultivate a reflective practice among adult social media users. This critical reflection can expand the possibilities of social media for identity formation, learning, and critical media literacy.

Finally, this study is personally significant, as I identify as a Black woman who has worn her hair in its natural state for 17 years. Thus, I have had first-hand experience with the identity formation and critical consciousness that can often develop from making such a personal decision regarding hair grooming practices. It wasn’t until much later in my hair journey that I began to rely on BNHCBs to inform my styling choices and product usage. Here, I was learning not just about grooming but about self-love. Therefore, this study holds great personal value, and it is my hope that by examining the intersectionality of blogging and Black womanhood, I will help adult educators and Black women become more aware of the significance of online learning communities mediated through social media. Ultimately, I believe this analysis can lead to improved teaching practices and engagement with social media as an effective critical public pedagogical tool.
Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions guide the direction of this study:

1. The content of BNHCBs does not simply contain neutral information, but, rather, is influenced by the experiences and hegemonic assumptions of Black womanhood.

2. The notion that BNHCBs create space to give voice can be analyzed for influences of ideological viewpoints and political perspectives in terms of power and oppression within culture and gender.

3. BNHCBs create learning environments that help their followers (un)learn the oppression that has often been associated with Black hair, thereby leading to positive identity development.

4. Not all BNHCBs aim for critical consciousness and social action but all BNHCBs aim for some sort of learning (e.g., new hair techniques, product usage). Some BNHCBs may perpetuate the Black womanhood stereotypes, while others may (re)present such stereotypes. The personal interpretation of such BNHCBs by individual users will either reaffirm the stereotypes or challenge them.

5. BNHCBs create a space for reciprocal dialogue through blog posts, which leads to reciprocal learning between the blogger and user. Such learning is often unmediated (Wright, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009).

6. Though specific to one genre of blogging, this study can be a catalyst for other studies which can analyze the interconnection between blogging, critical consciousness, and social action.

7. Adult identity development and learning is shaped by social media engagement (Birnbaum, 2013; Dennen, 2008; Kohls & Nagy, 2012).
8. Black women choose to wear their hair natural for varying reasons (e.g., cost-effectiveness, resistance, health)—it is not always political.

**Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

As with all studies, there are limitations and strengths to this particular study. The potential limitations for my study are as follows:

1. **The Digital Divide:** Special consideration needs to be given to populations of low socio-economic status, so that they are not further marginalized due to a potential lack of access to the Web and other digital technologies.

2. **Positionality:** Due to my identification as a Black woman who wears her hair natural, participant responses may have been skewed with my physical representation. My positionality may have also caused me to make assumptions of shared understandings or lived experiences, which could affect my data interpretation (Bettinger, 2010).

3. **Generalizability:** As a qualitative study, this study cannot be considered generalizable as this data is based on the meaning making of the individual and cannot be assumed to reflect the perspective of other Black women.

Although there are potential limitations with this study, there are also considerable strengths. Firstly, this study will add to the body of adult education research by giving voice to Black women on their concerns of Black womanhood and identity within a communal learning environment. This is especially important within this marginalized group, since societal practices continue to render them invisible. Secondly, this study has the potential to strengthen the connection between theory and practice by revealing the learning that occurs through more unmediated means within critical public pedagogy as an interventionist praxis, particularly by addressing how blogging as a form of critical public pedagogy actually works “to teach the
public and how the intended educational meanings of public pedagogies are internalized, reconfigured, and mobilized by public citizens” (Sandlin et al., 2011a, p. 359).

Definitions of Terms

1. **Public pedagogy:** Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick (2010) identify public pedagogies as “spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools” (p. 1). These spaces and sites consist of institutions, such as museums, libraries, zoos, television, the Web, grassroots organizations, town meetings, and art-based approaches (Sandlin, O’ Malley, Burdick, 2011a; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011b).

2. **Critical public pedagogy:** Burdick and Sandlin (2010) define critical public pedagogy as an approach to adult education that relies on “non institutional educational discourses and practices committed to cultural critique and activism” (p. 351). These sites are an important space for critical pedagogy, as it allows critical pedagogues to “utilize cultural learning as a basis for interventionist praxis” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 149).

3. **Popular culture:** Giroux (1994) argues that popular culture “produces meanings mediated through claims to truth represented in images that circulate in an electronic, informational hyperspace which disassociates itself from history, context, and struggle” (p. 4). Today, these images have become an effective tool for how we learn and (un)learn our identities. Giroux (2000) argues that popular culture is a substantive and educational force “where identities are continually being transformed and power enacted” (p. 354). Moreover, Payne and Barbera (2010) provide the following definition of popular culture as a discursive practice: “Popular culture, in short, is that culture which expresses the aesthetic, ideological, hedonistic, spiritual, and symbolic values of a
particular group of people; we can read those values in popular practices, texts, and objects” (p. 554).

4. **Representation**: “Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language” (Hall, 1997, p. 17). This constructivist approach to representation through language relies on signs to convey meaning, which is translated from codes that result from social conventions within a given culture—“our shared ‘maps of meaning’—which we learn and unconsciously internalize as we become members of our culture” (Hall, p. 29). Within the context of this study, media representations will be analyzed through ideology and the motives of the communicator within discursive practices.

5. **Discursive practices**: The process involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of texts that involves relationships to text and social conditions (Richardson, 2007). Discursive practices are “characterized by groups of rules that define their respective specificities” (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 193). Within the framework of this study, discursive practices will be examined for how they are “institutionalized or are moved from being linguistic utterances to set conditions for stable social relations” (Badie, Berg-Scholosser, & Morlino, 2011, pp. 674-675).

6. **Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**: Van Dijk (2001), defines CDA as “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). As such, CDA seeks to invest in social change by exposing how language (re)produces social inequalities. It assumes that “power is transmitted and practiced through discourse” of intended meaning and the speaker
This perspective of power is relevant to the ideas of Michel Foucault (2004), as he looked beyond the traditional view of power (i.e., subjugation, institutions, class) to examine the ways in which individuals exercise power to resist, or self-discipline their actions.

7. **Critical consciousness:** Critical consciousness, or *conscientization*, is a social concept developed by Paulo Freire (2000) that focuses on unmasking hegemony through a critique of the status quo, which upholds power imbalance in social structures. A critical consciousness can be found in individuals who stand for social responsibility and “willingly involve themselves responsibly in the human situation, even at the risk of certain defeat” (Kohler, 1949, p. 549). However, developing critical consciousness does not necessarily always lead to social action, but an individual will have a new perspective and understanding of the perceived reality and her or his interaction with the environment.

8. **Social action:** In this context, social action shall be viewed more broadly as an action or activity that is progressive and “culturally political” but not necessarily “radically political” (Atton, 2014, p. 348; Fiske, 1992).

9. **Social media:** This second development of the World Wide Web, shifts the use of the Web from simple consumption to dynamic, user-generated content that supports an interactive experience. Examples of social media include Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, and various blogs. Social media affords users the opportunity to be both producers and consumers of media content (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012).

10. **Blogs:** Personal websites where an individual regularly writes about personal opinion, experiences, and activities.
11. **Black natural hair care blogs (BNHCBs):** Blogs created by Black women who wear their hair in its natural (non-chemically process or straightened, kinky/curly) state that is used as a medium to create a community of women who value Black natural hair, what it represents, and the information they gain in caring for such a unique hair texture.

12. **Black female identity development:** A collective identity or sense of group membership that shifts from uncritical acceptance of dominant culture hegemony “to an internally determined stance” that values both the dominant and Black cultures (Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996, p. 626). This identity development is informed by womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990), which assesses Black womanhood within a social context, with particular emphasis on women’s attitudes about themselves in relation to others. The womanist identity development theory consists of four distinct stages: (1) Preencounter, (2) Encounter, (3) Immersion-Emersion, and (4) Internalization.

13. **Informal online learning community:** A naturally occurring and unstructured form of peer-to-peer learning that occurs through social media applications to address the learning needs of its members.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In a blog post by CurlyNikki, the world’s leading Black natural hair care blog (BNHCB), Erica Thurman (2012) reflects on her emotional response to her male friend’s dismissal of the politics of Black hair:

Clearly you’ve never…listened to some adult go on and on about your cousin’s ‘good hair’ while looking at yours and lamenting about how it needs to be tamed. Or stood by while men flocked to your friend with long straight hair. You’ve never felt the liberation of a big chop [i.e., cutting out chemical relaxer to expose natural hair] as an act of resistance against the mother[s] who put so much energy into your hair that even you began to feel that it alone defined you.

Thurman’s personal narrative on Black women and the politics of their hair demonstrates the democratic potential of blogging. However, this area is in need of further research, as the inclination toward online learning communities, in particular blogs that foster personal narratives as a form of knowledge where learners can have their interests heard and valorized, is often met
with questions as to its true impact on social action and change (Lovink, 2011; Maratea, 2008; Morozov, 2011). Likewise, Wright and Sandlin (2017) argue, “Even with the plethora of choices for information and entertainment, people tend to consume that which supports their entrenched beliefs, rather than narratives that interrupt them” (p. 90). Although there are numerous forms of resistance, these messages are hidden within online spaces with limited or small audiences (Wright & Sandlin, 2017).

With this in mind, the purpose of my study is to explore the role discursive practices and online learning communities within Black natural hair care blogs (BNHCBs) play in the construction of Black female identity and critical consciousness in both online and offline (i.e., real world) spaces, as they pertain to a form of resistance (i.e., cultural politics) from the blog commenters’ perspectives. In particular, this study will focus on BNHCBs as a subsection of online learning communities and argue that these blogs give voice to the underrepresented.

Moreover, my study focuses on Black women’s engagement with BNHCBs, with the hopes that it will add meaning to the concept of social action within blogs (Atton, 2014; Fiske, 1992). Ultimately, I hope this research provides a counternarrative to more traditional discussions of facilitated adult learning and development by specifically focusing on the online learning community that develops from underrepresented groups of Black women bloggers and their roles in facilitating other Black women’s identity development, social consciousness, and social action. Based on the purpose of my study, I will explore the following research questions:

1. What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?

2. What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the blogger’s practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?
3. How do the blog commenters’ online personalities align with their offline personalities?

In line with the purpose and research questions, I begin this chapter with an overview of critical race theory, particularly from a feminist perspective, which gives background to understanding the conceptual framework of this study. Hence, in the following section, I examine how critical race theory and feminist critical race theory inform critical pedagogy and the investigation of learning from popular culture. After establishing these contextual concepts, I explain the conceptual framework of critical public pedagogy. Next, I examine a radical understanding of adult development, which will include Stuart Hall’s work on representation, and then follow this by discussing Janet Helm’s (1990) womanist identity development theory and Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) Black feminist thought to bring meaning to Black women’s identity development. Because this study is related not only to Black womanhood, but also to social networking, I explore blogging within the context of informal online learning and then briefly discuss how all of these frameworks merge together. Afterward, I examine the otherness of Black womanhood and the controlling images that perpetuate the myth. This overview provides background to understanding how the Black body, skin, and hair can be read as text (i.e., cultural products). Next, I discuss how BNHCBs are informed by the previously discussed concepts. After establishing this context, I begin reviewing the literature related to Black women’s identity development within popular culture, including studies on blogging, consciousness-raising, and social action. I conclude with a discussion of the literature related to Black women’s identity development within adult education and how the reviewed literature provides a foundation for the importance of this research in terms of the intersection of blogging, adult education, Black womanhood, and critical consciousness development through reciprocal learning in online learning communities within blogging platforms.
Theoretical Framework

In order to examine Black women’s identity development, consciousness-raising, and social action capacity, it is necessary to first examine the influence of critical race theory and its criticism of oppressive forces that reproduce the status quo. After this examination, I will discuss popular culture within the framework of Hall’s politics of representation and then follow with a brief discussion of the conceptual framework of critical public pedagogy, especially as it relates to Black feminist thought and womanist identity development theory. Next, I will discuss aspects of the social network learning theory, connectivism, to provide a lens for how individuals learn from their engagement with online learning communities. Lastly, I will identify how these theories and conceptual frameworks intersect to inform this study.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is rooted in the overarching philosophical school of critical theory. When critical race theory is informed by a feminist perspective, it provides a lens to examine how Black women learn to resist dominant ideologies within shared spaces. In order to better understand how critical race theory and feminist critical race theory inform this study, I will first discuss the origin and main assumptions of critical theory.

Critical theory. The origin of critical theory is associated with a group of German social theorists (including Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) from the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory in Germany. The Frankfurt School was founded after World War I as a critical response to European fascism in order to perceive and challenge its dominant ideology through Marxism (Payne & Barbera, 2010, Brookfield, 2005). To illuminate challenging the processes of hegemony, Brookfield (2005) identifies the Frankfurt School’s idea of ideology critique as “critical distancing from, and then oppositional reengagement with, the dominant culture” as the
primary goal of adulthood (pp. 12-13). Thus, critical theory relies on reflective discourse that questions dominant social norms and hegemonic assumptions to help learners acquire emancipatory knowledge to inform action that leads to social change. Put another way, critical theory is about becoming aware of how one is oppressed and turning that awareness into action.

To expand on these ideals, Brookfield (2005) identifies five distinct characteristics of critical theory in his essential text on critical theory in adult education, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching*. First, critical theory’s primary unit of analysis is people acting within historical structures that perpetuate capitalism. This analysis of capitalism brings to light how our identities and sense of worth are commodified through our labor. Secondly, critical theory speaks to interventionist praxis by enlightening people with knowledge that will free them from their unconscious levels of oppression. This emancipatory action, Brookfield (2005) argues, “is clearly transformative and exists to bring about social change” (p. 26). Thirdly, critical theory is a barrier-free research approach, where the researcher and subject (particularly those who are marginalized) support a vision of a just society informed by critical theory. In line with this third characteristic, critical theory’s fourth characteristic is that it envisions a more democratic world realized through the social and cultural formation of one’s identity. Thus, living as a developed, mature, and compassionate adult is not just for the privileged few but for all members of society, where everyone has equal voice. The fifth and final characteristic of critical theory, and often the most frustrating, is that it is impossible to verify whether it is true or false because the inspired society is not realized.

These five distinctive characteristics of critical theory bring to light the following three core assumptions within critical theory regarding our social realities:
1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities.

2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and seems to be normal, natural, and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology.

3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it (Brookfield, 2005, p. viii).

This final assumption gives us hope for what Horkheimer (1972) stated “is not simply the theory of emancipation; it is the practice of it as well” (p. 233). Therefore, in order to be effective, critical theory must move beyond theory to practice. This lack of practicality is a main critique among adult education practitioners, as many believe critical theory is often theoretical and rarely practical (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Brookfield, 2005). Collins (1995) asserts the traditional Marxian critical theory alluded to a theory of emancipatory learning; however, it was Habermas that made this social theory an emancipatory educational practice.

Thus, Collins credits Habermas with a version of critical theory that “holds out the promise of enabling us to specify concretely with practical intent how we can think of all of society as a vast school” (Collins, 1995, p. 12). This broad view of learning develops from Habermas’ simultaneous view of society as a system and a lifeworld, where “the lifeworld appears as a reservoir of taken-for-granteds, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation” (Habermas, 1995, p. 124). Put another way, the lifeworld is our everyday unconscious cultural interactions that inform our mutual understanding of the world. Thus, the lifeworld is a site of cultural reproduction. However, this structural,
communicative component can be dismantled through the public sphere, where individuals informally gather to freely discuss societal issues.

Habermas (1989, 2004) brings meaning to dismantling the lifeworld, which reifies economic subsystems that block certain groups from accessing information, by viewing the public sphere as a place that “neutralizes intellectual challenges to the dominant order” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 234). The weakening of the public sphere, along with the colonization of the lifeworld, Brookfield (2005) argues, leaves intellectuals “impotent, offering only the sorts of notes to a dying civilization or messages in bottles” (p. 234). This critical consciousness and free exchange of ideas prevents society from *communicative rationality*, or communicative reason, which allows for “unconstrained argumentative speech” to form a “unifying consensus” among the public (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 319). Through this public deliberation within the public sphere, the lifeworld can be reproduced and become resistant to systemic forces.

Reproducing the lifeworld can be achieved through critically analyzing our unconscious actions that maintain the status quo and developing tools to get people there. The work of Brookfield (2005) speaks to this aim, as he provides adult educators with a framework for practice. This framework includes the following seven adult learning tasks: (1) challenging ideological knowledge construction through critical self-reflection of largely unconscious and symbolic processes; (2) contesting hegemony by identifying the oppressive forces society teaches us to accept as natural; (3) unmasking power from a Foucauldian notion of multiple sites and channels of power that moves beyond institutions to individuals’ exercise of power to resist; (4) learning to overcome the alienation induced by becoming aware of the ideological manipulation of commodification through participatory democracy; (5) combating one-dimensional thought by explicitly teaching learners critical thinking and exposing them to
diverse and dissenting perspectives; (6) reclaiming reason through opinions developed informally within the public sphere (where there is full access and consideration of all the relevant facts about a particular issue) and “gather[ing] their political energies behind a particular movement for change” (p. 231); and (7) practicing a new model of democracy built on a communicative action that avoids binary reasoning while learning to live with the inherent contingencies within the democratic process.

However, Brookfield’s framework aligns with critical theorists’ traditional focus on socioeconomic class as their unit of analysis. Therefore, Brookfield (2005) argues, “Critical theory’s focus on alienation, and its attribution of alienation to capitalism and bureaucratic rationality, do not lead it to an historical focus on understanding and combating racism through selfethnic or other forms of liberation” (p. 309). Based on the fundamentals of critical theory, what is missing from this analysis, and what is essential to this study, is a clear and consistent focus on race and gender. As a result, the theoretical framework of critical race theory and a feminist perspective of critical race theory will be used within this study to analyze issues surrounding race and gender.

**Critical race theory.** Like critical theory, the goals of critical race theory are challenging ideology and action for change. Based on Dovidio and Gaertner’s (2000) aversive-racism perspective, Brookfield and Holst (2011) argue, “Critical race theory assumes that racism is endemic, and that as legal measures restrict its overt expression…it reconfigures itself in racial microaggressions and aversive racism” (p. 208). Brookfield (2010) defines racial microaggressions and aversive racism as follows:

Racial microaggressions are the subtle, daily expressions of racism embodied in speech, gestures, and actions such as who gets called on to contribute in discussions and how
those contributions are interpreted. Aversive racism comprises the racist behaviors that liberal Whites enact even as they profess sincerely to be free of racism. (p. 75)

Reconfiguring racial bias through more covert forms of racism, Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) assert, makes traditional methods of eradicating racism ineffective. However, Taylor (1998) indicates critical race theory contests these subtle forms of racism through an “oppositional scholarship” that “challenges the experiences of whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color” (p. 122). Thus, critical race theory can be viewed as a framework that combines various strategies and methodologies to analyze the construction of race, particularly the binary distinction of Blacks and Whites.

Closson (2010) further relates critical race theory to Africentrism (Colin & Guy, 1998) by arguing that critical race theory, like Africentrism, views the Black experience as a privileged standpoint that requires a separate framework. However, critical race theory differs from Africentrism in two distinct ways: (1) it does not claim to be a worldview and (2) it mainly critiques racial issues in the United States. Additionally, critical race theory is distinct from Brookfield’s (2005) racializing criticality, as its purpose is neither to demonstrate the racial relevancy of Marxism and neo-Marxism nor to develop a theory from the fathers of critical theory (Closson). Instead, critical race theory, “a critique of the racial reform movement in the United States,” focuses primarily on racial inequities and how racism shapes the social fabric of America (Closson, p. 276). Based on these foci, critical race theory makes the following five assumptions: (1) racism is pervasive in our society; (2) critical race theory is multidisciplinary; (3) civil rights law and educational theories are limiting in their race-based views; (4) commonly accepted ideas (e.g., color blindness and meritocracy) serve the interest of Whites; and (5) credibility must be given to the experiences of people of color in both historical and social
contexts (Isaac, Merriweather, & Rogers, 2010). These assumptions are framed within critical theory. Consequently, the origins of critical race theory are worth discussing.

Critical race theory was developed in the 1970s by 35 “critical legal scholars” of color as a theoretical tool to examine race and racism within existing societal power structures by creating a politicized discourse about people of color (Closson, 2010, p. 264; Lynn, 1999). Legal scholar, Derrick Bell (1992), considered the father of critical race theory, focused on the civil rights discourse on race, as a counterhegemonic legal scholarship that challenged White normativity by bringing the African-American experience to the forefront. According to Closson (2010), “Bell’s legacy to critical race theory is skepticism about civil rights discourse, and activist orientation, and counter-story-telling” (p. 264). Such a discourse within critical race theory by people of color and for people of color is in of itself empowering, but more importantly, critical race theory exposes racial microaggressions, develops counterspaces, and creates counterstories to raise levels of consciousness (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Such practices are crucial to our understanding of and resistance to racial inequalities. Therefore, critical race theory will be examined more closely, based on these three factors.

**Exposure to microaggressions.** Constitutional laws suggest we are a neutral and colorblind society; however, these laws should be viewed with caution, since they have created new vehicles for racist actions known as racial microaggressions. Howard-Hamilton (2003) define racial microaggressions as “conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, and visual forms of insults directed toward people of color” (p. 23). As stated previously, this contemporary portrayal of racism makes it difficult to analyze and combat, which Howard-Hamilton argues, causes “tremendous anxiety for those who experience this racist psychological battering” (p. 23). Such anxiety is often induced by unconscious racist responses by White people, such as “You are
pretty for a Black girl” and “I don’t think of you as Black.” Such insensitive remarks are often uttered because of the myths of *color blindness* and *meritocracy* (Taylor, 1998).

Regarding the first myth, adhering to a color-blind perspective eradicates the historicity of race and racism in our society, and according to Taylor (1998), “allows us to ignore the racial construction of whiteness and reinforces its privileged and oppressive position” (p. 123). Therefore, White supremacy remains a constant by continuing to pit all other races against the racial construction of Whiteness. Ignoring race also takes away the privileged standpoint of people of color and silences their voice. Additionally, the myth of meritocracy relies on narrow stories from wealth to demonstrate that hard work is all that is needed to attain money, power, and privilege. However, this “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality ignores the systematic racism that continues to restrict the economic growth of people of color. To this, Taylor (1998) argues, “[C]ritical race theory asserts that such standards are chosen, they are not inevitable, and they should be only debated and reformed in ways that no longer benefit privileged whites alone” (p. 123). However, critical race theory asserts the interests of people of color can only be achieved when they align with the interests of White policymakers (Taylor, 1998; Closson, 2010). This phenomenon is called *interest convergence*. Based on this perspective, the opposite is also true—policies that are designed to benefit people of color and threaten White supremacy are dismissed. From a critical race theory perspective, interest convergence not only explains racial injustices, but it also offers a strategy for overcoming racial barriers (Closson, 2010). Developing strategies to resist the interests of the majority often requires a think tank of similar people with similar interests.

**Development of counterspaces.** Marginalized groups need a safe place to share their stories and acknowledge the anxiety-provoking microaggressions thrust upon them. Within
critical race theory, such a space is known as a *counterspace*. Based on the work of Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000), students of color found other students who looked like them to establish a counterspace that provided “shelter from the daily torrent of microaggressions,” while also being “a place that [was] validating and supportive” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 23). Thus, creating counterspaces is a response to racial microaggressions that allows those from marginalized groups to share their experiences. However, critical race theory believes venting frustrations is only a rudimentary step in getting the voices of often silenced groups heard. Therefore, Solorzano, et al. (2000) argue that counterspaces “serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (p. 70). Such counterspaces can include fraternities and sororities, churches, and various other organizations specifically for people of color. Ultimately, these spaces serve as a strategic, safe space to hear the range of voices that are able to name racism through personal experiences related to racial microaggressions.

**Creation of counterstories.** In an effort to bring voice to marginalized groups, critical race theory relies heavily on the use of narratives as counterstories to dominant discourse (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Berry, 2010). Counter-storytelling places considerable emphasis on the multidimensionality of people of color’s narratives to recount their personal experiences with racism. As such, it challenges the dominant view of homogeneous experiences of people of color through personal narratives of different and often untold stories. These personal reflections, Brookfield and Holst (2011) argue, “[C]hallenge not just what Whites consider to be racial reality (that civil rights has made racism a nonissue) but also what constitutes appropriate forms of classroom expression or scholarship” (p. 208). These counterspaces allow people of color to examine racism and its personal effects to give voice to those who are marginalized and
isolated. This collective analysis is empowering because it allows members of the space to hear how others frame their arguments, which helps them become better informed in making their own arguments (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

**Feminist Engagement with Critical Race Theory**

Feminist engagement with critical race theory also encourages the expression of voice through counter-storytelling to find one’s voice. However, this feminist perspective is a deliberate attempt to bring gender oppression and the ways this intersects with race and class oppression to critical race theory (Brookfield, 2010). Critical race theory’s lack of serious engagement with feminist perspectives, particularly those related to Black womanhood, is a necessary means of analysis within the context of this study. Therefore, this section will bring a feminist perspective to critical race theory.

In her analysis of feminist consciousness, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks (1989) writes about spaces for feminist concerns:

One such space has been the feminist focus on coming to voice—on moving from silence into speech as revolutionary gesture. Once again, the idea of finding one’s voice or having a voice assumes a primacy in talk, discourse, writing, and action…Feminist focus on finding a voice may seem clichéd at times, especially when insistence is that women share a common speech or that all women have something meaningful to say at all times. However, for women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings …come to voice as an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subject can we speak. As object, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others. (p. 12)
Although hooks speaks from her lived experience, she argues that, for Black women, one’s sense of self comes together to embody a collective identity that accounts for the ancestral history.

“Yet,” hooks argues, “it is precisely these voices that are silenced, suppressed, when we are dominated” (p. 31). However, in the struggle to recover their collective voice, Black women are able to gain a sense of being. hooks (1989) calls this process “self-recovery,” where Black women not only name or uncover their pain but link this naming process to substantive strategies and models for change to avoid becoming disillusioned by feminism. Part of this disillusionment develops out of an imperialist, White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy that coopts the being and voices of Black women into spectacle (hooks, 1989). To this, hooks asserts:

If the identified audience, those spoken to, is determined solely by ruling groups who control production and distribution, then it is easy for the marginal voice striving for a hearing to allow what is said to be overdetermined by the needs of that majority group who appears to be listening, to be tuned in. (p. 14)

Brookfield and Holst (2011) argue that this quote illustrates hooks’ inclination to critical (race) theory; therefore, hooks’ feminist perspective “is not an attempt to gain equality with men but a fight against the whole ideology and practice of domination constituted by the interlocking systems of sexism, racism, and classism” (p. 328). Equally important to hooks’ (1994) feminist critical race theory perspective, is her aim to use adult education as a means to transgress the boundaries of education in order to achieve feminist consciousness-raising.

**Critical Race Theory within Adult Education**

The previous discussion surrounding racial microaggression, counterspaces, and counterstories is not limited to law, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1998) popularized critical race theory within education, while Elizabeth Peterson (1999) introduced this theory to the field of
adult education (Isaac et al, 2010). Currently, a number of adult education scholars have used critical race theory to frame their research and practice (Merriweather Hunn, Guy, & Manglitz, 2006; Morgan, Frazier, Fredericks, Waters, & Merriweather Hunn, 2009). Therefore, applying critical race theory to the field of adult education is a necessary avenue of research, as it brings to task the necessity of educational practice within critical adult education curriculum. As such, Solorzano, et al. (2000) argue the significance of critical race theory within education, stating:

The critical race theory framework for education is different from other critical race theory frameworks because it simultaneously attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, tests, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class by showing how these social constructs intersect to impact on communities of color. Further, it focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of communities of color and offers a liberatory and transformative method for examining racial/ethnic, gender, and class discrimination. It also utilizes transdisciplinary knowledge and the methodological base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, and the law to forge better understandings of various forms of discrimination. (p. 63)

This counterstory to Western educational traditions of exclusion promotes equality and multiple perspectives that speak to Black women’s needs to break their cultural silence. By naming racism, Black women can find their voice and be recognized for their legitimacy (Omolade, 1987; hooks, 1994; Freire, 2000; White, 2011).

**Feminist practices of critical race theory.** When we turn to a discourse surrounding the informed feminist practice of critical race theory, we can see that, in hooks (1994) words:

“[C]onfronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we
learn; rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth” (p. 113). This is especially true when discussing the impact of racism and other discriminatory norms and practices, as critically analyzing White supremacy through the perspective of marginalized groups provides “an alternative social reality through use of varied language” (Florence, 1998, p. 120). Thus, educators informed by feminist critical race theory use counterhegemonic tools that reimagine the way knowledge is disseminated in the classroom (hooks, 1994). To hooks, a feminist approach to critical race theory connects students’ learning with their lived experiences to not only make the learning more meaningful and enjoyable but also to recognize the multidimensionality of Black female narratives as counterstories to dominant discourse (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Berry, 2010). This brings recognition to the learner and lessens the impact of the resulting “cultural silencing” that manifests from cultural hegemony (hooks, 1994; Florence, 1998; Freire, 2000). Like critical race theory, a classroom informed by feminist critical race theory creates a liberatory space (i.e., counterspace) where teachers and students interact in a collaborative teaching and learning process that creates counterstories which promote equality and multiple perspectives that legitimize the knowledge of Black women. However, such a liberatory space cannot exist without educators publicly scrutinizing their own racism and their collusion in perpetuating racism (Brookfield, 2010). Such scrutiny extends beyond White teachers to that of Black women educators, as White (2011) argues for Black women educators to engage in critical self-reflection and to be cognizant of their identities and physical bodies, as these factors can impact the classroom dynamic.

Ultimately, Brookfield’s seven adult learning tasks, critical race theory’s three factors for consciousness-raising, and feminist critical race theory’s call to bring Black women to voice naturally align with the educational practices of critical public pedagogy, which provides a
conceptual framework for providing an understanding of informal spaces of learning and activism. The following section explores this conceptual framework in greater detail.

**Critical Public Pedagogy**

Critical public pedagogy provides a framework, which allows for the integration of critical race theory and feminist critical race theory to become the vehicle to facilitate critical consciousness and social action. What follows is a brief discussion of the foundations of this practice, its core assumptions related to learning, and its limitations and relevance to this study.

**Critical pedagogy.** Like two of the disciplines most revered practitioners, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, adult education began from a place of hope through social action, specifically regarding teaching with multicultural competence, challenging power dynamics, and decoding a racialized discourse (Peterson, 1996; Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Guy, 1999; Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010). Horton and Freire are two prolific adult educators who helped bring theory to practice. Although they both shared a similar goal of educating the oppressed and creating social change and empowerment of adults through participatory education, the tactics they used to reach this goal differed. Whereas Horton’s experiences taught him to work outside the political system, Freire’s experiences taught him that he could make changes inside the political system.

Horton, one of the founders of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, believed his formal education disconnected him from “how people really learned” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 41), as he soon realized learning had to begin with experience. Horton’s vision for Highlander was for people to learn from each other and for everyone to respect one another’s knowledge, as the individual’s learned to respect their knowledge.
Unlike Horton, Freire was afforded the opportunity to be challenged by his teachers, which undoubtedly created his desire to work within the system for change. Through his government work with laborers, Freire learned “how to discuss with the people” (Horton & Freire, p. 65), as his wife, Elza, helped him understand he could not speak to the workers as he spoke to academics. Freire needed to respect the people’s knowledge and assess whether his knowledge was beneficial to the group. These experiences led him to publish his most seminal work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, where he calls adult educators and learners to action:

[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, 2000, p. 39)

Although Freire rarely used the term “critical pedagogy,” his pedagogy is one articulation of critical pedagogy. Presently, critical educators (Harris & Jarvis, 2000; Brookfield, 2005; Wright & Sandlin, 2009; Wright, 2010; Brookfield & Holst, 2011; English & Mayo, 2012) have expanded the foundational practice of critical pedagogy from K-12 educators Peter McLaren (2002, 2016) and Henry Giroux (Giroux & McLaren, 1989) into an educational movement.

Based on the combination of praxis and theory, critical pedagogy is broadly the pedagogy of critical theory. However, McLaren (2016) further specifies that “critical pedagogy examines schools both in their historical context and as part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the class-driven dominant society” (p. 121). Fundamentally, critical pedagogy, like critical theory, is concerned with understanding power structures and how they maintain social
inequities, with the overall aim of upending such power. Thus, a critical pedagogical approach to learning encompasses the central tenants of critical consciousness and praxis.

Based on a Gramscian framework, Brookfield (2005) explains the goal of critical consciousness is to understand how adults “learn an awareness of their oppression and how this awareness helps them learn to organize for political transformation” (p. 103). Such awareness is central to critical pedagogy as the practice of critical consciousness to uncover the ideologies that often oppress people by race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Freire, 2000). This idea echoes Freire’s conscientization, which hooks (1994) translates to her and her students’ active engagement. Thus, it is imperative that critical consciousness be paired with praxis if social change is to be fully realized. From the perspective of Freire, praxis is “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” and make it more equitable (hooks, 1994, p. 14).

This emphasis on radicalizing learning with resistance and social action gives adult educators and learners “a political language to articulate that process” (hooks, 1994, p. 46). hooks (1994) further expresses how Freire challenged her to move beyond the “colonizing mindset” in teaching by forcing her to “think deeply about the construction of an identity in resistance” (p. 46). As such, hooks was influenced by Freire to conceptualize education as “the practice of freedom,” through active participation in the classroom and evoking her students to do the same. Later, hooks worked directly with Freire, to which she said the experience “restored [her] faith in liberatory education” (p. 18), as Freire’s concept of a liberatory education led individuals to challenge the passive role of education, in which the educators are the depositors of knowledge and the learners are the depositaries (i.e., “banking” concept). Breaking free of this passive system leads to liberated creativity, transformation, and knowledge (Freire, 2000). However, part of breaking free can arguably be met outside of the classroom through
nonformal modes of education. As stated earlier, society at large is our greatest source of education, whether through mediated or unmediated means. Critical theory gives us the framework to unmask the hegemony within our lifeworld; however, such a highly rational process does not fully account for the impact of popular culture.

In his final work, German philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, affirmed the critical potential of “autonomous artistic expression” (Payne & Barbera, p. 434), which is a shift in thinking of critical adult education. Through viewing artistic forms of expression, we are able to see a world fully realized by critical theory—a world free of oppressive forces. Immersion into this artistic world offers us “a chance of breaking with the familiar, of inducing in us an awareness of other ways of being in the world” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 201). However, in his comparative critique of Marcuse and Angela Davis, Brookfield (2005) argues that art can extend beyond Marcuse’s notion of aesthetic sensibilities to include Davis’ view that “art created explicitly in the service of political struggle, and that addresses that struggle’s purpose directly by galvanizing action, plays a crucial role in social movements” (pp. 347-348). Thus, art within this space can create a counternarrative to the hegemonic influences of popular culture.

**Popular culture as public pedagogy.** At first glance, the term *popular culture* seems to imply a quantitative descriptor of culture, where what is considered “popular” is related to the amount of consumption. This commodified version of popular culture is legitimate, but, it neither speaks to the history of past values embedded within cultural texts nor the established terms to separate social groups by cultural differences (Payne & Barbera, 2010). Thus, Payne and Barbera (2010) provide the following definition of popular culture as a discursive practice: “Popular culture, in short, is that culture which expresses the aesthetic, ideological, hedonistic, spiritual, and symbolic values of a particular group of people; we can read those values in
popular practices, texts, and objects” (p. 554). The difficulty herein lies with identifying exactly who the people are within these particular groups.

Fiske (2009) argues that the concept of “the people” is not a “stable concept, but one whose terms are constantly under reformulation in a dialectic relationship with the dominant classes” (p. 565). This concept, in part, informs a critical perspective of popular culture that is viewed as “those symbolic institutions which produce the people, which produce, that is to say, a particular form of collective identity, a particular set of attitudes and values, a particular sort of recognition, a particular sense of belonging” (Payne & Barbera, p. 555). This definition paints a bleak portrait of people as passive consumers of cultural commodities, incapable of discriminating the messages bombarding them. This view, as Fiske (2009) asserts, does not account for the diverse social identities seen within our society. Thus, for the purposes of this study, Storey (2009) and Fiske’s (2009) views of popular culture are most relevant: “[P]eople make popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industries” (p. xix), and thereby have the potential to empower themselves through a conflict with cultural forms and interests that differ from those who produce cultural commodities (Fiske, 2009).

Given the social influence of popular culture, Sandlin and company (Wright & Sandlin, 2009; Sandlin et al., 2011a, Sandlin et al. 2011b, Burdick & Sandlin, 2013) conducted substantial literature reviews to assess the hegemonic and counterhegemonic influences of public pedagogy. Through their analyses, they conclude that more research needs to be done to bring greater meaning to education outside of institutional walls, particularly with adults who engage seriously with popular culture. The aim of such research is to “illuminate the ways in which educational elements within these spaces diverge from, problematize, disrupt, or oppose the practices and performances of formal schooling” (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011, p. 364).
Ultimately, such work indicates that public pedagogy must not be positioned in relation to a rigid framework of teaching and learning, as seen within institutionalized schooling.

The public pedagogy of popular culture is increasingly valued by critical educators as an important site of learning (Kinetchoe, 2002; Guy, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Giroux (2000) argues that popular culture is a substantive and educational force “where identities are continually being transformed and power enacted” (p. 354). Thus, learning itself becomes the means not only for the acquisition of agency but for the concept of social change itself” (p. 354). Likewise, Guy (2007) challenges adult educators to view popular culture as “a vehicle for challenging structured inequalities and social injustices” (p. 15) through pedagogical practices that determine the “different interpretations that can be made by different identity groups in different contexts” (p. 22). hooks' (2006) work speaks to this challenge; however, she contests that such work “merely mimic[s] in a new way old patterns of cultural imperialism and colonialism” if adult educators do not create a culture of self-interrogation that “negates cultural imperialism in all its manifestations” (pp. 6, 7). As such, critical studies of media and popular culture studies bring meaning to public pedagogy as a potential site of resistance that teaches us to cross the borders of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. However, popular culture generally creates and perpetuates a public pedagogy of dominant ideologies. Specific to this study, mass-mediated popular culture is an effective learning tool where Black women learn through “symbolic representations of black ‘others’ that result in the marginalization and demonization of black people as a group” (Guy, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, it is important to examine Black women within the public spaces of popular culture, situated within a historical context, to gain a critical understanding of its influence on their identity and the politics of representation.
**Critical Public Pedagogy.** Spaces of nonformal education like museums, television, and social media, are just as essential, possibly more so, to our understanding of identity development and social institutions than what is taught in the classroom. However, such spaces often times are set up to instruct citizenship, which Biesta (2014) argues, is “oriented toward the erasure of plurality, and thus toward the erasure of the conditions for politics and freedom” (p. 21). Turning from an instructional view of pedagogy to a collective learning view, presents the world as a classroom, which Biesta asserts “brings democracy under a regime of learning” (p. 22). Based on these two interpretations of public pedagogy as instruction and learning under a collective, Biesta offers a third form of public pedagogy that is concerned with “publicness” (p. 23). This form of pedagogy is premised on human togetherness and activist in reclaiming plurality (Biesta, 2014) and brings meaning to *critical* public pedagogy, which Burdick and Sandlin (2010) define as “those non institutional educational discourses and practices committed to cultural critique and activism” (p. 351). Such sites of discourse and practice give space to critical pedagogues to utilize nonformal learning opportunities “as a basis for interventionist praxis” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 149).

According to Savage (2010), critical public pedagogy’s origins are wide and varied, as the term *public pedagogy* has historically been given various meanings from various educational scholars who study the influence of cultural studies, feminism, and education. Since it is difficult to determine a clear foundation, Sandlin, et al. (2010) call “for a radically interdisciplinary and contextualized” multicultural research, theory, and practice to address the various spaces of pedagogy (p. 3). To add context, Schubert (2010) argues that public pedagogy is best perceived through the historical lenses of curriculum studies and the foundations of education. Schubert credits John Dewey’s (1938) distinction of “educative experience from non-
educative and miseducative experience” (p. 54), a concept influenced by Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) seminal work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, with laying the foundation for curriculum studies. These origins of curriculum studies gave rise to studies of popular culture; however, Wright and Sandlin (2009) argue that public pedagogy is a newly identified framework for studying culture within adult education.

More specifically, Sandlin, O’ Malley, and Burdick (2011a) credit feminist researcher, Carmen Luke’s (1993, 1996, 2003) pivotal work on the role of popular culture in gender identity and youth with introducing popular culture and informal learning as public pedagogy. Expanding on Luke’s work, Henry A. Giroux (1994, 2000, 2003a, 2004a, 2004b) popularized public pedagogy through his description of intersections of cultural studies and education (Sandlin et al., 2010). Within these disciplines, Giroux, while informed by Gramsci (1999), began critically analyzing mass media, such as Disney and Benetton, which influenced a number of educational scholars (Guy, 2004; Sandlin, 2005; Sandlin & Milam, 2008; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Tisdell, 2008; Wright, 2007, 2010; Wright & Sandlin, 2009) who began analyzing the miseducation of popular culture.

**Core assumptions of critical public pedagogy.** To add greater distinction to critical public pedagogy, the following assumptions about its influence on learning and the construction of knowledge will be discussed: (1) public pedagogy’s unique educative and (mis)educative capacity for our understanding of development and institutional structures and (2) hegemonic external forces as sources for public intellectualism.

**Education and (mis)education in the public sphere.** The public sphere is an informal space where individuals gather to freely discuss societal issues. Such a space is accessible to anyone; therefore, critical public pedagogy assumes all individuals can access the information
disseminated in public spaces. This free access has the potential to inform those who are marginalized and give them voice; thereby, providing them with the space to challenge their hegemonic assumptions. Furthermore, this notion of learning in public spaces challenges our rigid understanding of pedagogy and forces us to move beyond cognition to spaces informed by aesthetics, emotions, and presence (Sandlin et al., 2011a). Ellsworth (2005) further argues public pedagogy sites focused on art and aesthetic create a sense of creativity, openness, and ambiguity that operate as a framework transitioning one from the old self to the new. This supports a critical transformative learning objective, where the learners not only challenge their assumptions but also resist and change the existing culture that perpetuates social inequities. One such work within the field of adult education that speaks to the aesthetics is Zorrilla and Tisdell’s (2016) examination of the work of conceptual artist, Luis Camnitzer. The findings from this study indicate that the artist relied on eliciting the creativity of the viewer, instead of making overtly political statements. Thus, the role of Camnitzer’s conceptual art was found to evoke consciousness-raising, to which the authors deemed aligned with the principles of critical public pedagogy.

Camnitzer’s work also speaks to intentionality, as what may be most intriguing about critical public pedagogy is that the learner often lacks intentionality when interacting with the symbol of critical public pedagogy—even though the maker is often very intentional in her or his aim. This speaks to the potential for adults to be educated and reach levels of self-actualization through unmediated means (Wright, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). However, the overarching goal of critical public pedagogy extends beyond self-actualization to political action. For this reason, critical educators value the pedagogy of popular culture for its potential for social action (Kincheloe, 2002; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Sandlin, Wright, and Clark (2013) argue that
“contrary to the ideas of traditional adult learning and development theories, individuals are embedded in cultural contexts that shape who they are and how they learn” (p. 17). This cultural influence lends itself to a critique of the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality within cultural institutions, popular culture, and the media (Sandlin et al., 2011a; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011b). Such critical analysis is important to our understanding of identity construction and the potential for (mis)education thorough an educational outcome that produces a homogeneous public identity and set of values that inform our knowledge and how we interact with the world (Sandlin et al., 2011a). However, they do not necessarily lead to social action.

Counterhegemonic practices as public intellectualism. In problematizing critical public pedagogy, Burdick and Sandlin (2010) contest that its foundation is rooted in counterhegemonic practices. Such practices can occur in public institutional spaces and grass root efforts to engage collective democratic efforts (e.g., public artistry, performance displays) to challenge existing social practices. For example, the museum is often considered the cultural repository of a society; however, English and Mayo (2012) argue that this space provides opportunities for “renegotiate[ing] relations of hegemony” to foster inclusive spaces that appeal to critical public pedagogy (p. 103). Additionally, cultural jamming utilizes anti-consumerist activism to coopt hegemonic media images as a form of social activism (Bracken, Sandlin & Wright, 2009; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Such displays of resistance within popular culture are of great value to educators as an educative tool of resistance (Wright, 2007). Moreover, Giroux (2003b) contends that higher education is “one of the few sites left in which students can learn about the limits of commercial values, address what it means to learn the skills of social citizenship, and work to deepen and expand the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life” (p. 102). Therefore, Giroux strongly believes in the “idea of interrogating public pedagogies as an
interventionist educational practice—still largely located within schools” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 154). Additionally, Giroux (2004b) urges adult educators to make their academic writing public to limit the barrier to education; thereby, educating the public on the hegemony within popular culture and increasing their political agency. This call for educators to disseminate knowledge speaks to the role of the public intellectual.

Based on the public pedagogy literature reviewed by Sandlin, et al. (2011a), educators are most heavily regarded to facilitate optimal learning in public spaces. These educators within public spaces, or public intellectuals, are academics whose work extends beyond the institutional walls to provide the public with critical perspectives to learn to perceive and resist dominant ideologies that undermine their democratic potential (Brass, 2014). Conversely, Sandlin et al. (2011a) argue that public intellectualism is not only reserved for academics or those associated with institutions, as such practices clearly include politically engaged communities that decenter academic theory and research “in the interest of expanding the possibilities for subjectivity, critique, and a better world” (Brass, 2014, p. 98). However, a more individualistic view of the public intellectual can speak more to the potential for engaging communities.

Foucault’s view of the intellectual helps to problematize the public intellectual, as he saw the function of the public intellectual as a “critical interpreter” (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 281). Thus, in Foucault’s view, the public intellectual should not be sought for answers or advice but for help in identifying why certain phenomena are problematic (Payne & Barbera). This view of the public intellectual is one of interventionist praxis that empowers those marginalized within society to become socially active. By being more of a political organizer than an interlocutor of knowledge, public intellectualism can be seen as nothing more than organic intellectuals. Gramsci (1999) viewed the processes of thinking, conceptualizing, and philosophizing as
organic, as he believed all people have the capability of reasoning (Brookfield, 2005), and thereby becoming organic intellectuals. In his analysis of Gramsci, Brookfield (2005) postulates:

“[If] everyone is indeed a philosopher, then getting them to think critically does not mean introducing them to some new form of higher order reasoning. It means, instead, adding a critical edge or dimension to their already existing forms of conceptualizing.” (p. 108)

This view positions the intellectual as having the empathetic capacity for working people because they too inhabit the same lifeworld. To Gramsci (1999), the organic intellectual is not someone with elite status, but an authentic member of the oppressed group. “This is why,” Brookfield (2005) asserts, “it is so difficult for well-meaning middle-class radicals to become organic intellectuals” (p. 109). Based on this analysis, an organic intellectual can be anyone who empathizes with the oppressed and is motivated to organize on their behalf through understandable, strategic tactics that lead to a political revolution based on ideological critique. It is this capacity for critical public pedagogy to be both a space for critically evaluating one’s assumptions and resisting social inequities that can develop one’s identity.

**Limitations of critical public pedagogy.** Although critical public pedagogy has roots in critical pedagogy, it relies less on rational dialogue and autonomy and more on *relational* dialogue and embodied, holistic, aesthetic learning where “the self is viewed as multidimensional and always in the process of ‘becoming’” (Ellsworth, 2005; Sandlin et al., 2011b). Thus, the notion of multiple ways of knowing and political inquiry as a form of practice is an important perspective. However, critical public pedagogy is still underdeveloped and closely tied to critical public discourse, which “focuses more on the reproduction of inequality than on how political resistance might be engaged” (Sandlin et al., 2011a, p. 346). The difficulty lies in researchers from various fields of study utilizing the term *public pedagogy* in different ways
(Sandlin et al., 2011a, 2011b). To this end, critical public discourse may fall trap to a disconnect between theory and practice. Sandlin et al. (2011a) acknowledge this issue, as studies on critical public pedagogy frequently lack a clear dialogue on “how these educational sites and practices actually work to teach the public and how the intended educational meanings of public pedagogies are internalized, reconfigured, and mobilized by public citizens” (p. 359).

Another limitation of critical public pedagogy is its lack of mutual responsibility for learning. Critical public pedagogy makes a strong argument for social intellectualism, which supports educators having a key role in fostering critical dialogue and addresses “making cultural and ideological critiques more accessible to the public” (Brass, 2014, p. 101). This dependence on educators blurs the line between formal and informal institutions of learning to which, Sandlin et al. (2011a) warn educators to be reflective in how their schooling framework might “reify traditional forms of intellectual activity” in a public space (p. 365). Such self-reflection is not as common a practice within critical public pedagogy.

Overall, critical public pedagogy speaks to more of the patriarchal side of critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994). Critical public pedagogy also focuses less on empowering the educator and more on critically analyzing social, cultural, and political dimensions, as often seen within an embodied mode of learning focused on an artistic, hands-on approach. Despite these limitations, critical public pedagogy provokes learners to a political discourse. Therefore, this study examines the utility of critical public pedagogy, as a means to connect informal modes of learning and public activism to a radical understanding of adult development that can lead to better educational praxis.
A Radical Understanding of Adult Development

The very notion of traditional theories of adulthood has been challenged by Pomerantz and Benjamin (2000) and Smith and Taylor (2010), who argue that concrete stages of adult development do not account for the fluidity of the adult experience, especially in relation to social and historical constructs. Moreover, Brookfield and Holst (2011) attest that meaning-making is situated within a cultural context; therefore, these authors identified three tasks necessary to reach a radical understanding of adult development: (1) to develop a collective identity, (2) to develop a sense of agency, and (3) to develop a collective movement. The fluidity of adult development within a sociohistorical context and the radical nature of these developmental tasks is greatly informed by critical public pedagogy, which bring meaning to Black female identity development. Additionally, the uniqueness of Black female identity development can be further articulated through Black feminist thought and the womanist identity development theory. Therefore, the politics surrounding Black representation within popular culture is a primary avenue of analysis within the context of this study.

Stuart Hall and the politics of representation. The work of British cultural theorist and sociologist, Stuart Hall, is influential to race and gender studies, particularly regarding popular culture. Within this context, Hall’s focus on identity, media representation, and race relations within a historical context explains how people who belong to the same culture make meaning of their world through differences within a “shared conceptual map” of mental representations (Hall, 2007, p. 18). Hall (2009) contests that this shared conceptual map requires a common language of words, sounds, or images that transmit meaning. Known as signs, Hall identifies that they, “stand for or represent the concepts and the conceptual relations between them which we carry around in our heads and together they make up the meaning-systems of our
culture” (p. 18). Thus, language extends beyond spoken and written word to include both visual images (e.g., gestures, fashion, facial expressions) and music that represent our conceptual map. The combination of shared conceptual maps and language systems forms cultures when they are combined with codes, which Hall (2009) states “govern the relationships of translation between them” (p. 21). Therefore, codes enable people within a culture to effectively communicate by learning the “system and conventions of representation” (Hall, 2007, p. 22).

However, Hall (2009) states that people within a culture internalize these systems and conventions unconsciously, and thereby express concepts and interpret ideas through their systems of representation, which construct and produce meaning through a signifying practice of things in the world. Such representation in culture is vital in how we identify ourselves and society’s interpretation of us— all of which informs our day-to-day functioning. The often unconscious internalization of these systems and conventions have implications for representation, particularly in regard to Black women in popular culture.

Hall’s (2009) work on representation within popular culture asserts, “The role of the ‘popular’ in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly made over as low and outside” (pp. 377-378). This is why Black popular culture is so important, as it is a form of resistance to being labeled “low” and “outside.” Therefore, Black popular culture is another form of representation; however, Hall (2009) cautions us to not essentialize Black popular culture through “black cultural repertoires” that define difference outside of the context of history (Hall, 2009). Instead, Black popular culture must be viewed outside the binary distinction of Black and White if we are to contest otherness. Othering Blackness, Hall (2009)
argues, dislocates the Black experience from history and equates Blackness with biology, which is translated within popular culture and shapes our identities, as Hall (2009) contests:

…popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. It is a theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (p. 382)

Thus, identity is constructed by internal and external forces. However, one’s identity can be reconstructed through new cultural symbols. Therefore, Black women cannot unconsciously absorb the symbols of representation but must critically evaluate the culture in which they live, as it plays a critical role in how they imagine themselves (i.e., racial identity), and thereby represent themselves within an oppositional framework that is void of the “range of different black subjectivities” (Hall, 2009, p. 381). Hall further argues that this narrow scope of Black subjects in the media, “engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer” (Hall, 1997, p. 226). Specifically, Hall’s (1997) analysis of Black images in the media aligns with the framework of power, institutions, and economics, as argued by critical theorists. However, his work on representation also heavily focused on the intersection of race and class within media. What is missing from Hall’s analysis of the politics of representation, however, is wider discussion of the intersection of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2000). Therefore, I will discuss a more multifaceted view of the representation of Black people, and Black women in particular, which challenges the media messages that shape Black women’s actions and their identity.
**Womanist Identity Development Theory**

Janet E. Helms’ (1990) womanist identity development theory informs the unique identity development of Black women by paralleling the Black racial identity development process (Cross, 1981). To add even greater distinction, Helms uses the term *womanist*, as defined by Alice Walker (1983), to address the issue of race and class-based oppressions, particularly for Black women. This model assesses womanhood within a social context, with particular emphasis on women’s attitudes about themselves in relation to others (Letlaka-Rennert, Luswazi, Helms, & Zea, 1997). To develop this model, Helms analyzed the relevant theories on racial identity and surmised that all the models indicate women develop a healthy identity when they move from an external definition of womanhood to an internal definition that is shaped by the woman’s own values and attitudes. Within the womanist identity development theory model, four distinct stages are associated with Black women’s identity attitudes:

1. **Preencounter Stage**: “[T]he woman conforms to societal views about gender, holds a constricted view of women’s roles, and nonconsciously thinks and behaves in ways that devalue women and esteem men as reference groups” (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992, p. 403)

2. **Encounter Stage**: The woman begins to question her gendered assumptions when challenged by new experiences and/or information “that heighten the personal relevance of womanhood and suggest alternative ways of being” (Ossana et al., 1992, p. 403)

3. **Immersion-Emersion Stage**: The woman rejects male perceptions of womanhood and defines herself through self-affirmations
(4) Internalization Stage: The woman consciously refuses to be defined by external definitions of womanhood. As a result, her emerging positive definition of womanhood is based on her self-definition and shared experiences with women she values for their knowledge.

In essence, Helm’s womanist identity development theory speaks to the tension Black women experience in relations to their sense of identity. Society devalues and delimits the contributions of Black women; therefore, Black women must rearticulate their existence and construct their own meaning of womanhood. This engagement in reclaiming a newly constructed identity is further articulated within Black feminist thought.

Black Feminist Thought

In uncovering the invisibility of Black women intellectuals, Black feminist, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) laments, “Why are African-American women and our ideas not known and not believed in” (p. 3)? Though her seminal work, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, Collins (2000) answers this question through a complex argument of Black women’s engagement and reclamation of their knowledge in spite of oppressive forces. This “tension between the suppression of African-American women’s ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression,” Collins argues, “constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought” (p. 3). Such politics are further revealed through six distinguishing features of Black feminist thought.

First, Black women’s inherited struggle with multiple oppression by the simultaneous interaction of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2000; Andersen & Collins, 2013) bring the complexities of the Black women’s experience to center. This matrix of domination, Collins argues, “can be seen as an historically specific organization of power in which social groups are
embedded and which they aim to influence” (p. 228). Second, these challenges are common to many Black women, but individual group members have varying responses to such societal issues based on their own lived experience. Third, in response to their oppression, Black women have developed alternative forms of knowledge and practices designed to foster group empowerment. Fourth, Black women intellectuals analyze intersecting oppressions that impact Black women to work towards social justice. It is within this fourth distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought that Collins takes on a critical public pedagogy approach to public intellectualism by arguing that Black women intellectuals often exist outside of institutional walls and the Black middle class. Therefore, any Black women who ascribes to a critical public pedagogy perspective may be considered an intellectual. A fifth distinguishing feature is that the knowledges and practices ascribed to Black feminist thought must be dynamic to resist fluid social conditions. Lastly, the struggles fought within Black feminist thought are part of a larger struggle for social justice.

Based on these six distinguishing features, Black feminist thought links the contradictory perspectives of oppression and activism to the overarching goal of empowerment. In order to empower Black women, Black feminist thought utilizes the multidimensionality of Black female narratives as counterstories to dominant discourse, which promote equality and multiple perspectives that speak to Black women’s needs to break their cultural silence and be recognized as legitimate and valid (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Berry, 2010; White, 2011; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Omolade, 1987). Essential to this study is this empowerment facilitated through blogging.

**Blogging and Informal Online Learning Communities**

Thus far, areas of analysis have included critical perspectives ranging from public pedagogy to media representation to identity development. However, since this study focuses on
BNHCBs and Black female identity development within an online learning community, I believe that a discussion of blogging in relation to informal online learning is appropriate.

In her analysis of blogging as public pedagogy, Dennis (2015) defines blogging as “the use of a regularly updated website or web page, authored and curated by an individual or small group, written in a conversational style” (p. 284). However, Dave Winer (2015), blog pioneer, puts much more emphasis on blogging for freedom, as he makes the following distinction:

If it was one voice, unedited, not determined by group-think—then it was a blog, no matter what form it took. If it was the result of group-think, with lots of ass-covering and offense avoiding, then it’s not.

Based on the work of Winer, Lovink (2011) argues blogs are primarily used by an “introspective individual who reflects on his or her thoughts and impressions…blogs are expressions of free speech, of an individualism that believes each is entitled to his or her own opinion and should be brave enough to say it” (p. 97). However, Lovink argues Winer’s definition of blogs as a source of authenticity and courage is more likely a created persona that desires to be heard. The concern here is with the unedited self-expression seen within personal blogs and how they inform and provoke our emotional responses. To this, Lovink (2011) asserts:

To study blogs we must understand that it is not enough to measure the output of this or that application. Critical internet studies should instead start with the assumption that media do not merely report but play a key role in the circulation of sentiments. Users are caught in a web of stimuli and feelings that are channeled in specific ways. (p. 95)

Although Lovink (2011) argues that such feelings are expressed through the solitary exercise of self-reflection that result in limited online social exchanges, Thomas and Brown (2011) measure
the success of blogs by reader comments and external links (i.e., bloglinks) to other blogs. Such a form of participation can create a dynamic and meaningful learning experience.

Specific to this form of communication, Brown and Adler (2008) regard social learning from the perspective that “our understanding of content is socially constructed through conversations about that content and through grounded interactions, especially with others, around problems or actions. The focus is not so much on what we are learning but on how we are learning” (p. 18). Thus, the learning focus shifts to human interactions and learning activities within a communal setting, where understanding is socially constructed. Thomas and Brown (2011) call this type of learning environment a collective, which is defined by a collection of people’s active engagement with learning through skills and talents. What makes these collectives different from communities is that they extend beyond group membership and shared interest to participation and interactions among participants. This sense of engagement is where learning takes place. Thomas and Brown consider such participation within learning communities to range from posting blog comments to developing a new website, as each participatory form impacts both “what the individual is able to draw from it and how it shapes and augments the stream of information” (p. 52). Hence, engagement, Thomas and Brown argue, does not necessitate content creation, but instead may be something as simple as following posts on a blog. To Thomas and Brown, the potential for collectives to enact knowledge can be illustrated through the blogging process:

The power of a blog, for example, rests in part with the author or authors who start it; in part with the readers who leave comments; in part with those who link to, cite, reference, or respond to it; and in part with the readers, who may do nothing more than have their presence recorded by a web server. None of those events alone is sufficient for
understanding the phenomenon it is the combination of the active and passive (such as comments, ratings, and links) forms of participation that make a blog or website successful. (pp. 53-54)

Thus, the overall premise of online learning communities is not to teach, but it is to create the space for collectives to organically emerge (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Through these communities, meaningful learning is produced through the process of engagement with things of personal interest. These things, Thomas and Brown (2011) argue, are rarely acknowledged as learning within the educational setting. However, the true power of learning from online learning communities manifests in the personal intersecting with the collective in meaningful ways to produce a new culture of learning immersed in imagination and experimentation.

As an extension of the learning communities discussed by Brown and Adler (2008) and Thomas and Brown (2011), Siemens (2004) relies on connectivism to critique the lack of focus on constructivism, cognitivism, and behaviorism bring to the digital age, by arguing that the learning process is situated within the social network itself. Siemens further attests traditional learning theories are primarily concerned with the learning process; however, connectivism situates learning within a rapidly changing environment that connects diverse, current sources of information to facilitate lifelong learning that is responsive to shifting contexts. Thus, lifelong learning is the result of preserving our digital connections—not accumulating knowledge, as Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) argue, “Owning a given information is less important than knowing where and how to retrieve it” (p. 3). Based on connectivism, learning is strengthened and supported by online users’ ability to create, share, and manage content.

Informed by connectivism, Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) propose a model for online learning activities within formal, nonformal, and informal learning environments, which include
the following knowledge processes: (a) acquisition of online communication skills; (b) motivation through positive peer interactions; (c) meaningful perception of learning activities and value of collaboration; (d) awareness of positive group affiliation and motivation for visibility; and (e) commitment to making the virtual environment one of mutual respect, trust, and understanding. Thus, the connectivism model of learning recognizes the social connections that foster learning and the new tools needed for current learners to thrive in the digital age.

**Merging of the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

This study is largely informed by critical race theory and feminist perspectives of critical race theory. Based on these theoretical frameworks, a study of Black women’s identity development, consciousness-raising, and social action within a blogging platform gains meaning through using such sites as counterspaces for counter-storytelling, which ultimately gives voice to Black women’s issues. Although these theories can address issues of microaggressions and interest convergence within blogging platforms, they do not collectively provide an adequate foundation for Black women’s identity development within a blogging platform. Therefore, I rely on the conceptual framework of critical public pedagogy to bring meaning to utilizing blogs as a public sphere, where contestation by those who do not ascribe to the dominant view of an intellectual can be expressed. With the notable gap of Black women’s identity development, consciousness-raising, and social action in relation to online learning communities, critical public pedagogy is combined with Black feminist thought, womanist identity development theory, and the theory of connectivism to create a conceptual foundation for this study. Together, they provide a framework for Black women to begin examining their identity development and modes of resistance as they relate to their online and offline actions and the media representations that currently marginalize their multifaceted ways of being.
Next, to further support the concept of Black women’s identity development through online learning communities, I discuss the *otherness* of Black women and their controlling images. I then speak specifically to BNHCBs. I then provide an overview of the current literature on Black women’s identity development within popular culture and blogging for critical consciousness. Finally, I end this chapter with implications for adult education.

**Racializing the “Other”**

A discussion of Black womanhood must begin with race. Storey (2012) discusses race from the perspective that “there is just one ‘race,’ the human race” (p. 172), since there are no genetic markers that scientifically prove divisions without races (Storey, 2009, Abbattista, 2011). Therefore, race is a cultural, historical, and political construct, as it was created out of “capitalist necessity to reproduce social inequality” (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001, p. 377) and secure and maintain the different forms of “racialization” (Gilroy, 2002, as cited in Storey, 2012, p. 172). Herein lies the root of racism—the signifying (meaning-making) practice of racial differences. Thus, race has become essentialized through symbols and signs to prove that Black and White people are inherently different, with the construction of Whiteness being the racial marker all other races must be measured against. As such, racism, as birthed by slavery, is rooted in group membership that deems one as the favored in-group or the denigrate out-group (Hall, 2013; Wodak & Reisigl, 2001). This ideology has led to a binary racialized discourse that defines White people as normative and superior, while representing Black people as inferior and the devalued *other*. Such a discourse of categorical differences gives meaning to our lives and helps us understand who we are and who we are not (Storey, 2009). However, it also has led to institutionalized ideas and practices that stereotype individuals by something they do as if it is part of their biological makeup (Moya, 2010, as cited in Storey, 2012).
Such stereotyping of how we “do race” individually and collectively has led to historical controlling images (i.e., mammy, Jezebel) made to signify difference in Black women, which create negative representations of unattractiveness, hypersexualization, and ineptitude. These culturally hegemonic images are embedded in popular culture and media, which, according to Giroux (1994), creates a false truth that is absent from history and context. Today, these images, which are perpetuated by an imperialist, White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, have become an effective tool for how we learn and (un)learn our identities in relation to difference.

**Historical Racial Archetypes as Controlling Images of Black Women**

American popular culture and politics have perpetuated Black womanhood stereotypes by creating a binary distinction that tends to position Black women as negative and White women as positive (Giroux, 1994). In regard to Black women, this learning can often be detrimental to their self-understanding, especially for women who are in the preencounter stage of their identity development, which Helms (1990) identifies as an initial stage in her womanist identity development theory, where Black women conform to societal norms.

In the Postbellum South, the very essence of a White, middle-class (often masculine) identity led to the construction of racial archetypes (i.e., brute, mammy, happy sambo, pickaninny, coon, Jezebel). These archetypes, which manifested from the binary distinction between White and Black, were used as a defense of slavery to demonstrate how it was a successful tool in domesticating Black people (Riggs, 1986); thereby, reducing the sexual anxieties of White slaveholders and preserving the White race (Storey, 2009). In terms of Black women, these controlling images positioned their womanhood within a dominate culture that focused largely on the socially ascribed behaviors of White middle-class women who possessed the four virtues of “true womanhood:” “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Collins,
Thus, the controlling (and most enduring) images of the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the Jezebel reflected the dominant culture’s interest to maintain the subordination of Black women, while upholding the socially constructed beauty of White women.

Collins (2000) argues that “objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference” (p. 71). Thus, slaveholders normalized the European culture as follows: “European = civilized = Christian = superior = free, whereas African = uncivilized = heathen = inferior = un-free” (James, 2001, p. 237). This mindset reaffirmed the Eurocentric perspective of Africans being deemed as uncivilized and one with nature; thereby, reducing Africans to instinctual creatures (Storey, 2009). Here, Kareithi (2001) argues that Africans were depicted with an “open expression of emotion and feeling rather than intellect, a lack of ‘civilized refinement’ in sexual and social life, a reliance on custom and ritual, and the lack of developed civil institutions, all of which are linked to ‘Nature’” (p. 12).

The mammy. Collins (2000) describes the mammy as “the faithful, obedient domestic servant [who was] created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves” (p. 72). The mammy was asexual. Her exaggerated physical features of dark skin and obesity made her unattractive to White slaveholders, who often sexually exploited Black women. This image “meant that the white wife—and by extension, the white family, [were] safe” (Pilgrim, 2012b). Robinson (2011) also argues, “the role of mammy legitimized slavery, since it allowed African American women to come as close as they possibly could to the pristine standards of white womanhood, motherhood” (p. 51). This was depicted in the perceptions of the dominant culture, as they perceived the mammy’s nurturance of their White children often better than the care for her own; thus, symbolizing the mammy’s devotion (and resulting subordination) to White male power and contentment as being a slave (Collins, 2000; Pilgrim, 2012b). The lack of care, and
often disdain for her own family, was a symbol of the Black mother in her home, which led to the contemporary image of the “matriarch.” According to Collins, the matriarch, unlike the maternal mammy, typified poor motherly instincts, which were caused by working too many hours away from home. Therefore, the matriarch was unable to supervise her children, which led to Black children’s poor school performance (Collins, 2000).

**The Jezebel.** The archetype of the Jezebel in many ways is in opposition to the mammy (West, 2008; Robinson, 2011). The Black woman is the antithesis of the White woman, who is one of self-respect, modesty, and self-control. Instead, the Black woman is “often portrayed as innately promiscuous, even predatory” (Pilgrim, 2012a). This stereotype manifested out of the first encounter, when Europeans misinterpreted African women’s scant coverings and tribal dances as immoral. Thus, the Eurocentric standard of sexuality was again used to oppress Black woman as subhuman, barbaric whores. This attitude was further used to justify White men raping Black women and manipulating them into sexual acts, since Black women were thought to have an insatiable desire for White men. Additionally, the perceived voyeuristic tendencies of Black women manifested in the sideshow of “The Hottentot Venus”. Ultimately, this negative view led to the contemporary controlling image of the “hoochie” or whore (Collins, 2000).

**The tragic mulatto.** Historically, the tragic mulatto is portrayed as a fair-skinned woman, who is the offspring of a White slave master and a Black female slave. The common assumption was that the mulatto likely inherited the worst character traits of both races (Hurd, 1997). Based on the literary characters introduced by Lydia Maria Child in the 1840s, the mulatto’s life was tragic because she did not know her mother’s or her own race, since she was taken to live with her father (Pilgrim, 2012c). Thus, the mulatto believed she was White, and her true identity was only revealed after her White father’s death. Once her true identity was
discovered, she was forced into slavery, denied by her White lover, and faced a death subjected to White male violence (Pilgrim, 2012c). Her sexual abuse was a result of some slave holders’ views of dark skin as unattractive and repulsive; thus, the mulatto’s features were more clearly in line with the White standards of female attractiveness (Pilgrim, 2012a). Ultimately, this stereotype illustrates the mulatto as one trying to navigate two worlds of Black and White culture but never truly being accepted by either. Thus, she was obsessed with defining her racial status (Hurd, 1997). These portrayals of the tragic mulatto continued into the 20th century, where the psychological effects were realized (e.g., self-hatred, hypersexualization, depression, suicide).

**The picanninny.** Although the picanninny is the dominant racial archetype of Black children, their stereotypical attributes of unkempt hair, bulging eyes, and wide red mouths (Pilgrim, 2012d) bring meaning to Black women’s identity development within popular culture, particularly as the archetype relates to Black female hair. Pilgrim (2012d) describes the picaninny’s hair as having “hair tied or matted in short stalks that point in all directions.” This description of Black hair as unkempt has led to a negative perception of Black natural hair as unruly and uncivilized, thereby being considered undesirable.

**Black Natural Hair Care Blogs**

With the advent of social media, informal online learning opportunities have expanded Web users’ opportunities to be both producers and consumers of media content; thus, educators must respond to these new forms of communication (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012). Moreover, Sandlin et al. (2013b) contest, “[I]ndividuals are embedded in cultural contexts that shape who they are and how they learn” (p. 17). Thus, Kahn and Kellner (2004) view the blogging community as particularly deserving of analysis, since “bloggers have demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global
media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention” (p. 91). This is especially important to Black women, since societal practices continue to render them invisible.

Of particular importance to this study’s foundation in Black women’s identity development and blogging, is Black women who wear their hair natural, since BNHCBs inspire Black women to wear their hair in its natural state (i.e., non-chemically straightened or treated). The development of such blogs centers on the natural hair social movement. Thus, from a critical public pedagogy perspective informed by Black feminist thought, BNHCBs can be considered a form of public pedagogy, a counterstory to the dominant narrative of female beauty. Within this context, Black natural hair care bloggers tell their stories from a Black female experience. They are no longer silenced, as their blogs can take the form of an online diary. Although, hooks (1994) cautions looking to people of color as the “native informant” (p. 43), these bloggers’ narratives create new forms of knowledge that demonstrates the multidimensionality of the Black female experience (Berry, 2010). These narratives, argues White (2011) “demonstrate how the personal is both political and theoretical” (p. 196). Thus, bloggers informed by these pedagogies must not be afraid to take risks in self-disclosure, as this level of intimacy encourages others to do the same (hooks, 1994; White, 2011). Ultimately, this can lead to self-actualization, as the individuals who engage with such blogs can become empowered through their production and dissemination of knowledge. However, bloggers, in particular, must continuously reflect on their postings to ensure they are maintaining a democratic space that supports the online community (Brookfield, 1995).

Such issues of resistance are noted in a study by Brock, Kvasny, and Hales (2010) who looked deeper into social networking sites by conducting a critical technocultural discourse analysis of three blogs that discussed the concept of the Black woman. Based on their findings,
Brock et al. (2010) concluded that the interactive capabilities of blogging allow Black women to correct misconceptions and expand opinions as a means of regaining control over their identities. Within this context, blogging can be used as a platform to produce creative cultural images and discourses that challenge the dominant discourse, and in particular to this study, produce a counternarrative to the ideology of Black womanhood.

**Methodology of Review of Black Women’s Identity Development within Popular Culture**

Using the background information above as a guide, I conducted a search for conceptual and research-based literature on EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Google Scholar using the descriptors of “popular culture” and “public pedagogy,” and the keywords “Black women,” “Black women’s identity” or “Black female identity” or “natural hair” or “Black women’s hair” or “Black skin color.” I also searched the reference section of the literature particularly pertaining to Black hair and skin for relevant works. After filtering out duplicates and irrelevant entries, I chose a total of 50 conceptual studies and 20 research-based studies to address the connection between identity and popular culture, especially with regard to hair texture and skin color. What follows is a review of the conceptual and research-based literature that was produced from these searches.

**A Conceptual Look at Black Women’s Identity Development within Popular Culture**

The Black female body and hair are read as cultural text; however, these physical attributes do not account for the multiplicity of their being (Gilley, 2005, Johnson, 2013). Moreover, the historical controlling images discussed above are the foundations of contemporary portrayals of Black women as unattractive, overworked domestics, unfit mothers, and hypersexualized (Givens & Monahan, 2005; Hudson, 2007; Campbell, Giannino, China, & Harris, 2008). Since the emergence of American popular culture and its politics, the
perpetuation of Black womanhood stereotypes creates a binary distinction that positions Black women as negative and White women as positive (Giroux, 1994). Situated within culturally hegemonic images and representations, Giroux (1994) argues that popular culture “produces meanings mediated through claims to truth represented in images that circulate in an electronic, informational hyperspace which disassociates itself from history, context, and struggle” (p. 4). Today, these images have become an effective tool for how we learn and (un)learn our identities. Additionally, Harkness (2012) contests that audiences’ experiences play a pivotal role in whether or not they (un)learn stereotypes when marginalized groups “reconfigure the norms” through conscious counternarratives (p. 296). However, Wright and Sandlin’s (2017) work asserts that everyday living experiences provide opportunities for resistance.

One such powerful counternarrative is cultural jamming, where cultural jammers appropriate popular culture as a means to critique and actively resist the dominant discourse. Sandlin and Milam (2008) argue that these forms of popular culture incite emotion that leads to feelings of hope for a changed identity. Moreover, emotion is also evoked from visual imagery, as Soares (2012) found in her study of collage as a form of culture jamming the Brazilian media’s representation of Black people. As a result, she argues for an “alternate symbolic structure capable of conveying the uniqueness of the black condition” (p. 97). Moreover, Wright (2010) argues that comedy can also be used as a counternarrative. Hence, Rossing (2016) applied critical public pedagogy to his analysis of “emancipatory racial humor,” which he identifies as “a disarming critical public pedagogy that confronts racial hegemony” (p. 614). Within his essay, Rossing asserts that this form of critical public pedagogy has the potential to develop critical consciousness and communities by affirming group identities. Accordingly, Bradley (2015) discusses the significance of comedienne, Issa Rae’s viral Web series, The Mis-
Adventures of Awkward Black Girl, and she contends that Rae effectively pairs humor and social media, namely YouTube, to address Black women’s anxieties from to the daily confrontation of microaggressions. Moreover, Bradly asserts that social media has become a revolutionary space that allows Black women to “visualize themselves, establish communities and share/document their experiences online” (p. 149). She further argues:

*Mis-Adventures* is not a direct political statement although Rae is very vocal elsewhere about the need for black folks to mobilize for social-political change. Rather, *Mis-Adventures* creates a sense of black agency by introducing the possibility of black women as human beings. The show challenges the status quo of who (not necessarily what) is considered normal by displaying ‘normal’ everyday experiences. (p. 149)

Conversely, Fulton (2004) discovered this in her analysis of Black female comedienueses, where she found that these women use comedic material to challenge dominant ideologies of Black womanhood. Although the reclamation of sexuality is characteristic of third wave feminism (Gilley, 2005), Fulton, like Harkness (2012), is concerned about those who view these comedienues as human beings. Mehaffy (1997) argues a similar point in her analysis of trade card advertising from 1876-1900, as she suggests that the novelty of the trade cards “trivialized and normalized the impact of its framing visual epistemologies of race, gender, and national self-identity” (p. 172). Here, the Black female body was subjected to primitiveness, and the ubiquity of the cards quickly normalized the dominant culture’s very notion of knowledge through visual imagery.

Due to the power of visual imagery, Harris and Jarvis (2000) urge educators to be more inclusive in their practices, especially in regard to the images portrayed by literary text. As such, McKittrick (2000) relied on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* to show the intersectionality of race
and gender and assert that the novel illustrates how the body and mind fill a space that demonstrates “how identities and places are mutually constructed and incoherent” (p. 140). In turn, Vasquez (2014) examined *The Bluest Eye* through a comparison with Caribbean writer, Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*. Through his conceptual analysis, Vasquez found that the protagonists’ levels of agency are dependent upon “temporal and geographical distance from colonialism and popular culture, and ultimately, positive maternal influences” (p. 84). He concludes that Kincaid’s character has a stronger sense of agency.

Critically analyzing these counternarratives, brings greater meaning to Wright and Sandlin’s (2009) argument that adult learners construct their identity through relating their lived experiences with those of particular characters and incorporating elements from various ideologies into their daily lives. Wright (2000) further argues media narratives are often hegemonic, as “these narratives play on collective fears, reinforce stereotypes, and provide explanations for social injustices that seem natural and true based on cultural myths” (p. 51). Similarly, these hegemonic narratives play out in film, as Abraham’s (2002) critical analysis of the film adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals how the director freely used *historical revisionism* regarding the portrayal of White women and Native Americans; however, this revisionism did not extend to Black women, who maintained their historical archetype of being sexually corrupt. In this regard, Euell (1997) argues that the Black theater should be considered a forum for “a powerful process of healing and empowerment” (p. 674). As such, Carey (2014) critically analyzed Black Christian films by Tyler Perry and asserts that most of Perry’s films are antifeminist, since they shift the women’s responsibility of healing on herself and away from the progress of the African American community. Likewise, Williams-Witherspoon (2014) studied the text of Black playwright, August Wilson’s notion of the “ideal Black woman,” which the
author contests “conform to traditional gendered roles and expectations,” yet instead of playing into the stereotypical roles of the Mammy and Jezebel, Wilson subverts such stereotypes and uses them as a source of empowerment (p. 13). Consequently, Ciecko (1999) argues that Black women filmmakers have an opportunity to make films that challenge dominant perceptions. Despite finding that counterhegemonic films are not widely accepted by the majority, Ciecko asserts that society’s expectations of what Black female filmmakers should be producing align with their perception of what Black women value. Additionally, Speed (2001) focused on contemporary Black films about college education, where she found that these films relied on Black women and youth as “cultural authority” to depict not only the benefits of higher education but also the unique experiences within the Black community (p. 82).

Documentaries, such as Good Hair (Hunter, O’Donnell, & Stilson, 2009), Dark Girls (Berry & Duke, 2012), and Imagine a Future (Cortes & Lynch, 2013) and various other works by Black authors (Rooks, 1996; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Patton, 2006; Thompson, 2009) have helped unveil the complexities of Black skin color and hair texture. For example, Thompson (2009) examined the issue of desired beauty and perceived beauty among Black women as it relates to their hair grooming practices. Using the social comparison model, she found that Black women compare themselves with White beauty standards and straighten their hair to better blend in physically, since “Black hair in its natural state is often negatively marked for its difference” (p. 840). As such, Rooks (1996) argues that Black women have had to claim their beauty, through beauty care regimes to subscribe to White norms of attractiveness. However, Craig (2006) asserts that Black women’s hair care routines (i.e., straight, braids, dreadlocks, weaves) can lead to entrepreneurship, friendship, and a collectively-valued female appearance. However, Zukiswa, Coetzee, and Rau (2017) found in their study of young Black African
women that their hair has everyday implications for how they feel about themselves and how they perceive others feel toward them. Additionally, Zukiswa et al. (2017) found that, despite the desired norm of straight hair, their discourse on “good” versus “bad” hair differs from the American discourse of coarse hair to one that centers around healthy versus weak hair. Moreover, hairstyle choices were not tied to the women disavowing their African roots.

When referencing the Black American history of hair, the most well-known entrepreneur of Black women’s hair products, Madam C. J. Walker, comes to mind. Although Walker made her fortune from developing Black hair and beauty products, Phillips (2008) highlights the often unacknowledged first Black female millionaire and beauty entrepreneur, Annie Malone. As Phillips (2008) indicates, Malone’s African-inspired hair and body care line of the early 1900s, PORO, was a “resistant beauty culture,” as it valued the “African concept of beauty, self and spirituality” (pp. 13, 14). Thus, Phillips (2008) asserts that Malone’s philosophy recognized that “the status of black-bodied women in the United States were inextricably bound to their Black communities” (p. 14). Whereas, PORO did not support the use of skin bleaching chemicals, Gooden (2011) found that Black publishing newspapers and magazines frequently printed skin bleaching ads to target the small population of middle-class Black women, which the author suggests was an inadvertent attempt for elite Black people (mostly men) to set beauty standards. Moreover, Dearing (2010) traces the negative perception of dark skin to European art and culture. He suggests that a biblical passage from the Song of Solomon challenges the ideology that Black skin is not beautiful, as it translates to “I am black, but beautiful” or “I am black and beautiful” (p. 184). Dearing goes on to argue that even if Black women represented the idealized qualities of White women, they still could not be loved by virtue of the color of their skin.
A number of articles centered around hip-hops influence on Black women’s identity (Henderson, 2013; Layne, 2013; Henry, West, & Jackson, 2010; Cheryl, 2000; Lindsey, 2013). Henry, West, and Jackson (2010) argue that contemporary hip-hop’s overt and disrespectful denigration of Black women has perpetuated their internalized oppression. However, these authors recognize the positive perceptions displayed by such artists as Queen Latifah, Beyoncé, and Mary J. Blige help redefine the Black women in hip-hop. Similarly, in her examination of Black women’s contributions to rap music, Cheryl (2000) argues that Black female rappers challenge the male-dominated field by using their “performances as platforms to refute, deconstruct, and reconstruct alternative visions of their identity.” Additionally, McNally (2016) contests in his analysis of Black female rapper, Azealia Banks’ video “212,” which is a cultural critique of racism, sexism and cultural appropriation, that her message may be missed by the “color-blind” hip-hop fans and musicians such as Iggy Azalea, who may overlook the music’s hidden transcript of resistance in favor of its public transcript of provocative sexuality and openness to whites” (p. 76). However, Henry et al. (2010) caution that the conflicting derogatory and empowering messages seen in such platforms may leave Black women confused if they do not have a healthy self-esteem, value system, and positive role models and relationships. For this reason, Lindsey (2013) suggests that counternarratives from girl-centered empowerment videos, such as “I Love My Hair” and “Whip My Hair” is a viable option in the use of popular culture to empower Black girls and adolescents.

There are also examples of artists using art to challenge dominant ideology regarding Black representation (Cleveland, 2010; Harvey, Hayes, Ragland, & Patterson, 2008; Dallow, 2004). For example, Cleveland (2010) found two Black Brazilian artists who create art that challenges power inequalities by using “the Black body as a vehicle for representation of those
shared experiences between Africans and African descendants across the diaspora” (p. 318). These artists’ overall goal is to (re)present history by infiltrating White dominated spaces. Also, in Smith’s (2010) review of poems by Akilah Oliver, she argues that such prose is an example of “critical poetics of identity” that disrupts traditional views of Black women’s bodies by claiming the “body as a primary site of historical knowledge” (pp. 117, 110). Likewise, Lumsden (2009) argues that social movement media, such as the Black Panther newspaper, reframes Black womanhood as activist and not as object by speaking from their unique standpoint.

Media like the Black Panther, helped create a community that has now evolved to social media, as Florini (2013) suggests that Black users of social media create their own space by “actively performing their racial identities” through such tactics as figurative language and wordplay, which ultimately has the potential to create a collective space for racial identity (p. 235). Additionally, Reid-Brinkley (2007) conducted a conceptual analysis of online message boards on Essence, a Black women’s magazine, regarding a debate on sexism and misogyny in hip-hop. This author concluded that online message boards provide a necessary space for Black women to discuss relevant issues and create a community of resistance. Likewise, Johnson (2013) asserts that Black hair blogs and vlogs are popular among Black women because they create a community of belonging, affirmation, and acceptance “that strays from dominant society’s expectation of hair aesthetics” (p. 10). However, the author argues that these platforms can only facilitate empowerment of Black women’s hair styling choices if they foster an honest dialogue. Florini (2013) discusses one example of the negative effects of online media, as she notes that Black women used the Twitter hashtag to criticize the appearance of a hip-hop star’s weave, which reflected the “level of scrutiny Black women’s hair routinely receives” (p. 232).
A Research-Based Look at the Construction of Black Women’s Identity

Research within this context also features narrative, which supports the multiplicity of the Black female experience. One such narrative was found in Caldwell’s (2003) work with Afro-Brazilian women and the negative stereotypes they endure. Based on the personal narratives, Caldwell (2003) concluded that the relationship between hair and Afro-Brazilian women’s identities is difficult to examine, as her participants each had to come to terms with the significance of their hair through personal experiences often linked to specific sociopolitical contexts. Moreover, Caldwell concludes, “The relationship between hair and consciousness further suggests that Black women’s hair is a key site for mapping and reflecting internal struggles and transformations related to race and gender” (p. 27). Such internal consternation is also projected unto other Black women, as Audre Lorde (1990) found in her experience of having her own hair scrutinized by another Black woman, as she stated:

I had found another example of Black people being used to testify against other Black people, using our enemies’ weapons against each other, judging each other by the color of our skin, the cut of our clothes, the styling of our hair. How long will we allow ourselves to be used as instruments of oppression against one another? (p. 110)

White (2005) explored this issue with her survey and rhetorical analysis of 14 women who chose to wear their hair natural. Her findings illustrate the women decided to reject not only the Eurocentric standards of beauty but also the Black standards of beauty. Additionally, Weitz (2001) found through her interviews with 44 women that Black women are consciously aware of dominant expectations regarding their hair, which the author argues gives them power in deciding to accommodate, resist, or combine the two tactics. Additionally, Awad et al. (2015) conducted five focus groups with 31 Black female students to uncover their perceptions of Black
beauty and body image. A thematic analysis reveals four main domains relating to (1) the importance of hair to body image; (2) skin tone validation or shaming by others (i.e., colorism); (3) shape of bodies; and (4) messages of beauty and body images from family and the media regarding the importance of how others see them. In terms of hair, participants reported racial microaggressions, ignorance, and the “idea that Black women’s aesthetics are not considered normative” or wearing natural hair is seen as expressing a political ideology (p. 546).

Additionally, Brooks and McNair (2015) conducted a content analysis of six Black picture books about hair to examine how Black hair is presented to children from different backgrounds. The following three themes emerged: “(1) the perspective that all hair is good, (2) the connection between Black hair and African American history, and (3) the bonding of females while hair is being combed and/or styled” (p. 302). The authors concluded the importance of children seeing images of themselves in the books they read and the potential for sociopolitical resistive acts.

Regarding resistive acts, Carey (2011) discusses in her first-person account how she uses Caribbean dance to redefine Black femininity through self-expression and identity that challenges traditional views of appropriateness for the Black female body. She questions whether or not Black women impose their “hurt and resentment concerning their own sexual histories and the impact slavery and colonization has and still has on their bodies that they cannot reach out to their younger students, friends, sisters and daughters and help instead of hurt” (p. 133). In this regard, De Veaux (2000) writes her first-person account in the form of a letter to her Aunt Nanadine regarding her unrelenting teasing of De Veaux’s dark skin in comparison to the predominant lighter skin of her family. Here, De Veaux narrates her internalized oppression of her dark skin, as she struggles “to internalize beauty, because color is still a critical issue between our people” (p. 69). Also, Griffin (2012) uses the methodology of autoethnography to
tell her story of creating a bridge between her Black body and her White body. As a biracial woman, Griffin tells a tale of resistance and community building, as she urges narrative as a means of self-reflexivity and identity development that “expose the intricate workings of power, and bring complicity and complacency with domination to light” (p. 151). Additionally, hooks (1989b) tells of her personal experience and dialogue with women groups about the politics of straightening Black hair. Here, hooks relives her childhood of hair straightening, which she equated with her transition to womanhood. However, she cautions such an uncritical assumption, as she asserts that the very notion of Black women straightening their hair is rooted in them “changing their appearance to imitate white people’s looks…to look as much like white people as possible, to look safe, is related to a desire to succeed in the white world” (p. 2). hooks concludes with the realization that “[w]e cannot resist this socialization if we deny that white supremacy informs our efforts to construct self and identity” (p. 5). Banks (2000) evokes similar sentiments through her interviews with Black women about their hair. Moreover, Steele (2016) envisions Black blogs as an extension of the Black oral tradition, as she used critical technocultural discourse analysis to assess nine blogs authored by Black people to demonstrate “traditional Black rhetorical strategies” that “demonstrate solidarity and resistance and urge uplift” (p. 13). Additionally, Steele found that bloggers employed certain language specific to their community and make Black popular culture references from the 1980s and 1990s to show create a sense of community.

In terms of constructing one self and one’s identity, Oware’s (2009) content analysis of female rap songs from 1992-2000 found that the female rappers conveyed a contradictory message mixed with female empowerment and self-objectification, the latter of which continues to subject Black women to traditional notions of Black womanhood, especially with regard to
sexuality. The question remains, are viewers able to critically analyze these messages as reclaiming sexuality and control or does it further perpetuate the stereotypes? This perpetuation of hegemonic perceptions of Black womanhood is seen within Johnson’s (2013) work, where she conducted a content analysis of the visual and written rhetoric of Black women’s hair care/styling products in *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines in five-year intervals from 1985 to 2010. Her results demonstrate “the construction of desire in the chemical relaxer product has a direct correlation with hairstyle choices worn by Black females” (p. 49). Similar to Sandlin and Maudlin (2012), Johnson suggests that the advertisers connect their perceptions of Black women’s values and desires to the advertised message, which is limited to beauty and style. Likewise, Sandlin and Maudlin conducted an interpretive cultural textual analysis on current discourses about female consumers, particularly in regard to Black women. Based on their analysis, they found that mainstream network commercials infrequently feature Black women, except for beauty commercials featuring light-skinned celebrities. In terms of television media, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found in a systematic content analysis of a one-week sample of prime-time television in 1996 that Black characters were the least groomed and dressed more provocatively and less professionally than their White counterparts. Similarly, the study by Jeffries and Jeffries (2015), in which they employed a case study method to examine seven modern-day media texts to determine the portrayal of Black women’s body, voice, and image in the media. They concluded that the increased visibility of strong, Black women is a welcome counternarrative to traditionally stereotyped roles of Black women. However, they contest that the “complex, layered characterization” of Black women in the media will be difficult for consumers to deconstruct; thereby, leading to perpetuating stereotypes due to distal views of Black women (p. 131). Moreover, Patterson-Faye (2016) analyzed in-depth interviews with plus-
size models, bloggers, and designers through a Black feminist lens to demonstrate how plus-size Black women models reject the mammy archetype and define and redefine their sexualities through visibility; thereby, defining what is sexy, fashionable, and attractive. Reimagining the human body was also noted in a study by Miller, Armstrong, and Edwards (2005), who found that lifestyle programs, such as *What Not to Wear* and *Extreme Makeover*, create a paradox of difference, which assumes that “seeking to be different through consumption means buying into a (sub)cultural identity shared with others” (para. 14). These authors go on to argue that the human body has become central to one’s identity, which challenges genetic differences through social constructions of difference.

However, change is possible, as Wright (2007) found based on her research on British women’s transformational learning from watching Dr. Cathy Gale of *The Avengers*. Wright demonstrates how some viewers changed their lives by adopting the character’s valued traits into their personal identities. To this, Wright and Sandlin (2009) argue, “Wonder and inquiry are the results of a stimulated imagination. The products of popular culture help people imagine themselves as someone different and imagine a world that is less self-destructive” (p. 134). However, Tisdell (2008) cautions that the entertainment or pleasure value of television and film, particularly those that are counterhegemonic, can mask the transformational learning experiences to be gained from such interactions. This lack of criticality calls for critical public pedagogy and critical media literacy, so individuals consciously think about and resist the representations and power portrayed in the media. This particularly important to Black women, since their media portrayals are often negative. Thus, counternarrative acts are important within this culture.
Review of Blogging to Enact Consciousness-Raising and Social Action

To gain a greater understanding of the impact of blogging in general, conceptual and research-based studies were reviewed that inform a study of consciousness-raising and social action within informal online learning communities. Locating studies for this review began by using EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Google Scholar to search for “social networking sites,” “blogs,” “blogging,” and “online learning communities” with combinations of the related search terms “public pedagogy,” “consciousness raising,” “social action,” “Internet activism” and “resistance.” After filtering out duplicates and irrelevant entries, 25 sources were left for review. An additional search of examining reference lists yielded 17 additional sources. Based on the studies reviewed, activists utilize blogging in the following ways: (1) collect and publish information, (2) engage in dialogue and form a community, and (3) mobilize groups. The following sections explore the literature in each of these three key areas.

Collection and publication of information. Warren, Sulaian, and Jaafar (2014) identify various reasons activists use blogging, such as to “seek information, check on others, follow links, post civic messages, promote social events, appeal for donations, call for volunteers, discuss social issues, schedule plans and advocate change” (p. 284). Dennis (2015) discovered in her analysis of adult education bloggers that blog posts recounted learning occurring outside the classroom in “everyday life” (p. 293). Dennis also found that both bloggers valued education as an affinity space and reconceptualized it as a public pedagogic space, where bloggers can promote social movements. Reitsamer and Zobl (2014) noted a similar learning potential within blogging communities, where information is not only exchanged but skills are traded as well. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) and Cnaan and Milofsky (2007) support this claim, as they both concluded that information exchange and sharing are the foundation of activists’ use of blogs.
Moreover, Papacharissi (2002) contests that the retrieval and storage capabilities of blogs make political information available to a mass audience. boyd (2008) further argues that such information is not only searchable but replicable, while Kavada (2010) adds that the Internet allows civic-minded individuals to discover information that is “normally suppressed” (p.105). Thus, Agre (2002) believes such promises of “ubiquitous information makes [blogs] a perfect screen for projecting the hopes and fears of a society” (p. 311). This sense of hope was noted in Harrison’s (2014) research, where bloggers, who could have just written a personal journal, took to blogging instead to help other people with fertility issues. To this, Maratea (2008) argues that blogs have a distinct “carrying capacity” due to such networking capabilities as “hyperlinking and blogrolling,” which connect readers “with any piece of information or data on the Web that supports the claims being made by the blogger” (pp. 144-145). Although, Maratea argues the rapid and frequent information exchange of blogs only benefits a small number of individuals who access it, the author suggests several factors that contribute to the strength of blogs as a claims-making medium, such as: (a) mainstream credibility of a select group of influential blogs; (b) capability to update blogs quickly and efficiently at any point in the day; (c) the “carrying capacity” to support claims; (d) ability to verify claims through outside sources; and (e) the “tight-knit blogging communities” that allow for personal narratives (p. 143). Additionally, Kavada (2010) asserts that there are five key practices that should be employed to fully engage with and disseminate information: (1) set up a website for the cause; (2) launch websites for particular events; (3) rely on independent media platforms; (4) utilize blogging, microblogging, video, and photo-sharing sites (e.g., Blogger, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr); and (5) augment information through email and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook).
Despite these benefits, Kavada (2013) cautions such rapid dissemination of information, as she asserts that the speed of spreading information is also the speed at which the mobilization efforts often disappear. Moreover, van Dijk (2006) values such rapid information exchange, but he warns that gaining such information does not necessarily decrease the distance between members and those who are in control. Kavada realized this in her analysis of the London 2004 European Social Forum (ESF) conference held by members of the Global Justice Movement. Here, she indicates that the conflict between the “Horizontals” and the “Verticals” views of organizing, strategizing, and decision making produced different outcomes (Kavada, 2013, p. 76). According to Kavada, the Verticals adhered to a more traditional view of broadcasting information, where the leader disseminated knowledge to the masses through websites and email lists. Whereas, the Horizontals oriented their knowledge exchange through a more dialogic process where the participants could also produce and circulate knowledge through email lists. Based on this, Kavada found that the latter method garnered greater participation and interactivity. However, van Dijk (2006) contests that exchange and retrieval of political information is the only claim of digital democracy that has been fully realized. He contends that there is still a dire need for greater community building and citizen political decision-making. Likewise, Schneider and Simonetto (2016) discovered in their qualitative media analysis of public sociologists’ tweets from their Twitter profiles that the sociologists limited their dialogic exchanges to those within their discipline, while they rarely engaged with those in the public.

**Dialogue and community.** As humans, we have the innate desire to interact and build trusting relationships with other individuals around common experiences (Cnaan & Milofsky, 2007; Maratea, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002; Kavada, 2010; Hardy & Kukla, 2015). As such, Cnaan and Milofsky (2007) contest that a virtual community can thrive because “the concept of
community has shifted, focusing less on a shared place and more on networks of social interaction that develops from common interests, concerns and needs” (p. 240). However, these authors also assert that informal online learning communities must be maintained through a shared collective of identity and norms; thus, only a segment of online groups truly develop into a community. Ortiz and Ostertag (2014) note such a collective identity in their research on bloggers who organized themselves around a shared identity of “Katrina bloggers” (p. 72). Likewise, Hardy and Kukla (2015) discovered in their analysis of women’s online discourse surrounding their miscarriage experiences that discussion boards allow for more dialogic exchanges in real-time among a group of people who have equal authority. However, blog formats, where there is a central author, have the potential for collaborative exchanges from comment threads, but some just call for an audience to construct their identity. Moreover, Hardy and Kukla asset, “Dedicated discursive communities can be places where such stories are built and shared, making new narrative possibilities recognizable” (p. 124). Moreover, Atton (2014) suggests that activists use blogs as a way to seek communities that valorize their interests and gain voice, as King (2009) found in her analysis of LGBTQ adults’ use of podcasting. Thus, blogging has been lauded as a powerful medium for recruiting and connecting concerned citizens (Tatarchevskiy, 2011; Maratea, 2008; Kahn & Kellner, 2004) through what Gimmler (2001) considers “free and open discourse” of networking (p. 28). Although, he recognizes the inherent democracy embedded in blogging, he also recognizes the digital divide, especially in developing countries that do not have affordable access to the Internet (Papacharissi, 2004).

Even though Internet access may seem to be an unalienable right in developed countries, several researchers (Loewenstein, 2008; Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012; Harlow, 2011; Aouragh, 2008; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012) argue that this is not the case for citizens in
developing countries, as these citizens are often forced to censor their online dissent for fear of indictment from a threatening government. Thus, Loewenstein (2008) terms the persistence of such bloggers as “blogging bravery” (p. 211) and concludes, from his interviews with activists from Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Syria, and China, that they use blogging to fight for their personal and political freedoms. Loewenstein’s major contention is that the voices of these Eastern bloggers are being ignored by the “Western-centric perspectives of the mainstream media and its elite” (p. 211). Thus, Gimmler (2001) argues that the government has a serious obligation to not restrict access to information, since barriers to communication and interaction void citizens of their basic rights to function in a democracy. However, Loewenstein sees promise in this form of transnational blogging, which he believes can lead to “accountable journalism,” if there is “collaboration between writers, readers and editors” (p. 213). As such, Maratea (2008) asserts that claims from marginalized voices can, at times, force the press to react to such claims. Thus, the globalization of social problems equates to better representation transnationally, which Maratea suggests stifles the power of the traditional methods of news reporting by limiting popular media as “the primary gatekeeper of public discourse” (p. 144).

Ultimately, blogs have the capacity to disseminate diverse voices and societal problems; however, Maratea (2008) argues that most of the claims made by activists do not attain global status. Moreover, Papacharissi (2002) cautions that such globalized discussions can “frequently fragmentize political discourse” (p. 9). Additionally, Schneider (1996) found in her study of online abortion discussions that such a level of diverse voices can lead to inequalities among participants, since only a limited number of discussants engaged in high rates of dialogue. Thus, Schneider questions the democratic potential of blogging. To this, Agre (2002) argues that considering blogging as a new tool for social activism ignores the reality of the significant role
social interaction plays in such a process. As such, Maratea warns that claims made by activists can be heavily influenced by the intersectionality of their culture and political beliefs with that of their audience; thereby, leading to others discounting the significance of their claims. Moreover, Gimmler (2001) argues that social networking applications afford activists the ability to set specific and personal agendas. Although these are valid concerns, many activists seek a sense of community from blogs in order to find like-minded people who share in their political interests. Furthermore, Kline, Burstein, de Keijzer, and Berger (2005) and Hamilton (2009) contend that activists that position themselves as insiders gain more credibility.

Overall, activists rely on blogging as a powerful platform, as Rohlinger and Brown’s (2009) study of post-9/11 Internet protests found that activists utilize blogs: (a) as a forum to oppose dominant views in the company of likeminded people; (b) to rely on anonymity to buffer challengers; and (c) to encourage challengers to move “from the virtual to the real world by engaging citizens in intermediary forms of activism” (p. 143). However, Kavada (2010) argues that the type of blogging platform used can affect the level of sharing, as she found that it was easier for activists to share their viewpoints in smaller listservs, such as email, while larger platforms like Facebook resulted in more abstract postings. To this, various researchers (Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006; Atton, 2003; Wojcieszak, 2009; Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013; Marien, 2013) claim that a hybrid of online and face-to-face discussions are the most successful method to spur political participation. Moreover, Ryan et al. (2013) argue that using such integrated communication is necessary because of the specific needs of various audiences. Thus, more “mundane” online social tools (e.g., email, mobile phones) will need to be considered when trying to incite action (Nielsen, 2010; Atton, 2014).
**Coordinating actions.** The potential of blogs to mobilize people is a goal of online activism (Dennis, 2015; Harp et al., 2012; Aouragh, 2008). This potential can be realized through online open discourse in a space where the social connections made through blogging have great potential to engage citizens in participating directly in “the process of decision-making and have a direct influence upon it” (Gimmler, 2001, p. 32; Papacharissi, 2004). Additionally, Finer (2016) found that blogs can create a foundation for a synergistic moment, which help shape public opinion. Additionally, Finer’s research suggests that bloggers can become more visible by sensationalizing their messages of advocacy. However, such movement is limited by the small percentage of bloggers who successfully build large readerships (Maratea, 2008). Thus, to gain larger audiences, some scholars (Maratea, 2008; boyd, 2008; Kahn & Kellner, 2004) argue that activists use blogs in particular to contend for public attention by presenting their claims in a dramatic fashion that garners attention. For example, Burwell and Bolder (2014) interviewed two bloggers who managed success by utilizing the popular news comedy shows, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. The authors concluded that such success stems from their blogs’ interactivity with the show programs, the role of emotions (in this case enjoyment) in politics, and the blogs’ intersection with popular culture.

However, Internet activists are still met with the same challenges of traditional activists, since both traditional and digital forms of activism still compete with mainstream media (Maratea, 2008). Thus, Internet activists may need to utilize blogging as a powerful marketing tool, as Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) suggest that activist organizations who use blogs signal to the public that they are “willing to actively engage” (p. 35; Reitsamer & Zobl, 2014). Such easy publicity often relies on celebrities; however, Tatarchevskiy (2011) argues that blogs have expanded the potential of the ordinary citizen as one who is capable of shaping the public image.
Often, this “forces organizations to seek creative ways to become visible and legitimate” (p. 309). To this, Tatarchevskiy argues that activist organizations ask the public to participate in what he terms “visual labor,” which uses images to raise awareness and make the organizations’ claims legitimate (p. 309). However, the author views such volunteerism as largely performative, passive, and void of interconnectivity. Tatarchevskiy goes on to state that these performative activists “coexists alongside the professional players responsible for actual strategic action in civil society organizations, but their value is now reduced to a mere representation of activism itself” (p. 309). Tatarchevskiy provides one example of a missed attempt at visual labor in his discussion of a pie-throwing contest used to raise awareness for human trafficking. Tatarchevskiy cautions that such a fun gathering is interpreted as active involvement, but it is actually “devoid of any critical or radical urge” (p. 310). Moreover, such activities, which Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) term “consumption philanthropy,” are popularized within our culture, which obscures the significance of the social problem (p. 975; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). Therefore, our culture needs to critically reflect on such practices and the consumptive power of branding social problems and ask whether or not such practices really increase civic engagement.

Despite this, Internet activism seems to have some success in consciousness-raising, even though a number of authors question the true power of blogging to make any purposeful, revolutionary changes within society (Curry, 2012; Tatarchevskiy, 2011; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002, Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Agre (2002) adds that the “Internet changes nothing on its own, but it can amplify existing forces, and those amplified forces might change something” (p. 317). Thus, it seems like the techniques employed in Internet activism have to be assessed for the effects of capitalism, as Paracharissi (2002) attests, “it is possible that internet-based technologies will adapt themselves to the current political culture, rather than create a new
one” (p. 9). Furthermore, boyd (2008) contends that blogging does not have the potential to make people engage in social action, but it does have the potential to analyze whether or not online political activities are successfully getting their message across.

Perhaps activists should examine the critique of authors like de Castell (2014) and Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), who assert that activists and activist organizations are not using blogs to their fullest potential and may need to be taught how to fully engage their audiences. Additionally, Schneider (1996) argues that a democratic online utopia can be had if online activists: (1) are neither responsive to state nor commercial pressures; (2) exist in a space owned and operated by the participants; and (3) chose a space with decreased barriers to engagement with the community. Lastly, Atton (2014) argues that the term “empowering” is overworked, so researchers should look to the everyday experiences of online community spaces for “instances of everyday sociality” (p. 353). Atton believes these seemingly mundane activities are worthy of analysis because of the widespread production of such “banal media” (p. 353). Accordingly, Van Cleaf (2015) investigated “mommy blogs” to contend that blogging is a political act, but it can become a commodity, as they discovered that the personal experiences of blogging has the potential to shift to for-profit production due to increased site traffic and advertising. Thus, Van Cleaf concludes, “mommy blogs reveal a simultaneous commodification and depoliticization of motherhood, where value is generated by mothers but absorbed by media platforms.” (p. 249). Hence, seemingly banal media can be quickly commodified.

**Black Women’s Identity Development within Adult Education**

Adult education’s foundation in social action, particularly regarding power dynamics, racialized discourse, and multicultural competence, has implications for Black women’s identity development and diverse methods of teaching and learning. As such, this section will examine
Black women’s identity development as it relates to adult education to support the lifelong learning and adult education implications of this study.

Sheared (1994) specifically focuses on the role of the adult educator in ensuring that all voices are heard within the classroom. More specifically, she brings attention to giving voice in terms of “political, economic, and social life stories, experiences, cultures, and histories that have been excluded from the educational mainstream” (Sheared, 1994, p. 26). Such exclusion tends to negatively affect women and people of color. Thus, Sheared critiques the impact of gender and race within adult education; thereby, challenging adult educators to utilizing more inclusive instructional practices that “incorporate polyrhythmic realities” and “give voice to those whom traditional and unidimensional methods of instruction have silenced” through a “womanist methodology” (p. 28). Such a methodology is grounded in the recognition of intersecting realities of both the adult educator and the learners, which is similar to bell hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy. This pedagogical approach emphasizes a holistic and reciprocal learning process among educator and learner that leads to passion and empowerment through a focus on multiculturalism and voice. Thus, Sheared (1994) and hooks (1994) share a teaching philosophy that challenges traditional teaching practices, which marginalizes individuals who exist outside of the dominant ideology. These arguments put forth by these two Black feminist scholars have strong implications for Black women’s identity development, as both seek to give voice to Black women through democratic pedagogical practices that acknowledge lived experiences as meaningful forms of knowledge.

Johnson-Bailey (2001) speaks to this issue of race and ethnicity within adult education, as she argues that our understanding of race “is invariably situated in our everyday lives and inevitably permeates every facet. Therefore, our classes, practices, programs, and research
reflect what we know and believe about race” (p. 91). Thus, Johnson-Bailey warns adult educators to avoid a colorblind teaching mentality that does not recognize the unique lived experiences and circumstances of people of color. Such an avoidance hinders the power of adult education as an effective tool in facilitating identity development within Black women. Moreover, Johnson-Bailey’s and Cervero’s (2008) personal narratives discuss the constructs of race and gender within their lived experiences as adult educators. As such, they conclude that educators “must simultaneously recognize, acknowledge, and manage race in our relationship [with students]” (p. 312). The authors argue that such recognition can help form deeper connections with their students to redefine racial power relations. Through such dialogue across racial and gender barriers, Black women educators can draw on their own experiences to foster a democratic learning environment that challenges “negative credibility issues and classroom interactions” (Brown, Cervero, Johnson-Bailey, 2000). Thus, the intersectionality of gender and race affects classroom interactions and teaching practices due to the internalization of societal perceptions of such constructs.

**Implications for Adult Educators and Researchers**

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from the literature reviewed in this chapter. Namely, blogs and other social networking applications are primarily used to access and disseminate information. The ubiquity of information to be gained online can prove to be a valuable tool for adult educators and lifelong learners, as learners have the ability to access content from individuals and groups that are not the focus of mass media. Thereby, educators can evoke emotion by exposing learners to the personal narratives of those who are being oppressed. This is human interaction within a communal setting that extends globally. This interaction can also be facilitated among learners in a classroom environment, as this literature
supports online learning communities that foster personal narratives as a form of knowledge, especially in groups that agree to mutual respect, where learners can have their interests heard.

Additionally, Thornburg (2007) argues that learners who publish their work online have greater incentive to produce more critical work, since they anticipate feedback from other learners. This notion lends itself to online collaboration, such as seen in wikis, as Huffman (2006) asserts can be used in classrooms to facilitate learner group collaboration through editing and refining the content among learners with shared knowledge.

Moreover, blogging has augmented the impact of learning. As such, Thomas and Brown (2011) consider “the personal and the collective in the context of education,” as engaging learners in group projects through blogging. More specifically, Thomas and Brown envision blogs as “experimental in nature, used to test and refine ideas” within a community (p. 64). They further argue that individuals learn through tacit knowledge, experiencing, and watching others. This notion of learning by doing is imperative in an ever-changing world, which will depend on lifelong learners who can form connections between what is familiar and new through experimenting and modifying existing approaches to learning (Pettenati & Cigognini, 2007).

In terms of implications for adult education researchers, this chapter indicates an increasing amount of studies in recent years that address issues of blogging and social action. The literature reviewed reveals a need for more research relating to this construct’s impact on women, stronger theoretical frameworks, deeper analysis of the true impact of blogging on social action and change, and deeper engagement from the field of lifelong learning and adult education. To attempt to address these gaps, this study on Black women’s engagement with BNHCBs may very well add meaning to the notion of “culturally political” social action within blogs (Atton, 2014, p. 348; Fiske, 1992).
Summary

Based on the historical, conceptual, and research-based literature discussed in this chapter, Black women construct their identities through their bodies and through their community. However, it is also important that Black women learn to critically understand how these factors influence their identities. Ultimately, these three criteria (i.e., Black bodies, community, critical analysis) can greatly inform a study of blogs aimed at Black women, especially in light of the research suggesting activists engage in blogging to (1) collect and publish information, (2) engage in dialogue and form a community, and (3) mobilize groups.

First, Black women’s bodies and hair are read as cultural text; therefore, an examination of Black blogs should not only focus on the narrative of the women’s voices but also the meanings mediated through representative images on these particular sites. Examining the narratives and images can uncover the types of information BNHCBs publish and collect for readership to facilitate community dialogue. A question for analysis could be, “What evidence is there of text that represent dominant ideologies of Black womanhood and what text are considered a counternarrative?” Additional efforts should be made to put such an analysis within a context of history and struggle (Giroux, 1994).

Next, a study of Black blogs, and in particular BNHCBs, should analyze the construct of community by viewing the demographic served. This is of particular importance, since popular advertising targets middle-class, Black women. Are BNHCBs reaching a broader demographic; thereby, ensuring a more diverse space where multiple perspectives of Black female identity can be shared? Moreover, such spaces should be assessed for the level of cultural authority asserted by the blog moderators and how this phenomenon facilitates dialogue (Speed, 2001).
Lastly, a study on BNHCBs should focus on the sites ability to facilitate identity development and social action through self-reflective narrative. Here, the moderator may be of utmost importance, since she controls the content on her page. Are there examples of issues that extend beyond beauty, such as internalized oppression, which help facilitate a natural hair social movement? Ultimately, a study of BNHCBs framed within critical public pedagogy can greatly inform Black women’s identity development and consciousness and lead to a strong counternarrative that (re)presents Black womanhood.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Through blogging, Black women can openly and creatively express their unique perspectives regarding the world around them and how the world regards them. Blogging has the power to create an open space to value individual voice and embrace mutuality. This is particularly powerful among those from marginalized groups, especially Black women in this study. Within this context, Black women who blog or follow blogs are no longer silenced, since blogs can take the form of an online diary. From an educational perspective, blogs have the potential to be inclusive through a multicultural approach that expands what is considered knowledge, which can help resist dominant ideologies by valuing diverse voices. Embracing multicultural ways of knowing through blogging can lead to greater identity development through critical consciousness, and perhaps social action. Therefore, this study’s focus on BNHCBs as a medium for identity development, critical consciousness, and social action brings new and much needed understanding to the field of lifelong learning and adult education.

In order to analyze racialized text and hair as cultural text, I rely on the theoretical framework of critical public pedagogy informed by Black feminist thought (Hill, 2000) and womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990) to shape the research questions and drive my analysis. First, my initial assumption is that the content of BNHCBs does not simply contain neutral information, but, rather, is influenced by experiences and knowledge of Black womanhood. The second assumption is that BNHCBs create space to give voice, which can be analyzed for influences of ideological viewpoints and political perspectives in terms of power and oppression within culture and gender. My goal is to constructively critique and make suggestions for BNHCBs toward social justice and Black women’s empowerment. Thus, the
following questions guide this investigation of BNHCBs as an example of the intersection between Black womanhood and blogging as a means of adult education for identity development, critical consciousness, and social action:

1. What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?

2. What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the bloggers’ practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?

3. How do the blog commenters’ online personalities align with their offline personalities?

In an earnest attempt to answer these questions, I conducted a two-prong methodological approach: (1) conduct a critical qualitative content analysis of blog posts by bloggers, as well as subsequent comments by their blog readers, and (2) conduct in-depth interviews with their blog commenters, as a means to gain their perspectives on the development of their identity formation, critical consciousness, and capacity for social action.

In order to bring greater clarity to the qualitative methodology of this investigation, I explore the qualitative research paradigm and emphasize its key assumptions in relationship to this study. I then discuss the research design type (i.e., qualitative content analysis) in a similar manner. Next, I discuss my background as a researcher and my connection to the subject and this study. After establishing the rationale for the participants and the selection process, I thoroughly explain the methodology of data collection along with the data analysis of this investigation. After these practical matters are discussed, I explain and discuss the verification of this study (i.e., confirmability, credibility, dependability, transferability) in the context of the purpose and data collection.
A Qualitative Research Paradigm

Qualitative research is most appropriate for this study, as it seeks to understand the multiple ways people make meaning from their experiences by attempting to develop a holistic account of the research problem or issue under study (Creswell, 2009). In order to accomplish this, Merriam (2009) indicates that qualitative researchers must “delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 14). Thus, it is imperative to understand the participants’ perceptions of the phenomenon under study, which is accomplished by the researcher collecting and analyzing multiple forms of data in the natural setting through in-depth participant interviews, observations, and documents. Throughout this data analysis process, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, which allows for better interpretation of nuances (e.g., unexpected reactions). Due to the human factor, the researcher’s worldview, assumptions, and biases must be explored and revealed. This transparency and openness allows the reader to be better informed about how the researcher analyzed the phenomenon under study.

Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research

Basic interpretive qualitative research is one such study that fits the description of qualitative research outlined above. To justify this claim, Merriam (2002) indicates that the basic interpretive qualitative researcher “is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (p. 6). As such, semi-structured interviews are a key form of data collection within this study. Overall, this research interest is grounded in constructivism, since a central theme of a basic interpretive qualitative study is that reality is constructed within a social context. Within this framework, Merriam
(2009) believes that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23). Thus, qualitative research is a reflexive, interpretive process that the researcher undergoes to build theories and concepts—the opposite of a quantitative research approach. Once the data are gathered, the researcher analyzes this information until themes emerge. The results of this thematic analysis must be experientially confirmed through the participants’ words, which are better known as rich, thick descriptions.

However, the overall objective of my study is not to just conduct semi-structured interviews in order to understand how the women who utilize BNHCBs make sense of their lived experiences, but it is also to see how they critique and challenge current hegemonic social structures that continue to marginalize Black women. Thus, viewing this phenomenon through a critical research orientation provides a basis for examining the context of the social problem, including the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts that shape the phenomenon as a means to uncover the outcomes of those who are involved.

**Qualitative Content Analysis**

Since the phenomenon under study is the role of BNHCBs in Black women’s identity development and consciousness raising, which may lead to social action, the qualitative content analysis approaches of qualitative media content analysis (QMCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) were combined with critical public pedagogy to shape the research questions and drive analysis. QMCA is often used to understand or interpret meaning, while CDA is often used to uncover the way meaning and relationships to power are produced.
Qualitative Media Content Analysis

The origins of QMCA begin within *content analysis*, which is often considered quantitative in nature. Neuendorf (2002) defines content analysis as “the systematic, objective, *quantitative* [emphasis added] analysis of message characteristics [in mass media]. It includes the careful examination of human interaction…character portrayals…and word usage” (p. 1). Thus, *quantitative* media content analysis seeks to discover “how media contents reflect or interpret social, cultural and political norms, attitudes, beliefs and values” (Newbold, Boyd-Barrett, & Van den Bulck, 2002, p. 79). This is accomplished by systematically counting the frequency of media texts (i.e., words, sentences, symbols, images, themes) in order to identify common patterns (Hoeschsmann & Poyntz, 2012). Although this approach claims objectivity, Gunter (2000) argues that this “purely descriptive” method makes “few inferences in advance about the potential significance of their findings in the *context* [emphasis added] of what they reveal about the production ideologies or impact of media content on audiences” (p. 81). Due to these limitations, QMCA was developed as an analytical tool that could emphasize the multiple meanings inherent in media texts (Gunter, 2000). Thus, the collection of qualitative data is necessary to gain a full understanding of manifest (surface) and latent (symbolic) meanings for the audience and the effects of the media text (Macnamara, 2005). As such, Shoemaker and Reese (2014) seek to make sense of the media environment, since today’s mass media have “many senders and many receivers” of information (p. 40). These authors argue that our brains “are entertained and taught by the media to think in specific ways about our lives, people, and places, and to *appropriately respond* [emphasis added] to emotional images, sights, and sounds” (p. 63). According to Shoemaker and Reese, this is problematic because our brains contain hegemonic assumptions that define our world. Therefore, it is important to understand the
relationship between media texts and its intended audience regarding context and audience characteristics (Macnamara, 2005).

Additionally, there are five distinct ways to study media texts: structuralist-semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, and interpretive analysis (Hijmans, 1996, as cited in Gunter, 2000). Within the context of this study, qualitative interpretive media content analysis and critical discourse analysis (to be discussed in the following section) will be the main methodological approaches used to determine the meaning structure of the text.

In terms of interpretive analysis, the researcher relies on descriptive and classification skills when reading media texts to uncover relationships between textual patterns and characteristics and material content (Newbold et al., 2002). Thus, applying interpretive analysis to QMCA focuses on the “formation of theory from the observation of messages and the coding of those messages” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 6). Neuendorf (2002) further asserts that QMCAs ties to social science by stating, “[W]ith its roots in social scientific inquiry, it involves theoretical sampling; analytical categories; cumulative, comparative analysis; and the formation of types or conceptual categories” (p. 6). Thus, an interpretive approach to QMCA has a methodology that relies on explicit coding rules that link to method and theory (Gunter, 2000).

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Neuendorf (2002) describes discourse analysis (DA) as a form of qualitative content analysis that “engages in characteristics of manifest language and word use, description of topics in media texts, through consistency and connection of words to theme analysis of content and the establishment of central terms” (p. 5). Therefore, this method aims to characterize media representations (e.g., ideology, motives of communicator) through thematic analysis of discourse...
meanings. Using critical lens, CDA has been used to provide social critique, assist in developing appropriate social interventions, empower people, and unravel “how language conspires to legitimate and perpetuate unequal power relations” (Willig, 1999).

Van Dijk (2001), defines CDA as “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). As such, CDA seeks to invest in social change by exposing how language (re)produces social inequalities. It assumes that “power is transmitted and practiced through discourse” of intended meaning and the speaker (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). This perspective of power is relevant to the ideas of Michel Foucault (2004), as he looked beyond the traditional view of power (i.e., subjugation, institutions, class) to examine the ways in which individuals exercise power to resist, or self-discipline their actions.

More specifically, Foucault (1978) defined power not as “an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (p. 93). Hence, a Foucauldian perspective of CDA does not view power in terms of binary opposition between the dominant and marginalized groups. As a result, there are different types of power, which reside in everyone through both visible (i.e., protest) and invisible (i.e., silence) means. It is the effects of this power that can assist individuals in moving toward their own emancipation and engagement in social action. Thus, Foucault asserts, “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (p. 101).

Ultimately, the strength of CDA lies in making connections between social and cultural structures and processes on the one hand, and properties of text on the other (Fairclough &
Wodak, 1997). As such, Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) observe: “[D]iscourse practices—through which texts are provided (created) and consumed (received and interpreted)—are viewed as an important form of social practice which contributes to the constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations” (p. 61). Therefore, CDA employs a hermeneutic (i.e., written, verbal, nonverbal communication) methodological approach that strongly relies on linguistic categories (e.g., naming and reference, predication, syntax, transitivity, modality).

Although CDA may be considered a methodology, there is not one particular method analysts rely upon. Instead, CDA encompasses a whole host of critical strategies (Machin & Mayr, p. 4) because the theoretical approach “does not constitute a well-defined empirical methodology,” and it is eclectic and diverse in its methods (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 27). However, CDA is rooted in DA and assumes that language is not static but active. Thus, the notion of discourse focuses on “‘what and how language communicates when it is used purposefully in particular instances and contexts’” (Richardson, 2007, p. 24).

**Semiotics and Textual Analysis**

Gunter (2000) considers *semiotics* another method of qualitative content analysis, which analyzes the deeper meaning of text through signified codes, signs, and binaries interpreted by the reader. Ultimately, semiotics and textual analysis analyze text’s social practices and power relations, which are foundational aspects of critical analysis. Richardson (2007) argues that “it is at this point that discourse analysis becomes *critical* discourse analysis” (p. 42). In terms of semiotics, signs are composed of two elements: the signifier (i.e., physical image) and the signified (i.e., mental concept). Machin and Mayr (2012) distinguish semiotics by using the term *discourse*. Here, Machin and Mayr define discourse as “language in real contexts of use…”[which] operates above the level of grammar and semantics” to uncover what happens with
these texts within a social context (p. 20). Thus, the process of CDA analyzes word and
grammar choices within texts “in order to discover the underlying discourse(s) and ideologies”
(Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 20). Here, the basic method of *textual analysis* comes in handy, since
it analyzes vocabulary, semantics, and grammar within the context of connoted and denoted
meaning and assumes the producer of text has agency to choose her or his words. As such, the
following tools are relevant to this study: *lexical analysis, naming and reference, predication,
presuppositions,* and *rhetorical tropes*.

Richardson (2007) argues that an analysis of particular words (i.e., *lexical analysis*) is
often the first step toward CDA, as the words used to communicate the message of a text directly
frame the meaning. These words include an analysis of the nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs
chosen in a particular text. A lexical analysis also leads to an analysis of how people are named
and referenced, as *referential strategies* perform a function that projects meaning and value on
the referent (Richardson, 2007). Moreover, van Dijk’s (1996) concept of the *ideological square*
suggests that individuals use referential strategies to represent the world through their
perceptions of particular characteristics of the *insider* and the *outsider*, with the latter being
represented in a negative way (Richardson, 2007). Along these same lines, *predicational
strategies* are a more direct tool used to represent the values and characteristics of individuals.
Typically, predication is used to give an individual a title—whether positive or negative.

Thus far, the lexical analysis tools discussed are manifested in the text; however, there
are also *presuppositions*, which Richardson (2007) defines as “implicit claims inherent in the
explicit meaning of a text or utterance which are taken for granted” and mutually assumed by
both parties (p. 63). Lastly, an analysis of *rhetorical tropes* (i.e., hyperboles, metaphors)
examines the use of words to denote or connote something that is apart from their intended or ordinary meaning (Richardson, 2007).

**Background of Researcher**

My background as a researcher begins with a recognition of the interconnectedness of my experiences, which ultimately give meaning to my life purpose. It is through a critical self-reflection that I have learned to transgress the culturally constructed boundaries of my mind. Taking such a contemplative stance is critical to who I wish to become as an adult educator. It begins with my authentic self (Tisdell, 2003), which is based on my personal philosophy of being a progressive-radical. I strongly align myself with the ideals of experience, problem-solving, and social change through a process of self-actualization. These ideals are rooted in my own identity as a Black woman and my understanding of the suppression of ideas that come from a Black feminist perspective (Hill, 2000). Although I see a desperate need for the scholarship of Black female scholars to be valued and heard, I must be cognizant of my positionality within this study, especially as it relates to discussing socially contentious issues, such as race.

Moreover, my positionality extends beyond a Black female to one who also wears her hair in its natural state. This positionality may be relevant to participants I interview. Because building rapport is essential to obtain in-depth qualitative data through narration, I reveal to each interviewee my racial identity and hair aesthetic preference at the start of each interview. This perspective positions me as an insider, which may have helped me gain greater credibility (Kline, Burstein, de Keijzer, & Berger, 2005; Hamilton, 2009) through a blogging platform. Thus, interview participants may be more apt to sharing their stories.

Moreover, my positionality provides me with greater ability to generate salient questions about Black womanhood and use figurative language and wordplay (Florini, 2013), since I am a
member of the Black natural hair care community. Although my insider perspective comes with great advantages, I am cautious about my assumptions with regard to shared experiences, since stories and shared information have the potential to create unique narratives that acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings by different Black women, if I am mindful of the participants’ perspectives.

Ultimately, an understanding of my positionality with participants can lead to a level of openness that requires a commitment to integrity of outcomes. Thus, I am committed to moving beyond my personal interests, which will only be read by fellow academics, to extend my research to those who do not normally have access. This freedom to explore the educational relationship between culture and politics is empowering and affirms my commitment as an adult educator beyond the academic walls.

Participant Selection

For this study, I rely on a qualitative research methodology, which examines a specific phenomenon from the perspective of the participants involved (Merriam, 2002). Thus, I select a small, purposeful sample to gain greater understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives on Black womanhood and how it relates to identity development, social consciousness, and social action. I gain these perspectives by analyzing the blog posts and respective comments, while also conducting in-depth interviews of the blog commenters. To achieve such a purposeful sample, which captures the essence of the participants’ lived experiences and the phenomenon under study, I employ criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling. This sampling method helps me set apart specific blogs from the hundreds of similar blogs in cyberspace.
Blog Selection Criteria

I utilize the phrase “Black natural hair care blogs” under the online search engine, Google, to select the blog sites for analysis. The items returned from this search had to be a blog that predominately focuses on Black natural hair care from an individual authorship perspective that adds a personal dimension (Dennis, 2015). The authors of such blogs had to also self-identify as Black women, wear their hair in its natural, un-chemically treated state, and be around 25 years or older. To better assess for collaborative learning, I chose blogs that average one personal blog post weekly, which was calculated based on the number of months the blog had been active divided by the total number of blog posts. Lastly, the blogs I chose utilized Disqus, which enables blog followers to post comments.

Blog Descriptions

This section provides a synopsis of the two blogs chosen for analysis: Curly Nikki (CN) and Black Girl with Long Hair (BGLH). Below is a description of each blog and its founder.

CurlyNikki. Based on Google’s search algorithms, CN is ranked as number one when using the search phrase “Black natural hair care blogs.” Although Google deems CN as the most relevant result for BNHCBs, SimilarWeb (2017), a digital market intelligence company, ranked it number 15 in the Beauty and Fitness category, based on CN’s nearly 596,000 monthly visits in June 2017. Founded by Nikki Walton in October 2008, CurlyNikki “serve as an online ‘hair therapy session’ for those struggling to embrace their naturally curly hair” (Walton, 2008, para. 1). This psychological perspective is grounded in the founder’s background as a licensed psychotherapist. As such, Walton indicates that her mission is “to provide balance between physical beauty and personal esteem in a way that defies societal norms—providing Hair Therapy to achieve real hair, real beauty and real self-esteem” (Walton, 2008, para. 2)!
Walton’s posts often embody a therapeutic tone of self-reflection and empowerment. Due to CurlyNikki.com’s loyal fan base of millions of followers and its touting as the “most comprehensive source for natural hair care information on the Web” (Samuel, 2012, para. 6), this blog has a far-reaching influence on other BNHCBs. This is evident in how much Walton relies on posts from other bloggers, as she reposts other bloggers’ posts on her page, while also giving credit to the originator by attaching a hyperlink to the respective bloggers’ original post.

**Black Girl with Long Hair.** Although Google Search ranks *Black Girl with Long Hair* (BGLH) as the second most relevant BNHCB, BGLH is in fierce competition with CN. According to SimilarWeb (2017), BGLH had nearly 813,000 total visits in June 2017, which ranks them at number 10 under their Beauty and Fitness category. Founder, Leila Noelliste, began her blog in 2008 “after being appalled at how few spaces existed online for black women” (Noelliste, n. d., para. 2). With her roots in journalism, Noelliste uses this medium as a “brand of storytelling” and values its importance “for the preservation of democracy and the documentation of culture” (Mathis, 2014, para. 4). Noelliste’s journalistic approach is apparent in her writing style, which makes her blog read like a news article. This style is drastically different from Walton, who uses much more colloquial language that is typically shared among others in the Black community. Another distinct difference between the two blogs is immediately apparent when you click on the “About Us” tab. The “us” denotes more of a communal and collaborative approach to this blog, as opposed to CN’s “About Me” section, which talks more from an individual standpoint.

**Blog Post Section Criteria**

Blog posts appear in chronological order, with the most recent blog post appearing first. Blog posts are also titled and dated, which, along with the chronology, allows for greater analysis
of context. These posts are further contextualized with each post by a blog commenter, whose contribution becomes integrated into the blog content as a collaborative process (Dennis, 2015). The phenomenon of this collaboration is critical to this study; therefore, an analysis of the entirety of the blog posts is essential.

With this in mind, I rely on specific selection criteria to bring greater focus to the content within the blogs. Based on the blog selection criteria, the blog content within the selected blogs was chosen within a manageable timeframe of three years from the start of data collection in February 2017. A total of 20 blog posts (10 per blog) were chosen for this analysis. Each selected blog post was chosen based on the ten highest number of comments from CN and BGLH’s founders (Walton and Noelliste, respectively) within the past three years. However, in order to perform an effective textual analysis, I managed the 9,413 blog post comments (7,678 from CN and 1,735 from BGLH) by only analyzing the first 25 comments of the 20 posts (500 total comments). To ensure I analyzed only posts authored by Walton, I searched for articles using the tag “musings of a first time mom,” which is the tag Walton consistently uses when writing her posts. The top most commented posts mostly center around natural hair care products and styling techniques. However, one post focuses on the relevancy of a Black celebrity wearing her hair natural on air, while another post addresses the controversy surrounding Black affinity online spaces. Likewise, to ensure I analyzed only posts authored by Noelliste, I searched for articles using the tag “Black Girl with Long Hair,” which is the tag Noelliste consistently uses when writing her own posts. The top most commented posts focus on: (a) Black women’s bodies as a form of resistance; (b) the otherness of Black women; (c) fetishizing Black features; (d) Black affinity spaces; and (e) colorism (i.e., discrimination based on skin color).
Commenter Participant Selection Criteria

As a registered user of Disqus, I am able to view the Disqus pages of BGLH and CN. These Disqus pages include links to their “Top Commenters” Disqus pages, which allowed me to view the commenters’ posting history, while also allowing me to either gain more contact information (e.g., link to personal blog) or solicit participation by replying to a previous comment the blog commenter submitted to a site other than CN or BGLH, as these two sites prohibit solicitation. My reply encouraged those who were interested in participating in an interview to email me for more information (see recruitment script in Appendix A). Of the 33 potential candidates I contacted, 15 responded with interest. However, two of these women did not log on to video chat during our agreed upon interview time and date; one did not follow up to emails to set up an interview time; one had to withdrawal due to a family medical emergency; and one was only 17 years old. The remaining ten women responded via email and confirmed their interest. Aside from already ensuring that these women met the first and second blog follower selection criterion, as indicated in Chapter Three, the women had to self-identify with the four remaining criteria: (3) self-identifies as African-American/Black; (4) presents or self-identifies as female; (5) wears hair in its natural, un-chemically treated state; and (6) around 25 years or older.

Data Collection

Since qualitative research is used to gather in-depth information from participants through their lived experiences, data collection procedures that will ensure rich, thick descriptive data are the focus of this section. According to Merriam (2002), documents, observations, and interviews are all considered major sources of qualitative data. With this in mind, I utilize a two-pronged qualitative approach that relies on blog content and interview data for analysis. These
methods closely match the type of information needed to determine the lived experiences of Black women who participate in BNHCBs.

**Blog Posts**

Blog posts and comments (i.e., text, images, videos) are the primary means of data collection for this study, since they aid me in cross-examining the subsequent interviews for discrepancies. For the purpose of this study, I rely on texts and some images related to Black womanhood to gather pertinent information about BNHCBs as an example of connecting blogging to identity development, critical consciousness, and social action. Since much of the data is text, it is important to remember that research based on blog posts, particularly from a marginalized group, can contribute greatly to the investigation by relying on text within a community that creates candidness and intellectual pursuit (hooks, 1994). For this reason, data collected from Black women’s own words will be valuable to the construct of Black womanhood from the voice of Black women.

In terms of analyzing the blog postings, I utilize an interpretive QMCA approach, along with a CDA approach that is informed by van Dijk (1996, 2001). QMCA and CDA, as informed by critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist thought (Hill, 2000) and womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990), allow me to reduce the text as data to uncover patterns that bring meaning to Black womanhood. This method allows me to develop codes and transform them into themes to uncover similar phrases, relationships, patterns, commonalities or disparities when compared among themselves and the interviews (Berg, 2001). The level of sampling and units of analysis is at the word, phrase, sentence, subject topic, and image levels, and I analyze these units in relation to the semiotics and lexical analysis discussed previously (Berg, 2001). Van Dijk’s *sociocognitive* approach, which focuses on cognition and the influence of societal
structures on discourse and “how these societal structures are in turn enacted, legitimated or challenged by discourse” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 212), also guide this analysis. Although the bloggers and commenters are not assumed to engage in racist discourse, the contribution of van Dijk’s model is in its ability to link “the generation of prejudice to discursive units larger than the sentence” (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001, p. 379). This assumption can be applied to the women’s long-term memory, which van Dijk believes is directly responsible for producing and retaining the ethnic prejudices (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001).

For this method, I developed codes and then I transformed these codes into themes to uncover similar phrases, relationships, patterns, commonalities, and disparities when compared among the bloggers and the blog readers. To provide a deeper textual analysis of racialized discourse, I provide a level of sampling and units of analysis at the word, phrase, sentence, subject topic, and image levels to examine how these forms of discourse convey social problems and issues of power that continue to marginalize Black women. Such an analysis of text and images must go beyond the literal (i.e., denoted) meaning and include the connoted meaning, especially as it relates to racial identity (Hall, 1997). Moreover, textual analysis grounded in CDA analyzes what is connoted and denoted in the text and assumes that the producer of text has agency to choose a combination of linguistic and visual elements to help her convey her message. To uncover the meaning-making, I utilize a textual analysis to determine specific word choices and sentence construction used in the meaning-making of the Black women in this study. Specific textual analysis tools used, include: lexical analysis, naming and reference, predication, presuppositions, and rhetorical tropes.
**Textual Analysis Tools**

Within this level of analysis, an analysis of particular words (i.e., *lexical analysis*) is often the first step toward discourse analysis, as the words used to communicate the message of a text directly frame the story (Richardson, 2007). These words include an analysis of the nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs chosen in a particular text. Additionally, a lexical analysis leads to an analysis of how people are named and referenced, as *referential strategies* perform a function that projects meaning and value on the referent (Richardson). Moreover, Teun van Dijk’s (2011) concept of the *ideological square* suggests that individuals use referential strategies to represent the world through the perceptions and emphasis on particular characteristics of the “insider” and the “outsider,” with the latter being represented in a negative way (Richardson). Along these same lines, *predicational strategies* are a more direct tool used to represent the values and characteristics of individuals. Typically, predication is used to give an individual a title—whether positive or negative. Additionally, *transitivity* is also central to this analysis, as it helps determine “agency and responsibility” for the kinds of actions of the participant and the circumstances that result (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 104). These three linguistic resources are relevant to this analysis, as the words and images the bloggers and blog commenters choose to represent what they and others do “will signify discourses that can shape the way that we will perceive participants, events, and circumstances,” and thereby influence if we align alongside or against others (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 12). Such alignment is central to the sense of community and agency that develops from online learning communities, especially a community that is primarily supported by marginalized groups.

In addition to these strategies that explicitly identify the ingroup and outgroup, there are also hidden or presupposed meanings in texts used to persuade the reader without overtly stating
ideologies (Richardson, 2007; Machin & Mayr, 2012). These meanings, or presuppositions, are defined as “a taken-for-granted, implicit claim embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance” (Richardson, 2007, p. 63). The hallmark of this strategy is that the implied meaning is presented in a way that is understood by both parties; however, the text is clearly debatable (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Lastly, an analysis of these blog posts should include an analysis of the rhetorical tropes the bloggers and readers use to make their arguments. According to Richardson (2007), a rhetorical trope uses words to denote or connote something that is separate from their intended or ordinary meaning. Examples of such tropes analyzed in this study include analogies, metaphors, personification, abstract nouns, idioms, and neologisms (i.e., coined words or expressions).

**Themes Grounded in the Four Principles of Black Womanhood within Digital Spaces**

Based on the literature review in Chapter Two, I derived the following four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces: (a) the implications of the politics of representation with regard to contesting and/or perpetuating hegemonic assumptions of Black womanhood; (b) a critical analysis of popular culture and media messages of Black womanhood as connected to power and big business; (c) the utilization of journalistic sociopolitical intervention to exercise power to resist, self-discipline actions, and/or sensationalize messages; and (d) a dialogic exchange of information where the reader can also be the producer of knowledge through an online learning community. These four principles where shortened by the italicized wording to help organize my findings in my QMCA and CDA analysis, which will hopefully support a future theory of Black womanhood within digital spaces, largely based on the four principles I derived from the literature review. Moreover, developing these four principles prior to data collection allowed me to bring some structure to this analysis, which helped me minimize any
cognitive changes I may have experienced during the analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). Such structure limits biases and increases reliability, as each principle helped organize and define the ten themes that emerged from the data: (a) the sanctity of Black affinity spaces; (b) the shame in othering ourselves; (c) perpetuating the angry Black woman trope; (d) a lack of self-ethnic reflectors; (e) the big business of natural hair care; (f) the blogger and commenters sense of agency; (g) tactics used to normalize natural hair; (h) bloggers and commenters word choice regarding sensationalizing posts; (i) initiating and maintaining online conversations; and (j) reimagining the natural hair care expert. The four principles, which are based on how the Black women who engage with these particular BNHCBs utilize the various forms of text to challenge or perpetuate value produced from dominate ideologies, are as follows:

- **The Politics of Representation:** The ways in which the communicator uses language to convey meaning and belonging to a shared identity of Black women who wear their hair in its natural state. Along with evidence of the ways in which the bloggers and blog commenters critically analyze controlling images to identify how they inform their identities as Black women and instances of historical racial archetypes (i.e., mammy, matriarch, tragic mulatto, picanninny) and hegemonic assumptions of Black womanhood based on the hegemony/dominant ideologies of what society deems to be the essence of Black womanhood. Perpetuated through the creation of binary distinctions that position Black women as negative and White women as positive (Giroux, 1994), which has implications for instances of internalized oppression. The emerging themes that align within this principle include: (a) the sanctity of Black affinity spaces; (b) the shame in othering ourselves; and (c) perpetuating the angry Black woman trope.
• **Critical Analysis of Popular Culture and Media:** Focusing on Hall’s (1997) analysis of the Black subject within popular culture, where he argues that an analysis of images must go beyond the literal denoted meaning and include the connoted meaning, especially as it relates to racial identity. Additionally, Hall (2009) contends that although power is restrictive and counteractive, it is also productive. Therefore, it is important to analyze the media messages (e.g., invisibility of Black women, narrow representation) and their connections with the circulation of power within the big business of the beauty and fashion industry, in order to challenge such power. The emerging themes that align within this principle include: (a) a lack of self-ethnic reflectors and (b) the big business of natural hair care.

• **Journalistic Sociopolitical Intervention:** The ways in which the bloggers and readers use text to exercise power to resist, or self-discipline their actions. How bloggers become more visible by sensationalizing their messages of advocacy through emotions and intersecting with popular culture (Burwell & Bolder, 2014; Finer, 2016) to gain larger audiences. The producer of the text has agency to choose her words. Additionally, instances of “everyday sociality” (Atton, 2014, p. 353) seen as evidence of seemingly mundane activities as a means of cultural politics that may lead to social action. The emerging themes that align within this principle include: (a) bloggers and commenters sense of agency, (b) tactics used to normalize natural hair, and (c) the bloggers and commenters actions regarding sensationalizing posts.

• **Dialogic Exchange of Information:** Knowledge exchange through a dialogic process where the reader also produces and circulates knowledge (Kavada, 2013) through an initiation and maintenance of dialogue within the online learning community. The
emerging themes that align within this principle include: (a) initiating and maintaining online conversations and (b) reimagining the natural hair care expert.

With these principles as a frame of reference, I used a content analysis schedule (Table 3-1) to develop the manifest (i.e., surface) and latent (i.e., symbolic) content that emerged from the blog posts and supporting reader comments (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Polit & Beck, 2014). Thus, the methodology I employ for this research is primarily inductive, as I look at the data from the content analysis and interviews to cluster them together into themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, these emerging themes were developed from the content analysis and then subsequently tested with the interviews that followed, which morphed into a “slightly deductive mode of thought” (Merriam & Tisdell, p. 210). This approach was carried out to the point of saturation (i.e., no new information emerges from the data). Yet, it is my hope to use the emerging data to “[weave] together new information into theories” (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 10). More specifically, it is my hope that a potential theory that will develop from future testing and confirming the four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces, which I derived from the literature review.
Table 3-1. Example of Content Analysis Coding/Category Schedule for CurlyNikki Blog Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning Units</th>
<th>Condensed Meaning Units</th>
<th>Four Principles</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I found intriguing about your decision to speak on this matter was the strong sense of entitlement you must have felt to discuss the meaning and purpose of the blog I created. I mean if I understand you correctly, you’re on my side, but only because the site was never for black women anyway? Well, damn...with friends like that, who needs trolls?</td>
<td>Feeling entitled to speak about blog I created. On my side but only because site was inclusion. Who needs enemies with friends like this?</td>
<td>Politics of Representation</td>
<td>Deconstructing the Angry Black Woman Trope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I must admit, I like the folks at Ebony (and Essence, too), especially since you’ve become more natural hair friendly. I do always wonder, however, why our biggest black publications didn’t lead the natural hair charge.</td>
<td>Like black magazines, especially becoming more natural hair friendly. Wonder why publications don’t lead natural hair charge.</td>
<td>Critical Analysis of Popular Culture and Media</td>
<td>Analyzing the Commodification of Natural Hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If women from other cultures are inspired by our stories, I'm cool with that. This means that it will become easier for black women to display their blackness outside of our ‘safe’ black spaces.</td>
<td>Ok with non-black women being inspired. Means it will be easier for black women to display blackness outside black spaces.</td>
<td>Journalistic Sociopolitical Intervention</td>
<td>Normalization of Natural Hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show her some love in the comments below! She'll be reading them!</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogative Exchange of Information</td>
<td>Initiating &amp; Maintaining Conversations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews

In terms of analyzing the interviews, I utilized a basic interpretive qualitative research approach instead of QMCA, since QMCA is primarily designed to examine message characteristics in mass media (Neuendorf, 2002). By utilizing a basic interpretive qualitative method to analyze the interviews, I am able to uncover how the participants make meaning out of their interactions with BNHCBs (Merriam, 2002). However, the overall objective of this study is not to just conduct semi-structured interviews in order to understand how the women who utilize BNHCBs make sense of their lived experiences, it is also to see how they critique and challenge current hegemonic social structures that continue to marginalize Black women. Thus, analyzing their interviews through a CDA approach provides a basis for how I examine the context of the social problem, including the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts that shape the phenomenon. Thus, a CDA approach that is informed by van Dijk (1996, 2001) will uncover how word choice brings meaning to Black womanhood. For this method, I developed codes and then I transformed these codes into themes to identify if they fit within the four previously identified principles to uncover similar phrases, relationships, patterns, commonalities, and disparities when compared among the participants I interviewed.

I relied on semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) in the form of in-depth phone and/or online-chat interviews that lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. I audiotaped and transcribed these interviews and then read and reread all transcriptions several times to identify common themes. Once all data were collected and transcribed from the participants, I analyzed all qualitative data by using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, I analyzed and coded all qualitative data to inform the research questions, and then I made comparisons across the themes and concepts. It is important to note that QMCA and CDA are not just limited to media
content, as they also have utility in the interviews transcribed as text; therefore, I applied these methodological approaches to the interviews to uncover meaning (Berg, 2001). I then compared the data from the QMCA and CDA to the interviews to either confirm or negate the findings.

**Disqus Comments**

When analyzing the participants’ Disqus comments, I again utilized QMCA and CDA, as informed by critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist thought (Hill, 2000) and womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990). This methodology allowed me to reduce the text as data to uncover patterns that bring meaning to Black womanhood. I also relied on the same four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces I used in Chapter Four (Table 4-2) to help organize the themes related to the participants’ online engagement. With these principles as a frame of reference, I used the same content analysis coding/category schedule I used in Chapter Four (see Table 3-1 for an example) to develop the manifest and latent content from the Disqus comments (Polit & Beck, 2014).

In order to determine if the participants’ level of engagement remains consistent across online and offline spaces, I selected the 25 most recent comments of each of their Disqus pages to gain a snapshot of their online behavior. This analysis gave me a total of 250 comments to analyze in the following areas: (a) date joined Disqus; (b) total number of comments; (c) types of content engaging; (d) number of times replied to a fellow reader’s comment; (e) average recent comment rate (summation of comment post dates divided by 25); and (f) fit to the four broad organizational principles.

**Verification**

Verification strategies are vital to conducting a solid qualitative research study, as they ensure that the findings of such a study can be considered trustworthy and believable (Merriam,
2002). Thus, qualitative researchers address issues related to trustworthiness through the criteria of conformability, credibility, dependability, and transferability.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability speaks to the extent to which the data and interpretation are independent of the perspective of the researcher. Thus, this verification strategy relies on triangulation of all data to address confirmability. Moreover, I relied on (a) multiple theories, (b) multiple methods, and (c) multiple sources of data to confirm my findings. Firstly, as outlined in Chapters One and Two, I rely on multiple conceptual and theoretical lenses to examine the identity development and critical consciousness in Black women who post comments on BNHCBs. These frameworks include (a) a Black feminist perspective of critical race theory, (b) critical public pedagogy informed by Black feminist thought, (c) womanist identity development theory, and (d) connectivism learning theory. I rely on these multiple conceptual and theoretical lenses, I use these lenses to view the phenomenon in this study more comprehensively. Moreover, I rely on content analysis of blog posts and comments, in-depth interviews, and analysis of participant comments on Disqus to better triangulate the data through the use of multiple methods of data collection. Accordingly, I check the blog posts against what I observe in the comment section, interviews, and subsequent Disqus comments, and vice versa (Merriam, 2009). Finally, I triangulate multiple data sources by conducting interviews and examining blog comments through the data collection process. Additionally, QMCA and CDA of the blog content offers me additional sources of data to draw conclusions. Collectively, these three forms of triangulation allow me to add greater depth to the findings outlined in Chapters Four and Five. However, it is important to note that triangulation would be impossible without an audit trail that
keeps track of all data and corresponding material within the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the consistency and accuracy of the participants’ actual perceptions with the researcher’s interpretation of the findings. This verification strategy uncovers whether the researcher’s perspective aligns with the participants’ perspectives. Thus, the biases of the researcher must be revealed to ward off confounding findings. Although examination of these biases is important, it is also important to recognize that the nature of qualitative research permits multiple interpretations (Wolcott, 1990). As part of this credibility check, I reflect on my positionality within this research, as I have previously discussed. I manage my positionality through data triangulation and data categories/analysis schedules. Data triangulation occurs throughout the interviews with the utilization of “observer comments” to be mindful of my own behavior and potential projection of my own experiences as a Black woman with natural hair. Furthermore, I review and compare these observer comments to the thematic analysis.

**Dependability**

Dependability strategies are also important to trustworthiness within qualitative research, as they address the ability of the research to be replicated. As such, I maintain copious notes and data collection methods through an audit trail. Additionally, triangulation (as previously discussed) also add to the dependability of this study. Lastly, I am also mindful of the potential effects online and telephone mediums can have on the data (Merriam, 2002).

**Transferability**

Transferability, which is the degree to which the research findings can be transferred (or generalized) to other contexts, is the final verification criteria. Due to the narrow focus of this
study, generalizations based on the findings may be limited to Black women. However, some findings may be further explored within a different context of blogging, particularly within marginalized groups, to demonstrate the transferability of this study, thereby making the findings more valid. Since particular blogs are chosen as the medium to gain meaning of the constructs of this study, the blogs selected may broaden the understanding of the relationship between bloggers and blog followers for identity development, critical consciousness, and social action. Thus, an analysis of this relationship is transferable as other bloggers can be studied to explore this relationship within the field of adult education.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the methodology for this study. This chapter began with a brief overview of qualitative research, which included a discussion of basic interpretive qualitative research in relation to this study. Next, I discussed qualitative content analysis, which included the key assumptions of qualitative media content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and semiotics and textual analysis. In the following section, I discussed my role as a researcher, including research interests and my positionality. I concluded by identifying the selection process for my participants, data collection, and verification processes.
The purpose of my study is to explore the role discursive practices and online learning communities within Black natural hair care blogs (BNHCBs) play in the construction of Black female identity and critical consciousness in both online and offline (i.e., real world) spaces, as they pertain to a form of resistance (i.e., cultural politics) from the readers’ perspectives. The research questions that guide my study are:

1. What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?
2. What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the bloggers’ practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?
3. How do the blog commenters’ online personalities align with their offline personalities?

To investigate these questions, I utilize a two-prong methodological approach, which encompasses the following steps: (1) conduct an interpretive qualitative media content analysis (QMCA) of blog posts by CurlyNikki (CN) and Black Girl with Long Hair (BGLH), as well as subsequent comments by their blog readers and (2) conduct in-depth interviews with CN and BGLH blog readers, which will be the focus of Chapter Five. Additionally, I utilize QMCA to uncover themes represented within the blog posts. This analysis laid the foundation for me to also conduct a textual analysis grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) to make connections between social and cultural structures, processes, and properties of text.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the textual data obtained from the CN and BGLH blog posts. This chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first section, I will
provide an overview of each blog, followed by a synopsis of the 20 blog posts (ten per blog) chosen for this analysis. Each selected blog post was chosen based on the ten highest number of comments from CN and BGLH within the past three years. The second section begins with a brief overview of the relevancy and suitability of using QMCA and CDA for this study, as they are tools used to uncover patterns that bring meaning to Black womanhood. However, in order to perform an effective textual analysis, I managed the 9,413 blog post comments (7,678 from CN and 1,735 from BGLH) by only analyzing the first 25 comments of the 20 posts (500 total comments). In the final section of this chapter, I give a detailed discussion of the findings of the QMCA and CDA conducted on these comments, as they relate to the research questions and the four principles of Black womanhood.

**Blog Post Summaries**

This section provides a synopsis of the top ten blog posts authored by the blog founders of CN and BGLH, which provides context for the QMCA and CDA to follow. To begin, I provide an overview of CurlyNikki (CN) and Black Girl with Long Hair (BGLH) to identify each blog’s purpose, organization, and background of the founder.

**CurlyNikki**

Based on Google’s search algorithms, CN is ranked as number one when using the search phrase “Black natural hair care blogs.” Although Google deems CN as the most relevant result for BNHCBs, SimilarWeb, a digital market intelligence company, ranked it number 15 in the Beauty and Fitness category, based on CN’s nearly 596,000 monthly visits in June 2017 (“Curlynikki.com,” 2017). Founder and Head of Content Development, Nikki Walton, a trained psychotherapist, launched CurlyNikki in October 2008. On her “About Me” section of her blog, Walton is direct and personable in how she introduces herself and her purpose. At the top of this
page is a portrait of Walton sitting outside on a lounge chair (Figure 4-1). Her contorted pose, pouty mouth, and sunglasses give the impression of a celebrity. The text below the image reads: “If You’re Not Feeling Your Hair, You’re Not Feeling Yourself…” (Walton, 2008). These sorts of colloquial phrases (e.g., turnt up, hella, this sh*t right here, extra dopeness) are language Walton utilizes regularly, which gives her blog posts a more casual and lighthearted feel. Walton indicates that her blog was created “to serve as an online ‘hair therapy session’ for those struggling to embrace their naturally curly hair” (Walton, 2008, para. 1). She further acknowledges that her blog goes beyond teaching women how to manage their curly hair, as it was also established as space for women to share their “experiences, frustrations, and triumphs of being Naturally Glamorous” (Walton, 2008, para. 1).

Figure 4-1. Nikki Walton “About Me” portrait.

Below her purpose statement, Walton posts the following media logos: USA Today, MSNBC, The Huffington Post, Ebony, ABC, Black Enterprise, Essence, and CNN. Under this imagery, Walton has a link to her Internet Movie Database (IMDb) biography. Her IMDb page
further details her TV credits on shows such as *The Dr. Oz Show, The Today Show*, and *The Steve Harvey Show*, where she appears as a guest panelist and expert (“Nikki Walton,” n. d.). Returning to her “About Me” page, Walton includes another image of her in a mermaid-cut, formal black gown at the *45th Annual NAACP Image Awards*, where she indicates she was nominated for being a best-selling author of *Better Than Good Hair* (Walton, 2008). What follows are 13 more bullet points detailing her accomplishments in the press from being profiled on *The Today Show* to conducting nearly 100 celebrity interviews with the likes of Chaka Khan, Tracee Ellis Ross, Raven Symone, and Wanda Sykes. Most notable is her bullet point, which states “Making moves to exercise my considerable leverage in the industry on behalf of the CurlyNikki community (TextureMedia/Ultra Standard Acquisition Press Release; Walton, 2008).” Walton includes a link to the Market Watch press release, *Ultra/Standard Acquires TextureMedia,* (“Ultra/Standard Acquires TextureMedia,” 2015), which promotes the benefit of TextureMedia, the largest hair and beauty online platform for textured hair, being acquired by Ultra/Standard, the beauty care industry leader in distributing multicultural hair and beauty products. When interviewed for this press release, Walton states:

> When I joined forces with NaturallyCurly in 2010, my goal was to find capable partners and a business model that would spur growth while protecting the integrity of CurlyNikki.com for my consumer community. I think we’ve successfully accomplished that. I’m also satisfied that the Ultra/Standard acquisition of TextureMedia is consistent with my original goals. (“Ultra/Standard Acquires TextureMedia,” 2015, para. 7).

Below this bullet point on her blog, Walton includes a picture of her with Micheal Ross, President of Ultra/Standard; Ryan Alberta, Vice President of Purchasing/Business Development for Ultra/Standard; and Michelle Breyer, co-founder of Naturallycurly.com and Head of
Business Development for TextureMedia. Walton also has a screen shot of her from her appearance on the Melissa Harris Perry show; a candid picture of her and Al Roker backstage at NBC’s The Today Show; a behind the scenes shot of her on the Dr. Oz Show set, and a screen shot of her during the taping of The Steve Harvey Show. Walton ends her list of accomplishments with Jamila Bey, New York Times journalist and radio host, coining her as “the modern day Madame CJ Walker” (Walton, 2008). Walton further articulates her mission of CurlyNikki by providing the following background information:

I’m a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and hold a masters degree in Psychology. In my practice as a psychotherapist, I regularly counsel women through depression, low self-esteem, and image development. Hair comes up more than you think. My mission here is to provide balance between physical beauty and personal esteem in a way that defies societal norms—providing Hair Therapy to achieve real hair, real beauty and real self-esteem! Hence the RED COUCH. (Walton, 2008, para. 2)

Walton differentiates her approach to natural hair by stating that it is “neither a political statement, nor a ‘back to nature’ movement,” as she simply wants to promote a healthy lifestyle by making natural hair more accessible and versatile (Walton, 2008, para. 3). Walton concludes her post with a link to a clip of her appearance on the Tyra Banks Show, along with a nine-paragraph essay of her “Hair Story,” which details her early experiences with her hair, her difficulties managing her hair throughout college, her discovery of Naturallycurly.com and Nappturality, and the support of her husband. Regarding the latter, Walton pens the following:

My husband loves my natural hair and actually requested that I wear it natural on our wedding day! I almost cried, because I thought he wanted to see it straight…He has been nothing but supportive, and truth be told, HE is the reason I found the confidence to go
natural. He made me look inside of myself and see that the cause of my psychological distress was my irrational belief about how my hair ‘should’ be. My self-awareness of this fact coupled with the education I’ve received from various forums have helped me get past the negativity. (Walton, 2008, para. 12)

Walton keeps things personal by including a picture of her from her May 2005 undergraduate graduation and pictures from her wedding day. Although she seems to just be narrating her personal biography, her blog, once examined, has created a model of how issues typically centered in the Black community can become accessible and recognized by mainstream media.

**CurlyNikki Top 10 Blog Posts**

To ensure I analyzed only posts authored by Walton, I searched for articles using the tag “musings of a first time mom,” which is the tag she consistently uses when writing her own posts. The top most commented posts center around natural hair care products and styling techniques. One post focuses on the significance of a Black celebrity wearing her hair natural on air, while another post addresses the controversy surrounding Black affinity online spaces.

**Post 1: Stretched Hair, Don’t Care (June 27, 2014).** With 1,648 comments, “Stretched Hair, Don’t Care” (Walton, 2014a) is clearly the most heavily commented post by Walton. This post begins with a picture of Walton’s hair in a high-top bun, with the text below the image, stating, “when all else fails, bun that ish” (Walton, 2014a). This phrase sets the premise of this post, which centers around Walton trying to find hair products that can combat high humidity. In failing to secure a styler that would keep her curls defined, Walton laments that she had every intention of recommending her favorite styler to her readers, but she has yet to find one. Although she cannot fulfill her readers’ requests, Walton does provide them with a quick tutorial on how she moisturizes and styles her hair with her favorite moisturizer and hair stylers.
Post 2: The Real Reason Why Your Wash and Go Sucks (July 17, 2014). Walton opens her post with a picture of her gazing off to the side, ringlets of curls framing her face. She then references her previous posts about her bun, but she indicates she misses her curls and set out to find a new wash and go technique. She states, “[I] came up with something that may make a difference in your life…on some real levels” (Walton, 2014g, para. 1). Walton goes on to explain to her readers, bullet point by bullet point, her hair styling process. She ends the post with answers to common problems with this hair style. This post amassed 1062 comments.

Post 3: Tamron Hall Rocks Her Natural Hair (June 30, 2014). With 1,017 comments, Walton celebrates Tamron Hall’s, former NBC Today Show anchor, natural hair debut on air. Walton (2014b) opens “Tamron Hall Rocks Her Natural Hair on the Today Show! (Update-Get the Look!)” with a picture of Hall in an all-white dress with her natural hair on the set of the Today Show. The text below the image says, “she literally #WokeUpLikeDis” (Walton, 2014b). Walton also references a previous post, where she discusses the challenges Hall faces with wearing her hair natural on air. She also displays images of Hall’s tweets to announce her natural hair debut. Walton ends the post with an update of the details of Hall’s styling process.

Post 4: CurlyNikki Responds to Ebony.com (July 3, 2014). Opening with an image of her site banner, Walton addresses her readers with background regarding her post: “CurlyNikki Responds to Ebony.com” (Walton, 2014d). She explains how her site has been one of inclusion and not exclusion, which sometimes leads her to post submissions from non-Black readers. Walton acknowledges the backlash she received from featuring a non-Black reader, most notably from the Ebony.com editorial. Here, she shares her lengthy response to Ebony.com’s “bogus and hypocritical” editorial with her fans (Walton, 2014d, para. 1). This post garnered 927 comments.
Post 5: The Best Dietary Supplement for Thicker Natural Hair (January 12, 2016).

In a side profile portrait with her full hair, Walton indicates she is re-posting “The Best Dietary Supplement for Thicker Natural Hair” for “awesomeness” (Walton, 2016). She opens by discussing how she gets numerous emails about hair vitamins, and she sets the disclaimer that “there are no quick fixes, magic potions or lotions, just patience, consistency and a healthy lifestyle” (Walton, 2016, para. 2). However, she does recommend one supplement, which she believes contributes to her thicker hair. After answering one question regarding hair growth, Walton shares her vitamin supplementation for her hair, but she also shares the recommendations from her gastroenterologist and Harvard.edu regarding the benefits of probiotics for vitamin absorption. This post totaled 890 comments.

Post 6: Where the Amla at, Tho (May 4, 2015)? A total of 841 readers commented on Walton’s repost, “Where the Amla at, Tho? – Using Amla Oil to Promote Hair Growth” (Walton, 2015a). Here, Walton reminisces on her trip to India, especially the beauty secrets she learned. She raves about Indian women and their long healthy hair, and she helps her readers get the full picture by showing an image of a young Indian girl with flowing locks. The text underneath the image reads: “#spectacle” (Walton, 2015a). She goes on to discuss how she was offered henna and homemade amla oil for her host. Walton adds that the benefits of amla oil are thicker, shinier hair, but she realizes that it is not readily available in the states. Therefore, she tells her readers where they can either purchase the oil or make their own.

Post 7: Bun So Hard (June 30, 2014). It seems like Walton’s readers are drawn to her high-top buns, as 469 of them chose to comment on the post: “Bun So Hard. (How to Get a Big Bun with Fine Hair),” Walton (2014d) is seen relaxing outside while sipping an alcoholic beverage through a straw. She talks about her weekend excursions and how she maintained her
hair in the process. A follow up to her June 27, 2014, “Stretched Hair, Don’t Care” (Walton, 2014a) post, Walton outlines her process for styling her hair in her high-top bun. She also responds to questions from her readers regarding how she maintains her styles between washes.

**Post 8: Braid So Hard (October 20, 2014).** With 295 comments, “Braid So Hard” walks the readers through the steps of Walton’s hair shampooing and styling process for her daughter, Gia (Walton, 2014f). Walton opens the post with a picture of the back of her young daughter’s hair with half of it styled. Walton briefly outlines the steps she takes to do her daughter’s hair, and it’s the post with a subtle response to media depictions of princesses and how her daughter’s hair is “way-doper” than any princess hair.

**Post 9: Long Hair, Kindercare (June 23, 2014).** This post also discusses Walton’s hair grooming techniques she uses for her daughter, Gia. In “Long Hair, Kindercare” (Walton, 2014c), Walton begins the post with a profile image of her young daughter’s braided hair. For her reader’s, Walton outlines the steps for shampooing and styling her hair. She adds that this is the first hair washing day she has done since moving to D.C. Additionally, Walton shows pictures of her excursions in her new town, which include singing and dancing with the street performer’s boombox blasting Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. This post amassed 277 comments.

**Post 10: My 2015 Natural Hair Regimen & Product Guide (September 4, 2015).** With her pop culture reference to the cult-classic, *Friday*, Walton opens her post, “My 2015 Natural Hair Regimen & Product Guide” (Walton, 2015b), with a still image of the infamous Felicia character in the movie, who has a head full of plaits. The text under the image is a play on words to the movie, and it reads, “Craig...Craig, can I borrow your product guide?” (Walton, 2015b). Here, Walton discusses her intent to post the updates she made to her hair regimen, but the write up was so long she decided to make it into a book. Walton asked her readers to send
her an email to a specified email address, if they want the information. She gives readers hints to what is in the book, and she also includes pictures of her hair. This post totaled 256 comments.

**Black Girl with Long Hair**

Although Google Search ranks Black Girl with Long Hair (BGLH) as the second most relevant BNHCB, BGLH is in fierce competition with CN. According to SimilarWeb, BGLH had nearly 813,000 total visits in June 2017, which ranks them at number 10 under their Beauty and Fitness category (“blackgirllonghair.com,” 2017). Founder and editor, Leila Noelliste, began her blog six months before CN, in April 2008, and made a clear distinction that her blog was for Black women. With her roots in journalism, Noelliste uses this medium as a “brand of storytelling” and values its importance “for the preservation of democracy and the documentation of culture” (Mathis, 2015, para. 4). Noelliste’s journalistic approach is apparent in her writing style, which makes her blog read like a news article. This style is drastically different from Walton, who uses much more colloquial language that is typically shared among others in the Black community. Another distinct difference between the two blogs is immediately apparent when you click on the “About Us” tab. The “us” denotes more of a communal and collaborative approach to this blog, as opposed to CN’s “About Me” section, which talks more from an individualistic standpoint. This “About Us” page of BGLH opens with an illustration of a Black woman with an afro. Within the afro, the phrase “black is beautiful” is seen. This imagery makes it very apparent that this blog is a space for Black women with natural hair, hence the title of this blog.
Figure 4-2. *Black Girl with Long Hair* “About Us” image.

Below this image, Noelliste (n. d., para. 1) states the purpose of BLGH, as she writes:

> Black Girl with Long Hair is a natural hair turned beauty and culture website created by and for black women. Started in April 2008 by Leila Noelliste, the community has grown into a platform for celebrating the unique beauty and culture of black women.

Noelliste goes on to articulate the goal of BGLH, which is “to provide daily content that is interesting, enlightening, inspiring, and thought-provoking” (Noelliste, n. d., para. 2). The final paragraph touts BGLH as “one of the highest-traffic websites for black women ages 18 to 34, with 2.6 million monthly visits and 4 million monthly page views” (Noelliste, n. d., para. 3). No source is provided in reference to these numbers. Additionally, Noelliste solicits readers to not only join BGLH’s Facebook page, which has nearly 453,000 members, but to also seek new collaborators. This “About Us” section is a stark difference from CN’s “About Me” section for not only pronoun usage, but length and level of self-disclosure, while Walton is more personable.
in her introduction, Noelliste is somewhat more formal. However, with some site navigation, I was able to uncover the following brief biography of Noelliste: “Leila Noelliste, founder of Black Girl with Long Hair (April 2008). Social media, pop culture and black beauty enthusiast. bell hooks’ hair twin…” (Noelliste, 2017a). Albeit brief, this bio identifies Noelliste’s passions for social media, pop culture, and Black beauty, but the additional mention of bell hooks’ hair intrigued me. Was Noelliste simply comparing their strands or was it a nod to hooks’ (1989b) iconic essay, “Straightening Our Hair,” which talks about the importance of Black women’s critical consciousness in examining the politics of race and beauty? To try to uncover the meaning behind her statement, I searched BGLH for mentions of bell hooks and found an article written by Noelliste on March 7, 2017, entitled, “Why bell hooks is My Natural Hair Goals.” In this article, Noelliste identifies the common experience of Black women learning to accept their hair, which often centers on texture and length. She further makes things personal by talking about her struggles with hair volume. “Volume worship,” (para. 2) as Noelliste (2017a) describes it, had her trying to attain a beauty standard that was beyond her reach, as she recounts:

After several years of almost perpetual frustration, I came to my peace, realizing that these styles were just no good for my hair no matter how many tutorials I tried. Instead my hair loved to be woven and bound in styles like cornrows and small braids. (para. 4)

Soon Noelliste noticed substantial hair growth and a healthier scalp; however, she was one of few women her age who wore their hair in small box braids, as she states, “At this point I’m used to being the only black woman rocking box braids when I go places” (Noelliste, 2017a, para. 8). Noelliste’s ability to embrace a hairstyle that works for her hair liberated her, but her recent watching of a YouTube video featuring bell hooks speaking gave her pause:
...[I] took immediate notice of her hair—long, slender braids sectioned and spread all over her head. I was struck by the nakedness of her presentation. There were no styles or tricks to conjure up more length or volume. Just a woman and her hair. (para. 9)

Although Noelliste does have a more formal approach to her word choices in her blog, she still has moments when she allows herself to be vulnerable with her readers. In a blog post entitled, “Yes, BGLH is Coming Back…But I’m Done Writing about Racial Aggressions Against Black Women,” on June 8, 2017, Noelliste explains to her readers why she took a three-month hiatus, as she states, “I was just burnt out and exhausted. And a lot of that had to do with the direction BGLH was going in content wise” (Noelliste, 2017b, para. 1). Noelliste discusses how she decided to include more issues related to Black culture in March 2015:

And at first things were fine. But over time I came to feel that ‘culture coverage’ was becoming ‘a meticulous catalogue of racial aggressions against black women including but not limited to erasure by beauty brands, cultural appropriation and racist marketing.’ I felt that I was just waiting for the next big scandal to drop, so I could then write about it. And it was eroding my soul. (Noelliste, 2017b, para. 2)

Noelliste (para. 3) openly admits this hypervigilance negatively affected her readers, stating:

The scandalous stories are the ones that get the clicks, but many longtime fans were telling me that they could no longer log onto BGLH for fear of what they’d find. My platform—that for years had been a safe and comfortable beauty space—was becoming just another trigger in a culture that methodically preys on black women’s self-esteem.

With the help of her three-person writing team, Noelliste decided that July 1, 2017, would be BGLH’s “reset and refresh date” (Noelliste, 2017b, para. 7). Most notably, Noelliste’s post on July 13, 2017, “Tell People to F*ck Off and 9 Other Things that are Self-care” (Noelliste, 2017c)
is tagged “Mental Health and Self-care,” which is the first of its kind on BGLH. This new direction of BGLH is in some ways similar to the content seen on CN, where there are frequent posts under the tags “black mental health” and “health/wellness.” Since Noelliste’s recent post is indicated to be from her journal, the new direction of BGLH may start to be more reflective of Noelliste’s personal development and growth.

**Black Girl with Long Hair Top 10 Blog Posts**

To ensure I analyzed only posts authored by Noelliste, I searched for articles using the tag “Black Girl with Long Hair,” which is the tag Noelliste consistently uses when writing her own posts. The top most commented posts focus on: (a) Black women’s bodies as a form of resistance; (b) the otherness of Black women; (c) fetishizing Black features; (d) Black affinity spaces; and (e) colorism (i.e., discrimination based on skin color).

**Post 1: Black Woman Artists Poses Nude (June 4, 2015).** A total of 386 readers commented on the post “Black Woman Artists Poses Nude at Former New York City Slave Trading Sites, Including Wall Street” (Noelliste, 2015a). Noelliste begins with an image of a Black woman posing nude while standing on a wooden box in the middle of Wall Street. The text under the image is the title of the piece: “‘From Her Body Came Their Greatest Wealth’, [sic] Wall Street, New York, from the White Shoes series, Copyright Nona Faustine” (Noelliste, 2015a). Noelliste continues by stating Faustine’s purpose: “For her photo series, White Shoes, artist Nona Faustine wanted to call attention to [the slave trading] history and its enduring legacy” (Noelliste, 2015a, para. 1). Noelliste further articulates Faustine’s focus through direct quotes, while displaying eight more images. Lastly, Noelliste gives context by acknowledging the “use of women’s bodies for sociopolitical reasons” (Noelliste, 2015a, para. 3).
Post 2: A Non-Black Man Gave His Wife Permission (July 5, 2016). Speaking about one of the natural hair communities’ most popular vloggers, Whitney White, garnered 192 comments for the post, “A Non-Black Man Gave His Wife Permission to Touch Naptural85’s Hair” (Noelliste, 2016c). Noelliste reiterates the interaction Whitney had at an airport when a non-Black man told his wife he could touch her hair, an interaction she states had the editors at BGLH’s “stomachs churning” (Noelliste, 2016c, para. 1). Noelliste concludes by displaying screenshots of Whitney’s tweets as she reiterated her entire violating experience.

Post 3: It Has Begun (August 2, 2015). “It Has Begun…Allure Magazine Provides Step-by-Step Instructions for White Girls to Achieve an Afro” (Noelliste, 2015b) begins with a photo of the Allure magazine article, “You (Yes, You) Can Have an Afro* *Even if You Have Straight Hair,” which highlights a White woman wearing her hair in what appears to be a curly afro. Noelliste follows this photo by asserting, “First they laugh, then they copy…#blackwomenaretastemakers” (Noelliste, 2015b). She simply concludes this short post by asking her readers to share their thoughts. This post totaled 175 comments.

Post 4: [Pics] Swedish Women are Doing “Chocolate” Spray Tans (March 10, 2016). Noelliste begins “Swedish Women are Doing “Chocolate” Spray Tans to Darken Their Skin” (Noelliste, 2016b) as an editorial on the Stockholm-based Emmaatan Salon, which specializes in deeper brown colors of spray tan solutions. Noelliste includes images of the product bottles and images from Emmaatan’s website and Instagram account, which showcases White Swedish women with fake brown tans. Noelliste inserts her opinion at the end by discussing the history of shaming dark skin in the United States and worldwide, which appears to confuse her as to why dark skin is being marketed. This post has 171 total comments.
Post 5: A White BGLH Reader Responds (July 6, 2014). In what appears to be a response to the controversy surrounding CN spotlighting a White woman on her blog (“CurlyNikki Responds to Ebony.com,” Walton, 2014d), Noelliste continues to address the debate on “A White BGLH Reader Responds: Why ‘#TeamNatural is for Black Women’ is NOT Reverse Racism” (Noelliste, 2014) by reminding readers of their initial and contesting responses to the issue. Moreover, she acknowledges BGLH’s non-Black readers and their purpose for following the blog. In an effort to gain perspective, Noelliste shares with her BGLH readers an email she received from a White BGLH reader. Due to the significance of this email, Noelliste followed up by interviewing this woman about her experiences and feelings of exclusion in a Black-dominated online space. Based on this long post, 168 readers expressed their opinions.

Post 6: This Photo of Actor Lance Gross and Friends (December 26, 2016). In “This Photo of Actor Lance Gross and Friends Was Supposed to Be Funny, Now It’s Sparking a Debate on Colorism” (Noelliste, 2016f), Noelliste discusses the photo, which depicts a dark-skinned Black woman alone, while the rest of her Black male friends are sitting lovingly with their light-skin partners. Noelliste acknowledges the various perspectives people on social media have toward the image, which she displays. She follows up by posting a message from the woman who states the photo is a joke and people are being too sensitive to the issue of colorism. Noelliste asks her readers to share their thoughts, and 156 people chose to speak about the issue.

Post 7: Picture of Black Woman’s Lips (February 18, 2016). In “Picture of Black Woman’s Lips Prompts Racist Comments on MAC Cosmetic’s Instagram Page” (Noelliste, 2016a), Noelliste posts the MAC Cosmetics’ Instagram photo of a close up of a Black woman’s full lips in a deep shade of purple. Noelliste acknowledges that this is the “picture that incited hundreds of hateful and racist comments” (Noelliste, 2016a, para. 1). She goes on to share
screenshots of the hateful comments people made on the MAC Instagram account and makes the following comparison: “physical features typical of black women are seen as beautiful, but not when they are on black women” (Noelliste, 2016a, para. 2). This statement is followed by a before and after of Kylie Jenner’s lips. Noelliste goes on to display five photos of Black women with full lips and concludes with statistics from a new study that shows an increase in young women wanting lip injections. The BGLH community responded with 135 comments.

**Post 8: BGLH Was Just Dragged (October 31, 2016).** In one of her longer posts, “BGLH Was Just Dragged for Describing Lighter-Skinned Women with Loose Curls as Black,” Noelliste (2015d) garnered 125 comments when she addressed the controversy surrounding one of BGLH’s recent posts regarding women who regularly straighten their hair with heat to loosen their curl pattern (i.e., “heat train”). Noelliste gave her own background of why she approved this concept article, as she tried to heat train her hair unsuccessfully during college. She uses her experience to justify why the women depicted in the previous article where light-skinned and had a looser curl pattern, as she says that these women have greater success with heat training in contrast to someone like her who has kinkier hair and a darker hue. She asks her readers, “But how do we give voice to darker-skinned black women while not refusing lighter-skinned women a seat at the table of Black womanhood?” (Noelliste, 2016d, para. 15). Noelliste concludes by defending the light-skinned writer of this controversial piece.

**Post 9: Eartha Kitt’s Words on Backlash (November 9, 2015).** Noelliste discusses a quote from Eartha Kitt made in 1955 in which she talks about interracial marriage. In “Eartha Kitt’s Words on Backlash for Marrying Interracially in the 60s Still Ring True Today” (Noelliste, 2015c), Noelliste shares part of an interview in which Kitt talks about being rejected by Harry Belfonte as she recalls him telling her: “A black woman would hold a black man
back…If I wanted to marry a black man there wasn’t one because the white girls had them.” (Noelliste, 2015c, para. 2). Noelliste concludes by acknowledging how Kitt’s words are similarly experienced today. A total of 117 BGLH readers commented on this post.

Post 10: Beyoncé is Being Accused of Colorism (December 5, 2016). In “Beyoncé is Being Accused of Colorism After 10-Year-Old Song ‘Creole’ Resurfaces” (Noelliste, 2016e), Noelliste indicates that Beyoncé’s song, “Creole,” from her 2006 album B’Day is guilty of colorism. Noelliste describes Beyoncé’s Creole heritage and then displays the lyrics to the song, stating: Unfortunately, the song reads more as a celebration of light skinnedness” (Noelliste, 2016e, para. 2). Noelliste concludes this post by acknowledge multiracial Black Americans and being embarrassed by Beyoncé’s lyrics, which she believes celebrate light skin and exoticism of Creole women. This post amassed 110 comments.

Analysis Summary and Data Display of Blog Posts and Comments

Before discussing the findings, it’s important to first provide a rationale as to the relevancy and suitability of using a qualitative media content analysis (QMCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a tool to uncover patterns which bring meaning to Black womanhood. In terms of analyzing the blog posts, I utilized an interpretive QMCA approach, along with a CDA approach that is informed by van Dijk (1996, 2001) to uncover how word choice creates meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012). QMCA and CDA, as informed by critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) and womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990), allows me to reduce the written text as data to uncover patterns that bring meaning to Black womanhood. For this method, I developed codes and then I transformed these codes into themes to uncover similar phrases, relationships, patterns, commonalities, and disparities when compared among the bloggers and the blog readers. To
provide a deeper textual analysis of racialized discourse, I provide a level of sampling and units of analysis at the word, phrase, sentence, subject topic, and image levels to examine how these forms of discourse convey social problems and issues of power that continue to marginalize Black women. Such an analysis must go beyond the literal (i.e., denoted) meaning and include the connoted meaning, especially as it relates to racial identity (Hall, 1997). Moreover, textual analysis grounded in CDA analyzes what is connotated and denoted in the text and assumes that the producer of text has agency to choose a combination of linguistic and visual elements to help convey her message. To uncover the meaning-making, I utilize a textual analysis to determine specific word choices and sentence construction used in the meaning-making of the Black women in this study. Specific textual analysis tools used, include: *lexical analysis, naming and reference, predication, presuppositions, and rhetorical tropes*. More detailed information relating to these textual analysis tools can be found in Chapter Three.

**Data Grounded in the Four Principles of Black Womanhood within Digital Spaces**

To bring greater focus to the QMCA and CDA and draw relationships relevant to the data collected, I relied on the four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces, as derived from the literature review in Chapter Two: (a) the implications of *the politics of representation* with regard to contesting and/or perpetuating hegemonic assumptions of Black womanhood; (b) a *critical analysis of popular culture and media* messages of Black womanhood as connected to power and big business; (c) the utilization of *journalistic sociopolitical intervention* to exercise power to resist, self-discipline actions, and/or sensationalize messages; and (d) a *dialogic exchange of information* where the reader can also be the producer of knowledge through an online learning community. Below, I examine these principles to reveal how the women who engage with these BNHCBs utilize the various forms of text to challenge or perpetuate value
produced from dominate ideologies, from which Black women make meaning and construct their identities and forms of knowledge.

To limit bias and increase reliability, I developed these four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces prior to data collection, which allowed me to better structure this analysis and minimize any cognitive shifts I may have experienced during the analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). Consequently, the data headings used for this analysis were shortened from the four principles, as follows: (1) the politics of representation; (2) critical analysis of popular culture and media; (3) journalistic sociopolitical intervention; and (4) dialogic exchange of information. A more detailed overview of these four principles can be found in Chapter Three.

With these principles as a frame of reference, I used a content analysis schedule (see Table 3-1 in Chapter 3 for an example) to develop the manifest (i.e., surface) and latent (i.e., symbolic) content that emerged from the blog posts and supporting reader comments (Macnamara, 2005; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Polit & Beck, 2014). The following presents detailed discussion on each of the four principles and the subsequent ten themes, which are outlined in Table 4-1. This analysis is followed by a discussion of the themes relevancy to the four principles of Black womanhood, critical consciousness, and the potential to help Black women resist dominant ideologies.
Table 4-1. Blog Post Data Display

<table>
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<td>Non-Black readers can learn but must know their place</td>
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<td>Dark skin/Black hair is bad (i.e., colorism, curlism)</td>
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<td>Arbitrary markers of Blackness based on phenotype</td>
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<td>White women attempting to relate to hair struggles</td>
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<td>Critical Analysis of Popular</td>
<td>Lack of Self-Ethnic Reflectors</td>
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<td>Featuring women on site in blogger’s self-image</td>
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<td>Cultural appropriation; White women see as trend</td>
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<td>Hair companies cashing in on natural hair care</td>
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<td>Crediting Black women for fashion/beauty influence</td>
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<td>Journalistic Sociopolitical</td>
<td>Sense of Agency</td>
<td>Bloggers using platform to make charities visible</td>
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<td>Dialogic Exchange of</td>
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<td>Criticizing how bloggers manage content</td>
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<td>Information</td>
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<td>Readers remaining skeptical of information</td>
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<td>Reimagining the Expert</td>
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<td>Trying product/technique endorsed by blogger</td>
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<td>Using comment section to solicit/give advice</td>
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<td>Blogger not considered an expert</td>
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Politics of Representation

“The controversy concerning the definition of the term 'natural' is one that is charged with emotion and often goes hand in hand with the issue of protecting 'the sanctity of black spaces.'”
-Nikki Walton (2014e, para. 2)

The issue of identity and the politics of representation are key in the discussion of QMCA and CDA within this study, as it focuses on Black individuals; however, when informed by critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) and womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990), the analysis gives meaning to Black women and how they are represented. Moreover, specific to this study are the issues related to how Black women engage with BNHCBs and whether they challenge or perpetuate value produced from dominant ideologies. Thus, the blog posts and comments provide insight into how Black women make meaning and construct their identities and forms of knowledge. Based on this analysis, the following three representative factors of the politics of representation emerged: (a) the sanctity of Black affinity spaces; (b) society fetishizing Black women’s bodies and arbitrary markers of Blackness; and (c) playing into the angry Black woman trope.

The Sanctity of Black Affinity Spaces

Can anyone be included in the natural hair community? As stated earlier, CN and BGLH take a different stance on the purpose of their blogs. Where CN is more inclusive, BGLH leans more toward maintaining a dedicated space for Black women. The bloggers’ divergent perspectives became more apparent when Walton posted an interview she conducted with White reader, Sarah, who discussed her own hair journey. The interview has since been removed from CN because it drew backlash, almost immediately. Walton responded to the controversy by asking, “Must we do this natural hair thing ourselves in order to preserve a black space, or should we popularize and push our movement to the broader public” (Walton, 2014a, para. 11)?
At surface-level, it seems that Walton is soliciting an open response from her readers, but her question is actually rhetorical, since she states in the preface to her open letter to Ebony.com that she has “always chosen inclusion over exclusion” (Walton, 2014a, para. 1). This is also evidenced by her purpose statement on her “About Me” page, which does not explicitly state that CN is for Black women. It more broadly states her blog is for “those struggling to embrace their naturally curly hair” (Walton, 2014a, para. 1). Moreover, in her question-posing, Walton also uses the referential strategies of “we,” “ourselves,” and “our” to specifically name and identify her Black female readers. Additionally, these referential strategies also identify her as a part of the ingroup and position her and her Black female readers alongside each other to promote the natural hair movement. This language promotes a sense of agency that gives Black women the responsibility to either exclude or include the outgroup (i.e., White women). To further articulate her position of inclusion, Walton states, “The site is for black women, and whoever else finds it useful…featuring other ethnic groups does not mean that my blog is not for black women” (Walton, 2014d, para. 5, 6). With this response, Walton names the out-group as “other ethnic groups” and refrains from solely naming White women, which distances her from the very criticism she is facing with including a White woman on her site that is predominately frequented by Black women. Walton does, however, acknowledge the frustrations and anger of her Black readers by speaking to the divisiveness and vitriol that spawned from featuring Sarah. She also speaks to concerns that her space is no longer a safe zone, as she states:

For those that do feel a certain way, I don’t think that those views make them racist or somehow wrong. But, I do believe that we need to learn to have this conversation without attacking each other. If you’re concerned about the integrity of this ‘black space’,
I would direct you to the thousands of black women that have been featured elsewhere on this site. No really, all you have to do is scroll down. (Walton, 2014d, para. 5)

Walton argues that featuring one or two non-Black readers a year pales in comparison to the plethora of Black women continuously featured on her site. She also addresses readers who place negative labels, such as “racist,” on people who support exclusion, which she identifies as a word used to attack others. By not naming those who use such language and simply saying “those views,” Walton does not directly cast blame. This strategy makes her criticism less punitive. Such sensitivity to her readership is also seen when Walton empathizes with her readers in the following way:

Many women sincerely feel that we must keep these spaces to ourselves in order to maintain a sense of self and security. You know what, they’re right. On the other hand, a lot of non-black women identify strongly with the self-esteem issues black women face as the result of cultural and institutionalized racism. If they feel this way, then they’re right too. (Walton, 2014d, para. 3)

Although Walton does not discount the feelings of her non-Black readers, she does make a distinction between the cause of their “self-esteem issues” and those of Black women, which she identifies as the consequence of both “cultural and institutionalized racism.” This perspective-taking and naming of racism seem to validate Walton’s White and Black readers. CN reader, MyrinaKR (2014), further elaborates on this fundamental difference in her response to a White woman who believes all women struggle with hair and body image issues, and thus should support each other as women, as she states:

I do not discount that you have been ill treated [sic], but your experience is NOT that of black women and never will be because of another concept that is alive and well that
benefits you…white privilege…I appreciate your response and pray that we can continue to learn how to support one another and execute that with a genuine heart.

This response highlights the issue Black feminists have with White feminists who speak on their behalf. Ignoring the intersecting identities within a feminist framework often ignores race, which ignores the unique experience of many Black women (Collins, 2000; Andersen & Collins, 2013). Although MyrinaKR identifies white privilege, which can be a difficult concept to understand, she uses language that suggests both parties have been working together to support racial issues; however, this is highly debatable, as the question remains: How do White and Black women support each other? CN reader, Amira Renee (2014), offers this:

[I]ts [sic] not about exclusion its [sic] about knowing your place as a supporter, the same way we support you. we [sic] do not act as if our experiences and our causes are the same because they are not in every case. that [sic] is all that we ask for in return....a mutual respect for space. everything [sic] is not meant to be shared. it [sic] is always great to have something that people with many cultural similarities can identify with that is geared toward them. there [sic] is nothing wrong with that. and [sic] that goes for every ethnicity. there [sic] is nothing wrong with supporting and sharing knowledge and stories but know your place within the community. remember [sic] why this was started and who started it and do not over step the boundaries in someone else's territory.

Amira Renee’s (2014) claim, “know your place within the community,” identifies Black women as the collective with shared values and characteristics that non-Black women can only offer sympathy, from a distance. Such distance is not offered to Black women, as Amira Renee later laments, “[W]e always have to share things that were created to uplift us (while uplifting others
as supporters at the same time). why [sic] cant [sic] that be enough…” CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), further speaks to what she perceives is the danger of inclusion:

…CurlyNikki you failed in your response. You did not highlight the need to have these spaces reserved for us. You mentioned that you wanted to be inclusive? But how can you be inclusive if most of us ARE YET TO HEAL [sic]. How can you let in a representative of a group who forced us to contend with an issue as mere as hair? You cannot speak of a destination if you are yet to build a boat. Guests at a funeral should not mourn MORE THAN the bereaved. When they do, we should be suspicious. This is apt in this case.

Here, NaturalHAIR identifies Sarah as a member of a negative group who was dismissive of the struggles Black women deal with when it comes to their hair. Using language, such as “forced” further adds negative connotations to White women and their influence on the identity of Black women surrounding their hair. Furthermore, NaturalHAIR uses analogies to connote the misguided nature of White women’s desire to be included. By raising suspicion, NaturalHAIR, speaks to the phenomenon of White fragility, which Dr. Robin DiAngelo, a White critical racial and social justice educator coined and defines as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves…to reinstate white racial equilibrium” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). In this case, NaturalHAIR identifies Sarah’s feelings of inclusion as a defense mechanism used to unconsciously recenter her Whiteness and privilege.

Another defense mechanism DiAngelo (2011) identifies is argumentation. This is evident on BGLH, where White people pose as Black people to defend a different perspective that avoids feelings of guilt. In response to these tactics, BGLH readers snap back with statements, such as: “Why are you trolling on a website devoted to issues that confront black women and making comments?!” (Confused, 2016) and “Don’t worry, no one is going to shame
you for being the beneficiary of her ancestors [sic] pain” (Marisol, 2015). Such strategies negatively label White women as beneficiaries of slavery or Internet trolls, who Moreau (2017) defines as “member[s] of an online social community who deliberately [try] to disrupt, attack, offend or generally cause trouble within the community by posting certain comments, photos, videos, GIFs or some other form of online content” (para. 1). Such intrusion is disruptive to communities, particularly within BNHCBs. As a result, many Black women are protective of their safe space and they are reluctant to extend it to non-Black people. Noelliste (2014) shares in this apprehension, as she believes her Black-centered blog, BGLH, is “absolutely essential and necessary” (para. 1). Despite her clear demographic, Noelliste took the opportunity to give voice to White women within her predominately Black space when she featured White reader, Ali, on her blog. Although this post was giving voice to a White woman who supports the exclusivity of Black affinity spaces, Noelliste was met with opposition from Black women who believe “other voices should be irrelevant and most definitely not spotlighted” (lurking, 2014). In particular, BGLH reader, ninagirl93 (2014), retorts:

[T]he [sic] voices of black women expressed on this site were ENOUGH. although [sic] I understand the good intentions behind this article, it is also highly problematic. we [sic] do not require whiteness to legitimize our experiences and emotions. this [sic] tim wise-esque [sic] co-sign was unnecessary or rather misplaced on BLACKgirllonghair (most of whom are in the know). Please cc this to becky [sic], felicia [sic] et al instead.

By comparing Ali’s support to White antiracist activist, Tim Wise, ninagirl93 speaks to the controversy surrounding White allies who whitesplain. Maisha Z. Johnson of Everyday Feminism (2016) identifies a classic sign of whitesplaining as “a condescending tone and a paternalistic assumption that a person of color doesn’t know enough to accurately articulate their
own experience” (para. 5). Herein lies a major issue with giving voice to White people in Black spaces: paternalism and privilege that attempts to normalize Black culture into White culture.

BGLH reader, jojo satoes (2014), uses the analogies “mental slavery” and Black women needing “the white stamp of approval” for validation. However, Noelliste contends:

I understand what you are saying nina [sic]. And I respect how you feel. The only reason we made the decision to include Ali’s voice is that we noticed many black readers were speaking on behalf of our white audience, making assertions about how they feel. Whether it was our writer Jc referring to this as apartheid, or other commenters saying that our space was hostile, we felt it was important — given the discussion — for a non-black reader to speak on her own terms. Ali’s voice is not to legitimize us, but to offer her perspective. (Black Girl with Long Hair, 2014)

Noelliste’s response critiques those who try to essentialize White people by speaking on their behalf. This issue is addressed in the post about White women wearing afros, where White BGLH reader, Sherry Anderson, corrects a response from a Black reader that identifies the essence (Hall, 2009) of White people making “fun of our hair since they stole black folks and brought them over here” (GKillingbeck, 2015). Sherry Anderson (2015) responds, “SOME white people,” to which reader GKillingbeck (2015) fires back:

So that’s what made you comment? To protect whiteness. Im [sic] going to keep my comment the way it is, [sic] so much is going on with this article and you commented to make sure white people’s feeling aren’t being hurt so you decided to step in with “some.”

GKillingbecks’ frustration speaks to white fragility and privilege, but it also speaks to the strained relationship among Black and White women (Giroux, 1994; Collins, 2000). Can both groups come together to benefit everyone? While some continue to argue for exclusivity, a few
Black women respond by acknowledging the benefit of global acceptance of natural hair, as BGLH reader, Jill (2014), responds:

   I wish that as black women, instead of fighting for complete exclusivity, [we] could see that this natural hair movement has the ability to inspire ALL types of women all over the world…it’s the birth of natural acceptance that started with us and spread all over the world.

Jill’s use of words like “fighting” and “birth” add meaning to what many Black women consider the “struggle” of self-acceptance through accepting their natural hair, which is in stark opposition to societal beauty standards. Jill also identifies Black women’s agency within the natural hair movement and embraces the consequence of self-acceptance spreading globally.

Due to the popularity of natural hair, Noelliste acknowledges a “small but significant percentage” of non-Black followers who visit her site either for an education on Black natural hair care or to admire the “ingenuity and creativity of natural styles” (Noelliste, 2014, para. 2). Of these White women who frequent her site, many of them could be potential allies. However, BGLH reader, MelyB, speaks to a potential problem, as she states:

   I appreciate your inclusion of Ali’s comments but wish that more Caucasian women like her would express their views directly to “Felicity” [White women] AND to Walton. Sadly I think her views would fall on deaf ears, as did those of us who expressed anger & disappointment about the feature.

Thus, MelyB does not believe White people advocating for Black people by means of their fellow White people will make an impact, yet the work to eradicate institutionalized and systemic racism are rarely successful without White allies (Collins, 2000; Brown, 2002).
The Shame in Othering Ourselves

The issue with Sarah speaking in a predominately Black space branches into issues related to colorism, which Alice Walker (1983) defines as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (p. 290). Noelliste (2016d) addresses the issue of how colorism can lead to discrimination, even among Black women, as she states:

As we try to process our anger over colorism, it is easy to lash out at the women we see as its embodiment. We tell them they are not really black, that they cannot sit with us, that their struggles are invalid and don’t belong in the dialogue on black girl anguish. We resent them for having access to spaces we don’t. We forget that, yes they have privilege, but rarely enough to escape the burdens society places on the backs of black women. They’re carrying a lighter pack, but we’re all hunched over. (para. 12)

Deeply rooted in the history of slavery, Noelliste acknowledges the deep resentment many Black women feel when they are confronted with their skin color (Dearing, 2010; Pilgrim, 2012a). Noelliste gives weight to the construct of colorism and its consequences by metaphorically comparing it to a burden placed on the backs of Black women. Moreover, her choice to use colorism as an abstract noun within the sentence she constructed makes colorism a tangible object that women can possess. In this case, colorism is a prized possession only the fortunate, light skin women possess. Noelliste’s choice of words depicts the deep resentment dark skin women feel toward light skin women, which she alludes to as a form of bullying with the metaphor “they cannot sit with us.” However, the actions dark skin women subject onto light skin women may be a consequence of the silencing of dark skin women. Noelliste approached this issue, as she asks, “[H]ow do we give voice to darker-skinned black women while not refusing lighter-skinned women a seat at the table of black womanhood” (Noelliste, 2016d, p.
Consequently, BGLH reader, TC1200 (2016), responds by exclaiming, “Refusing light-skinned women a seat at the table??? Really?? Light-skinned Black women are notorious for being the only Black women allowed a seat at the table! I am light-skinned and I can acknowledge this.” By identifying herself as light skin, TC1200 gives credibility to the concept of colorism, while giving voice to dark skin women who are often silenced because of their close proximity to the nature of the issue. Such identity markers seem arbitrary, but BGLH reader, Acts of Faith Blog (2016), advocates for establishing a “firm boundary” when accounting for light skin women in the “browner, more coily, not biracial” category, as opposed to being categorized as Black. BGLH reader, cth4GiG (2016), speaks to the difficulty with establishing these firm boundaries of skin color and hair texture, which dictates that Black women with light-skin have looser curls, by adding: “My black is beautiful and I’m fair and kinky [hair]**drop the mic.**” By naming herself as “fair and kinky,” cth4GiG disrupts the current narrative that light-skin women have looser textured hair and/or they are biracial. Noelliste (2016) also speaks to this incessant need to categorize Black people by defending one of her editors, Elle:

The irony in all of this is that the writer who compiled the article for BGLH is herself a fair-skinned, loose-hair-textured black woman who regularly fights the notion — projected onto her by others — that she is not black enough. When she compiled those images [of light-skin, looser-hair-textured Black women], she saw a reflection of herself — a black woman. What a jolt to realize that others do not. (para. 15)

This issue of Elle defending her Blackness is reminiscent of the tragic mulatto trope, where biracial women try to navigate the two worlds of Black and White culture but never truly being accepted by either group (Hurd, 1997; Pilgrim, 2012a). BGLH reader, VoicesofReason (2016), addresses this issue when she responds to a fellow reader who dismisses the Blackness of light-
skin women in a photograph, by posing the following question: “If they identify as black who are you to tell them they are not? Like, at what shade on the spectrum does a black person cease being black in your eyes?” BGLH reader, La Bandita (2016), responds, “White, ok. If you look White you can’t say you’re Black unless you walk around with a Black card, lol.” This response sheds light on the Black phenotype of dark skin and kinky, coarse hair as markers of Blackness (Hall, 2009). This type of hair is not preferred in society, so the term *curlism* is often used when discussing the preferential treatment of a Black woman with a looser curl pattern (Wallace, 2013). This form of otherness further complicates White women attempting to relate to the struggles Black women face with their hair, which CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), argues:

Black women and White women DO NOT HAVE THE SAME STRUGGLE. We just do not. We are CONSTANTLY reminded of our BLACKNESS. But that young lady, Sarah, only has to wear a bun and viola she can be worshiped by the world.

NaturalHAIR’s analogy of White women being “worshipped by the world” speaks to society devaluing Black women’s natural hair as unkempt and unprofessional, while upholding White women’s hair as the idealized standard of beauty (Pilgrim, 2012d). CN reader, Lsaint (2014), echoes this belief when she responds to a White reader’s attempt to relate to hair issues, by stating, “You got this whole situation wrong you can still wear your natural hair to work without any complaints. It’s not the same [sic] this movement is much more than you could sympathize with.” Here, Lsaint uses language that positions White women as the outsiders who make futile attempts to “sympathize” with Black women. Digging deeper into the psychology of Black hair, BGLH reader, GKillingbeck (2015b), states:
…it’s not right to spend centuries until PRESENT to make a race of people feel like crap about their own hair to the point where they have alot [sic] of black women SO programmed that they relax their children’s hair as young as 3 to 4 years.

GKillingbeck use of words, such as “centuries,” “PRESENT,” and “programmed” help depict the dark history that has led to Black women’s internalized oppression as a consequence of the pervasive Eurocentric beauty standards all women must adhere to within this society (Weitz, 2001; White, 2005; Thurman, 2012). CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), acknowledges this hegemony when she criticizes Walton, stating: “Ebony [Magazine] is for black women, you are right. They did not help the natural hair movement, you are right. BUT they are culpable as you for still buying into eurocentric [sic] standards. I am sorry.” NaturalHAIR’s critique may be in reference to Walton and her brand recommending hair tutorials and products to help Black women achieve “stretched hair” that give the appearance of a looser curl pattern (“Do natural hair brands,” 2013), which is more acceptable in our society. Such hair grooming practices that change the natural texture of a Black woman’s hair are not a new concept, as Black women have pressed (i.e., use heat to temporarily straighten), relaxed, and adorned weaves and wigs for over a century to look more presentable and better manage their hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

However, when White women attempt to wear an afro or adorn cornrows, Black women protest and call it cultural appropriation (Young, 2010), which in this case, is the fetishizing of Black women’s bodies (Tate, 2003; West, 2008). BGLH reader, Hallokatzchen (2016), addresses this issue, when she responded to the post discussing racist comments made about a Black woman’s lips, stating: “People love black features as long as they’re not on black bodies. I bet if this was a white girl who paid for those lips, the comments would have been different.” Hallokatzchen’s choice to abstract Black features, such as lips, speaks to the fetishization of Black women bodies.
and how, void of history, the media extracts the features of Black women (i.e., buttocks, full lips, skin color) as a profitable tool. BGLH reader, HoHo S. (2016), also speaks to this issue when commenting on White Swedish women getting “chocolate” spray tans, as she states, “[I]t’s kind of irritating to know these women can darken up their skin like this and just take it off but mine is there forever. Too many people who look like me go through so much crap so its..ugh.” Thus, Hallokatzchen and HoHo S.’s comments paint a picture that Black features are considered beautiful, but not when they are on Black women. HoHo S’s choice of words also hint at racism and its consequence of internalized oppression. BGLH reader, Tessa Jackson (2016), articulates it this way: “It is easy to be like a black person but it is a lot harder to be black.”

Cue Rachel Dolezal, the White woman who pretended to be Black (Aitkenhead, 2017; King, 2017). BGLH reader, Eve (2016), speaks to this issue:

Rachel Dolezal was up there “passing” as black is because black people have diluted the word to include damn near everyone and their mom. It’s part of black people’s insecurity to want to accept anything as black, that way when they favor eurocentric hair textures, features, and light skin they can claim that these things are “black”. And the mixed racially ambigious [sic] people love it, because amongst white people they are nothing special but amongst blacks they get literally fawned over and imitated just look at people like Lil Kim and Azaelia Banks who are skin bleaching and wearing nasty straight hair weave 24/7 this is what all this “black people are diverse looking” rhetoric does. There is such a thing as a black phenotype there are certain features that are UNIQUE to black people and as black people we should CELEBRATE those things and embrace them not ignore them by diluting what it means to be black.
Eve’s words align herself alongside an unadulterated Black phenotype, which is in opposition to the White standard of beauty. Moreover, she challenges Black women to take agency and not succumb to self-hate. Noelliste (2016e) addresses this affinity for lighter skin and looser curls by stating: “[I]t seems we are most invested in acknowledging this ancestry [European], i.e., lighten our skin and loosen our hair” (para. 17). However, one month earlier, Noelliste (2016d) addressed what she considers a “fundamental challenge of black womanhood” by stating:

We, the darker-skinned, kinkier-haired, broader-nosed mothers, sisters, cousins and friends stay in our place in the shadows, understanding that we are not the pretty ones, but grateful to have proximity to those who are…And of course this is not a universal story for all dark-skinned black women. It’s reductive to associate dark skin with tragedy. But it is also a narrative that plays out way too often. (para. 10-11)

By choosing the phrase, “stay in our place,” Noelliste speaks to the oppression of colorism, which often gives greater credibility to women who have more Eurocentric features, which BGLH reader, Rockey Power (2016), acknowledges in her response to a light skin reader, by stating “It’s messed up these writers need a lightskinned voice to hear what the not lightskinned people say. At least they don’t think you bitter and angry.” This response speaks to the silence and stigmatization of assertive Black women, as they are often viewed as angry through the patriarchal gaze (hooks, 1992).

**Deconstructing the Angry Black Woman Trope**

The trope of the angry Black woman is a manifestation of the controlling images of the matriarch and mammy caricatures. However, Collins (2000) also posits these images “seek to regulate Black women’s behavior, it also seems designed to influence White women’s gendered identities” (p. 77). This speaks to the comparison of Black women against White women, and
thereby deeming Black women as unfeminine. Collins believes this degradation of Black women is further influenced by “Black men reject[ing] Black women as martial partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than White ones because we are too assertive” (p. 77). Noelliste addresses this issue in her post about Eartha Kitt’s decision to marry a White man. Here, Noelliste (2015c) quotes Kitt’s interview from an unknown source:

People would say ‘Why didn’t you marry a Black man?’ I would reply “because the white girls had them!”…When Harry Belfonte picks me out of his bed in Philadelphia and said: ‘I don’t want you to take me seriously because no Black woman can do anything for me’. I could not help him to progress into where he was going to go. ‘A black woman would hold a black man back’, that’s what he told me. If I wanted to marry a black man there wasn’t one because the white girls had them. (para. 2)

This rejection of Black women by Black men resonated with numerous BGLH readers, such as Guest (2015), whose comment speaks directly to Black women emasculating Black men (Collins, 2000), as she states, “So nothing is new under the sun. Black women need to do for self and self alone.” BGLH reader, Tiffany williams (2015), further articulates this issues as disillusionment by Black women, as she states:

[B]lack women need to start dating [interracially] and stop waiting on a black kang to magically appear at your door step. Black men have shown countless times that they’re in love with anything non black [sic] as possible but black women stay trying to find the right one, and holding out on men of other races because some day a black man will suddenly appear in front of them. Keep telling yourself that and you’ll be single forever.
Believing Black men are undependable and devalue Black women is a painful reality many of the blog commenters face. However, Tiffany Williams (2015), demands Black women take agency, as she states:

[While non black men may dislike black women, black men dislike us way more in general. They never march for us like we march for them, they blame us for our abuse or rape. They don’t support us the way we support them… it’s alright to love black men but love them enough to call out their bullshit. Stop coddling them like babies.]

Tiffany’s perception of Black men as babies speaks to the *infantilization* of Black people (Abbattista, 2011). Viewing Black men in this way may explain why Black women reject Black men and marry interracially. However, Collins (2000) argues, “Given the history of sexual abuse of Black women by White men, individual Black women who choose White partners become reminders of a difficult history for Black women as a collectivity” (p. 162). Sadly, BGLH reader, FreeTea (2015), experiences this antagonism, as she states:

…Black people think that I don’t care about the issues facing the Black community because I married White. I’ve been accused of self-hate. People have continually alleged that I “just want mixed babies.” People call me a traitor. The most hurtful thing? People assume that true love between myself and my husband is an impossibility, and we’re only with each other because of fetishes and internalized White Supremacy.

This reminder of the master/slave relationship illustrates the controlling image of the jezebel (Robinson, 2011; Pilgrim, 2012a), which Collins (2000) believes is used to mask the power dynamic and “provide the illusion of consent” (p. 162). However, such a depiction removes all agency from Black women. To this, BGLH readers, Tiffany Williams and Guest, proclaim that
Black women need to put more effort into supporting one another, as opposed to putting that energy into supporting Black men.

Additionally, CN readers speak to this level of agency, as LovePeaceCurls (2014), asserts, “I personally think that many people have an issue with learning how to transition into our stance of power WHILE respecting the struggle that our people experienced so that we could get to a point of equality.” LovePeaceCurls’ word choice of “transition into our stance of power” suggests Black women have yet to develop their agency. However, CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), speaks to the issue Black women face when they choose to speak out on issues within their communities, as she adamantly states in all capitalized letters: “They tell us STOP CRYING, SUCK IT, OR THE FAMOUS ONE, SHE IS ANGRY, HATEFUL, AGGRESSIVE. Words used to silence black women.” Conversely, BGLH reader, OXxo (2016), believes anger can be justified, as states, “I know people are scared of being the ‘angry black woman’ but at certain times angry behaviour [sic] is completely appropriate especially in front of other black people.” Thus, OXxo speaks to the safe place created by BNHCBs, who create a sense of community based on shared experiences. Yet, some readers believe that speaking on issues that plague Black women can cause division; therefore, it is better to focus on the positive, to which BGLH reader, jazinegrrrl (2016), quips back:

‘Focus on the positive’ only benefits lighter women. This 3rd rail issue [of colorism] needs to keep getting exposed. Black women need to unapologetically take their rightful seat at the table, even if they have to elbow a few out of the way.

Here, jazinegrrrl juxtaposes “focus on the positive” with “elbow a few out of the way” to illustrate the aggressive action she believes is necessary to make progress, as the latter has not progressed Black women. However, not everyone feels this way, as BGLH reader, Black+
(2016), responds, “How about WE build a bigger table, or add to it….Btw [by the way], Jazine, you don’t need to elbow anyone. I’ll gladly give you a seat of [sic] you ask. #BlackSpectrumLove2017.” So, although Black affinity spaces, such as BGLH, provide a safe space for Black women to express their anger and lament their daily frustrations of being within a marginalized group, spaces like this also provide a platform for Black women to create a shared sisterhood that encourages them to take agency over their lives in a way that includes all Black women. For instance, BGLH reader, NOT A TROLL (2016), encourages herself and other women to move past the outrage, as she implores:

…[Let’s] get ourselves together (if you haven’t done so already and get into relationships with men who love and appreciate us AND our skin. In 2017, let’s leave men that don’t love us in the past and focus on moving forward.

Fellow BGLH reader, Elaine Hunter (2016), shares this conviction, and states, “Go where you are celebrated and not tolerated…black women keep feeding into the degradation and for the life of me I can not [sic] understand WHY we continue to put up with it. It has to stop.” However, such degradation is not just at the hands of Black men, as Black women can often be seen attacking one another online. In particular, Walton’s response to Jamilah Lemieux’s, columnist for Ebony.com, who published an editorial about Walton’s (2014e) interview with White reader, Sarah, also highlights the lack of sisterhood among Black women, as she states:

What I found intriguing about your decision to speak on this matter was the strong sense of entitlement you must have felt to discuss the meaning and purpose of the blog I created…Well, damn...with friends like that, who needs trolls? (para. 6)

Walton’s response to the negativity Lemieux spread across the Internet seems to be par for the course, as Noelliste (2016e) acknowledges she expects her comment box to be “reckless”
because she has a high traffic site (para. 1). A level of vitriol seems to be expected; therefore, both CN and BGLH moderate the content allowed on their blogs.

**Critical Analysis of Popular Culture and Media**

“*Media savvy individuals know that what is always portrayed is not always the reality. Learn to discern, please.*”

*Black Girl with Long Hair reader, VoiceofReason (2016)*

Black popular culture is critical to cultivating a resistance to being labeled an outsider. As such, Hall’s (2009) work on representation within popular culture asserts that the function of popular culture is to “fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength” (p. 377). Thus, it is imperative to, as Hall (1997) states, “focus is on the black subject and the variety of images which are on display in popular culture and the mass media” (p. 225). However, there is limited variation of Black women in the media, as it promotes a light skin and looser curl aesthetic when representing Black women. Such a narrow representation plays into how Black women, particularly those with dark skin and kinky hair, imagine themselves (Hall, 2009). Such issues emerged from this current study and were further shaped by the following two sub-themes: (a) the importance of self-ethnic reflectors and (b) the politics of natural hair care consumerism.

**Self-ethnic Reflectors**

Walton (2014e) recognizes the importance of her blog representing people that look like her, as she states, “I’m a dope black chick, and so I made the site in my image. This is the main reason why it mostly features other dope black chicks” (para. 5). Walton uses the Biblical allusion of “made in my image” to show her agency over how she manages the content of her blog. Since she is conscious in her choice to include Black women on her site, readers like NaturalHAIR (2014) admit they began following CN because “VOGUE, ELLE,
MARIECLAIRE, and an onslaught of magazines catered to one group and one group only, WHITE WOMEN.” By capitalizing “WHITE WOMEN” and the magazines that overrepresent them, NaturalHAIR displays the power of the media creating the narrative of White beauty. However, White women are not the only group overrepresented in the media.

BGLH reader, Acts of Faith Blog (2016), argues that light skin, biracial women already have “majority representation,” and therefore do not need any more efforts to display their phenotype. Fellow BGLH reader, sindochy (2016), also supports this perspective, as she criticizes one of BGLH’s posts for displaying a narrow scope of Black women, as she contends:

When the majority of the pictures featured only type 3 hair [looser curl], almost to the exclusion of type 4 [coarse, kinky hair], that’s when we have a blatant display of colorism. And this contributes to the erasure of black womanhood…It furthers the notion that only black women with the ‘desired phenotype’ should be featured and promoted.

Again, the phenotypes of light skin and loose curls are presented as an abstract noun, which the dominant culture desires. Moreover, the notion that Black women with the desired phenotypes are chosen to represent Black women in the media is a pervasive problem that has recently become an issue among young Black feminists (Ishola, 2016).

In her critique of this issue, Abi Ishola, dissects the recognition given to modern-day Black feminists, Amandla Stenberg, Willow Smith, and Zendaya Coleman, as she positions their influence against the influence of the founders of Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors. Although she acknowledges they have received recognition and do not have the popularity of the young celebrities, she adds that their popularity is “largely a privilege reserved for black women who are biracial or fair skinned” (Ishola, 2016, para. 7).

However, there is a consequence that comes with allowing biracial or light skin women to
represent the majority of Black women, which BGLH reader, AnonymousThouART (2016), criticizes, as she states, “Inclusive kumbaya isn’t helpful. Then again that’s what allowed Zoe Saldana to play Nina Simone.” Here, AnonymousThouART is referring to the Nina Simone biopic which cast Zoe Saldana, who identifies as Black, but also has Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage, over other qualified actresses who better resemble the dark skin and facial features of Simone. The controversy grew when Saldana performed the role in makeup to darken her light skin and prosthetics to broaden her facial features (Howard, 2016). This issue sheds light on the underrepresentation of major motion picture dark skin, Black actresses. Their invisibility perpetuates the devaluing of dark skin. Dark skin does not sell, unless the actor portrayal maintains the negative controlling images of Black womanhood (Hall, 1997; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

Analyzing the Commodification of Natural Hair

The underrepresentation of dark skin Black women in major films is one way the media renders Black women invisible. However, the beauty care industry may arguably play a bigger role in devaluing Black women. According to market research firm, Mintal, Black consumers spent an estimated $2.7 billion on Black hair care products in 2015 (“Natural hair movement,” 2016). Moreover, the recent natural hair movement has increased the sales of styling products by 26.8 percent from 2013 to 2015, which comprises 35 percent of Black hair care sales (“Natural hair movement,” 2016). Thus, Black natural hair care is a trending money-maker, yet it seems Black-centered magazines, like Ebony and Essence, are not cashing in, as Walton (2014d) directly addresses:
I must admit, I like the folks at Ebony (and Essence, too), especially since you’ve become more natural hair friendly. I do always wonder, however, why our biggest black publications didn’t lead the natural hair charge. (para. 7)

Walton’s passive aggressive comment depicts *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines’ limited agency in promoting the natural hair movement. Moreover, the work of Johnson (2013) speaks directly to the question Walton asks, as her content analysis of *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines in five-year intervals from 1985 to 2010 revealed a constructed desire for chemically relaxed hair, which was tied to income for the magazines. With the increasing revenue of natural hair, Black magazines are changing their marketing, simply because hair care companies are taking notice.

Due to this trend, it seems that the media is trying to increase their revenue by expanding their branding to White women. The inclusion of White woman, as previously discussed, runs the risk of cultural appropriation. Comments by BGLH readers address the issue of White women appropriating a Black aesthetic and relegating it down to a mere trend. When addressing *Allure* magazine promoting White women wearing afros, BGLH reader, maralondon (2015), recognizes the profitability of this tactic, as she claims, “The magazine is promoting a trend which they hope their followers will latch onto. This is how the fashion and beauty industries make their money.” While Black women like maralondon argue that magazines are making money by fetishizing Black women as a trend, BGLH reader, KissOfDanger (2016), quips back: “I say let’s charge royalties.” KissOfDanger’s comeback suggests that Black women own the Black aesthetic and want proper recognition. Likewise, BGLH reader, crankyreader (2015), speaks to the influence of Black women, as she comments on the “trend” of afros, stating:

I think you are underestimating how much black women have redefined beauty, in everyday life and pop culture. White girls who want this look know it’s called an afro,
and I can’t think of a single white actress or model with an afro yet; it is not yet a white style. Perhaps it’s annoying that now white girls get to have this too…

By using the phrase “redefined beauty,” crankyreader gives agency to Black women and their actions to influence popular culture. However, her words also imply that White women will eventually appropriate afros. Yet, not everyone feels this sense of entitlement and distain over a particular hair aesthetic, as BGLH reader, BlueCornMoon (2016), shares:

I, too, am sick of this mess, but I think it would be best to ignore this crap. Everytime [sic] there’s a negative story about ANYTHING, the media goes crazy repeating the nasty tweets & putting them up for all to see. This just gives those idiots TOO MUCH ATTENTION & TOO MUCH POWER! They look forward to seeing their ignorant remarks highlighted in the news.

By giving them the title of “idiots,” BlueCornMoon clearly depicts the media as the enemy, who has “TOO MUCH POWER.” Therefore, BlueCornMoon argues that Black women can disempower the media by ignoring their salacious tactics. However, BGLH seems to benefit from the media frenzy BlueCornMoon so adamantly critiques. Consequently, BGLH reader, April (2015), expresses her displeasure with BGLH, by stating:

I’m starting to believe the writers here only sit around waiting for something to be outraged about. So what if a white girl wants an afro?...Afros look good and I’m sure black people don’t own any one hairstyle. Just calm down, everything isn’t a plot against black women.

April’s words support inclusion and by calling afros a “hairstyle,” she relegates Black hair to a mere aesthetic. As stated earlier, Noelliste (2017b) has recently taken full responsibility for the
recurrent theme of Black women and tragedy, which April and other BGLH readers criticize.

However, two years earlier, Noelliste (2015b) proclaimed the following in a comment thread:

- Black women being copied by women of other cultures happens all the time and has been happening for decades and will continue to happen for the foreseeable future. It’s a cultural constant at this point. Also we pointed out that it is copying (which it is) but we never said it was a ‘plot against black women’. That is for readers to debate and discuss. Trust, if we had an issue with [White women wearing afros] we would have spoken on it. As for me, personally, white women can copy anything they want that I do, say or wear. All I ask in return is that black women be regarded culturally as the style taste makers they are and always have been.

Here, Noelliste gives Black women the title of “style taste makers,” but she argues that dominant culture does not recognize their influence. Thus, Noelliste uses her platform to express her beliefs about the contributions of Black women; thereby, giving them voice.

**Journalistic Sociopolitical Intervention**

“As a practical matter, what I do know, is that it is difficult to try to make something popular and accepted by not sharing it with others. #WhereTheyDoThatAt”

- Nikki Walton (2014d, para. 4)

Hall (1997) argues that there can be many meanings present within a single image, but there is not one true meaning, as meaning is not static. He further argues, “[P]ower not only constrains and prevents: it is also productive” and produces new knowledge, practices, and discourses” (Hall, 2000, p. 261). Thus, BNHCBs can be viewed as sites of power disruption and co-optation. Instances of this circulation of power are seen within the blog posts and comments, as Walton, Noelliste, and their readers construct sentences that signify: (a) a sense of agency
among Black women; (b) the consequences of normalizing natural hair; and (c) tactics used to sensationalize media content.

**Sense of Agency**

Based on the blog posts assessed for this study, Walton and Noelliste exercise their agency very differently. Whereas, Walton identifies strongly with overseas charities and media representation, Noelliste identifies more closely with educating readers on the historicity of race in this country. With regard to CN, Walton (2014d) shares her “service mission/vacation” in South Africa with her readers, which she has dubbed “Curly Culture Missions” (para. 9). Walton adds, “When I go, I usually serve my readership by telling them interesting stories about women like them around the world” (para. 9). Walton’s word choice (i.e., “missions,” “serve”) presents her as a missionary. From this position, Walton indicates the following:

> We had a very successful trip, raised some money for our charity and personally sponsored one of the young ladies who acts as a mentor to the younger children… We saw for ourselves that the folks of Metro Kids South Africa really needed help and I tried my best to convey that to my audience. (para. 10)

Here, Walton identifies the importance of using her platform to reach her audience about the importance of her charities. However, her sense of agency is not always as explicit as this.

Being a sort of cross-over natural, Walton has gained the respect of numerous celebrities. In her post about news anchor, Tamron Hall, displaying her natural hair on the *Today Show*, Walton (2014d) relishes in this historic media representation, as she states, “I can’t help but wonder how many women have been encouraged by seeing such a public figure show her natural beauty in such a public way” (para. 10). Walton’s statement highlights the importance of *self-ethnic reflectors* in the media and adds a layer of responsibility for Black women in the media, as their
very presence has the ability to shape the actions of other Black women. Specifically, Walton names the natural hair movement and its community as having a pivotal role in Hall’s courage to display her natural hair on air, as she asserts, “I'm proud that our community was able to inspire and encourage Tamron and I'm proud that she's doing the same thing for the millions that tuned in today” (Walton, 2014b, para. 3). Walton’s naming of the natural hair community and its influence speaks to the power of cultural movements creating a shift in mainstream society. This is not only evidenced by Hall’s natural hair appearance on the Today Show, but also by the hair care industry, which has taken notice.

Aside from Walton’s posts centering around charity and media representation, her post on the controversy surrounding her featuring a non-Black reader gave space for one of her readers to educate some of her fellow readers on the history of African-American music and its subsequent appropriation. This comment is an outlier among the responses observed on Walton’s most heavily commented blog posts. However, her post about the politics of inclusion in predominately Black populated spaces is also an outlier, as most of the popular posts penned by Walton focus on hair tutorials. However, BGLH is no stranger to political topics. For example, in the comment section of the article accusing Beyoncé of colorism, BGLH reader, Me (2016), issues the following response to South African reader, Itumeleng, who questions why “Western blacks” seem to be obsessed with light skin:

If you know anything about African American history you’ll understand that African Americans are seemingly obsessed with skin complexion because of the brainwashing and hatred that occurred during slavery. At that time whites called us ugly for being brown or dark. When white slave masters would rape black female slaves, a mixed baby would be the product. Most times that baby would have much [lighter] skin (being half
white). That child would be treated a little better, and earn the privilege to work in the house (away from the hot sun in the cotton fields) just because he or she was “lighter”.

The dark slaves ALWAYS were forced to work outside. This created a huge complex for blacks that transcended through generations. Hence now we still have African Americans who hate their dark skin, or feel that they are better because they are light.

“Better” is anything that is closer to being White…..like lighter skin or Euro-centric features. Not ALL African Americans think this way….but there are many who do…

Me’s response positions White people as responsible for Black people’s internalized oppression, which is a consequence of their “brainwashing” and “hatred” that originated from slavery. Furthermore, Me’s reference to slave history aligns with the dynamics of the posts Noelliste creates, which, within the scope of this study, give her the opportunity to educate her readers on the ramifications of American slavery. For example, Noelliste’s (2015a) most popular post gives her the opportunity to display Faustine’s nude photo series, and thereby opens up a dialogue for her to discuss Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman as she states, “[K]nown as Venus Hottentot; a Khoikhoi African woman whose large buttocks and curvy figure were exhibited in freak shows throughout 19th century Europe” (para. 6). BGLH reader, Kita Williams (2015), responds to this post and the historicity of Black women’s bodies, stating, “Absolutely love the bold statement. Black woman in its rarest form taking back the image that was meant to ridicule and debase. I applaud her.” Here, Kita Williams speaks to Faustine’s agency in co-opting historically negative imagery of Black female slaves. Furthermore, Noelliste (2015a) gives voice to Faustine by allowing her to exercise her agency on a larger scale, as Faustine articulates:

As a time traveler I’m very invested in the past and our future. I see myself, the people who built this city and country as one. They deserve so much recognition for their
sacrifice and contributions, something that is still being denied them…I wanted to uncover those places where a tangible link to the past exists. Being a documentarian at heart I wanted you to feel and see those spaces, let your mind wonder… (para. 2)

By Faustine identifying herself as a “time traveler” and being “one” with the slaves who built New York city, she speaks to the inability for African-American’s to ever fully separate themselves from slavery, especially the consequences that still result from it. Moreover, Faustine’s words give perspective to her photo series, yet some readers still rejected her work in its nude form by calling it “pointless and disgusting,” mainly due to her weight (Ebony, 2015).

BGLH reader, Nicole Lasher (2015), fires back to these negative reader comments, arguing, “[B]ack in the slave days (and still in some places) some would say this ‘heifer’ would make a mighty fine wet nurse and/or breeder. Her price would be around the equivalent of buying a new car today. Getting the point yet?” Here, Lasher uses her agency to educate readers who viewed this art uncritically. She later addresses the otherness of Black women’s bodies, stating:

Our bodies have always been a spectacle for ‘white’ people…Women of all ages and sizes were still stripped down and sold on the block. If you only want to see the ‘pretty’ ones, that’s your sick fantasy, not the reality. (Nicole Lasher, 2015)

It is evident that Faustine’s work evoked emotion, and in some, a deeper critical analysis, as BGLH reader, Leslie (2015) responds:

[I] wrote this long, passionate, angry piece about the pain I feel when I see black women being sold back on the block but instead of chains, designer names…My dream is for enough of us to be awakened and strengthened to say ‘no more.’

Leslie’s words speak to the consequences of slavery and how it manifests presently with consumerism, as if she is suggesting the Black people are slaves to “designer names.” This level
of awakening seems to be critical to BGLH readers like Leslie, who use the online learning community to educate other readers, whether it be naming the “Chocolate” spray tans as a form of “blackface” or identifying criminal laws that prohibit unsolicited physical contact of strangers touching their natural hair. However, some readers also give perspective to non-Black readers. For example, BGLH reader, understand562 (2015), responds to a reader who brings up “black on black crime” as she proclaims, “[S]ee what you fail to realize is that black on black crime is a side notation associated with being taught self hate [sic] all goes back to the root of the issue slavery plz [please] go educate yourself.” BGLH, reader, BklynSun3 (2015), lends her support, stating, “White on white crime is just as high. As most crimes are committed by people of one race against members of their own race. Your argument in invalid.” Here, both of these readers use history and trends to support their claims, such tactics promote a critical perspective and dismiss using an uncritical eye when analyzing these issues, as the latter has the potential to perpetuate the myth of Black womanhood (Fulton, 2004; Harkness, 2012).

Normalization of Natural Hair

As stated earlier, Noelliste uses her agency to educate her readers on the ramifications of African-American history. With her post of Faustine’s work, Noelliste gives greater perspective to the historicity of race within this photo series, particularly as it relates to Black women:

The use of women’s bodies for sociopolitical reasons is still very controversial, particularly for black women. Black woman protesters recently marched topless during San Francisco rush hour to draw attention to police brutality against black women, a move that drew both admiration and criticism. (Noelliste, 2015a, para. 4)

Here, Noelliste speaks to the great risk in challenging dominant ideology with this level of visual imagery, as some who view such images trivialize, and thereby normalize the dominant culture’s
knowledge of the Black female body (Fulton, 2004; Harkness, 2012). BGLH reader, omfg’s (2015), response to Faustine’s work illustrates this issue, as she says:

[I] mean great, she’s a fat black woman (who takes pride in all three [I] supposed [sic]), who goes around butt naked to pose for pictures and calls it art… so sick of all of [sic] narcissism and nonsense meant to shock. this [sic] feels like it is more about her, than actually enlightening people about the plight of the black slave woman, or giving the slave woman a voice.

By labeling her as a “fat black woman” and narcissistic, omfg trivializes Faustine’s work to a mere shock tactic, void of enlightening society about Black female slaves. Additionally, this response only demonstrates how giving Black women a voice rarely leads to progression unless mainstream society is listening. To this aim, Walton (2014d) offers the following perspective:

If women from other cultures are inspired by our stories, I'm cool with that. This means that it will become easier for black women to display their blackness outside of our ‘safe’ black spaces…I believe that the most important part of my job is to provide a space for all women to enjoy the security they deserve while living in a society that openly questions their legitimacy. Jamilah, if I am only providing enough space for my readers to feel comfortable in a room (or a blog) full of women similar to me, then I haven’t provided my readers any security at all. (para. 3, 5)

Walton’s argument centers around the security Black women feel in “safe black spaces,” such as on CN. However, Walton suggests this is a false sense of security that does not translate to the real world. Moreover, she shifts the position of her site from focusing on Black women to focusing on “all women.” This tactic keeps Walton aligned with her inclusive position for CN. This inclusive perspective is further supported by her apparent acceptance by mainstream
society, which gives her greater credibility in conveying natural hair acceptance to the masses (Maratea, 2008). CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), agrees with Walton’s stance, adding:

We will never create change if we are only having these discussions among ourselves. Including others in the conversation is how we begin to heal. A movement calling for the acceptance and appreciation of our diversity can not [sic] be successful with a foundation of exclusivity. I don't believe that has ever worked in our history. While we certainly need to practice affirming ourselves, some of the progress we seek will not be achieved without the affirmation of others.

NaturalHAIR’s position on Black women needing to “begin to heal” implies a sense of brokenness among Black women, which may lead to exclusivity. However, NaturalHAIR argues that such exclusion voids Black women of being affirmed by others. To this, Walton gives evidence of the benefits of being affirmed by the dominant culture, as she states:

I and other bloggers have been working hard to make the natural hair movement popular. It’s obvious now that our impact on the hair care industry and popular culture has been tremendous. Generally, this has led to good outcomes like a crap load more product options, and a warmer reception among friends, family and colleagues. Without popularity, none of this would have been possible. However, we can't have popularity without sacrificing privacy. (Walton, 2014d, para. 4)

Through a critical race theory lens, this gain in popularity can be explained by the phenomenon of interest convergence, as the interests of Black women align with the interest of the hair care industry (Taylor, 1998; Closson, 2010). It seems, however, that Walton and other bloggers have developed savvy marketing strategies to appeal to the dominant view, which has led to greater representation of hair care products and acceptance of natural hair on Black women’s bodies.
Sensationalizing the Message through Word Choice

A writer’s word choice, or diction, is an important aspect of ensuring she clearly conveys her meaning to her audience. Carefully selecting precise words in content writing, especially in blogging, not only increases impact but also drives traffic. However, attracting visitors to a site runs the risk of writer’s using *clickbait*, which is defined as “something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” (*Merriam-Webster.com*, 2017). Jeffrey Dvorkin (2016), columnist at PBS.org, argues that this phenomenon is one of “digital’s worst qualities” (para. 14). Nevertheless, clicks bring income to bloggers. Moreover, when I did a Google search of “revenue from blogging,” I was quickly provided with a plethora of sites devoted to giving step-by-step instructions on how to make money blogging (e.g., Andrews, 2017; Morrow, 2017; Agarwal, 2017). With many focused on making money, Dvorkin cautions consumers to remain skeptical of the information they consume. BGLH reader, MelyB (2014), shares in this sentiment as she cautions fellow readers in their consumption of the controversy surrounding Walton’s feature of White reader, Sarah:

This issue would have died down days ago had that chick not been so dismissive in the face of the controversy she thirsted for; compounded by Nikki’s self-serving ‘response’. Given the reactions of not only Nikki but several prominent vloggers/bloggers, I am convinced that this was a troll stunt geared towards increasing Nikki’s profile with non-Black women that Nikki co-signed [agreed to].

MelyB’s label of White reader, Sarah, as “that chick” positions her as an outsider that cannot be trusted because she “thirsted for” the spotlight. However, MelyB positions Walton similarly, as she suggests she is “self-serving” and driven by increasing her site traffic.
However, BGLH readers are not the only ones criticizing Walton’s decision, as CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), responds to Walton’s post suggesting she used clickbait, as she contends, “While I appreciate your point of view you completely diverted the discussion to pettiness and I am sorry, clicks.” While some readers are skeptical of how bloggers manage their content, others believe they should have freedom to choose. CN reader, CurlyGirl (2014), defends Walton by stating:

[I]t's for her to determine whether it should be reserved for one segment of the population or not. You're being rather entitled in demanding it be exclusive to those like you. You didn't create this space, it's Nikki's, not yours.

Here, CurlyGirl determines that Walton has full agency and responsibility for her blog, and positions her and the readers as spectators who have no autonomy over the content of her space. BGLH reader, jojosatoes (2014), takes the same stance, by stating, “I’m fighting for the blogger’s choice. I have a problem with people dictating how someone manages their content just because that person is black with natural hair and have a blog that features [sic] NH [natural hair].” Jojosatoes’ support speaks to the readers perception of the blogger’s content. Should a site primarily geared toward Black natural hair care stay within that vein and never venture into other topics related to Black womanhood? BGLH reader, Hair Anomaly (2014), answers this question from the standpoint of a narrow focus, as she adds:

Thought #1: Why is it that all I get from BGLH is how much the whites and color-struck beige people of the world hate dark skin, kinky hair, big lips, wide hips, etc.??...Are these articles supposed to be uplifting and unifying, or is the point to fuel anger and clicks?...Thought #2: Forget these fools…can someone please give me some tips on what to do with my high porosity, 4B [coily] hair that’s broken off in the front…
Hair Anomaly’s comment implies that BGLH is part of the problem of dividing the culture through sensationalizing content. Hair Anomaly goes on to label White people and those focused on issues of colorism as “fools,” which suggests that those who engage with these topics are also fools, simply by proximity. Criticism of how Walton and Noelliste should manage their blog content speaks to how these bloggers maintain the missions and foci of their blogs, which helps define and align the blog content to the personalities of those they are trying to reach. Therefore, the final theme of this analysis will address how Walton and Noelliste maintain their engagement with the personalities of their audience.

**Dialogic Exchange of Information**

“I felt physically uncomfortable reading the situation, I am sure being there would have been exponentially worse.”
*Black Girl with Long Hair Reader, Emma W (2016)*

Based on their mission statements, Walton’s (2008) audience includes anyone who needs an “educational tool” to help overcome frustrations regarding their naturally curly hair (para. 1); whereas, Noelliste’s (2017a) target audience is Black women interested in their “unique beauty and culture” (para. 1). As previously discussed, Walton’s (2008) blog broadly defines those with natural hair; however, she specifically identifies her space as an “online ‘hair therapy session,’” where readers can share their “experiences, frustrations, and triumphs” (para. 1). Noelliste (2017a), on the other hand, specifically identifies Black women as those with natural hair, but she more broadly states her blog content is “interesting, enlightening, inspiring, and thought-provoking” (para. 1). Thus, Walton and Noelliste seem to cater to women in different stages of natural hair development. In terms of Walton, the personality of the CN reader seems to be that of the frustrated, new natural who is learning how to manage her hair. However, the personality of the BGLH reader appears to be more secure with her natural hair (and Black womanhood), but
they are seeking affirmations outside of mainstream culture. To frame these audience personalities within Helm’s (1990) womanist identity development theory, CN’s targeted audience is in the *encounter* stage of development, which is defined by women beginning to question their gendered and racial assumptions when challenged by new experiences and/or information. Conversely, BGLH’s targeted audience are within the *immersion-emersion* and *internalization* stages, which are defined by those who reject societal norms and define themselves through self-affirmations and shared experiences with knowledgeable women (Ossan, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). These audience characteristics are affirmed through the tactics Walton, Noelliste, and their readers use to (a) maintain a dialogue and (b) exchange information that assures members are a valued part of the community.

**Initiating and Maintaining Conversations**

Based on the blog posts analyzed in this study, both CN and BGLH readers attempt to maintain a dialogue with the bloggers; however, the data from this study indicates that Noelliste and the staff of BGLH are more engaged with their readers than Walton. This is mainly apparent in the post Noelliste published to defend an article she approved for one of her staff writers, Elle, to write. As a result of Noelliste’s response to her readers’ criticisms, Elle, maintained a dialogue with readers in the comment section to defend her work, as evidenced below:

**Acts of Faith Blog (2016):** Why be so concerned about including lighter, brighter, biracial when they already have majority representation? Why is it so hard to set a firm boundary and say they should see themselves in the browner, more coily, not biracial?

**Elle (2016):** It’s not about “being concerned” about making sure lighter women are included, it’s about seeing us all as black women. When I see articles about black women that only feature brown or darker skinned women, it doesn’t upset me because I
still see myself in them. And several of the women in the article are brown skinned to me, but perhaps that’s a difference in how people describe skin tones…

Here, Elle fights against being an outsider by advocating lighter skin women, like her, are all seen as “black women.” She juxtaposes the criticism of readers who do not see themselves in light skin women with her position of seeing herself “brown or darker skinned women.”

Likewise, Walton was presented with similar criticism for her decision to publish an article that featured White reader, Sarah. As a result, similar to Noelliste, Walton published an open letter to the Ebony.com writer who criticized her work. Despite her rationale, some CN readers took issue with Walton’s letter, as reader, NaturalHAIR (2014), posted a six-paragraph letter, where she criticizes Walton’s “pettiness” and failure to “highlight the need to have these spaces reserved” for Black women. Walton did not offer NaturalHAIR a response. However, fellow reader, Kingteeuhh (2014), defends Walton’s work on her behalf:

[T]his is an interesting POV. How i [sic] interpreted CurlyNikki's reponse [sic]--she isn't disagreeing with your points. In fact she's acknowledging many of them. She mentioned not putting a lot of thought into being exclusive which quite frankly makes a lot of sense. I don't think your disappointment is focused in the right place.

Walton’s choice to remain silent, while allowing her reader, Kingteeuhh to respond on her behalf brings up questions regarding who moderates the comment section of these blogs, as Noelliste (2016d) acknowledges she removes comments from her site that “become increasingly offensive” (para. 7). Moderating comments helps to increase the level of safety and trustworthiness of a brand; thus, numerous companies have been developed to assist social media sites with keeping their content safe by managing risks and interruptions that will damage the reputation of their sites (e.g., Chawla, 2015; “Keeping Social Platforms Safe,” 2017;
“Moderating 101,” 2017). Such damage decreases traffic, and thereby decreases dialogue and a sense of community. However, dialogue within a community is not always limited to shared perspectives, as being exposed to divergent ways of thinking facilitates perspective-taking within communal spaces (Brown & Adler, 2008; Thomas & Brown, 2011). This perspective-taking, however, is not just limited to the reader, as the blogger can also learn to empathize and broaden their view on an issue. For example, BGLH reader, Puff (2014), praises Noelliste for her demonstration of balancing divergent points of view:

You all did a marvelous job of balancing the major points of views and as women in journalism (and yes what you’ve done here is journalism), you have done a tremendous job that would rival any major media outlet. You’ve remained fair throughout and you’ve handled everything with such tact and grace.

Puff’s response suggests that bloggers like Noelliste should take on the role of facilitator within their blogging spaces, and thereby give voice to their readership. Based on the scope of this study, BGLH readers do not typically divulge admiration toward Noelliste. Conversely, there is more evidence of CN readers offering praise to Walton, such as “Great response Nikki” (Boho Chic, 2014) and “this is perfect with all the details (thumbs up)” (Yayou, 2015). More specifically, CN reader, FineNaturalHairandFaith (2014), praises Walton for how she styled her daughter’s hair, as she says, “You did a great job braiding and her hair is growing so long.” Reader, TyaD (2014a), shares similar sentiments when she proclaims, “Boog's locs are as luscious as yours!” These attempts to engage with Walton, however, are usually futile, as she rarely responds to comments, and the limited responses she does give typically amount to a quick “thank you.” Despite her limited engagement, Walton, like Noelliste, traditionally ends her posts by posing a question to her readers, such as: “Have you tried amla oil? Share your experiences
below” (Walton, 2015a)! This tactic prompts Walton’s readers to engage in a dialogue initially directed at Walton, but quickly turns into a dialogic exchange between readers. Walton typically provides limited comments within these threads, such as in this exchange:

**Erika Nikole (2014):** We all have those days when our hair doesn’t act right. Lol. Your hair looks great in that bun. I would love to try the Oyin’s Hair Dew.

**CurlyNikki (2014):** Thanks, Erika!

However, the conversation continues beyond this simple exchange, as follows:

**Kyndhal Stewart (2014):** I agree. Some days my hair just hates me. I don’t understand!!!

**Erika Nikole (2014):** Especially when one side of your hair looks good but the other side is just like “not today.” Lol

**Kyndhal Stewart (2014):** YESS! For me, it’s the front and the back. UGH

**Dezi (2014):** mine is that way too they are two different textures

**Tani P (2014):** several different textures for me!

**Megan M. (2014):** I know right! that is why wash n go’s equal no! for me.

This exchange demonstrates how fluid these online dialogues can be. Moreover, two common threads can be seen: (1) the women refer to their hair as an abstract noun and (2) the shared experience of Black women struggling with managing their natural hair. Thus, online learning communities like CN and BGLH provide a space for readers to empathize with one another, which sometimes manifest into storytelling, as BGLH reader, highglossluxury (2016), recalls a childhood experience:

When I was in a gym class, I remember this white girl ‘admiring’ my hair. She was like, ‘Oh, I like your hair!’ She had her hand in position to touch and then she said, ‘Can I
touch it?’ as I saw her hand slowly going for the ‘feel.’ I leaned back and told her ‘Hell Naw!!!!!!! I ain’t no damn animal!!!!’ This was back in 1984.

By putting “admiring” in quotation marks, highglossluxury, seems to add skepticism to the reason this White girl wanted to touch her hair. Moreover, she adds quotations around “feel,” which seem to bring a sense of community to the common issue of White people’s fascination with Black hair. Lastly, highglossluxury’s use of colloquial language, such as “Hell Naw” and “ain’t” speak to Hall’s (2007) concept of common language shared among cultural groups. Hall adds that the combination of shared conceptual maps of mental representations and language systems forms cultures that, when they are combined with codes, “govern the relationships of translation between them” (Hall, 2007, p. 21). As such, cultures outside of the natural hair community may have difficulty translating the language systems because they do not have the codes (or position) to meaningfully decode the discourse. Such language is seen within both CN and BLGH, as Walton, Noelliste, and their readers rely on acronyms and neologisms (coined words), such as “PJ” (product junkie), “two-strand twist,” “pre-poo,” and “shrinkage” to discuss issues related to natural hair manageability and care. Additionally, there are instances of them using more colloquial language, such as “The homie,” “swag,” “on the lowlow,” “turn-up,” “look a little suspect,” “And the church said…,” and “Preach” to signify a shared experience.

Aside from sharing a common language system, these online spaces give readers a window into others’ daily lives, as seen in the following exchange:

**Naturally Mane (2014):** ugh girl your hair is so pretty! LOVE IT @ Khadijah H.

**Khadijah H. (2014):** Thank you!! omg why do I feel like i know you?! lol. Are you subbed to Afro Khadisiac on youtube?? I feel like I’ve seen your pic somewhere before :o
Naturally Mane (2014): yes girl! watch your videos a lot [sic], and made [a] comment on your giveaway recently wishing you luck in your classes

Khadijah H. (2014): AHH! I knew it! ^_^ yayyy :)))…Turns out I'm going to take that class in the Spring instead! (last minute craziness) I'm still going to take the break so focus on the math although i [sic] won't be taking the class right now. I have tons of new videos being edited right now! can't [sic] wait

Exchanges like these illustrate the human tendency to seek connection and belonging. Also, online learning communities are maintained by individuals who find like-minded peers who validate their experiences and perspectives. BGLH reader, Riak (2016), articulates this finding:

This made me cry. The part where you talked about colorism struck me so much. It’s all so true, colorism is much alive and well and it’ll always be there just like racism. But as a dark skinned women, this is the perfect discription [sic] of how I feel. Thank you.

Thus, spaces like BGLH give voice to those who are marginalized and often silenced, which provides a sense of solidarity and validation. However, such spaces also provide opportunities for everyday Black women to exercise their agency and expertise.

Reimagining the Expert

CN readers are overwhelmingly drawn to Walton’s hair tutorial posts, where she shares pictures of her hair and related hair topics. Some readers respond with admiration for her hair, while others walk a fine line between admiration and envy over the length of Walton’s hair. For example, upon seeing a picture of Walton’s high bun, reader, Kyndhal Stewart (2014), exclaimed, “I’m waiting for this stage!! I want ALL the hair!!” Here, Kyndhal Stewart makes Walton’s hair abstract, as if it is something she can possess. This desire to have hair like Walton’s keeps her readers coming back for her product recommendations. However, Walton
laments about the amount of natural hair products she has in her closet and her “inability to find a leave-in/styler that would not only moisturize and define, but hold [her curls]” (Walton, 2014a, para. 1). In an attempt to hold to her promise of providing her readers with product recommendations, Walton assures her readers she will resume experimenting with products in a few weeks and report back to them, since she is determined to find her “Holy Grail” of hair products (Walton, 2014a, para. 9). Describing hair products that give desired results as the “Holy Grail” alludes to how earnestly Walton will pursue the right products for her hair. It seems she is willing to put in the time to test products she can unequivocally recommend to her readers. As a result, when Walton finds a satisfying product, she will share her findings with her readers, and thereby solicit, “[Y]ou really have to try this” (Walton, 2014g, para. 2). As a result of this particular recommendation, numerous CN readers respond that they will try the endorsed product, while others recommend products they use and the stores where they can be purchased on sale. Additionally, when Walton recommends new hair techniques to help stretch shrunken natural curls, many of her readers are apt to try the new product recommendations, and some even indicate they do similar techniques. However, despite Walton’s great results with a particular product called *Curlformers®,* some readers remain skeptical, as evidenced by this exchange between CN readers:

**Soledad (2014):** Curl formers sound dangerous. A hook? I properly need to see a demo.

**1stLadyCee (2014):** Lol....I feel you. A hook, broken pieces and possible hair breakage.

**Soledad (2014):** It sounds painful. But, it [sic] Nikki’ daughter can sit during the style then it cant [sic] be that bad. Maybe...

With this skepticism, readers responded with advice and support on how to manage the product. For instance, reader, FineNaturalHairandFaith (2014), offers a different perspective, stating, “I
don’t think they are bad. I think using Curlformers has a little learning curve though…like I knew I put a little too much hair [in] a couple times and had to redo.” Additionally, reader, KurlyKP (2014), offers, “I think you have to get the hang of it too. I found that it was much easier when I did my friend’s hair to not try and pull too much hair though [sic], otherwise it’s [sic] gets tricky.” With this advice, some users declared they would try the product, and fellow readers asked them to post their results. Such embedded comments support Walton’s post, but do not identify her as the only person able to give advice. Consequently, Walton (2014g) seems to be learning right along with her readers, as she states, “I’m taking suggestions so leave some in the comments below” (para. 9). CN reader, Jen W (2014), was first to respond by offering her method for achieving a defined wash and go style, which differs from Walton’s damp styling method. Below is an exchange between Jen W and a fellow reader:

**Jen W (2014):** I actually do better with wet wash n gos where I put all my product on in the shower right after i [sic] rinse my hair. I shake a little bit, fluff with a pick and go. It’s like my hair needs the weight of the water. When I do a wash n go on damp hair, just raking product through, it just ends up looking crazy and shrunken. I may try this method when my hair gets longer though.

**TyaD (2014b):** What is your texture?

**Jen W (2014):** Somewhere in the 4 range. Not sure of the letter. All I know is it’s very coily, dense, and thin. I still have to be careful with my methods because it can become tangle city quick!

**TyaD (2014b):** Hmmm you giving me some hope now!

**Jen W (2014):** You should try it...
This exchange and the various other dialogues that occur within the comment threads of these blogs organically develops into a conversation that, at times, seems to occur in real time. Thus, the Black women who engage in the CN and BGLH learning communities rely on strategies that help them maintain a dialogue exchange that brings value to group membership.

**Summary**

Within this chapter, I began by providing summaries of the blogs and subsequent blog posts that were a part of this study. I then moved on to a brief discussion supporting the relevancy of QMCA and CDA to help uncover patterns which bring meaning to Black womanhood within this study. The final section detailed the findings in relation to the research questions and the four principles of Black womanhood that helped to frame the content analysis. Based on this framework, the principles as subsequent themes include: (a) the politics of representation that define Black affinity spaces, fetishize Black women’s bodies, and perpetuate the angry Black woman trope; (b) a critical analysis of popular culture and media representations of Black women and the politics of natural hair as an aesthetic; (c) the journalistic sociopolitical interventions the bloggers and readers utilize to popularize natural hair; and (d) the dialogic exchange of information that is maintained by a racialized discourse and platform that positions blog readers as those capable of offering advice. These themes were instrumental in answering the first two research questions. In the next chapter, the third question will be explored in more detail, as it relates to blog readers’ offline behaviors.
CHAPTER 5

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS AND DISQUS COMMENTS

The purpose of my study is to explore the role discursive practices and online learning communities within Black natural hair care blogs (BNHCBs) play in the construction of Black female identity and critical consciousness in both online and offline (real world) spaces, as they pertain to a form of resistance (i.e., cultural politics) from the readers’ perspectives. The research questions that guide my study are:

1. What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?
2. What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the bloggers’ practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?
3. How do the blog commenters’ online personalities align with their offline personalities?

To investigate these questions, I utilized a two-prong interpretive qualitative media content analysis (QMCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to evaluate blog posts by CurlyNikki (CN) and Black Girl with Long Hair (BGLH), as well as subsequent comments by their blog readers. This part of the study was the focus of Chapter Four. Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with CN and BGLH blog commenters to bring greater meaning to the findings in Chapter Four. The interview data and supporting QMCA and CDA from each participants’ Disqus (i.e., blog comment hosting service) pages form the basis of this chapter, which is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences, both online and offline, of Black women who participate in BNHCBs.

In the previous chapter (Chapter Four), I explored the blog content findings. However, in this chapter, I focus on the participant interview data and their respective Disqus content data.
Accordingly, I have divided this chapter into three main sections. After providing a brief explanation of the methodology I used to select my participants, I begin the first section by introducing each participant through descriptive profiles to gain greater insight into each woman’s offline behaviors. In the second section, I present the findings from the QMCA and CDA conducted on the data from the in-depth interviews. In the third and final section, I delve into each participants’ recent Disqus comments and compare this data to the interview data, to gain a deeper understanding of their online and offline behaviors.

**Commenter Interviews, Disqus Posts, and Data Display**

As a registered user of Disqus, I am able to view the Disqus pages of CN ad BGLH, which include links to their “Top Commenters” Disqus pages. This analytic tool allowed me to view these blog commenters’ posting histories, while also allowing me to either gain contact information (i.e., link to personal blog) or solicit participation by replying to a previous comment they submitted to a site other than CN or BGLH, as these two sites prohibit solicitation. My reply encouraged those who were interested in participating in an interview to email me for more information (see recruitment script in Appendix A). Of the 33 potential candidates I contacted, 15 responded with interest. However, two of these women did not log on to video chat during our agreed upon interview time and date; one did not follow up to my emails to set up an interview time; one had to withdrawal due to a family medical emergency; and one was only 17 years old. The remaining ten women responded via email and confirmed their interest. Aside from already ensuring these women met the first and second blog commenter selection criterion, as indicated in Chapter Three, the women had to self-identify with the four remaining criteria: (3) self-identifies as Black; (4) presents or self-identifies as female; (5) wears hair in its natural, un-chemically treated state; and (6) is around 25 years or older. These selection criteria are
foundational to effectively evaluate the four principles of Black womanhood within BNHCBs, as surmised from the literature review: (a) the implications of the politics of representation with regard to contesting and/or perpetuating hegemonic assumptions of Black womanhood; (b) a critical analysis of popular culture and media messages of Black womanhood as connected to power and big business; (c) the utilization of journalistic sociopolitical intervention to exercise power to resist, self-discipline actions, and/or sensationalize messages; and (d) a dialogic exchange of information where the reader can also be the producer of knowledge through an online learning community.

**Participant Profiles**

As indicated in Chapter Three, a total of ten CN and BGLH blog commenters participated in digitally recorded telephone or video chat interviews, which were conducted and later transcribed. Below, I introduce each participant, including their experience with transitioning from chemically relaxed to natural hair, otherwise known as “going natural.” These participant reflections on their natural hair journey are relevant to their identity development, as it speaks to their level of offline (i.e., real world) community support and initial stages of Black female identity development. Furthermore, I assigned each of the participants a characteristic title that encapsulates the overall impression and personality trait they presented during their interviews. These character titles were shared with each participant to ensure that the traits I chose resonated with them. These character titles will be revisited in the Disqus analysis section to help determine consistency between each participants’ online and offline behavior. Additionally, pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of each participant.

**Brianna, “The Consistent Teacher.”** Brianna is a 27-year-old fourth grade teacher for a large county school district less than an hour north of Orlando, Florida. Brianna decided to go
natural in 2010 during her sophomore year of college at Tuskegee University, a Historically Black University (HBCU) because “all” of her friends were natural and due to curiosity. She also believes many Black women get relaxers, not by choice, but because they are worried their hair will be too kinky or “because they feel like they can’t wear natural hair, so they get a relaxer.” Furthermore, Brianna reveals her natural hair journey, as she states:

I was kinda lead to believe that I had hair that was difficult... having become natural, it’s a completely different experience from that...my hair is a lot more easy to manage than I would have ever thought in the past and what my family would have ever thought.

This lack of support forced Brianna to look elsewhere, which is how she discovered CN. With the help of CN, BGLH, YouTube channels, and the natural hair online learning community, Brianna, who admits she reads BNHCBs daily, has learned a lot about natural hair care, and she is seen by her friends and a few family members, as a natural hair care expert because they routinely ask her for information about natural hair products and styling techniques. These offline interactions also manifest online, as Brianna has a YouTube channel and personal blog dedicated to simple tips to promote natural hair care and growth. Since starting her online presence in May 2010, as a way to document her natural hair journey, Brianna has gained 6,620 YouTube subscribers with nearly 642,000 views. Her blog has 59 followers. Moreover, Brianna has a strong desire to share her knowledge of natural hair to help other women.

Whitney, “The Hair Health Advocate.” Whitney is a 32-year-old gas plant operator in Boston, Massachusetts. She paid her way through college and earned her Bachelor’s degree. Whitney decided to go natural in 2006 when she was a sophomore in college. This was much to her father’s dismay. Additionally, she admits her mother continues to wear wigs because she
“has never felt comfortable in her own natural hair.” Thus, Whitney had limited support, which made her transition to natural hair difficult. She describes her natural hair journey as follows:

I had no idea that [bleaching] my hair was going to create an issue with moisture. And oh my gosh, the breakage was horrific… [My stylist] didn’t tell me it’s because I’m not managing my hair…So, my hair is in my hands [laughter]…I cut all my hair off…I stopped going [to the salon]. I was like, I am going to have to figure this out on my own.

It was during this time in 2006 that Whitney started reading CN. She confesses she loves to read and regularly frequents blogs, so BGLH also became a resource for her during her transition to natural hair. At that time, Whitney, states “I pretty much winged it, and I made a lot of mistakes with heat damage, right? Too much protein, not trimming my ends, like I made a lot of mistakes along the way, so that was my journey. It wasn’t an educated transition…to natural hair.”

Whitney’s struggles to recognize her natural hair pattern and improper maintenance have led her to create her own hair care line, which focuses on hair health. Through her all-natural, vegan hair products, Whitney helps her customers who struggle with hair loss or hair damage. In her first year of business, Whitney has reached an unlikely population of men, who are raving about her shampoo bars. Additionally, she has imbedded a blog within her store website to not only promote her products but also educate her customers on hair health.

Danita, “The Natural Hair Embracer.” Danita is 36 years old, and in 2015, she earned her Bachelor’s degree in Christian Counseling. She is currently seeking a Master’s of Counseling program that will support her roles as a wife and mother of two young boys. Although her identity is closely tied to being a wife and mother, Danita describes herself as “an African American natural woman who has loved the natural hair movement and for me, it’s not a fad. It’s a lifestyle…I love my natural texture. I love my curls. I love everything about natural
hair.” Moreover, during her transition, a relative told her, “You can never be natural because you don’t know how to do hair.” Instead of letting that discourage her, Danita took it as a challenge to grow her hair without a relaxer. However, she also credits her husband with her decision to go natural, as he posed the question, “Why do you put that stuff in your hair?” Danita admits she did not have a good answer for why she was putting harsh chemical in her hair, so within a month she stopped relaxing her hair. Danita’s natural hair journey was full of trials and errors. She also recalls how there were limited resources online in 2010 and “basically returned natural blindsided.” Soon after, Danita found CN, and began following her due to her being “relatable.” She says that CN has taught her how to embrace her natural hair.

**Chloe, “The Woman in the Mirror.”** Chloe is 26-year-old former bank teller in Detroit, Michigan. She attended Michigan State University, but has taken some time off to better manage her diabetes. She plans to return to school to earn her degree, which should take her about two more semesters. In terms of her early experiences with her hair, Chloe recalls, “I hated getting my hair done. One time I threw away all the combs, except the brushes because the brushes didn’t hurt as much.” Attempting to make her hair more manageable, Chloe’s mom began putting relaxers in her hair at a young age. However, she stopped at 12 when she started going to a stylist who pressed (i.e., used high heat to temporarily straighten) her hair every two weeks. She continued going to this stylist until her senior year of high school, which was in 2008. It was during this time Chloe discovered her curls at the nap of her neck, so she cut her hair to uniformly match the curly texture. Moreover, Chloe’s commitment to go natural has not wavered, despite some of her relatives asking, “Why don’t you get your hair done?” and “What are you doing with it?” Chloe usually responds by saying, “It’s doing what it wants.” However,
Chloe has a strong desire to have long hair like her mother, so when she first went natural, she created a vision board, and this is when she discovered BGLH:

I just happened to type in ‘Black girl with long hair.’ I didn’t know it was a blog. I was looking for an image to put on my vision board, and I just found the blog and I just started reading it… so I was able to see other people [with hair that looked like mine]. Additionally, Chloe acknowledges several BGLH blog posts that have helped her be more self-reflective of her position in society and her engagement with others.

Adeola, “The Lifelong Learner and Consultant.” Adeola is a 41-year-old wife and mother of two daughters, ages 8 and 12. She currently resides in Houston, Texas, and works as a program specialist. Born in Nigeria, Adeola moved to the United States to attend college when she was 17 years old. She currently has a Bachelor’s degree and curriculum certifications within her field of practice. Adeola also has a YouTube channel, which she started in 2012, to help Black children and adults who desire to grow healthy natural hair.

Through the process of transitioning her daughters’ hair from January 2011 to January 2012, Adeola reflected on why she was continuing to relax her hair, while telling her daughters it was not healthy. Subsequently, she transitioned to natural hair from November 2011 to November 2012. Her father was happy she was no longer putting harsh chemicals in her hair, but her mother said, “Oh, you won’t look pretty anymore.” Adeola stood firm in her decision and now her mother accepts her natural hair; however, she refuses to go natural herself. Additionally, Adeola indicates her mother “didn’t know anything but she tried.” Adeola states, “I pretty much didn’t take care of my hair because…the nanny would come and do my hair and then the next morning I would go to the salon.” However, Adeola had to do her own hair when she went to boarding school at the age of 13. She recalls how all of her friends were getting
relaxers, so her father permitted her to get one. However, she destroyed her hair because she did not even know how to wash her hair, as she used laundry soap.

A lifelong learner, Adeola understands she is still learning about natural hair. She embraces this learning process by incorporating her daughters and teaching through her YouTube channel to let mothers know “they are not alone.” Teaching people is no modest feat, as her channel has amassed over 80,000 YouTube subscribers and several reposts on CN’s blog.

**Erica, “The Aspiring Blogger.”** Erica is a 33-year-old student financial services specialist at a university in New Jersey. She has a Bachelor’s degree in Actuarial Studies, and she is currently working on her Master’s degree in Business Administration. Unlike the previous interviews, Erica’s family had a positive reaction to her natural hair, which may be attributed to her mother having dreadlocks long before Erica went natural. Thus, her family already had exposure to natural hair. Despite this exposure, Erica still relaxed her hair into her 20s, but like many of the women interviewed, she stopped because her hair was breaking off. As she recalls, “One day I said, ‘Well, let’s see what happens,’ and I stopped getting it pressed out. Then that’s when my natural hair journey started.” To document her journey, Erica started a blog and YouTube channel in June 2014. Her blog is more focused on cosmetic product reviews, as she describes her online space as an “expression” of herself. Currently, Erica has 64 YouTube subscribers. When initiating her blog, Erica admits she was still learning about herself and her hair, so she would search for natural hair information on the Internet. She admits she had to “wing it,” as there were few natural hair care sites in 2009. However, she soon discovered CN. After reading a couple posts, Erica admits she was hooked. Moreover, the success of Walton is something Erica admires, as she hopes to “reach people” in a similar way. In particular, she
hopes to gain more followers by getting more people engaged through posing questions and promoting her blog on her Instagram, much like CN.

Stella, “The Mindful Consumer.” Stella is a 32-year-old Bachelor’s level paralegal in Los Angeles, California, and a single mother of an 18-month-old son. Stella believes she was “well versed” in natural hair care prior to engaging with BGLH, and she admits she “loves looking at Black women with natural hair.” She also indicates how much she enjoys the comment sections because it’s a place to exchange information. In terms of her early experiences with her hair and her journey to natural hair, Stella recounts:

I just thought that I had really Black girl hair….and that what we needed to do was to either perm or relax… I continued to get relaxers from then on and off from then to like my early 20s…I also double processed my hair. I was also honey blonde, so, uh, I just found at a certain point…my hair was falling out.

Like Erica, Stella did not experience negative reactions from her family when she went natural. Additionally, Stella attributes her Black female identity to her grandmother, mother, sisters, and friends, who taught her important life lessons, a strong work ethic, and loyalty. Stella adds, “No matter what society says about Black women, it doesn’t move me or hurt me because, in my life, Black women have loved and supported me the most and that’s what I put back out there in the world.” Stella also states how she is mindful of what information she consumes online, as she believes “you are what you consume.” Therefore, she responds to negative commenters by leaving the site.

Anissa, “The Christian Blogger.” Anissa is a 50-year-old Bahamian-born technology consultant, who helps schools acquire technology funding. She has a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science and a Master’s degree in Education. Although she has advanced degrees in
the field in which she works, Anissa admits, “The stuff I do that I get paid for, I don’t find the most enjoyable.” Consequently, Anissa most strongly identifies with being a Christian blogger. She started her blog in 2000 as an outlet to help her cope with the loss of her brother, but throughout the years, her blog has changed, as she wants her readers to understand that “being a Christian isn’t something that limits you, but it opens you to a whole lot of things, you know? It’s a relationship thing, and I really want people to understand that.” Moreover, Anissa comes from a family of ten, with four boys and four girls. When she reflects on her early experiences with her hair, she recalls her mother having “a lot of hair to do,” so she eventually relaxed her and her sisters’ hair, but their hair broke off. When Anissa moved to the United States in 1978, she stopped relaxing her hair until she was a senior in college. Anissa continued to relax her hair until she got married and had four children. With three girls, she did not relax their hair until she had trouble managing one daughter’s hair, as Anissa recalls, “She has the thickest hair on Earth, and I swear to God I had the worst shoulder aches!” However, she decided, “I’m going to do better than my mother did. I’m going to take them to the salon, and I’m going to make sure their hair does not break off.” Anissa faithfully got her two eldest daughters’ hair relaxed every six weeks, until they moved to California, where she was paying $100 every six weeks for three of them to get relaxers. Due to the high price, she and her daughters eventually stopped getting relaxers, which was around the same time the natural hair movement began gaining momentum. Anissa recalls that this was in 2007, which was also the year she started reading CN, and was drawn to her “unassuming demeanor” and pictures of her natural hair.

**Heather, “The Mediator.”** Heather is a 24-year-old former office manager in North Carolina. Currently, she has an Associate’s degree in Medical Office Administration, but she is contemplating returning to school for Polysomnography, which is the study of sleep. In terms of
her early experiences with her hair, Heather recalls getting her hair pressed from the ages of five to eight and then around 8 years old, her mother started putting relaxers in her hair, which Heather states her mother was “feeling pressure” from her aunts to “do something” with her and her sister’s hair. Like many of the other women, Heather recounts how her hair broke off badly from getting relaxers. For her, this was in seventh grade, which she recalls as a traumatic experience. As a result, Heather began entertaining the idea of going natural, and in 2009, while in high school, she made the decision. Initially, Heather did not have access to the Internet, but she recalls reading the term “natural hair” in a magazine from the local beauty supply store. She recalls her difficulty in not succumbing to family pressures, as she discusses her journey:

I was 15 or 16, and I just was like, ‘I’m tired of getting relaxers.’ I didn’t know what to expect…And, um, eventually, my brother’s girlfriend, she was like my hair is awful. She said that she would buy me a kiddie perm…and even offered to put it in every 7 to 8 months…I felt bad because I had basically gave in, and when she asked me if I wanted to get another one after this, and I told her, ‘No, I’m going natural.’

With this firm decision to go natural, Heather, however, still needed to do some research, so she went to her brother’s house to use his PlayStation 3 to access the Internet. She wasn’t familiar with YouTube, but she remembered the term “natural hair,” so she typed it in the search bar, and she saw a plethora of women with natural hair. Later that year, in 2010, Heather found CN, and within a year, she was regularly commenting. Although Heather states she does not comment as frequently as she has in the past, she is listed first among CN’s “Top Commenters” on Disqus. Moreover, she indicates she engages with CN commenters for the shared experience and also to help speak on behalf of those who are angry and frustrated, as a way to bring perspective.
Amelia, “The Armchair Sociologist.” Amelia is a 50-year-old personal learning and development consultant of English for youth and adults in Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom. She is also a licensed trainer for women’s development. Amelia, like many of the other participants, recalls her early experiences with her hair, as negative. The youngest of seven children, Amelia states, “[My early experiences with my hair], well, it’s not positive, um, as so many Black women can relate. Getting chopped in my head by my sisters, who were assigned to comb my hair.” From the time she was four years old, her older sisters would yell while combing her hair, “Keep still! Your hair is so tough!” From the age of 16, Amelia got “curly perms,” or what American’s call “Jheri Curls.” However, it required a lot of upkeep.

While attending college in 1996, Amelia went to get her hair process, but upon seeing the condition of her scalp, the hairdresser said, “Honey, I can’t do your hair.” She had scabs in her scalp from seborrheic dermatitis, which was caused by the chemicals in her curly perm product. Amelia says she “learned to live with” the condition for “the sake of beauty.” However, since she could no longer get curly perms, Amelia found a natural hair salon in London, called Back to Eden, where they styled her hair in two-strand twists. Much to her dismay, Amelia did not find any sources for natural hair, but she was able to find a book, called Good Hair, at this same salon. It was through this book that Amelia learned the basics of going natural. However, it wasn’t until 2009, when she searched YouTube, that she found natural hair vlogger, Naptural85, and started doing some of the techniques she suggested. Amelia found success and soon more natural hair sites began to appear. BGLH was a site that particularly intrigued Amelia, who is a self-proclaimed “armchair sociologist,” as she relates to many of the topics on this site. Amelia also firmly believes “hair exists in a context; thus, many of her observations are reflective of her sociopolitical view.
Summary of Interview Participant Demographics

Adhering to the selection criterion, all ten participants identify as Black females who wear their hair natural. Their ages range from 24 to 50, with a mean of 35 years of age. The identification of Black, as opposed to African-American, is significant to this study because three of the participants (Adeola, Anissa, and Amelia) were born outside of the United States in their respective countries of Nigeria, the Bahamas, and the United Kingdom. In terms of educational attainment, all participants, with the exception of Chloe, have earned an advanced degree. The occupations of the participants vary from Whitney’s blue-collar work as a gas plant operator to Adeola’s work as a program specialist. Of the ten participants, four (Brianna, Erica, Anissa, and Amelia) work within education fields. Both Chloe and Heather, the youngest two of the participants, are currently unemployed. The years of being natural ranged from six to 21 years, with a mean of 9 years. The youngest age for having gone natural is 16 (Heather) and the oldest is 40 (Anissa). Six out of ten participants only engage with one of the two blogs analyzed. However, Brianna, Whitney, Chloe, and Anissa frequently engage with both CN and BGLH. Lastly, half of the participants have their own blogs. Brianna, Adeola, and Whitney have blogs predominately focusing on natural hair. Also, Whitney created her own all-natural hair product line. Lastly, Brianna focuses on hair, but she incorporates beauty and fashion into her blog, while Anissa’s blog focuses on Christianity.

Table 5-1 provides a summary of the demographic information of each woman interviewed, including age, current residence and country of origin (if applicable), educational attainment, occupation, approximate years being natural, engagement with Curly Nikki (CN) or Black Girl Long Hair (BGLH), and identity as a blogger.
Table 5-1. Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Approx. Years Natural</th>
<th>BGLH or CN</th>
<th>Blog Y/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Central Florida</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4th grade teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BGLH &amp; CN</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Gas Plant Operator</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>BGLH &amp; CN</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danita</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Christian Counselor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>CN</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Detroit, MA</td>
<td>High school; two years college</td>
<td>Unemployed; former bank teller</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>BGLH &amp; CN</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adeola</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Program Specialist</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>CN</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Student Financial Services Specialist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>CN</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Paralegal</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BGLH</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anissa</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>San Fernando Valley, CA (Bahamas)</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Technology Consultant</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>BGLH &amp; CN</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>Unemployed; former office administrator</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>CN</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Buckinghamshire (UK)</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Personal Learning &amp; Development Consultant</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>BGLH</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Analysis Summary and Data Display of Interviews

I discussed the methodology for this study in Chapter Three, which is further framed from the research questions and the theoretical framework of critical race theory informed from a feminist perspective and the conceptual framework of critical public pedagogy, especially as it relates to Black feminist thought. In terms of analyzing the interviews, I utilized a basic interpretive qualitative research approach instead of QMCA, since QMCA is primarily designed to examine message characteristics in mass media (Neuendorf, 2002). By utilizing this method to analyze the interviews, I am able to uncover how the participants make meaning out of their interactions with BNHCBs (Merriam, 2002). However, the overall objective of this study is not just to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to understand how the women who utilize BNHCBs make sense of their lived experiences, it is also to see how they critique and challenge current hegemonic social structures that continue to marginalize Black women. Thus, analyzing their interviews through a CDA approach provides a basis for how I examine the context of the social problem, including the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts that shape the phenomenon. Thus, a CDA approach that is informed by van Dijk (1996, 2001) will help uncover how word choice brings meaning to Black womanhood. For this method, I developed codes and then I transformed these codes into themes to uncover similar phrases, relationships, patterns, commonalities, and disparities when compared among the participants I interviewed.

Based on the methodological approach, the same ten themes were organized into the same four main areas, as indicated in Chapter Four. These emerging themes are outlined in Table 5-2. These themes inform the development of these Black women, as it relates to the womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990). In the following section, I will discuss each of these themes in relation to the research questions.
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<th>Examples</th>
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<td>Non-Black readers can learn but must know their place</td>
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<td>Natural hair movement is for Black women</td>
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<td>The Shame in Othering Ourselves</td>
<td>Natural hair is not presentable (i.e., curlism)</td>
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<td>Arbitrary rules for who is considered “natural”</td>
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<td>Bullying people into going natural</td>
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<td>Deconstructing the Angry Black Woman Trope</td>
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<td>Nasty comments on blog posts</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>BGLH playing into angry Black woman trope</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Analysis of Popular Culture and Media</td>
<td>Lack of Self-ethnic Reflectors</td>
<td>Gravitating to sites with Black representation</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Narrow representation of Black women &amp; hair texture</td>
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<td>Invisibility of Black women in the media</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Analyzing the Commodification of Natural Hair</td>
<td>Skepticism of bloggers who reach guru status</td>
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<td>“The Black Dollar” in hair care industry</td>
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<td>Biracial/looser curls commodity in natural hair market</td>
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<td>Dialogic Exchange of Information</td>
<td>Initiating &amp; Maintaining</td>
<td>Blogger not being responsive to their readers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conversations</td>
<td>People responding like are blogger’s friend</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community helps validate and confirm beliefs</td>
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<td>Reimagining the Expert</td>
<td>Blogger not considered expert; readers as teachers</td>
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<td>Using social media as teaching tool/sharing community</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Doing what works for you; not following every trend</td>
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<td>Journalistic Sociopolitical</td>
<td>Sense of Agency</td>
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<td>Intervention</td>
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<td>Choice of blogger to use platform or not 1:1 dialogues and consults</td>
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<td>Normalization of Natural Hair</td>
<td>White people missing the message</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political stereotype associated with natural hair</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Natural hair becoming a trend</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Critically reflecting on</td>
<td>Narrow focus of BGLH on plight of Black women</td>
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<td>Media Messages</td>
<td>Bloggers sensationalizing messages to drive traffic</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Visiting blog less due to new content/direction</td>
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</table>
Politics of Representation

“As African-Americans, I think that we tend to embrace trends more than we try to embrace ourselves.”
-Danita, Study Participant

The data gathered from the semi-structured, in-depth interviews speak to these Black women’s lived experiences, especially as it relates to constructing their identities. Based on their observations, the following three representative factors of the politics of representation emerged: (a) the sanctity of Black affinity spaces; (b) the manifestation of internalized oppression in Black women “othering” one another; and (c) playing into the angry Black woman trope.

The Sanctity of Black Affinity Spaces

Stella finds a lot of comradery on BGLH, as she reveals, “It’s like, did all the cool girls become natural?” Thus, she believes the majority of the women on BGLH are “very supportive” and freely “share tips and answer questions easily.” Likewise, Anissa states, “I’m happy that people are, um, embracing what God made them…Their natural hair…I think that’s a beautiful thing that lends itself to unity.” Additionally, Erica acknowledges CN was a source of encouragement for her to not give up when she was struggling with managing her natural hair. These women’s experiences speak to the support they receive from being a member of the ingroup. However, participants identify two outgroups: non-black women and Black men.

The community developed within BNHCBs is sustained by the shared values, characteristics, and experiences of Black women. Such experiences, particularly surrounding Black women’s hair in its natural state, are negative markers of difference, which often lead many Black women to ascribe to a White standard of beauty (Rooks, 1996; Thompson, 2009). As a result of this dichotomy, White and non-Black women are identified as the outgroup within BNHCBs. Stella speaks to this, as she states, “I don’t believe White women and non-Black
women should be centered in the natural hair community.” Similarly, Amelia states, “I don’t want to see it hijacked because it is another whole category of mixed race hair. That 3c texture of mixed hair is an entity within of itself. It could have a whole YouTube section all to itself.” Amelia’s specifically identifies the outgroup as a hair type, 3c, which, according to Naturally Curly (“Type 3 – Curly Hair,” n. d.), “Resemble[s] tight corkscrews and are approximately the circumference of a pencil or straw” (para. 4). Amelia also uses the word “hijacked,” which suggests biracial women are stealing the natural hair movement, to which Heather adamantly proclaims, “The natural hair movement [is] for Black women.” Heather, however, believes biracial women can learn tips about Black culture and “why they are learning about it in the first place.” This perspective speaks not only to Black women’s lived experience with their hair, but also to the need for others to value their experience. Heather further elaborates this point, as she states, “We are too busy trying to include everyone else when they exclude us and then we get mad when it kinda hits us in the face.” Heather’s comments allude to the silencing and erasure that can occur when including an outgroup under the premise that they have the same experiences of the marginalized group, as oftentimes the intersecting oppressions of race and gender are ignored in Black women (Collins, 2000; DiAngelo, 2011). Heather takes this issue even more personally because she has two Black nieces, who she says will be “suffering the most” and getting relaxers due to their biracial cousins being told by family members that they have “good hair.” Heather’s concern speaks to the perception that Black hair is bad and difficult to manage (hooks, 1989b; Banks, 2000). Moreover, Whitney acknowledges White women with biracial or adopted Black children frequent blogs like CN and BGLH to learn how to manage their daughter’s hair, since knowledge on how to care for Black hair is not well-known. Thus, Whitney believes that BLGH is “missing the mark” by excluding White women from an
education on proper hair grooming practices, which can help prevent chemical relaxers and high-heat hair straightening. However, she also believes these unfair exclusions apply to Black men.

Known as “wavering” (i.e., people who compress their hair to get waves), Whitney reveals there is a waver group of 50,000 members on Facebook. After she joined the group, she quickly learned there are Black men who deep condition and protect their hair. Consequently, Whitney was confronted with her personal biases, as she admits, “I base their knowledge on their sex…That is a form of discrimination. That was my problem, but they’re serious…but we, not we, I didn’t take them serious!” According to Whitney, these men retrieve information from BNHCBs and share it with their own community, but they don’t comment because “they’re not welcome.” However, these men happily include women because there are women who also wave. The inclusivity of the waver community seems to be in stark opposition to the natural hair care community, which raises questions as to the defined values and characteristics of naturals.

The Shame in Othering Ourselves

Feelings of otherness are often the result of actions performed by the dominant culture to identify the marginalized group for their differences (Hall, 2000). Consequently, Black women often recount experiences of feeling like they are an animal at the “petting zoo” (Rae, 2015, p. 81; Humphrey & Sheppard, 2011). Chloe herself admits she experiences this when White people ask to touch her hair. She typically does not mind, but she lets them know other Black people do. Thus, otherness not only increases anxiety surrounding hypervisibility, but it also perpetuates stereotypes. However, these stereotypes also occur within groups.

Specifically, Black women have internalized negative stereotypes as a consequence of the pervasive Eurocentric beauty standards within our society, which they often projected onto other Black women. As reported by some of the participants, such feelings manifest due to negative
childhood experiences with hair grooming practices, which are perpetuated by (a) their parents’ inability to properly manage and educate them about their hair and (b) the need to look presentable, which leads to (c) the phenomenon of curlism (i.e., preferential treatment of Black women with a looser curl pattern) and (d) arbitrary rules for Blackness and natural hair.

**Parents’ lack of hair education.** According to many of the participants, issues with hair-shaming seem to have manifested from their parents’ inability to properly teach them how to manage their hair. For instance, Chloe recalls begging her mother to shave her head, so she could pass for a boy and avoid the pain. This experience illustrates the pain associated with little Black girls getting their hair “done,” which often produces accusations that girls who cannot tolerate the harsh combing are “tender-headed” (Rae, 2015, p. 69). Likewise, Amelia recalls getting “chopped” in the head by her older sister who yelled, “Keep still your hair is so tough!” Such frustrations are a result of using inappropriate tools, such as fine-tooth combs, which would painfully rip out Black girls’ hair, since access to proper products and hair care tools were limited to those used for straight hair. Yet, one work-around was the Black hair salon.

Adeola recalls her mother did not know how to do hair, so she would take her to the hair salon every Saturday. However, the stylist neglected to teach her proper hair care, so when she went to boarding school she used laundry soap to wash her hair. Due to the hair damage she acquired, Adeola vowed she would teach her children proper hair care. Yet, some participants link poor hair grooming practices and a lack of education to a marked difference between their hair and their mother’s hair textures, as Stella states her mother has a “completely different hair type” than her, so her mother began putting relaxers in her hair as early as eight years old. As a result, Stella remembers thinking, “I had really Black girl hair…and that what we needed to do was to either perm or relax [my hair].” Stella, however, does not blame her mother for relaxing
her hair, stating, “That’s what [was] to be expected.” This distinction between a mother and child’s hair speaks to the invisibility of kinky, coily hair, since it is not embraced by society, the majority of people are not taught how to care for it. This lack of knowledge is pervasive within the Black community, and oftentimes young children are subjected to harsh, chemical relaxers, which have historically been the standard (and acceptable method) for managing coarse hair. Yet, such harsh chemicals, coupled with poor hair care practices, often result in hair damage. For instance, Brianna recalls the chemicals frequently burning her scalp and many of the women admit their hair broke off. Whitney attributes her breakage to her hair stylist’s intentional disregard to properly teach her how to care for her color treated and chemically-relaxed hair because she didn’t want her “taking any business from her pocket…It was all built on relationships and trust.” Such blind trust formed a co-dependency. However, since the popularity of the natural hair movement, and newly informed Black women, Black hair salons have had to adapt to the changing demands of their consumers, who no longer want to put caustic and corrosive agents or the estrogen and endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) in their hair (Wise, Palmer, Reich, Cozier, & Rosenberg, 2012). Such salon adaptations initially were in the form of pressing (i.e., use hot comb or flat iron to straighten) their clients’ hair, as Chloe recalls going to the salon every two weeks, and her hair stylist telling her she was going to “train” her hair to be straight by pressing it. However, over time, Chloe’s hair became heat damaged (i.e., brittle and permanently straightened). Despite overwhelming representation of women’s negative experiences conforming to a culture of straight hair, Erica recalls her mother teaching her how to care for her hair because she wanted her to “look presentable” to others.

**The need to look presentable.** Adeola admits she is the only one of her friends who is natural, as “most of them are married to guys or men that like prestigious women, doctors and
lawyers.” By using the word “prestigious,” Adeola suggests women, like her, who wear their hair natural are insignificant and common under the White patriarchal gaze (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013; hooks, 2015). This need to look presentable was something Anissa struggled with early on in her natural hair journey, as she confesses that if she feels she looks good she won’t think, “Oh, what’s my boss going to say about my hair?” This anxiety of one’s natural hair being seen as a “political statement or unkempt” is an issue Heather has also experienced.

Likewise, Brianna believes hair-shaming creates fear in Black women, so they decide to relax their hair to avoid public ridicule. Brianna speaks from personal experience, as she states:

[I was] straining to put myself in this box and to meet these expectations because there were those fears of, you know, you can’t keep a man if you have natural hair. You can’t keep a job if you have natural hair, so on and so forth, and I feel free of all that…I do feel more positive and empowered, um, natural.

The sense of agency Brianna has experienced since going natural has created a positive self-identity and a sense of empowerment to disregard the societal “box” that constricts counterhegemonic displays of beauty. Likewise, Danita believes hair-shaming causes Black women to hide and conform to societal pressures for upward mobility. However, she also sees women with natural hair trying to conform by wearing their hair in a bun when they have business meetings, but then wearing their hair free when they are walking around the office.

Thus, hair connotes social status, and in order to ensure upward mobility, Black women alter their hair to conform. However, Danita suggests conformity is safe, but it leads to Black women being misunderstood, as she states, “I like to ruffle feathers because it causes people to be brutally honest with what they are hiding from.” Thus, Danita implies nonconformity can be a
tool used to uncover people’s biases. Similarly, Stella noticed a shift in her male interactions since she’s been natural, as she states:

The attention does become less, but the quality is better, you know? Like instead of being yelled at across the street, ‘Hey, Redbone with the blonde hair,’ it was more ‘let me come up to you and talk to you’…so I think the attention was less but more respectful.

The change in the type of male attention Stella receives suggests natural hair is undesirable, but men who desire women with natural hair may be evidence of a shift in the hostility of Black men toward Black women (Collins, 2000). Yet, more broadly Stella’s experience illustrates hope for unity within the Black community, which is void of ingroup hostility, such as curlism.

**The phenomenon of curlism.** Based on the interviews, several women indicate they have experienced *curlism*. For example, Brianna, recollects, “I’ve cried tears. My mom calling me and telling me I need to do something with my hair when I was transitioning [from relaxed to natural hair].” The comment that Brianna needed to “do something” to her hair suggests her mother believes natural hair is unkempt, which is a stereotype from the controlling image of the pickaninny (Pilgrim, 2012d). Thus, when Black women decide not to conform to the dominant ideology of straight hair, it makes them *hypervisible* in a society that only embraces conformity. This ideology has been adopted by Black people, as a Black daughter with neatly plaited or bone-straight hair reflected an attentive mother, while ill-groomed hair reflected negligence.

Moreover, Stella recalls an experience she had while she was at Walmart in the ethnic hair care aisle. A Black mother approached her with her 5-year-old daughter and asked her what product she would recommend to make her daughter’s hair “curly.” Stella states the women went on to say, “I want something that’s going to make it silkier than yours.” Stella responded, “The point is it’s not going to happen, and what you’re describing is a texturizer [product that
chemically loosens curls].” Based on experiences like these, Stella is a strong proponent of Black women learning to accept their natural hair texture, as she sees the harm when they try to “achieve something that’s not going to happen, wanting straight, flowing hair.” Similarly, Heather recalls a relative telling her, “If I go natural and my hair looks like yours, I’m running back to the salon.” She admits she wanted to “go off,” but she realizes “how brainwashed Black people are when it comes to our hair.” Likewise, Amelia believes Black women with coarse hair need the most support. Consequently, Heather admits she still has moments where she struggles with embracing her hair texture. Danita admits she shared this struggle, but she credits CN with helping her learn to “be bold” in embracing her hair. Hence, Danita named her hair “Sassy” and likens it to a billboard sign, which reads, “Here I am. Take it or leave it.” This brazenness suggests full acceptance of one’s natural hair, sans arbitrary rules.

**Arbitrary rules for Blackness and natural hair.** Whitney believes such rules developed due to the infancy of the natural hair movement, which developed within the last 20 years. Thus, Chloe likens blogs back in 2008 to “bullying” women into becoming natural. This speaks to the victimization experienced by women with chemically relaxed hair, at the hands of those who wear their hair natural. Yet, both groups remain marginalized. Nonetheless, Heather says “Natural people are actually saying facts,” but they are being called “Natural Hair Nazis.” Likewise, Adeola notices certain blogs have a “Nazi-kind-of-way of doing things that they say it should be done this way or that way.” Depicting certain blogs as using “Nazi-like” tactics to influence their readers suggests a sense of limited autonomy to those who consume the content. However, Adeola states, “I’ll read what they have to say and then I draw my own line in the sand.” Likewise, Heather believes the choice to go natural must be a decision the women are comfortable making, as she states, “Don’t be uncomfortable for the sake of other’s. ‘Cause
you’re conforming to someone else’s ideal that still aren’t your own.” Thus, this discomfort stems from equating natural hair to a trend, which removes Black hair from its negative history, so the hegemony is not recognized until one decides to no longer conform.

Additionally, Whitney discusses the arbitrary markers Black people create when “justify[ing] Blackness according to color.” Chloe sees this issue among light skin Black people, who are told they are not “Black enough.” Both of these points illustrate the illusion of race and its social construction under the premise of dark skin and kinky hair as a marker of Blackness (Hall, 2009). Consequently, Stella has noticed others questioning her race since going natural, as she states, “Never in my life, when my hair was straight, I was never told that I had good hair…but when our hair is out…People always [want to know] ‘What are you?’” Likewise, Heather is often asked if she is mixed with Japanese, a question she was never asked when she had relaxed hair. She grips, “People can’t see the beauty in just being Black.” Heather’s comment speaks to the contemporary portrays of Black women as unattractive and unfeminine. A stereotype perpetuated by the angry Black woman trope.

**Deconstructing the Angry Black Woman Trope**

Whitney bemoans, “For Black women in general, we’re so used to the negativity. Whether it’s from, like, society, or some kinda subconscious influence, or whatever. In a negative environment, we thrive and that’s stupid!” As such, Amelia offers this perspective:

We’re also just so disjointed as Black people, which is why unity is strength, and we know that and the world knows that. It’s how we’ve been divided and conquered for years. And it seems to be the character, the over-arching character of Black people…Sort of that tribal division where there isn’t that support.
Here, Amelia argues that the lack of unity among Black people is a consequence of the racial division established during slavery, which led to binary racialized discourse among groups. Such discourse of categorical differences further contrived controlling images, such as the angry Black woman, which subjected Black women to learn an identity perpetuated by an imperialist, White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Amelia believes the insidious nature of slavery has led to “so much insecurity and damaged the self-esteem of Black women” to the point that they “tear down each other.” Such negativity, Heather adds, is evidenced on BGLH, as she states she does not frequent the site as much because the negativity has made her realize “how far Black people have come and how far we still have to go because we are always arguing with ourselves.” Whitney, however, acknowledges that these posts are “the most popular because there is a lot of negativity and people feel the same, but they don’t say it out loud.” Whitney further expresses concern that the comments are not being properly moderated, as she states, “The editors that are on there don’t correct people. They let it go because all they’re concerned with is sponsorship for the advertisements, the little side banners, and views. The more views the more you can charge.” Although sites like BGLH are safe spaces for Black women to freely talk about racism and discrimination, Adeola and Chloe argue that not “everyone’s out to get” Black women, as Chloe admits, “Sometimes to me on BGLH, especially lately, she’s been coming off a bit angry…I don’t want us to be playing into the angry Black woman stereotype.” Additionally, Brianna criticizes BGLH as being “a little too narrow.” She further elaborates by stating:

I understand my role as a Black woman…I have been on the receiving on some of those microaggressions, but I don’t think that every single thing is a big issue and we should blow it up on a blog post. And I think that’s kinda what White people are seeing…So, I think that some people might get that impression when they go to those blogs.
Brianna’s concern speaks to the issue of dominant culture viewing spaces like BGLH through an uncritical eye, which continues to perpetuate the myth of Black womanhood.

Conversely, Danita indicates that Walton displays a much more well-rounded example of Black womanhood on CN, as she “allows people to express what they feel and how they feel, but she doesn’t allow it to get ugly.” However, Adeola states that having a YouTube channel has been difficult because “people feel like…because they are behind that screen they can say whatever.” She admits her negative experiences have forced her to grow a “tougher shell,” which has resulted in her creating strict commenting guidelines for her channel. Likewise, readers take agency over moderating their own comments. Stella, for example, indicates she tends to “look for the positive” because “if you consume a bunch of negativity than that’s what you’re about.” Additionally, Heather indicates she tries to “focus on those who actually want to see Black people thrive [and] not be negative.” Likewise, Anissa is adamant she will “never be that person” that is nasty to other women. Thus, these women have a strong desire to portray Black women positively, a depiction which is vastly underrepresented in the media.

Critical Analysis of Popular Culture and Media

*Black culture doesn’t feel like ours anymore. It feels like it’s everybody’s. Everybody can do it.*

- Heather, Study Participant

Popular culture impacts Black women’s identity through media representation, as Hall (2000) contests, “[H]ow we ‘see’ ourselves and our social relations matters, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices” (p. 272). Thus, Black women’s engagement with the media plays into their attitudes about themselves in relation to others. Consequently, issues emerged from the interviews that inform the construct of critical analysis of popular culture and
media, as further shaped by the themes of (a) the importance of self-ethnic reflectors and (b) the politics of natural hair care consumerism.

**Self-ethnic Reflectors**

In a world that presents a very narrow scope of Black womanhood (Johnson, 2013), it’s imperative for Black women to have a space that portrays a more multifaceted view of their identities. As a result, this section will discuss the emerging themes of the participants’ perceptions of: (a) positive depictions of Black women; (b) negative images of Black women; and (c) media’s perpetuation of a narrow view of Black womanhood.

**Positive depictions of Black women.** Spaces that represent a broad perspective of Black women are often rare, which is why BNHCBs are so valued. Stella admits, “I just love looking at Black women with natural hair,” as she believes such images are a “positive representation” of Black women. Likewise, Whitney realizes Black women “want to see themselves reflected in the examples [media] gives.” Thus, she believes posts of women who post pictures of their natural hair get the most engagement, and spaces like BNHCBs are often the only sites where Black women with kinky, coily hair can see their hair texture represented.

Additionally, Danita speaks specifically to Walton’s influence, as she states, “[Walton] is on Dr. Oz, she’s on CBS, and she’s putting us on a positive light…when other people are just blogging and they’re showing up to natural hair conventions.” Moreover, Danita recalls Walton’s post about former *Today Show* news anchor, Tamron Hall, and the pressures she faces in wearing her hair straight on television. Thus, Danita perceives Walton as a role model, whose mainstream media presence is contributing to a positive perception of Black women. Erica shares a similar perspective, as she views Walton as “truthful” and mindful of what she says and “not just being politically correct or just trying to bash your head on, you know, you need to do
this.” Thus, Erica acknowledges Walton is strategic in utilizing online and media spaces to educate her intended audience and eradicate negative controlling images of Black women.

**Negative images of Black women.** Erica states she no longer watches shows that perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black women as an example to other Black women to “set themselves apart,” as she proclaims, “We are going to keep talking until it’s more of a forefront and people are going to recognize that not all black people are like that…we’re well-rounded and we’re intelligent, and just not what you see on TV.” Erica’s sentiments suggest the media depicts Black women through a narrow lens that diminishes them to being negative and uneducated. Amelia agrees with this perspective, as she states, “I think as a Black woman, that I’m invisible.” Additionally, Amelia further illustrates how the invisibility of Black women in the media impacts her interactions with her White friends, as she states:

> We are not out touching our White friend’s hair because we know about it, you know? I gave my White friends growing up advice about their hair…but they couldn’t do the same for me because I’m seen differently. I’m invisible.

Amelia’s experience speaks to the ubiquity of straight hair, and subsequent devaluing of coily and kinky hair. Despite the apparent invisibility of diverse representations of Black women, Brianna, however, does see progress in media representations of Black women, as she states:

> I definitely think there is more representation, absolutely. They’re trying to include us on more TV shows and less in those stereotypical roles. I think that Black women are being portrayed more strongly than they were in the past…I think more people are not afraid to show bold in your face Blackness…I think White people know we are already trying to say something. I mean, you know, we are already out here. Let’s go ahead and do this to show, this image…I feel like we’ve ripped the Band-Aid off.
Thus, Brianna recognizes current shows that help broaden the portrayals of Black women on television, while also uncovering hard truths about the Black experience.

**Media’s perpetuation of a narrow view of Black women.** Although Heather recognizes the variation in Black women’s natural hair textures, she takes issue with society embracing biracial women as the standard of beauty for Black girls and women, as she asserts:

> Who do you see on relaxer boxes? You see little black girls. I don’t see a biracial girl on the box, but you have the biracial girl on the texturizer telling our little Black girls that if you relax your hair, your hair will look like this little biracial girl.

This inherent desire to chemically relax Black hair is strongly connected to advertisers and their perceptions of Black women’s values and desires (Sandlin & Maudlin, 2012). Whitney insists this issue is perpetuated by advertisements for natural hair care products, as she contends:

> It's always the…racially ambiguous girl, the curly hair, and the chocolate girl with the short kinky hair…Chocolate girls have long, fine straight hair too. They exist…Why aren’t they shown? There’s a lot of light skin girls, lighter skin girls than me, who have coarse hair. But they’re not at the forefront, even in this Black-dominated hair market…I think it’s subconscious from the images we saw on TV…what it is to be Black and how that’s stereotyped and brought right in here to the natural hair community.

Thus, Whitney suggests the natural hair community, which is supposed to be the counternarrative to the media, actually aligns itself with the media, and thereby perpetuates narrow views of Black women, who can only be considered beautiful if they closely align with Whiteness (Pilgrim, 2012a). Likewise, Heather contends, “I see on biracial channels they have Black women commenting…Black women with curl envy…They would rather see [natural hair] promoted on a biracial girl than themselves but don’t realize they would rather see it on a biracial
Additionally, Adeola speaks to this issue, as she asserts, “Blogs that have women with the looser texture of hair do get more views…more brand deals and get more stuff.” These observations illustrate how what society deems as “good hair” is rewarded. However, this debate has become a point of contention among those within the natural hair community, as they contend biracial women have “hijacked” the natural hair movement (“Have We Allowed Biracial Women,” 2016). For instance, Black natural hair care blogger, Lisa a la Mode (Jean-Francois, 2017), who describes herself as “an influencer with tight type 4 curls” (para. 2) states:

I know for a fact that girls who look like me have far less opportunity for growth in the online natural hair game. There are probably 4-5 girls with 4b-4c hair who routinely collaborate with major brands, meanwhile, there are hundreds of girls with looser curls who routinely have access to those opportunities. (Jean-Francois, 2017, para. 2).

As a result, Amelia “actively” seeks YouTube videos by Black women with 4B/4C hair and subscribes to their channels to show support. Furthermore, she gives the following illustration of the power of suggestion by the media:

I’m watching TV and an advert will come on for shampoo and it will be a Black woman with 4B/4C hair, you know? Switching it in slow motion. She’s natural, you know? All of the glam shots, you know? The product comes up and women across the world are watching it and thinking, ‘Wow, she’s beautiful! Where can I get that shampoo, and it’s so influential that women are going out [to buy it].

Based on current beauty trends, Amelia’s dream commercial seems more like a spoof than reality, as natural hair is considered the antithesis of desirable hair. Hence, Amelia argues that hair with looser curls is “high commodity hair,” which continues to ignore Black women, and, as Heather argues, leads to biracial girls representing Black women and being considered “more
beautiful…They are changing the face of the natural hair movement. It’s been happening. It’s always happening.” Heather’s argument alludes to the controversial advertisement Shea Moisture, a Black-owned hair care company with a primarily Black female customer base, released on April 24, 2017. The new commercial message, “Break free from hair hate” (Shea Moisture, 2017), featured three White women and a light skin, racially ambiguous woman of color, which is not representative of the brand’s tightly-coiled and kinky hair demographic. The ad drew immediate backlash as a poorly executed attempt to expand their customer base to White women. However, most BNHCBs stayed silent, as Shea Moisture is a major sponsor of many bloggers, but not CN. As such, Walton issued the following statement on her blog:

The shit is disrespectful and Rich [owner of Shea Moisture] knows better. I don’t think you have to apologize for trying to sell hair products to white people. However, I don’t understand why inclusive campaigns aimed at white women necessarily exclude dark skinned Black women. #IDoUnderstandWhy #AndIDontLikeIt. (Orie, 2017)

Walton alludes to the politics associated with expanding Shea Moisture’s market base to White women, as inclusion often involves recentering Whiteness (DiAngelo, 2011).

Analyzing the Commodityfication of Natural Hair

According to Mintal (“Natural hair movement drives sales,” 2016), the natural hair care market is increasing the sales of Black hair care products by 26.8 percent, with an estimated $2.7 billion spent by Black consumers. With such staggering numbers, it is no surprise that issues from the interviews emerged surrounding (a) the influence of the “Black dollar;” (b) companies promoting product junkies; and (c) the implications surrounding bloggers reaching guru status.

The Black dollar. Stella agues, “Kinky-haired women actually spend more money on their hair than White women…there is no reason financially to switch your market, unless
there’s some type of prestige that comes along with, you know, marketing your products a certain way.” By Stella choosing the word “prestige” in the context of Black hair care product rebranding suggests that companies, such as Shea Moisture, may be attempting to crossover to further legitimize their brand by gaining the White consumer. However, Amelia suggests Black people need to use their economic power, which she dubs “The Black Dollar,” as she argues, “We have not taken ownership in the hair industry. We spend so much…so the fact that we don’t dominate that industry is a crying shame because the opportunity is there.” Consequently, since natural hair is a profitable business, many popular bloggers have become natural hair care marketing influencers, which means they get paid to endorse hair products to the target group of Black women with natural hair.

Promoting product junkies. Since big companies are now endorsing influential bloggers, Whitney blames these brands for paying influencers to push their products. Consequently, Anissa admits she fell for this trap early in her natural hair journey, as she states, “I used to buy all the next new products until I realized that they are all the same and all they’re doing is getting my money.” The issue Anissa speaks to is coined “product junkie” of “PJ,” which Walton (2012) describes as “someone who compulsively purchases any and all hair care products in sight and is forever on a mission to find the next best thing” (para. 3). This quest for the “Holy Grail” of hair products, Whitney argues, is a result of “big blogs” promoting a certain aesthetic that makes readers want to emulate the “popular girl” and buy the same products she is using. Moreover, the product junkism, Whitney argues, is further perpetuated by natural hair shows, as she contends, “It’s all commercialized. There’s a lot of infighting and they’re not focused on hair health…They don’t care if the product doesn’t work for you…They care about
you getting the product and that’s it. They want it in your hands.” Moreover, Whitney offers these insights about an upcoming natural hair show by Shea Moisture:

In order to participate in this show as a vendor, they want you to commit 200 samples for the next five cities. Wait, that’s 1,000 samples they want! They want you to pay them $1,000 to participate in this show, and you have to travel with them to each city, right? But you don’t get to speak... In order for you to speak to the guests or the audience, or have like a 10-minute presentation spot, you have to pay $10,000!

As a result of money pouring into these companies and hair shows, Whitney indicates that newly turned naturals, and long-time naturals who do not know how to take care of their hair buy countless natural hair products in their search for a miracle. However, Whitney contends that the main problem is these women have not learned their hair texture, and are left disappointed when a product does not make their hair look as advertised.

**Reaching guru status.** Danita cautions taking advice from many of the popular natural hair care bloggers, as she states, “If you look at the natural hair community, we follow trends. So, it’s like, ok, if you’re popular, why are you popular?” Likewise, Amelia believes “people seek something to worship,” as some of these bloggers have reached “guru status.” As a result, she has unsubscribed from natural hair “gurus.” She further contends:

They get to emperor level where absolute power rules, and so if they just sit there and say, ‘Well, I don’t know what to give them today. Why don’t I just tell them to pour margarine on their [hair] ends…and people will just think, ‘Oh, my god!’ But, if you and I said it people would have the filter of common sense, but because their celebrity demigods have said it, then it must be wonderful.
Likewise, Whitney argues, “There’s a conflict that people ignore because they like her. They buy the products because they like her. They buy it for the relationship they have with her in their minds because she’s on a video.” Yet, Whitney acknowledges she mistrusts these influencers “because their opinions are paid and bought for,” since they comply with their contracts, even though they are not personally using the product they are endorsing.

Nevertheless, as the founder of an upcoming all-natural hair care brand, Whitney often finds herself in a position to have to work with influences to increase visibility for her products. One effective way to do this is to have an influencer conduct a product review. Accordingly, Whitney contacted one of the contributors of BGLH to conduct a product review. However, her contract stipulated a $500 charge for a 60-second video to give a positive review of her product, which would be posted on all the influencer’s social media accounts. Despite a possibility of her product reaching upwards of 40,000 people, Whitney rejected the offer, asking, “Well, you haven’t actually tried it, so how you know you gonna like it?”

Moreover, the trend of companies paying influential bloggers is something that Adeola, who has amassed over 80,000 YouTube subscribers, is all too familiar with, as she discloses she gets weekly requests from hair care companies wanting her to review their products. She admits she does do some product reviews, but she often declines, as she states, “What the person wants me to do is not in line with...what I stand for.” Despite her substantial following, Adeola seems to hold firm to her principles. However, Whitney worries smaller bloggers will eventually “forget who they are” when they get a larger base of sponsorship. Amelia, however, tries to reconcile this, as she states:

How can they avoid that, in fairness, you know? Arguing in their defense… what would they say? ‘Well, when I had to shift as I became more successful I just couldn’t be the way I was before.’ I don’t know that I have any answer necessarily for it. I just think it’s
sad, really, that that is the case…Yeah, power and money corrupt…it takes a strong person grounded…to keep that sense of humility and not, um, be that way.

Amelia’s contemplation of bloggers succumbing to the power of money and abandoning the very core group that were their main supporters seems to be an all too common issue in the natural hair care community. However, Whitney, believes these bloggers, like Walton, have a false sense of celebrity status, as she quips, “I think [Walton] got big in her own mind, but in the real world nobody knows who she is. People are Instagram famous. People are YouTube famous.” Anissa, however, does recognize how quickly Walton became a “celebrity,” as she states, “She’s influential and she never expected that.” Thus, the celebrity status Walton has attained is what inspires aspiring blogger, Erica, who tries to emulate Walton’s formula. Similarly, Adeola researches strategies to increase readership and maintain an open dialogue.

**Dialogic Exchange of Information**

*If you’re continuously on the path and be consistent, your hair can become this, basically, walking/talking/breathing billboard. I never understood that until I totally became a person who embraced their hair. The good and the bad.*

- Danita, Study Participant

Undoubtedly, the World Wide Web is the juggernaut of vast amounts of information, and with the advent of Web 2.0, social media has made the information a reciprocal exchange. No longer is the expert limited to the author of the web content. Consequently, themes from the interviews emerged related to (a) initiating and maintaining conversations online and (b) redefining what it means to be a natural hair care expert.

**Initiating & Maintaining Conversations**

Thomas and Brown (2011) argue that the success of a blog is due in part to its readers’ comments, as such a form of participation can create a dynamic and meaningful learning
experience. Accordingly, the participants lived experiences provide reasons for their (a) choice to engage and (b) tactics used to maintain a more communal connection.

**Reasons for choosing to engage.** Not all the readers engage in the online learning communities to gain new knowledge about hair care practices. Amelia states that engaging in these online learning communities has given her “a window into other people’s thoughts,” since she is more interested in “the commentary than the actual posts.” Likewise, Stella indicates she typically comments on posts for “fun and to stay aware of what Black people and Black women are discussing.” On the other hand, Anissa believes CN has helped clarify and validate thoughts. This perspective speaks to how Thomas and Brown (2011) envision blogs as a space to “test and refine ideas” within a community (p. 64). However, the authors also recognize the communal learning space lends itself to socially constructing learning within “fluid relationships that are the result of shared interests and opportunity” (p. 50). Accordingly, Brianna states she will unfollow a blogger who has at least three consecutive posts that don’t resonate with her. Thus, Brianna values shared interests with the blog content. Likewise, Erica reports:

> If it touches you, or it’s something that affects you, I kinda feel compelled to share a little something and saying, ‘Thank you for sharing this. I kinda went through something like this, you know? It gave me the idea to do this or go about it this way’…sometimes some hair tips I didn’t know about and something I tried and it works and I’ll, you know, leave a comment and say, ‘Thank you. This worked when I tried it with my hair.’

Erica’s rationale for responding speaks to the value of experiences as relevant contributions to the larger group. However, spaces like BNHCBs also support online learning communities that can form connections between what is familiar and new (Pettenati & Cigognini, 2007). Accordingly, Heather likes to “offer alternatives” to hair care techniques. Additionally, when
she comments on more political posts, she states “I’m confident in what I’m saying, even if you don’t like it or accept it…I have historical facts, you know, to back what I’m saying.” Likewise, Chloe indicates she tends to comment on posts where she doesn’t fully agree with the author’s stance. However, she admits she has to choose whether or not to respond to a dissenting commenter because she doesn’t want to feel targeted. She admits she responds back if she can understand the other person’s perspective, stating, “Okay, I see where you’re coming from. I still feel that way. I don’t agree, but I hear you. We just not on the same page.” Although Chloe and Heather’s dialogues predominately center around challenging certain ideologies of their fellow BGLH readers, Amelia admits she has limited her comments on BGLH, as she states:

I’ve come to the conclusion that people are going to believe what they want to believe. There are those who want to keep an open mind and explore it. There are those that are like, ‘Can’t we all just get along?’ You know, life isn’t really like that, you know? It’s too ugly or too inconvenient for the truth to come up.

This “inconvenient truth” Amelia refers to centers around topics, such as racism and the invisibility of Black women. Such topics can elicit defensiveness in readers, and as Danita indicates, the potential for negative reactions often makes her choose her words carefully because she realizes that “somebody may not like [her] comment.” However, she admits there are times when she has an “I don’t care attitude” and she feels compelled to respond to certain posts. Likewise, Anissa states, “Honestly, anything I’ve written online I would say to you in person. That’s me. So even if I don’t agree with what you’re saying, there is a way to say it.” Thus, Anissa admits she refrains from inciting hostility online by self-monitoring, as she does not want to cause a negative disruption within the community.
**Maintaining communal connections.** Despite shared experiences with fellow readers, Heather states she does not make friends online. However, she does recall some CN readers recently responding to her, stating, “I was wondering where you [were].” This response suggests Heather is a main contributing commenter on CN’s online learning community. Like Heather, Danita denies building relationships with people online, as she believes the “Internet is a hiding place for people to either become self-righteous or bullies.” Likewise, Anissa believes people have an “online persona.” Yet, Anissa lovingly calls Walton her “daughter,” and confesses if she saw her she would hug her. She admits that it “sounds crazy,” but she admires Walton for being young, goal-driven, and following her dreams. Anissa’s feelings of familiarity may stem from the colloquial language Walton uses when writing and the intensity of some of her personally penned posts, which allow her readers to get a glimpse into her world. Despite Walton disclosing personal information, such as her struggles with grieving her grandmother’s death to her miscarriage, Amelia still cautions readers from getting too attached, as she asserts:

> It does seem a bit odd. People talking to her as if they are her friend…and I think, ‘Yeah, you do kinda think that this person would be your best friend,’ but reality should kick in. But to me, it’s like those who think they know movie stars inside and out, but this person is just playing a character…they’re hair gurus. It’s a character that they’re playing because they can’t [or they] don’t want to present every aspect of their lives. Thus, Amelia suggests bloggers like Walton choose how they present online, which very well may be an online persona they created in order to be heard (Lovink, 2011).

In addition to the bloggers’ potentially edited online self-expressions, many women criticize Walton and Noelliste for not being responsive to their readers. Hence, Amelia suggests Walton and Noelliste need to better manage their comment section, since she believes it’s
imperative you “not shut yourself off from the very audience that built you up in the first place.” Amelia equates this experience to “just watching as part of the [TV] audience,” as she contends, “I don’t like being relegated to that, you know? I don’t like that feeling.” Amelia’s criticism speaks to the lack of reciprocity from bloggers, which undermines the dialogic exchange of information. However, Adeola takes matters into her own hands, as she states:

Eighty percent of the time, the person that’s doing the video is not answering the question. And yet the person that’s asking the question will keep on watching their channel, but they don’t ever get their question answered. And that’s where I come in…I try to answer their question, if I can. Some YouTubers don’t like that.

Conversely, Whitney consistently engages with her customers, as she states, “I take my time and answer questions all the freakin’ time. I’m always talking to people because they don’t get that one-on-one attention.” Thus, Adeola and Whitney invest their time and energy into connecting with fellow readers and business clients, as they see the value in reciprocal dialogue. However, it is possible their experiences as consumers and readers of such content has given them a sense of empathy that Walton and Noelliste have not experienced, since they have positioned themselves as experts within the natural hair community for nearly 10 years.

**Reimaging the Expert**

Whitney acknowledges that White women with adopted Black children or those with naturally-born biracial children are often targeted vehemently with negative comments from Black women on BGLH. However, she postulates these women visit BGLH to consume the content but do not comment, a phenomenon known as *lurking* (Rubin, 2014). Moe and Schweidel (2014) argue that lurkers “see social media as a source of information” and “look to posters [commenters] to serve as opinion leaders” (p. 38). Thus, Whitney’s description of these
White women suggests they rely on Black women and those who post as the experts from whom they gain their knowledge. This speaks to the sense of agency Black women have as educators, as the online learning community within BNHCBs gives space for those beyond what society deems as “experts” to exchange information. Thus, people do not have to rely on Walton or Noelliste to provide the information. Moreover, due to her inconsistent engagement with her readers, Adeola does not believe Walton is a role model, as she believes role models are those “who are communicating back to their subscribers and they are helping.” Furthermore, Adeola offers these words to help illustrate the importance of engaging with her readers:

I focus on the next comment I get from a mother with a two-year-old and they’re, like, on wits end and they just want to shave their child’s hair off. I feel like the parent. ‘Okay, stop, breath in. Send me a message and let’s talk one-on-one. And you see that the mom is going through so much…people open up. That’s the human aspect of YouTube.

Thus, Adeola has a certain responsibility to her readers, which centers around more personalized advice. Such support, as indicated by the participants, is neither Walton nor Noelliste’s primary focus. Hence, Danita does not identify Walton as a hair care expert, but she does see her as a role model because she “encourages” her readers to embrace their hair.” Moreover, Whitney states, “[Walton is] not a hair expert. That’s her title that she’s given herself. She promotes natural hair, which is great.” Whitney makes a distinction here by saying Walton promotes natural hair—not natural hair products. Accordingly, Erica, states, “[Walton] is an expert on what she does with herself, but not everything is going to work for everybody.” Yet, Anissa does find she gets “curious” when Walton recommends a new product, so she will Google the product and do her own research. Hence, Walton’s recommendations coupled with her own research have helped Anissa develop a hair care routine that works specifically for her hair.
Additionally, most of the women admit they did not know much about natural hair prior to transitioning from relaxed hair. Consequently, Whitney admits that with the help of blogs like CN and BGLH, she has learned the little nuances of natural hair, such as how her hair is affected by seasonal change. Likewise, Erica has learned what styles, products, and hair care routines work best for her hair. Consequently, she has become a resource for her family and friends, as she states, “I’m the expert now because I’ve been natural for so long…I get asked a lot what products I use, and I’m like, ‘You have to find what works for you.’” However, Erica admits oftentimes the questions and comments she hears from these women are self-deprecating, which causes her to encourage women, by stating, “It takes patience to do this and you have to be willing to take the time to work with your hair…and just learn your hair…[and] more about yourself and just go on that journey.” Erica’s words of encouragement emphasize the significance of Black hair and its connection with identity development, as she suggests Black women will gain a deeper understanding of themselves through the process of learning how to manage their hair. Thus, BNHCBs serve as a space for exchanging information, which helps to encourage Black women on their offline “journey” toward self-acceptance. However, is it possible that these online spaces can also motivate women to resist dominant ideologies? The fourth and final section will explore this question in greater detail.

**Journalistic Sociopolitical Intervention**

“I feel quite proud of this natural hair movement. I think it’s got so much potential. It’s a shame in some ways that it’s not being harnessed in the right way. We’re still fighting against negative stereotypes.”

- Amelia, Study Participant

Giroux (2000) argues that popular culture is a substantive and educational force “where identities are continually being transformed and power enacted” (p. 354). Thus, BNHCBs can be
spaces where Black women develop a counternarrative against the dominant culture’s hegemonic Black narrative that reinforces otherness. Evidence of this circulation of power emerged from the interviews, as the participants spoke to: (a) a sense of agency among Black women; (b) the consequences of normalizing natural hair; and (c) tactics used to sensationalize media content.

**Sense of Agency**

By connecting with people’s everyday lives, BNHCBs can be sites of resistance, where the bloggers and readers educate the public on the hegemony within popular culture. Consequently, the data that emerged from the interviews centers around (a) the bloggers using their platform as a form of resistance; (b) the bloggers finding a proper balance between the mundane and the political; and (c) the readers exercising their agency.

**Bloggers utilizing their platform as a form of resistance.** Heather likens influential bloggers to musical artists, as she states, “It’s kinda like mainstream media. You want your favorite artist to address your favorite issues, but you shouldn’t rely on them to be that voice.” Accordingly, Brianna discusses her ambivalence regarding this issue, as she queries:

Do you really go to these places and spaces really looking for information about Trayvon Martin? If I’m on here looking for hair care tips, I’m looking for hair care tips, you know? I don’t open *O Magazine* looking for the same type of stuff I would get from *Martha Stewart*, you know? I get that I don’t really have a clear feeling about that because in one light I understand that that’s very important. You can present those issue, but then that’s not where I go for that stuff.

Likewise, Erica believes bloggers like Walton have a choice as to how they use their platform. Similarly, Danita respects CN for being one of the few BNHCBs to uncover relevant issues regarding natural hair, such as the politics of natural hair in the workplace and the military ban...
on natural hair (Rhodan, 2014; Mele, 2017). Thus, Danita believes CN speaks on these issues “even when it’s not popular,” as many natural hair care companies focus on staying “positive.” However, she sees value in acknowledging what is going on within the Black community. Likewise, Heather states, “Bringing [the community] together doesn’t mean you have to ignore topics like that because, if you ignore, you are just going to repeat it.” Based on their arguments, Danita and Heather allude to the silencing that often occurs among marginalized groups when they attempt to uncover issues specific to their communities. Issues which are often invisible to the dominant culture. Thus, Heather wishes Walton would use her influence, especially with her recurrent appearances on the Dr. Oz Show, to provide cultural critique to the public, as she states:

I was hoping more political things would be talked about and not that natural Black hair is just a vanity for Black women… most of the audience is non-Black, so they could understand why we even put it in our hair in the first place. And in kids’ hair…and I think that’s sad that that became a part of our culture.

Thus, Heather not only grapples with the social responsibility Black celebrities often must reconcile, but also with the false perception that Black women’s values and desires are limited to the aesthetics of beauty and style (Johnson, 2013). Although Heather acknowledge Walton has the potential to change perspectives, Anissa believes, based on Walton’s blog content, she only “tries to be socially conscious.” However, she credits one of Walton’s paid writers for exercising his agency by bringing sociopolitical commentary to CN, as she indicates, “Other than that, I don’t think she’s really making a voice or taking a stand.” Although Anissa does not believe Walton is an activist, she does give her credit for the positive message she sends her readers when she travels to countries like South Africa and Israel, as she states, “You need to see the world, so it can shape your perspective…where you sit in society.” Thus, the seemingly
mundane practice of Walton using her blog as an online diary can create new forms of knowledge that demonstrate the multidimensionality of the Black female experience, while also adding diverse voices from across the globe (Berry, 2010).

Conversely, none of the women identify Noelliste and her blog, BGLH, as a site of resistance. For instance, Heather states she will read the headline and choose not to read the article because of its negativity. Thus, Heather does not believe the efforts BGLH makes toward highlighting issues within the Black community are making an impact. In fact, she believes BGLH fails in finding a proper balance in exercising their political voice.

**Bloggers finding a proper balance between the mundane and the political.** Like Heather, Chloe expresses concern regarding BGLH’s content, as she likens Noelliste to Angela Davis, which alludes to the militant, Black Panther stereotype associated with Black women with natural hair. Moreover, Amelia questions whether or not the political voice within the natural hair community is impactful, as she queries: “[W]hat does it really achieve? All it does is your preaching to the already converted. The ones who already know.” Yet, she believes relying on tactics similar to gay right’s initiatives can bring about “small incremental change,” which she believes is an approach Black people have not mastered. Hence, Amelia points out the vitriol on BGLH. However, CN readers view this space as having potential to change the Black narrative, while still addressing relevant issues. Yet, Adeola admits Walton’s focus on the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, is one of the reasons she limited her engagement, as she argues:

It’s social media, meaning worldwide, okay? It’s not social media just for the U.S. Somebody that needs your help in Germany doesn’t know anything about Ferguson, so when they come to your website for hair health, they’re struggling with something, and all that does is it deters them from wanting to come to your channel. It’s not that you
cannot use your platform to say whatever you want, but what is the purpose of the platform?...I don’t think that if you are a natural hair blogger you should be doing politics stuff, unless the politics stuff has to tie with natural hair. Case in point, in South Africa last year, they had girls wanting to have natural hair and then the school wanted them to cut it…You can use that, but not if it’s to feed something that has nothing to do with hair.

Adeola’s critique speaks to the tremendous responsibility of navigating one’s identity and agency. Hence, the participants identified ways in which they exercise their agency through seemingly mundane activities centered around hair.

**Readers exercising their agency.** Heather admits she frequents BNHCBs because it offers her positivity, especially surrounding something as historically negative as Black hair. She also credits Walton with giving her voice in speaking up about issues that affect Black women. Additionally, Danita credits Walton with aspiring her to go back to school to earn a master’s degree in counseling, as she recognizes that within the comment sections, Black women are sharing their lived experiences, which oftentimes reflect a need for intervention. Consequently, she insists, “We need a lot more teachers. We need a lot more counselors. We need a lot more people for us than for them.” Likewise, Adeola identifies her personal blog as a resource for mothers of Black children; however, she also conducts consultations with parents either via telephone or face-to-face. Similarly, Whitney uses social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, to pose questions to stimulate discussions about hair health with her followers. Additionally, she is collaborating with a natural hair consultant to educate Black women about their hair and identify the appropriate products for their various hair textures. Danita also takes advantage of opportunities to educate Black women who approach her on the street about natural hair products, and she encourages them to keep being “bold” to wear their
natural hair out in public and no longer hide it under a weave. Likewise, Erica also stresses, “Letting people know who you really are and not hide behind a façade. And being true to yourself and having a courage and confidence just to put yourself out there, you know?” The boldness that Danita and Erica speak to evokes a sense of agency in Black women to wear their hair in its natural state, despite the negative connotations associated with natural hair being unkempt. Such judgements typically come from the workplace, as Whitney identifies. However, she takes agency over her hair styling choices, as she states:

I’m the only Black woman at my work yard…When I first got hired, I made sure I flat ironed my hair. I had to do my nine-month probation. After that I came in with box braids. They were pissed, and I’ve been wearing them ever since. And I love it because I’m in Boston, which is historically racist up here. And people judge me all the time, and I’m like judge me all you want! That’s fine with me!

Thus, Whitney alludes to stereotypes associated with Black women’s hairstyle choices. Also, Danita shares an experience where her boss gave her a “dirty look” when she wore her curls free and big. She recalls, “I was like, ‘Oh, so you are aware of my hair?’” She states she proudly wore her hair big for the remainder of that work week. Brianna also indicates she is conscious of how she self-presents, but she makes a distinction in how she exercises her agency, as she states:

I don’t want people to think, ‘Oh, she’s not as intelligent because she is Black’ or ‘She’s not going to work as hard’…in college [HBCU] they told us, ‘You don’t need to be as good as, you need to be better than.’ So, I do try to work hard…so that people will say, ‘Well, I’ve been exposed to [Brianna] and she is like this, so I know Black people can be like this.’ I just feel like, me living my life is going to be the best thing that I can do.
Likewise, Chloe credits BGLH with helping her become more self-aware of her actions. She recalls reading an article on someone being bullied when they were younger, and it helped her recognize she used to be a bully to a neighborhood girl who had dark skin. As a result, Chloe now tries to “build up other people,” while also making sure the kids she interacts with know that “you don’t talk bad about other people.” Hence, such occurrences of “everyday sociality” have merit and impact offline behavior (Atton, 2014, p. 353).

**The Normalization of Natural Hair**

Heather suggests that some women may have gone natural because they think natural hair is a “trend.” Yet, some women indicate the natural hair movement is not embraced by all Black women. For instance, Whitney acknowledges that the popularity of the natural hair movement has not influenced her mother, as “she will still wear a wig.” Likewise, Adeola admits her mother is the “number one supporter” of her blog, but she refuses to wear her hair natural. Additionally, Brianna identifies her younger cousin as being the only other natural within their family; however, she indicates that one of her maternal aunts is considering it. Although these participants admit they have not influenced their family, other participants state the opposite.

Erica reports her mother and a few of her family members have stopped relaxing their hair because of her example. Similarly, Stella states that after she went natural “pretty much all the women” in her family went natural. In terms of Danita, she reports that her entire family has transitioned to natural hair, simply because she went natural. Ultimately, the level of influence these women have among their families varies. However, Stella provides insight as to why most of the women in her family followed suite, as she reveals, “On my mom’s side, they are like Creole anyways, so, like, I pretty much have the kinkiest hair of all and they had hair that could probably always went natural.” By identifying her family as “Creole” and stating that they could
have “probably always went natural,” Stella suggests that the European ancestry on her maternal side creates greater acceptance of their hair. However, Stella indicates she does not place value over one hair type than another, as she hopes the “Black natural hair community becomes a given in the future, where it’s not a surprise, but it’s more of a surprise if you’re not natural.” Heather has a similar hope, as she envisions the next generation being predominately natural. Heather seems to think this dream is becoming a reality, as she sees more women adorning natural hair in the town adjacent to hers, which she states is a marked difference from the representation she saw in 2010. Heather also shares her sister’s hope of “little Black girls with hair down their backs, and these are norms. And they don’t have to go through a process of relaxing and hot combs, where their hair gets short over the years.” Thus, Heather suggests that the reason little Black girls are not typically seen with long locks is because of the damaging effects of chemical relaxers, even though some participants admit that relaxing little girls’ hair is often seen as a way to make life easier. For instance, Danita justifies her mother’s choice to give her and her sisters’ relaxers, stating, “My mom relaxed my hair because she had four heads to do, and including herself it made five [laughter]! So, it helped her.” Anissa shares a similar sentiment, as she states, “I have three girls and one boy. For a longtime I didn’t perm their hair. But one daughter, she has the thickest hair on Earth, and I swear to God, I had the worst shoulder aches!” Moreover, Chloe states, “Some women like their hair straight better than they do curly. It’s not always going to be because they want to be White.” Thus, Adeola appreciates the variation in women’s hair grooming choices, but she indicates she decided to go natural to be a “role model” for her children. Similarly, Erica believes Black women who wear their hair natural are simply choosing it as a preference. Likewise, Brianna personally does not wear her hair natural to make a political statement. However, she acknowledges that Black women who
are making an effort to take a political stance have a hard battle, as Black women’s negative feelings regarding their hair are “so ingrained” in them. Moreover, she believes efforts to change the dominant culture’s perceptions about natural hair are futile, as she states:

I don’t really think it’s the political statement, not now…when you give statements that means someone is listening. And I feel like the people that make statements, to many of them, [they] probably aren’t paying attention…If we are trying to affirm our Blackness to White people…[they] love natural hair…[they say] ‘Oh my gosh! I love your hair! I love it!’ So, I think that if I were trying to make a statement to them, they’re not getting it. They are thinking I’m making some edgy fashion statement.

Thus, Brianna alludes to the issue with normalizing Black culture, as the dominant culture typically views the cultural elements outside the context of history, which relegates, in this instance, Black women’s hair, to an aesthetic or mere trend. Danita further illustrates this issue, as she believes it wasn’t Angela Davis’ afro that was political, but her actions with the Black Panther Party that made her political. She further contends, “At that time, her hair was popular. We all wore afros then. Even White people wore afros, so I don’t understand. What does hair have to do with politics?” Danita’s question about the politics of natural hair speaks to the narrow definition of “political” as overt acts of protest. Thus, Anissa, who is from the Bahamas, believes American culture adds to the stereotype that natural hair is political, as she states:

In America, the people that you see with the ‘fight the power’ or Black power, or whatever, they had the afro. They had the dashikis…I had a dashiki. We are from the Bahamas. It’s the things we always wore, but I think when you are here [in America] that’s what they associate with someone who is radical. Someone who had to go against the culture. I mean, I have views, but my hair does not coincide with my political views.
Here, Anissa suggests American culture situated the afro with the activists of the Black Panther party. Moreover, Heather states she would like to believe she only represents herself when she steps outside her door, but she recognizes wearing her hair natural impacts her Black nieces and other youth. Thus, she assumes agency, and, as she indicates, does not rely on Black political activists or bloggers to discuss the importance of natural hair. Additionally, Heather positions Black hair within the context of Black women’s bodies, as she argues, “I don’t think any part about our bodies should be political. I mean, other races wear their hair and it’s not seen as political.” Thus, Heather suggests Black women’s bodies are viewed differently than “other races,” to which Thurman (2012) argues, Black women who wear their hair in its natural state are “redefining beauty and Eurocentric standards…that remain physically impossible for women of color to obtain without manipulating our bodies and our body image” (para. 4). Within this context, Thurman redefines “political” to mean nonconformity to hegemonic beauty standards. However, such hegemony is often unconscious, even to Black women, as Stella believes the reasons Black women go natural is as varied as they are. Hence, the Black female body and hair are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional view of Black womanhood. Yet, according to the participants, bloggers can also perpetuate a narrow view of Black women.

**Sensationalizing the Message**

Amelia admits she was immediately drawn to Black Girl with Long Hair because of the title, which alluded to the narrow perspective that Black women cannot grow long hair. Upon reading the blog content, she admits the conversations on BGLH were “relevant and interesting, with this underlying edge of disgruntlement about our plight as Black people. It wasn’t just about hair. It has this edge.” Nevertheless, Amelia does see how people are “tired” of the topics, and she believes BGLH is “ill-advised” in their concept of socially conscious content, so much
so, that she has been “tempted” to unsubscribe. Moreover, she believes this negativity is reflective of the negativity that happens within the Black community. Consequently, Stella admits she does not comment much on the site anymore, specifically because, as she states, “I don’t like the negative ‘This Black man/men hate natural hair posts. I normally respond by going to another site because I am what I consume.” Thus, Stella exercises agency by not participating in the negativity typically displayed on BGLH. However, according to Adeola and Anissa, potentially losing loyal followers like Stella and Amelia will not negatively affect BGLH because there is a constant cycle of new naturals who are looking to consume the content. Amelia identifies these new naturals as “the fresh ones that are keeping these people millionaires.” She goes on to say: “They are just soaking up every video the way I did back in 2009.” Amelia’s mention of videos seems to be where many naturals are now gaining their education, as Adeola, Erica, and Heather all state they frequent YouTube more than blogs because they would much rather watch a video than read an article. Thus, the most influential bloggers have multiple media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to meet the demands of their readers. However, attempting to meet the demands of a large customer base is bound to leave some disappointed. Namely, Whitney has noticed the shift in the direction of CN and BGLH, as she acknowledges Walton and Noelliste rarely post articles anymore that focus on natural hair care education, as Walton is more focused on her travels and Noelliste is more focused on “social perceptions of Black people.” As a result, Adeola admits she does not read CN as frequently as she once did because the content is “not really related to hair.” Additionally, Anissa criticizes Walton’s “microwave solutions.” In particular, she does not like Walton’s “new mediation posts.” Even though she thinks “her intentions are pure,” she cautions Walton sharing insights on what is helping her with her large readership, as she believes it is misguided.
**Disqus Analysis Summary and Data Display**

When analyzing the participants’ Disqus comments, I again utilized QMCA and CDA, as informed by critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist thought (Hill, 2000) and womanist identity development theory (Helms, 1990). This methodology allowed me to reduce the text as data to uncover patterns that bring meaning to Black womanhood. I also relied on the same data categories I used in Chapter Four (Table 4-2) to help organize the themes related to the participants’ online engagement. With these categories as a frame of reference, I used the same content analysis schedule I used in Chapter Four (see Table 3-1 for an example) to develop the manifest and latent content from the Disqus comments (Polit & Beck, 2014).

In order to determine if the participants’ level of engagement remains consistent across online and offline spaces, I selected the 25 most recent comments of each of their Disqus pages to gain a snapshot of their online behavior. This analysis gave me a total of 250 comments to analyze in the following areas: (a) date joined Disqus; (b) total number of comments; (c) types of content engaging; (d) number of times replied to a fellow reader’s comment; (e) average recent comment rate (summation of date of comment post divided by 25); and (f) fit with the four organizational principles. Table 5-3 provides this information, as of June 17, 2017.

Relying on each participant’s interview content analysis coding/category schedule to maintain consistency, the findings indicate that most of the participants online behavior remains consistent to their offline behavior. However, Chloe and Stella showed greater variability between their online and offline personalities. Additionally, the characteristic titles assigned and confirmed by each participant are denoted here to determine if the traits each participant presented during their interviews are consist to how they present online. In the next section, I discuss the themes from each participant’s Disqus pages in relation to the final research question.
Table 5-3. Participant Disqus Data Display of 25 Most Recent Comments (as of 6/17/2017)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Disqus Join Date</th>
<th>Type of Content</th>
<th># Comment Replies</th>
<th>Average Recent Comment Rate</th>
<th>Fit to Four Organizational Principles</th>
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<td>Brianna</td>
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<td>Hair Care Tips</td>
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<td>141</td>
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<td>Whitney</td>
<td>9/1/2015</td>
<td>How to Start Business</td>
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<td>9 months</td>
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<td>Danita</td>
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<td>9 days</td>
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<td>Chloe</td>
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<td>What Would You Do?</td>
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**Note:** The table entries include the alias, Disqus join date, type of content, number of comments, replies, average recent comment rate, and fit to four organizational principles.
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*Note.* PR=Politics of representation; CA=Critical analysis of popular culture & the media; JSP=Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression & collective agency; DE=Dialogic exchange of information
Brianna: Consistently “The Consistent Teacher”

Brianna’s profile states she joined Disqus on September 21, 2012, and she has posted 141 comments. Brianna also includes an avatar, with a picture of what appears to be her and her husband, as well as a link to her personal blog. Additionally, she recommends a post from BGLH, entitled “Why I’m Absolutely an Angry Black Woman.” In terms of engagement, most of Brianna’s comments are posted to CN and other sites that are considered BNHCBs. Likewise, her recent comments mainly focus on natural hair care. Additionally, Brianna tends to maintain a reciprocal dialogue with her blog readers, as eight out of her nine comment replies were to her readers. This reciprocity helps drive traffic (Gaudeul & Peroni, 2010). Furthermore, the frequency of Brianna’s most recent comments averages to about only one comment every 11 months, with her most recent post occurring within the last month. Lastly, an analysis of her 25 most recent comments indicate that she recently engaged in dialogues online regarding three out of four of the organizational principles identified in this study, with the exception of the sociopolitical construct. Although she has not recently commented on issues regarding this construct, Brianna’s interview addressed the bloggers’ influences on introspection, BNHCBs as a platform for critical social commentary, and musical artists cultural critiques.

Politics of representation. Brianna has recently engaged in blog posts that discuss feelings of otherness related to Black hair being a spectacle for strangers. Such hypervisibility was also discussed during her interview. Additionally, her comment identifying the cattiness of readers, speaks to a lack of unity among Black people, and her response to spitefulness aligns with her interview statements regarding BGLH’s hyperfocus on racial issues.

Critical analysis of popular culture and media. Brianna’s recent comments also correspond to issues surrounding the large consumer market of natural hair care, as she responds
to a post on cosmetic store, Sephora, strategizing their marketing to palliate the natural hair community. In comparison, Brianna alluded to similar issues during her interview when she identified TextureMedia as the parent company that owns CN. Brianna, however, recently criticized, a Black celebrity for taking advantage of the natural hair care market with her all-natural hair care line, which promises to grow long hair. Brianna scoffs, “…but she grew her hair while using Pantene” (Kayla V, 2016c). Her response engenders critical analysis of marketing claims. Such comments are a departure from the issues Brianna discussed during her interview. Moreover, two of Brianna’s posts are specific to her personal blog, as she rejoices when CN posted a video that mentions her site. However, she does acknowledge disappointment over low reader engagement, but, nonetheless, tells her follower she appreciates the support.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** Brianna’s recent comments align with her interview regarding how she has a strong desire to be “helpful to other people.” Likewise, she recently offered fellow readers tips by sharing a video from her personal YouTube channel. Moreover, the analyzed posts indicate Brianna is appreciative of her readers, as she states, “Comments like these are important. I frequently think of converting this blog to a site and walking away. Thank you for reading” (Kayla V, 2016b)! Brianna’s response suggests readers too can disseminate information, as she further states, “Now the cycle can continue and someone else can get help from YOUR comment.” (Kayla V, 2016a). Furthermore, Brianna herself offers information to fellow readers on CN, as she supports the recommendation of a product endorsement and shares her personal experiences with retaining length and moisture. However, she is cautious with the degree of personal information she shares, and in the same manner as she stated during the interview, she reveals how she took down videos from her YouTube channel to prevent her students and parents from see too much of her personal life. Brianna, however, does share
information on other blogs that identifies her as a teacher and a Tuskegee University graduate. She also shares that she uses a menstrual cup on a blog post discussing the Tampon Tax.

Additionally, Brianna empathizes with a CN post regarding a Black entrepreneur launching NoireBnB as a response to the discrimination Black people experience trying to book vacation homes with Airbnb (i.e., online marketplace to rent out unused spaces for travelers), as she reveals she and her husband experienced similar discrimination. Aside from revealing some personal information, Brianna’s recent comments about celebrities are a departure from content she discussed during her interview, as she recently made two online posts supporting Beyoncé in the midst of criticism and praising transgender actor, Lavern Cox, for her natural beauty.

**Whitney: Consistently “The Health Hair Advocate”**

Whitney’s Disqus profile includes an avatar illustration of her face and states she joined the online commenting platform on September 1, 2015. She has contributed 275 comments, most of which are on BGLH and CN. However, Whitney also comments on a commerce site, two Black female lifestyle blogs, and content specific to issues within popular culture related to Warner/DC filmmaker, Zack Snyder’s recent layoffs. Nevertheless, the majority of Whitney’s recent posts center around hair science and representations of Black people in the media, which closely align to the issues she discussed during her interview. Moreover, Whitney is the only participant who has recently not replied to commenter posts, but this is most likely due to her not using blogging platforms to engage with others, as she stated during her interview: “I like to talk to people one-on-one, and I do that on Facebook or I pose a question on Twitter.” Consequently, her recent commenting average is only one post every nine months, with her most recent post occurring four months ago. Lastly, an analysis of Whitney’s 25 most recent comments indicates she engages in dialogues regarding all four organizational principles.
Politics of representation. Like Brianna, Whitney engages in content regarding the otherness of Black hair, as evidenced by her response to a post entitled, “What are You Going to Do About Your Hair? My Boss is Policing My Blackness” (Ukpo, 2016). Brianna discloses the same issues she discussed during her interview pertaining to her experiences at her work yard. Despite feelings of otherness, Brianna seems to have found solace in the natural hair event, Curlfest, as she encourages fellow readers to attend, stating “I went for the first time and it was absolutely one of the best outdoor events I've ever participated in. Tons of welcoming women and men, activities and just encouragement all around” (MyFluffyPuffs, 2016b). Her praise for such an event seems like a departure from her negative views on hair shows she discussed during her interview. However, with the tagline: “The world’s largest natural beauty festival,” Curlfest is an outdoor event with live music, group sports, photo booths, and candid chats with natural hair bloggers, which appears to focus more on building a sense of community.

Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency. However, Curlfest is not the panacea for issues that continue to plague the Black community, as Whitney addresses the more insidious nature of racism: police officers killing unarmed Black men and the military ban on natural hair. Whitney also criticizes MadameNoire, a Black women’s lifestyle blog, for posting irrelevant content, as she argues, “Imagine if blogs like this didn't print useless articles promoting these birds. Then they wouldn't garner so much attention and would fly away” (MyFluffyPuffs, 2016c). This critique is akin to the criticism Whitney discussed during her interview with regard to BGLH allowing their readers to “go off” on sensationalized content.

Critical analysis of popular culture and media. Whitney speaks to the disparities in Black actor wages on the BGLH post “It is Shocking How Much Less Taraji P Henson, Viola Davis and Kerry Washington are Paid than White TV Stars” (Noelliste, 2016), which aligns with
her interview discussion about the invisibility and narrow representation of Black women in the media. Likewise, Whitney criticizes Zoe Saldana’s portrayal of Nina Simone, as she states:

Nina was and still is polar opposite of what America defines as "beautiful". Her natural aesthetic, strong presence and temperament requires someone in Nina's likeness…Zoe…[is] opposite of Nina in almost every category. A bunch of makeup with a prosthetic nose isn't going to change that. (MyFluffyPuffs, 2016a)

Whitney also speaks to the controlling images perpetuated by the media, as she adamantly proclaims, “I get tired of watching the majority of black casts from ‘reality shows’ make a fool of themselves. And it's Black people producing this foolishness” (MyFluffyPuffs, 2016d). Thus, she blames Black people for being a part of the problem.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** Whitney offers information on the controversy surrounding claims that relaxed hair is healthy hair and the dangers of synthetic hair ingredients. However, she also shares the benefits of naturally-derived ingredients that promote hair health. With this passion for educating, Whitney posted on the Shopify Blog to solicit advice for “how to keep the pace so as to remain accessible to [her] clients” (MyFluffyPuffs, 2017). Thus, Whitney assumes responsibility for maintaining reciprocal conversations with her clientele. These sentiments closely align to information she shared during her interview.

**Danita: Consistently “The Natural Hair Embracer”**

Adorned with an avatar of her face primarily hidden by her curls, Danita’s profile indicates she joined Disqus on October 22, 2012, and she has written a total of 1,173 comments. Danita’s most frequently comments on CN and BGLH; however, she also frequents two celebrity lifestyle blogs and a celebrity fashion stylist blog. Her most recent comments center around Black culture, especially articles that celebrate the accomplishments of Black people. Likewise,
Danita’s first ten posts on her lengthy list of recommended posts center around the same content, with the exception of one post related to health and wellness. Moreover, Danita’s average recent comment rate is approximately one post every nine days, with her most recent post occurring three days ago. Based on the scope of this analysis, Danita only exhibited one recent instance of replying to a reader comment. Lastly, an analysis of Danita’s 25 most recent comments indicates she engages in dialogues regarding most organizational principles, except for critical analysis of popular culture and the media. However, she discussed issues related to this construct during her interview, as she acknowledged her skepticism of popular bloggers.

**Politics of representation.** One of the most salient themes that emerged from Danita’s recent comments is her affirmation of Black people. For instance, Danita states, “I’m here for all the Black and Educated!!! Let’s get it” (Natural MiMi, 2017b) in response to the CN post “Black Grads are Highlighting Their Graduation Photos Using #BlackAndHooded” (Stidhum, 2017). Danita also praises posts that highlight Black-owned businesses and promote Black votership. These encouraging posts align with discussions from Danita’s interview where she made frequent references to being “bold enough to come and embrace” the good and the bad.

**Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency.** Similar to her interview, Danita comments on a CN post about self-love, stating, “This is why I became a counselor…We as women can give a compliment to others but can't for ourselves” (Natural MiMi, 2017a). Here, Danita alludes to negative self-esteem; however, she suggests that her journey to self-acceptance started with her hair, similar to her sentiments during her interview.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** Consequently, Danita has immersed herself in the CN learning community as a learner and an educator, as she shares her conditioning and hair washing methods. Additionally, she was able to garner a short recommendation from Walton
after she disclosed that she has high cholesterol. Framing Danita as an educator to strangers aligns with her interview, as she admitted she does not offer advice to her “very opinionated” family, but often gives advice to women “off the street” who approach about her hair.

**Chloe: Variably “The Woman in the Mirror”**

Chloe joined Disqus on August 25, 2012, and she has written 1,975 comments. Chloe does not include an avatar to visualize her online identity. Also, her Disqus page indicates she comments most frequently on blogs that specifically focus on issues pertaining to Black people, popular culture, and hair. However, the outlier is a site dedicated to sharing stories related to outdoor lifestyle and adventure sports. Based on her engagement with these blogs, Chloe’s recent comments center around Black celebrities and posts where bloggers pose questions to their readers. Moreover, Chloe recommended posts relating to travel news and Black culture. However, she did recently comment on posts regarding issues related to sex, beauty and style, and reality television. Additionally, Chloe’s average recent comment rate is approximately one post every 17 days, with her most recent post occurring two days ago. Based on the scope of this analysis, Chloe recently replied to ten reader’s comments. Lastly, an analysis of her recent comments indicates she recently engaged in dialogues from all four organizational principles.

**Politics of representation.** Chloe recently commented, “Love Tracee, but that dress looks like Big Bird and Jessica Rabbit had a baby” (cryssi, 2017e). Judgmental comments like these are completely disparate from Chloe’s interview comments, where she criticizes Noelliste for being judgmental. However, Chloe admits her complicity in judging others, as she states:

…With Black women, like Nicki Minaj, I find myself side-eyeing her. But if that’s what she wants to do to her body then I should be okay with it. It really has nothing to do with me. I felt like we should all learn to…embrace each other’s differences.
By stating, “I find myself side-eyeing her,” Chloe acknowledges she passes judgement on this hip hop artist to the point where it seems subconscious. However, it appears Chloe is reflecting on her actions, since she disclosed in the interview that a blog post on BGLH regarding bullying helped her recognize she engaged in such behaviors in her youth.

**Critical analysis of popular culture and media.** Based on her interview, Chloe focused her media critique on the lack of self-ethnic reflectors and how she found solace in viewing women that look like her on BGLH. However, her recent comments indicate she engaged in content specific to cultural appropriation. For instance, Chloe responds to the post “Stylish or Foolish? Spanish Actress Steps on Cannes Red Carpet Dressed as an African Geisha” (Uwumarogie, 2017), stating, “Only if you are Japanese and black should you attempt this fashion tragedy” (cryssi, 2017a). Her comments allude to the Spanish actress culturally appropriating parts of African and Japanese culture as a fashion accessory. Likewise, her comment: “Sounds about white…” (cryssi, 2017c), in reference to the article, “Why Did the New York Times Compare Sarah Baartman to Kim Kardashian?” (Wells, 2017) alludes to the dominant culture *whitewashing* the negative effects of racism and slavery (Giorgio, 2016).

**Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency.** In an article that questions if a celebrity is pregnant, Chloe turns her criticism toward the blogger, stating, “We know that this question is just plain rude…You wouldn't walk up to a friend, family member, associate, or run of the mill stranger and ask this….why is okay to do this to a famous woman” (cryssi, 2017e)? This criticism is similar to her discussion during the interview regarding BGLH being overly negative about celebrities.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** Conversely, in other exchanges, Chloe gives a light-hearted response, stating, “I mean those are some killer legs...looking down at my KFC
drumsticks got me looking for my mom's old Thighs of Steel” (cryssi, 2017f). Additionally, one of the most salient themes from Chloe’s comments is her direct response to blogger prompts, such as one that asked their audience about strange phobias, to which Chloe responds, “I hate multiple circular holes” (cryssi, 2017b). Chloe also discloses personal information, as she admits, “Sadly, I love trashy television” (cryssi, 2017e). Thus, it’s no surprise that four of Chloe’s recent comments include celebrity gossip posts, such as her lengthy response about a reality show, where Chloe shifts her pronoun usage from third person (they) to second person (you) as if she were speaking directly to the celebrity. In terms of her interview, Chloe’s discussion centered around attempting new hair techniques and a post validating her beliefs.

**Adeola: Consistently “The Lifelong Learner and Consultant”**

Adorned with a self-portrait avatar and a link to her personal blog, Adeola joined Disqus on July 17, 2012, and she has written a total of 309 comments. Adeola comments most frequently on BNHCBs, with the exception of a consultation blog for YouTube content creators. Based on the scope of this study, Adeola’s blog post recommendations and recent comments center around natural hair care tips. Recently, she is averaging one post every 8 months, with her most recent post occurring two months ago. Adeola recently replied to eight reader comments and her 25 most recent comments encompass most of the organizational principles, except for critical analysis of popular culture and media. However, Adeola’s interview did provide evidence of product endorsements and visibility of YouTubers with looser hair textures.

**Politics of representation.** Adeola recently responded to a CN post about Easter hairstyles for Black girls, stating, “She looks so beautiful” (DiscoveringNatural, 2017). Though brief, her response aligns with her passions for educating mothers on styling their children’s hair.
Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency. Adeola tagged the names of her YouTube channel to five recent posts. Additionally, six recent posts include images of Adeola demonstrating her hair techniques. These tactics help drive traffic to her site. Moreover, her recent feature on CN increases her visibility and helps Adeola gain credibility. This level of engagement is consistent with Adeola’s sentiments during her interview, where she revealed she takes YouTube content creator courses to improve her engagement.

Dialogic exchange of information. Adeola responds to prompts, such as “What detangling hacks do you have?” (Perkins, 2016), by providing her personal advice. Comments such as these align with her interview, where she stated, “If you have knowledge share it.” In terms of attempting to connect with Walton, Adeola sends responses complimenting her hair, congratulating her on the birth of her baby, and condolences upon the death of her grandmother. This heartfelt sentiment garnered a response from Walton thanking her and wishing her and her family a happy holiday season. Based on Adeola’s recent comments, there is evidence to support her deep engagement with Walton; however, during the interview she stated, “[T]he first thing I was reading [in the morning] was the CurlyNikki blog …It’s not like that anymore. I’m not on there so much.” Adeola most recently engaged with CN two months ago.

Erica: Consistently “The Aspiring Blogger”

Erica joined Disqus on October 26, 2013, and she has written a total of 769 comments. With a portrait of Erica as her avatar and a link to her blog, her page indicates she comments most frequently on CN, but she frequents and comments on blogs primarily focus on cosmetic reviews. Likewise, her latest blog post recommendation is specific to cosmetic and fashion post. Moreover, Erica’s average comment rate is approximately every 53 days, with her most recent post occurring 14 days ago. Based on the scope of this analysis, Erica did not recently reply to
any reader comments. Lastly, an analysis of Erica’s 25 most recent comments indicates she recently has only engaged in dialogues that fall within the construct of dialogic exchange of information. However, during Erica’s interview she discussed issues related to all the principles.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** Based on exchanging information, there are 13 occurrences where Erica posts responses indicating her strong desire to try a beauty product based off a blogger’s endorsement or product review. These comments strongly align with Erica’s interests, as she stated during her interview, “It’s just all about a platform where I can talk about things that I love,” which, according to her blog, is “beauty, fashion, hair and makeup.” Additionally, Erica crafts some responses that share some personal information about herself, but they are coupled with mentions of product usage, such as:

I didn't big chop, I just let my hair grow out and slowly cut the permed ends off. I love that hair masque by Shea Moisture. I also love the Camille Rose Naturals Curl Love Hair Milk and Miss Jessie's Baby Butter, best moisturizers I've tried. (Andrea Cain, 2017)

In other responses, Erica gives positive affirmations to bloggers regarding their photography skills and fashion choices. Most notable is that all but one of Erica’s responses garnered a response from the bloggers. One possible explanation for this is that these bloggers have small followings, and thereby thrive on comments to increase their traffic.

**Stella: Variably “The Mindful Consumer”**

With an avatar picture of what appears to be her toddler son, Stella’s profile boasts a total of 4,656 comments since she joined Disqus on September 8, 2013. Her total comments far exceed any of the other participants. Additionally, Stella includes a tagline on her page, which reads, “Back to life, back to reality….” (@stacielle, n. d.). Based on Stella’s comments, her chosen quote from a popular 1989 neo-soul song, suggests the necessity for people to understand
the Black experience. However, the “reality” Stella is referring to may also be reality television, since she frequently engages in blog posts related to Black reality shows. Additionally, she comments most frequently on lifestyle and gossip blogs intended for a Black audience. Stella’s average comment rate is approximately every five days, with her most recent post occurring one day ago. Based on the scope of this analysis, Stella has replied 21 times to reader comments, the most of any participant. Lastly, an analysis of Stella’s 25 most recent comments indicates she engages in dialogues online regarding most of the identified organizational principles, with the exception of journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency. However, discussion from her interview speaks to this construct, specifically to refraining from commenting on sites like BGLH “because they’re turning into a gossip site.” This perspective conflicts from Stella’s online behavior, as she mostly engages with gossip blogs.

**Politics of representation.** Stella demonstrates that she is very protective of the Black spaces she engages with, as evidenced by her naming and identifying non-Black readers in the following ways: (a) “It does troll, if u can’t be honest with yourself you sure can’t be honest with us. Be gone dumbazz” (Staci Elle, 2017); (b) “You are not Black stop with the we, troll” (Staci Elle, 2017); and (c) “White opinions…” (Staci Elle, n. d.). Her recent comments align with her statement from the interview, where she states, “I don’t believe White women and non-Black women should be centered in the natural hair community.” Although Stella was speaking specifically to BNHCBs, her perspective seems to apply to predominately Black spaces as well. Likewise, she recently argued with a biracial reader who revealed being ostracized. She further criticized Stella for not acknowledging her pain, in the post “What it Means to be Mixed Race During the Fight for Black Lives” (Luders-Manuel, n. d.), so Stella (Staci Elle, n. d.) counters:
(Playin the worlds’ smallest violin for ya!) yea being attacked for being bi-racial or light skinned will never be as harmful as being attacked for being dark. In the end society still privileges light skinned people and makes them the face of black people.”

Additionally, Stella revisited this post to taunt a biracial commenter who angrily lashed out at her for her criticism of the privilege biracial people receive, as she comments, “lol I'm still laughing at this rant months later- and still no upvotes for u... sad” (Staci Elle, n. d.)! Such engagement is disparate from how Stella presented during the interview, where she stated, “If you consume a bunch of negativity then that’s what you’re about, really, you know? I more so look for the positive.” Hence, Stella stated she usually responds to negative commenters by leaving the site. However, this exchange indicates that, in fact, the exact opposite is true.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** As a result of her speaking on the issue of colorism, numerous readers responded to Stella’s comment thanking her for validating their experience. For instance, one reader states, “I see that you are preaching Gospel like usual” (truthseeker2436577@yahoo.com), which alludes to Stella’s consistent online presence. Although she does admit she wants other people to face reality instead of being offended by the truth, she does seem to recognize that her approach is not well-received by everyone, as she says to a supportive fellow reader: “Hopefully your more kindly worded statements will reach these people” (Staci Elle, n. d.). The exchange indicated here aligns to Stella’s interview, where she discussed the comradery and support she gains from BNHCBs.

**Critical analysis of popular culture and media.** Stella extends her criticism to bloggers who use clickbait titles, such as “Beyoncé’s Dad Says Public Speaking is Her Weakness [Video]” (Bossip Staff, 2017), as she quips, “Lots of folks aren’t public speakers, nothing to see here…” (Staci Elle, 2017). Stella’s response suggests Bossip failed to sensationalize their
message. In terms of her interview, Stella did not speak specifically to bloggers sensationalizing their messages, as she focused more on self-ethnic reflectors and the Black hair care companies switching their marketing to cater to a White audience.

**Anissa: Consistently “The Christian Blogger”**

With an avatar consisting of her portrait and a link to her personal blog, Anissa’s profile indicates she joined Disqus on October 2, 2011, and she has written a total of 618 comments. Anissa’s most frequented communities include: CN, two Black culture blogs and two Christian blogs, while her blog recommendations include a post from a Black culture magazine relaunching their site and a wellness post from CN. Additionally, Anissa’s most recent comments indicate she engages with blog topics about Black culture that affirm Black people, and posts that also discuss issues of gentrification, discrimination, and invisibility. Moreover, Anissa recently commented on eight posts related to Christian hymns and prayer. She recently averages approximately one post every 20 days, with her most recent post occurring three days ago. Anissa also responded to two reader comments. Lastly, an analysis of her 25 most recent comments indicates her engagements fit within all four organizational principles.

**Politics of representation.** In terms of otherness, Anissa offers advice on a post soliciting guidance from its readers to help a White man adjust to working in a predominately Black workspace, as she states, “Don't try to be cool and talk slang. Don't be offensive and make broad generalizations about Black people. Be yourself - but if that's an ignorant, white privilege, entitled self, think before you speak” (nylse, 2017b). Moreover, Anissa responds to the CN post “Miss Black University of Texas Criticized for Not Being ‘Black Enough’” (Greenaway, 2017), by stating, “People are overreacting. Does ‘Black’ only look one way” (nylse, 2017a)? Anissa’s
response speaks to the arbitrary markers used to define Blackness. These recent comments, differ from Anissa’s interview, as she spoke mostly to feelings of otherness associated with hair.

**Critical analysis of popular culture and media.** With regard to self-ethnic reflectors, Anissa’s response to the CN post, “New Literary Subscription Box Features Book for Black Girls by Black Authors” (Igbo, 2017), suggests the invisibility of many Black authors, as she recalls her experiences when living in New York, as she states, “In my local library there was a tag on each AA that identified it as an AA author. I loved this idea because it highlighted the fact that so many are overlooked” (nylse, 2017c). Likewise, during her interview, Anissa stated she is “very intentional” with using Black images on her blog to form a “certain association” with underrepresented Black Christian bloggers.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** In terms of her identity, Anissa alludes to her Bahamian culture and identifies that she has children in college. She also comments on Christian blogs, which further align with the identity she discussed during her interview.

**Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency.** There are five occurrences where Anissa tags messages with Christian “linkups,” which demonstrates her strong desire to include herself and her blog in the Christian blogging community. Likewise, Anissa spoke to increasing her blog’s visibility during her interview.

**Heather: Consistently “The Mediator”**

Similar to Whitney, Heather has an illustration for her avatar, which is of a little Black girl with a head full of long natural hair. Heather’s profile indicates she joined Disqus on April 22, 2014, has written a total of 4,106 comments, and recommended three CN blog posts related to hair and wellness. Likewise, she most frequently comments on CN, three language learning blogs specific to learning Korean and a legal news blog. On this account, Heather’s blog
engagement is the most disparate from all the other participants. However, her most recent comments center around natural hair care tips and issues. Moreover, Heather’s recent commenting rate is approximately every seven months, with her most recent post occurring four months ago. Based on the scope of this analysis, Heather responded to ten blogs from fellow readers. Lastly, an analysis of Heather’s 25 most recent comments indicates she engages in most of the principles, with the exception of critical analysis of popular culture and media. However, she does address this construct during her interview, as she spoke to self-ethnic reflectors.

**Politics of representation.** Based on her recent Disqus comments, Heather articulates some of the issues she sees within the natural hair community, while also affirming the woman who wrote the article, as she states, “I'm so GLAD u pointed out that there are other protective styles, other than straight or curled weaves, that actually look like our hair…I'm glad u are learning to accept your hair” (Bre, 2016). This aligns with her interview, as she said she hoped most Black women will go natural or embrace other forms of Black hair protective styles.

**Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency.** In the CN post “The Natural Hair Movement Failed Me” (H, 2016), Heather responds, “[I] feel apart [sic] of the natural hair movement, because i know i helped influence those around me, whether they changed their views or not, when i went natural, but i also know that i went natural for me” (Bre, 2016). Heather shared these same sentiments during her interview when she discussed her desire to only represent herself but recognizing that her little Black nieces are looking up to her.

**Dialogic exchange of information.** Heather also displays her sense of belongingness to the CN community, as she inquires, “Where is everybody? I…finally decided to visit today, and don't see many ppl. I guess life is getting a bit busier than it was for us a few years ago” (Bre, 2016b). Heather spoke specifically to this exchange during her interview. Although recent posts
do indicate she builds connections and affirms readers and bloggers, Heather is no stranger to critique, as she confronts a fellow reader who does not see the purpose of Black Lives Matter:

You do realize this has been happening to black ppl in their neighborhoods since forever right? Only difference now is there are cameras readily available to record it, before cameras black ppl were getting killed and painted as if they deserved it when the cops could've been lying. When the police are getting calls from white ppl immediately saying they are scared, and they immediately say the "suspect" is a scary, BLACK, person....and how cops react differently when the suspect is white, vs when the suspect is black....please don't be naive/ignorant... (Bre, 2016a)

This comment speaks to Heather’s interview, where she states, “It’s like you want to help everybody, but you can’t or at least get people to see where you are coming from and while seeing where they’re coming from.” Consequently, Heather continued to engage with the dissenting reader by crafting three additional comments to clarify the reader’s stance. Moreover, based on the Disqus data, it appears Stella comments more frequently than any other participant. However, during her interview, Heather frequently referenced her rationale for commenting on blog posts. Thus, she assumes a reciprocal dialogue as part of her online identity.

**Amelia: Consistently “The Armchair Sociologist”**

Like, Chloe, Amelia does not have an avatar. Since joining Disqus on September 20, 2011, Amelia has written 357 comments. Additionally, she most frequently comments on BGLH and another Black hair care blog. Although she frequents a career help blog, grammar websites, a women’s empowerment blog, and a celebrity gossip blog, her most recent comments reference Black culture and Black issues. Moreover, her average comment rate is approximately one comment every 3.5 months, with her most recent post occurring one month ago. Additionally,
Amelia replied to 18 reader posts. Lastly, an analysis of her 25 most recent comments indicates she engages in dialogues meeting most of the principles, with the exception of exchanging information. However, Amelia spoke specifically to this construct during her interview, especially in terms of gaining knowledge about natural hair and blogger’s lack of reciprocity.

**Politics of representation.** In response to a fellow reader stating, “If only she wore that hair while in the white house” (Sandra Brooks, 2017) in response to a photo of Michelle Obama adorning natural hair, Amelia replied, “Says a lot about acceptance doesn’t it?! Sad” (kalexa1, 2017c). This response has underpinnings for societal pressures for hair straightening, upward mobility, and self-acceptance. Amelia further addresses this issue in her criticism of a blogger’s discourse on her hair, as she argues:

I do take umbrage with your putting "blessed" in speech marks when commenting on black hair though - as though there was some lie/irony in just describing black hair as a blessing. Why not? Not everyone views it negatively, thank goodness, and even if some do, there's no need to agree with such self-deprecation. Please! (kalexa1, 2017a)

Similarly, during her interview, Amelia discussed issues related to the insecurities of Black women, which she stated are difficult to overcome due to the “seeds of racism.” Amelia also argues about the otherness of Black hair in her response to an article, entitled “Naptural85 Tweeted about a Horrible Hair Touching Experience She Had While at Essence Fest” (Petra, 2016), as she insists hair is an extension of the body, which is intimate.

**Critical analysis of popular culture and media.** The spectacle of Black hair is in part due to the invisibility of Black women and natural hair in the media, as Amelia argues:

Everyone looks to see 'themselves' in images/media, the 'invisibility' is usually most noticeable to those who aren't acknowledged or included. Not so 'problematic' for those
included of course - unless they have the ability to consider others as well as themselves 
(a great character trait). (kalexa1, 2017b)

Amelia spoke to this issue during her interview when she discussed light skin and looser curls 
being “high commodity” renders Black women with darker skin and coarser hair invisible.

**Journalistic sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency.** Amelia’s appeal to 
those from the dominant culture being able to acknowledge the invisibility of marginalized 
groups speaks to the silencing of critical conversations. As a result, she lends her support to a 
fellow White male reader who chooses to think critically, as she praises:

> Well done you for standing up to the ranting over-sensitive head in the sand opposition.
> Have to admire your courage for speaking up and raising an interesting and relevant 
point. A point which clearly some people think needs to be shouted down until those 
making things 'uncomfortably' real for them keep quiet. Not everyone disagrees with the 
truth, thankfully. Besides, it's always amazing (not to mention predictable) how much 
quickly people become maniacally raging once any hint of race is mentioned. Very very 
telling indeed. Stay true & let the haters rage in ignorance. (kalexa1, 2017b)

Thus, Amelia finds inspiration from those who are willing to add their voice to the minority. 
Likewise, during her interview she identified the discomfort the dominant group feels as the 
“inconvenient truth” that they often ignore to resolve feelings of guilt.

**Summary**

I began this chapter with an introduction of each participant, which included their early 
experiences with their hair and their subsequent natural hair journey, to better understand their 
offline behavior. I then discussed the themes of findings for the interviews, which were based on 
the four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces, determined from the literature
review in Chapter Two. These principles guided the content analysis and helped me determine how Black women construct their identities and adopt or resist dominant ideologies concerning them. The four principles are as follows: (a) the politics of representation that define Black
affinity spaces, fetishize Black women’s bodies, and perpetuate the angry Black woman trope; (b) a critical analysis of popular culture and media that speaks to the representation of Black
women in the media and the politics of natural hair as an aesthetic; (c) the journalistic
sociopolitical self-expression and collective agency the bloggers and readers utilize to popularize
natural hair; and (d) the dialogic exchange of information that is maintained by a racialized
discourse and platform that positions blog readers as those capable of offering advice. These
principles were again used when I analyzed the participants’ Disqus pages and compared their
recent comments to the data from their interviews to gain a deeper understanding of how closely
their online and offline behaviors align. Additionally, these four principles were instrumental in
helping me organize the findings to answer the three research questions. In the final chapter, I
will merge the findings from the content analysis and interviews to discuss implications for
future research and theoretical implications.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

“The personal is both political and theoretical.”
- Aaronette M. White, Black Feminist Scholar (2011)

The purpose of my study was to explore the role discursive practices and online learning communities within Black natural hair care blogs (BNHCBs) play in the construction of Black female identity and critical consciousness in both online and offline spaces, as it pertains to a form of resistance (i.e., cultural politics) from the blog commenters’ perspectives. The research questions that guided my study were:

1. What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?
2. What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the blogger’s practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?
3. How do the blog commenters’ online identities align with their offline identities?

To investigate these questions, I utilized a two-prong interpretive qualitative media content analysis (QMCA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to evaluate the ten highest number of commented blog posts within the past three years from CurlyNikki (CN) and Black Girl with Long Hair (BGLH) founders, Nikki Walton and Leila Noelliste, respectively, as well as the first 25 comments from each of their readers. Thus, I analyzed 20 blog posts and a total of 500 comments. Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten CN and BGLH blog commenters and analyzed the 25 most recent comments from each of their respective Disqus (i.e., blog comment hosting service) pages for a total of 250 comments. My analysis was informed by critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist thought and womanist identity development theory, which allowed me to reduce the written text as data to uncover patterns that
bring meaning to the lived experiences, both online and offline, of Black women who engage in dialogues within BNHCBs.

To limit bias and increase reliability, I utilized the four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces to frame the QMCA and CDA analysis. These four principles, as derived from the literature review in Chapter Two, are as follows: (a) the implications of the politics of representation with regard to contesting and/or perpetuating hegemonic assumptions of Black womanhood; (b) a critical analysis of popular culture and media messages of Black womanhood as connected to power and big business; (c) the utilization of journalistic sociopolitical intervention to exercise power to resist, self-discipline actions, and/or sensationalize messages; and (d) a dialogic exchange of information where the reader can also be the producer of knowledge through an online learning community. Ten themes emerged from these principles: (a) the politics of representation, (b) critical analysis of popular culture and media, (c) journalistic sociopolitical intervention, and (d) dialogic exchange of information (see pages 118-121 for an explanation of the organizational structure). These principles were further organized with a content analysis schedule to further develop the emerging manifest and latent content.

Thus, the ten themes that emerged from the blog posts and subsequent comments, as detailed in Chapter Four, were as follows: (a) the sanctity of Black affinity spaces; (b) the shame in othering ourselves; (c) perpetuating the angry Black woman trope; (d) a lack of self-ethnic reflectors; (e) the big business of natural hair care; (f) the blogger and commenters sense of agency; (g) tactics used to normalize natural hair; (h) bloggers and commenters word choice regarding sensationalizing of posts; (i) initiating and maintaining online conversations; and (j) reimagining the natural hair care expert.
Likewise, the findings from the participant interviews and their recent Disqus comments, as detailed in Chapter Five, also align with the organized ten themes, as indicated above. The findings show that the participants spoke more specifically to ingroup issues with Black women perpetuating feelings of otherness (e.g., arbitrary rules for who is considered natural; hair-shaming) than they did issues surrounding the outgroups’ fetishizing of Black women’s bodies.

In light of this brief summary, I begin this chapter by discussing the integration of (a) the blog post and comment content analysis and (b) the participant interviews and Disqus comment findings. Next, I discuss the findings in light of the literature and conceptual frameworks of this study. Third, I consider the implications for theory and practice. I end this chapter with a brief consideration of the limitations, suggestions for further research, and conclude with my personal reflections on my growth and development throughout this doctoral program.

**Integration of Content Analysis and Participant Interview Findings in Light of the Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to answer three research questions to bring meaning to online learning communities that move beyond personal dimensions of learning and move toward an awareness of the social dimensions of learning for social change. While I discussed the content analysis findings from the blog posts in Chapter Four and the participant interview and supporting Disqus comments in Chapter Five, here I discuss how an integrated look at the findings answers the research questions. Accordingly, the discussion here is framed in light of the three questions: (1) blogger discursive practices; (2) commenter discursive practices; and (3) the consistency between the commenters’ online and offline personalities.
Blogger Discursive Practices

The first research question was: *What discursive practices do the bloggers use to facilitate identity formation and critical consciousness in their readers, as a means of engaging in resistance?* According to Richardson (2007), *discursive practices* address the production, distribution, and consumption of texts in relation to social conditions. Within the framework of this study, discursive practices are specific to Black women, especially in terms of their engagement with the online learning communities within BNHCBs. The findings, as reported in Chapter Four, provide insight into how Walton and Noelliste utilize discursive practices to facilitate Black female identity development and critical consciousness from their readers, with the potential for resistive acts of cultural politics.

With the exception of using the phrases “No, naw and HELL NO!” and “Just Dragged,” Noelliste’s trained journalism skills are apparent in her writing style, which makes her blog read much like a news article. This writing style is drastically different from the approach used by Walton, a trained psychotherapist, who uses neologisms specific to the natural hair community (e.g., wash and go, cowash, shrinkage) and more colloquial language (e.g., “creepin’ on a come up,” “And the church said…”) that is typically shared among others within the Black community. Since such language may make it difficult for non-Black women outside the natural hair community to translate, Walton seems to creatively identify her core group through her writing style. Moreover, when evaluating how Walton and Noelliste use text to facilitate identity formation, it is important to determine how they envision their readers. Based on their mission statements, Walton and Noelliste seem to cater to women in different stages of natural hair development. In terms of Walton, the identity of the CN reader is depicted as the frustrated, new natural who is learning how to manage her hair. Conversely, the identity of the BGLH reader
appears to be more secure in her natural hair (and Black womanhood), yet this space is sought to affirm her identity as a Black woman. With such disparate identities, it’s no wonder Walton and Noelliste’s most commented posts are vastly different from one another. Whereas, Walton’s top commented posts center around natural hair care tips, Noelliste’s posts predominately center around the consequences of slavery, particularly as it relates to colorism (i.e., discrimination based on skin color). As reported in Chapter Four, Noelliste metaphorically compared dark skin as a burden placed on the backs of Black women. Thus, Noelliste alludes to the history of Black women’s bodies being viewed as unattractive, since American culture and politics have perpetuated Black womanhood stereotypes by creating a binary distinction that positions Black women as negative and White women as positive. Accordingly, Noelliste extends privilege beyond Whiteness to include those who most closely align to it: light skin Black women. Noelliste (2016d) states, “We resent them for having access to spaces we don’t” (para. 12) to depict the deep animosity dark skin women have toward light skin Black women, which she alludes to as a form of bullying by using the metaphor “they cannot sit with us.” However, the exclusionary practices dark skin Black women subject onto light skin Black women may be a consequence of them being silenced. Hence, findings from the blog posts indicate that both BGLH and CN give voice to their members with darker skin and kinkier hair by speaking to their unique lived experiences and visually affirming their existence with self-ethnic reflectors.

Consequently, one of the factors that contribute to Black women believing the negative messages propagated about them (i.e., internalized oppression) is a lack of positive self-ethnic reflectors in the media. However, BGLH and CN create a counternarrative to the invisibility of Black women in the media, as Walton (2014e) states, “I’m a dope black chick, and so I made the site in my image. This is the main reason why it mostly features other dope black chicks” (para.
Walton uses the Biblical allusion of “made in my image” to show her agency over how she manages the content of her blog, as she is conscious in her choice to include Black women on her site. Moreover, Noelliste affirms Black women by giving them the title of “style taste makers,” but she argues that dominant culture does not recognize their influence. Thus, as reported in Chapter Four, Walton and Noelliste exercise their agency very differently. Whereas, Walton identifies strongly with overseas charities and media representation, Noelliste identifies more closely with educating readers on the historicity of race in this country. With regard to Walton (2014e), she discusses her “service mission/vacation” in South Africa in a way that presents her as a missionary (para. 5). Furthermore, she identifies the importance of using her platform to reach her audience not only about the importance of charities but also to encourage celebrities, such as former Today Show co-host, Tamron Hall, to display their natural hair in the media. Discussing the politics of hair and global societal issues in this non-threatening way illustrates how Walton’s acceptance by mainstream society has given her greater credibility in conveying natural hair acceptance to the masses. Through savvy marketing strategies that appeal to the dominant culture, Walton acknowledges her influence in helping gain greater representation of hair care products and acceptance of natural hair on Black women’s bodies. However, Walton’s post on the politics of inclusion in predominately Black populated spaces is an outlier to her frequent hairstyling and product usage posts. Conversely, Noelliste is no stranger to political topics. The dynamics of the posts Noelliste crafts give her the opportunity to educate her readers on the ramifications of American slavery. For example, her most popular post gives her the opportunity to display Faustine’s nude photo series (Noelliste, 2015a), and thereby opens up a dialogue for her to discuss Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman. Furthermore, Noelliste not only gives Faustine a larger platform to have her work seen, but she also gives
voice to Faustine by allowing her to discuss the historical significance behind her work, which represents the atrocities of slavery on Wall Street.

In addition to CN and BGLH including broader representations of Black women, the findings from the blog posts indicate that BGLH is more engaged than CN, as they maintained a dialogue with readers in the comment section to address criticisms. Although Walton also received criticism from her readers, there was no evidence that she responded to such reproach.

As reported in Chapter Four, Walton and Noelliste also differ in terms of how they make their spaces inclusive of White woman. This topic is highly controversial within the Black natural hair care community, as articles surrounding the infamous CN interview with White reader, Sarah, were among the top ten highest commented articles on both CN and BGLH. From Walton’s perspective, she sees value in inclusion, which from the outset she makes clear in her open letter to Ebony.com in response to an opinion piece that criticizes Walton for violating her BNHCB with the inclusion of Sarah. In her response, Walton uses referential strategies, such as “we,” “ourselves,” and “our” to not only name and identify Black female readers but also position them alongside one another to promote the natural hair movement, as she queries, “Must we do this natural hair thing ourselves in order to preserve a black space, or should we popularize and push our movement to the broader public” (Walton, 2014e, para. 11)? In addition to identifying the ingroup, Walton also promotes a sense of agency that gives Black women a choice: exclude and do the work ourselves or include to normalize natural hair. Yet, inclusion of White people in predominately Black spaces creates fear that the space is no longer a safe zone. Walton (2014e), however, identifies her site as a space for Black women, but she also states that it’s for “whoever else finds it useful” (para. 5). Walton refrains from specifically naming White people, which not only distances her from the very criticism she is facing, but it also alludes to a
level of insignificance for other groups coming into this space and violating it. Moreover, Walton contrasts her use of one or two non-Black readers a year against the “thousands of black women” she features elsewhere on her blog (para. 5). Hence, she suggests that Black women are secure within the confines of CN, simply due to the high level of representation. Such representation, Walton (2014e) adds, comes from a shared experience of “cultural and institutionalized racism,” which she compares to the “self-esteem issues” of non-Black readers to illustrate the gravity of the Black women’s experience and a fundamental difference between Black and White women (para. 3).

**Commenter Discursive Practices**

The second research question was: *What discursive practices do the blog commenters use in response to the blogger's practices that indicate identity formation and critical consciousness toward resistance?* The findings in Chapter Four demonstrate how Black women commenters use discourse that positions them as the *ingroup* and White and non-Black women as the *outgroup*. Namely, commenters spoke to the issue of “white privilege” as a ubiquitous problem that benefits White people, often without their knowledge. Such discourse often surfaced when White women made attempts to use inclusive language to demonstrate how “all women” struggle with hair and body image issues. Responses such as these ignore the intersecting identities of race and gender, and thereby ignores Black women. Thus, commenters made statements, such as “know your place within the community” (Amira Renee, 2014). This comment identifies Black women as a collective with shared values and characteristics, a community to which White women can only offer sympathy. However, such sympathy requires White women to not be dismissive of Black women’s struggles with their hair. For instance, CN reader, NaturalHAIR (2014) criticized Walton, by stating, “How can you let in a representative of a group who forced
us to contend with an issue as mere as hair?” By choosing the word “forced,” NaturalHAIR negatively connotes White women and their influence on the identity of Black women surrounding their hair. Moreover, NaturalHAIR argued, “We are CONSTANTLY reminded of our BLACKNESS. But that young lady, Sarah, only has to wear a bun and viola she can be worshiped by the world.” NaturalHAIR’s analogy of White women being “worshipped by the world” speaks to society devaluing Black women’s natural hair as unkempt and unprofessional while upholding White women’s hair as the idealized maker of beauty. Hence, commenters spoke to issues regarding exclusion versus inclusion of White women, which is resultant of the binary distinction that position Black women as negative and White women as positive. However, commenters challenged such perspectives. Thus, BGLH and CN allow Black women to have their feelings valorized, while creating a safe space where they are not accused of fitting into the angry Black woman trope simply for stating issues within their lived experiences. Such fear of fitting into the stereotype keeps many Black women silent, and as CN reader, LovePeaceCurls (2014) states, “[M]any people have an issue with learning how to transition into our stance of power WHILE respecting the struggle that our people experienced so that we could get to a point of equality.” This statement suggests finding a balance between speaking on issues that plague Black women.

Likewise, commenters spoke to the internalized oppression Black women experience as a consequence of the pervasive Eurocentric beauty standards within our society. However, such negative connotation of White people essentializes them to being the oppressor and operating from a place of ignorance that blindly wants to be included and, if not, becomes argumentative to defend their perspective and avoid feelings of guilt. Such responses are the result of the phenomenon of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). In response, some Black women negatively
labeled White women as *Internet trolls*, which suggests White women are disruptive to the online learning communities within BNHCBs. Likewise, readers spoke out in opposition to Noelliste when she chose to include White reader, Ali, as a supporter of the exclusivity of Black affinity spaces. Despite her support as a White ally, numerous Black women identified this tactic akin to *whitesplaining*, which allows White people to exercise their privilege and normalize Black culture as White culture. As reported in Chapter Four, the strain between Black and White women was evident in the blog comments. However, a few Black women responded that working alongside White women allies is a benefit. For instance, BGLH reader, Jill (2014), used words like “fighting for complete exclusivity” and “the birth of natural acceptance that started with us” to identify Black women as being misguided in the energy they direct toward exclusivity because they were the originators of the natural hair movement and, with that privilege comes a level of responsibility to spread the message. However, other readers identified fears of normalizing natural hair, which they argue leads to fetishism and White people taking credit for what they only see as a trend.

Commentary on the blog posts identifies the media as extracting the features of Black women (e.g., buttocks, full lips, skin color) as a profitable tool for White women. However, such tactics are void of history and still degrade Black women with said features as unattractive, but not when the features are on White bodies. Moreover, commenters referred to Black features as abstract nouns, which perpetuates the fetishizing of Black women’s bodies, as if certain aspects of Black women can just be plucked off their bodies and put unto White bodies who desire a similar aesthetic. Consequently, findings show that commenters use these identity markers to identify themselves within the natural hair community, such as “I’m fair and kinky” (cth4GiG,
This description disrupts the current narrative that light skin women have looser textured hair and/or they are biracial.

Hence, discourse surrounding Black identity based on looks was pervasive. Reader, VoicesofReason (2016), addressed this issue when she responded to a fellow reader who dismisses the Blackness of light skin women in a photograph, by posing the following question: “If they identify as black who are you to tell them they are not? Like, at what shade on the spectrum does a black person cease being black in your eyes?” Thus, there is evidence that some Black women try to establish arbitrary boundaries of Blackness, which are based on phenotypic features of skin color, and hair, and bodies. Though a consequence of slavery, the undefined rules for Black identity also speaks to the narrow scope of Black women in popular culture.

Thus, commenters argued that such underrepresentation promotes a light skin and looser curl aesthetic when representing Black women; thereby, playing into how Black women, particularly those with dark skin and kinky hair, imagine themselves. Also, commenters spoke to the underrepresentation of Black women in the media, which is why they were so drawn to BNHCBs like CN and BGLH, as these spaces display women that look like them. Commenters not only addressed the overrepresentation of White women but also light skin, biracial women. The latter, as many commenters argued, displays a narrow scope of Black women.

Many women also criticized BGLH’s narrow focus, as BGLH reader, April (2016), states, “I’m starting to believe the writers here only sit around waiting for something to be outraged about…Just calm down, everything isn’t a plot against black women.” However, by focusing on race, BGLH commenters overwhelming speak to sociopolitical issues that name internalized oppression as a consequence of the “brainwashing” and “hatred” that originated from slavery (Me, 2016). This level of awakening seems to be critical to BGLH readers like Me,
who use the online learning community to educate other readers, whether it be naming the “Chocolate” spray tans as a form of “blackface” or identifying criminal laws that prohibit unsolicited physical contact of strangers touching their natural hair. Moreover, findings from the comments indicate CN and BGLH online learning communities provide a space for readers to comment through storytelling, which often evoke empathy. Commenters also use colloquial language, acronyms, and neologisms that are common language shared among the natural hair and Black communities.

When integrating the commenters’ content analysis findings with the participant interviews and supporting Disqus comments, a picture emerges of Black women, who have overcome the internalized oppression associated with a childhood riddled with hair-shaming and harsh hair grooming practices, to emerge generally holding affirming beliefs regarding Black womanhood and natural hair. However, concerns still arise with regard to the divisiveness among Black women perpetuated by colorism and curlism, which many fear may derail the natural hair movement. Additionally, most of the women display affirming behaviors within their online spaces toward others within the community, but are cautious of including White women and looser curl biracial women in the movement for fear that their lived experiences with their kinky, coily hair will be relegated to a mere trend.

Consistency of Commenters’ Online and Offline Identities

The final research question was: How do the commenters’ online identities align with their offline identities? As reported in Chapter Five, the findings of the participant interviews and their respective Disqus comments reveal the women’s perceptions of their offline identities and how they align with their online identities. More specifically, most of the participants behaviors remain consistent, regardless if they present their identities offline or online.
However, Chloe, who I dubbed “The Woman in the Mirror,” and Stella, who I identified as “The Mindful Consumer,” showed the greatest variability between how they present offline and online. What stood out most to me about these two women was how they both were adamant in disavowing the very acts they appear to regularly participate in on various online spaces. Specifically, Chloe discussed extensively how several BGLH posts resonated with her and led to introspection; however, she also condemned Noelliste for “playing into the angry Black woman stereotype” by posting articles that criticized recent celebrity maternity photos. Yet, Chloe herself is culpable of the same behavior, as her Disqus profile shows evidence of her recently criticizing celebrities for their fashion choices, such as her response to an article that talks about the style evolution of a young actor, as Chloe contest, “Beautiful young woman and love her shows....but her style hasn't upgraded much at all. The difference is that of a Chevy Cruze and a Malibu” (cryssi, 2017g). To Chloe’s credit, she did admit during the interview that she realizes she passes judgment on Black female celebrities. However, she is trying to be more mindful of her actions, as she stated during her interview, “I felt like we should all learn to…embrace each other’s differences.” Despite her periodic negativity, Chloe speaks to her efforts to be self-reflective of her actions.

In terms of Stella, her online behavior indicates she engages most frequently with lifestyle and gossip blogs. Yet, this behavior conflicts with how she presented during the interview, as she said she is refraining from commenting on sites like BGLH “because they’re turning into a gossip site.” Additionally, Stella stated, “If you consume a bunch of negativity then that’s what you’re about, really, you know? I more so look for the positive.” However, her recent online engagement indicates she revisits older posts, and even taunts some of her most negative commenters months after online exchanges. Although this analysis seems to paint a
negative picture of Stella, her recent analyzed posts also indicate a high level of comradery from fellow commenters, as the findings indicate that Stella receives numerous comments extending gratitude to her for validating their experiences. Stella does acknowledge that her comments are not always well-received by those who oppose her, but she chooses to remain consistent. This sense of validation Stella receives speaks to the reason Stella engages with BNHCBs and blogs that give voice to Black people—the communal support. However, she remains protective of these spaces and is not afraid to unleash fiery words on those who do not support Black women.

Aside from Chloe and Stella, the remaining eight participants online identities closely align to their offline identities. Moreover, the five women who have personal blogs display a level of engagement that suggests they rely on other bloggers as a resource to grow their brand, whether through soliciting advice, engaging with influencers, or posting links to their blog on other sites. Overall, the participants use the online space to engage with those who have shared interests and experiences as a medium to have their interests heard and valorized.

**The Findings in Light of the Literature Review, Theories, and Conceptual Framework**

In Chapter Four, I provided a comprehensive review of the blog post and comment findings, while Chapter Five is dedicated to the participant interview and Disqus comment findings. However, it is important for me to merge these findings to provide a complete picture of the significance of the data. Thus, I will integrate these findings by organizing them within the framework of (a) racializing the “other;” (b) the construction of Black women’s identity within popular culture; and (c) blogging to enact consciousness-raising and resistance.

**Racializing the “Other”**

The social construction of race has heavy implications for Black womanhood, as the cultural, historical, and political underpinnings signify a sense of *otherness* that essentializes
Black women through symbols and signs to prove that they are inherently inferior to White women. Such a discourse of categorical differences gives meaning to Black women’s lives and helps them to not only understand who they are but also who they are not (Storey, 2009). However, such dichotomous ways of thinking create negative and false images of Black women, such as unattractiveness and hostility, which is absent from history and context (Giroux, 1994). Accordingly, these negative feelings of otherness were a prominent finding in both the blog content data, the interviews, and Disqus data. Namely, the otherness revealed in this study manifest through (a) the dominant culture fetishizing Black women’s bodies; (b) recognizing the Black woman’s complicity in othering one another; and (c) policing self to avoid being classified as the angry Black woman trope.

**Natural hair is for Black women.** Blogging has been lauded as a powerful medium for recruiting and connecting concerned citizens (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Maratea, 2008; Tatarchevskiy, 2011). This idea of citizenship can translate to the specific community of natural hair. Consequently, one of the main themes that emerges from integrating the blog post and interview data is the controversy surrounding who can be included in the natural hair movement. In Chapter Four, I reported that Noelliste and Walton have different perspectives on maintaining a dedicated space for Black women with natural hair. From the outset, Walton paints broad strokes when she refers to her reader as “those struggling to embrace their naturally curly hair” (Walton, 2014a, para. 1). However, when confronted on her decision to include a White personal who identifies with the natural hair movement, Walton stated, “The site is for black women, and whoever else finds it useful…featuring other ethnic groups does not mean that my blog is not for black women” (Walton, 2014e, para. 5, 6). However, findings reported in Chapter Four and Five indicate that Black women deeply value the community developed within
BNHCBs and other Black-centered sites, as they provide a safe space to discuss shared values and experiences. For instance, when reflecting on the comradery on BGLH, Stella quips, “I’m not gonna lie. It’s like, did all the cool girls become natural?” Her sentiments are felt by many of the women within this study, as the findings from the blog posts and interviews indicate that Black women that frequent BNHCBs feel a sense of unity, encouragement, validation, acceptance, visibility, and security. These findings affirm the work of Papacharissi (2002), Cnaan and Milofsky (2007), Maratea (2008), and Kavada (2010), as their works assert that humans engage with blogs to fill their innate desire to interact and build trusting relationships with other individuals around common experiences. Moreover, the findings as reported in Chapters Four and Five also indicate that Noelliste, Walton, and their readers rely on acronyms and neologisms (i.e., coined words), such as “PJ” (product junkie), “two-strand twist,” “pre-poo,” and “shrinkage” to discuss issues related to natural hair manageability and care. Additionally, the findings show instances of these Black women using colloquial language, such as “The homie,” “swag,” “on the lowlow,” “turn-up,” “look a little suspect,” “And the church said…,” and “Preach” to signify being an insider and living a shared experience. This evidence of a collective identity and norms supports the work of Cnaan and Milofsky (2007), Florini (2013), Ortiz and Ostertag (2014), and Steele (2016). For instance, Steele (2016) found that bloggers employed certain language specific to their community to create a sense of belonging that those outside of the community would have difficulty deciphering. Likewise, Florini (2013) suggests that Black users of social media create their own space by “actively performing their racial identities” through such tactics as figurative language and wordplay, which ultimately has the potential to create a collective space for racial identity (p. 235).
Such affinity for spaces such as BNHCBs seem to bring a protective factor, as the findings from Chapter Four and Five indicate that many of these Black women create barriers for who can and cannot be included within the natural hair community. Consequently, when Heather reflects on biracial women believing they are included in the movement, she adamantly proclaims, “The natural hair movement [is] for Black women.” Additionally, Amelia creates parameters surrounding hair texture, as she states, “I don’t want to see it hijacked because it is another whole category of mixed race hair. That 3c texture of mixed hair is an entity within of itself. It could have a whole YouTube section all to itself.” Using the term “hijacked” also speaks to many of the feelings discovered in the blog posts and interviews, which seem to align with various feelings, such as anxiety, frustration, and jealousy. These feelings are all consequences of the silencing and erasure they fear comes from including White and biracial women in the movement, as oftentimes the intersecting oppressions of race and gender are ignored in Black women (Collins, 2000; DiAngelo, 2011; Andersen & Collins, 2013). Such negative feelings, affirm the work of Dearing (2010), who asserts that even if Black women represented the idealized qualities of White women, they still could not be loved by virtue of the color of their skin.

**Complicity in othering ourselves.** Issues regarding otherness due to the phenotypic-markers of skin color and hair was a pervasive issue indicated in the blog posts and interview data. For instance, Noelliste addressed this issue from the perspective of colorism (i.e., discrimination based on skin color). However, she did not identify such discriminatory practices the responsibility of White people. In fact, it was just the opposite, as she turned her criticism to Black women who find it “easy to lash out” at the light skin or biracial Black woman they perceive to embody a skin color deemed acceptable by society (Noelliste, 2016d, p. 12). Such
acceptance, Noelliste (2016d) argues, is a form of privilege, as she states, “[Y]es they have privilege, but rarely enough to escape the burdens society places on the backs of black women. They’re carrying a lighter pack, but we’re all hunched over” (para. 12). Moreover, Noelliste and commenters assign light skin as an abstract noun, which suggests it’s a tangible object that women can possess. However, those who covet it, Noelliste argues, are left feeling resentful of those who are seemingly blessed to possess it, as she asks her readers, “[H]ow do we give voice to darker-skinned black women while not refusing lighter-skinned women a seat at the table of black womanhood” (Noelliste, 2016d, p. 14)? With colorism as such a salient issue within this study, especially with the arbitrary markers the women make in regard to who is considered biracial versus those who are considered light skin Black people, speaks to the enduring power of the origins of race and the creation of a racialized discourse, which not only separates those who physically appear to belong to different groups, but it also separates those within the same group. In all honesty, I found the discourse among these women on this issue to be mind-boggling at times. From those trying to establishing a “firm boundary,” such as “browner, more coily, not biracial” (Acts of Faith Blog, 2016) to those quipping back by asking, “[A]t what shade on the spectrum does a black person cease being black in your eyes?” (VoicesofReason, 2016), these mental gymnastics shed light on the stereotypical Black phenotype of dark skin and kinky, coarse hair as markers of Blackness (Hall, 2009). The findings regarding establishing such arbitrary markers of Blackness affirm the first-person accounts of De Veaux (2000) and Griffin (2012), who both discuss their issues with reconciling their Black bodies and skin color. However, this commentary also speaks to a deeper issue of self-acceptance that is often difficult for Black women to securely embrace.
Consequently, the findings from the blog posts and interviews indicate that many of the women have a shared experience of hair-shaming, or *curlism* (i.e., preferential treatment of a Black woman with a looser curl pattern), at the hands of their family members. For instance, BGLH reader, GKillingbeck (2015b), discusses the deep-seeded *internalized oppression* that develops from tying a negative identity to Black hair, as she laments about Black mothers being “SO programmed that they relax their children’s hair as young as 3 or 4.” Additionally, as reported in Chapter Five, many of the participants, issues with hair-shaming seem to have manifested from their parents’ inability to properly teach them how to manage their hair. From Chloe begging her mother to shave her head to Amelia being “chopped” in the head for having difficult to manage hair, many of the Black women recall painful hair grooming practices that were carelessly carried out to ensure they looked “presentable.” This need to look presentable is closely tied to Black mothers presenting their children in a way that reflects that they are attentive mothers, as a child with “unkempt hair” signified a negligent mother. These findings affirm the work of Awad et al. (2015), who found that messages from family regarding appearance were tied to concerns of how society would perceive them as being productive citizens. Additionally, this study affirms the work of Zukiswa, Coetzee, and Rau (2017), who found that there are everyday implications for young Black African women and their hair in terms of how they feel about themselves and how they perceive others feel toward them.

**The angry Black woman.** This narrative of the tragedy of dark skin stems from the controlling images of the matriarch and mammy caricatures, both of which stigmatizes Black women as “overly aggressive, unfeminine women” whose level of assertiveness often gets misconstrued as anger, hence the angry Black woman trope (Collins, 2000, p. 75). Many women identified with concerns for being labeled as the angry Black woman. Yet, CN reader,
NaturalHAIR (2014) recognizes those who label Black women as being angry or aggressive are trying to “silence black women.” Despite her level of consciousness, the findings indicate that Black women had differing opinions as to whether or not to speak out about issues within their community. Whereas, some take the position to remain silent others have no issue with speaking up. For instance, Amelia admits she has limited her comments on BGLH because she has come to the conclusion that “people are going to believe what they want to believe.” She identifies difficult topics as “the inconvenient truth,” since issues such as race and racism can elicit defensiveness in people. Despite the possibility of being characterized, BGLH reader, OXxoxo, finds solace in releasing her frustrations amongst other Black people because they can speak to her lived experience. Thus, spaces like BNHCBs seem to be a source of refuge for Black women, where they can either escape the stress of Black womanhood by viewing CN posts or have their concerns validated on BGLH. These findings affirm the work of Bradley (2015), who asserts that social media, namely YouTube, can be used to address Black women’s anxieties from the daily confrontation of microaggressions.

However, the controlling image of the angry Black woman not only stereotypes Black women’s behavior, but it also leads to a dichotomy where White women are the measuring stick used for evaluation of femininity and beauty. In this regard, Noelliste posted an article discussing actor, Eartha Kitt’s rejection by Black men, which resonated with numerous BGLH readers who shared their experiences about failed relationships with Black men and how they view them as undependable; therefore, they look for White partners. Additionally, Brianna spoke to her initial anxieties about going natural, as she was told she would not be able to “get a man.” These findings support the work of Carey (2014) and Williams-Witherspoon (2014), who both studied Black male playwrights to determine if they perpetuate the stereotypical Black
female tropes. Whereas, Carey found evidence to support perpetuating the stereotype, Williams-Witherspoon found evidence that Black men have the potential to subvert these hegemonic caricatures and use them as a source of empowerment for women.

However, this potential for empowerment has not been fully realized by Black women, as the findings from Chapter Four and Five attest that many of the women criticized the negativism among Black women. For instance, Walton and Noelliste both address the vitriol they receive on their blogs, to which Noelliste believes is an expected consequence of having a high traffic site. However, Whitney and Amelia both bemoan that the disjointedness among Black people in general, and Black women in particular, seems to be a constant theme. Moreover, numerous commenters and participants identified BGLH as feeding into the negativity, and Black people being drawn to the drama like moths to a flame. Chloe further expressed she is concerned that BGLH is “playing into the angry Black woman stereotype” because of their narrow focus on the racial issues that affect Black women. Moreover, Brianna expressed concern for the White gaze, as she believes White people may view BGLH and get a negative impression of Black women. These findings support the work of Harkness (2012), who contests that those who do not have group membership and view those from the outgroup through an uncritical eye may actually lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes of those within the outgroup who are attempting to “reconfigure the norms” through conscious counternarratives (p. 296). Likewise, the work of McNally (2016) contests creative cultural critique may be missed by “color-blind” fans. Also, the work of Jeffries and Jeffries (2015) is relevant, as they contest that the “complex, layered characterization” of Black women in the media will be difficult for consumers to deconstruct; thereby, leading to perpetuating stereotypes due to distal views of Black women (p. 131).
However, the negativism is not something Noelliste set out to uncover, as she recently disclosed that the direction of her blog needs to be revisited, since it has turned into “a meticulous catalogue of racial aggressions against black women including but not limited to erasure by beauty brands, cultural appropriation and racist marketing” (Noelliste, 2017b, para. 2). Although well-intentioned, Noelliste has recognized that her unveiling of the plight of the Black woman has done more harm than good. These findings support the work of Henry, West, and Jackson (2010), who caution that the conflicting derogatory and empowering messages seen in high-commodity platforms may leave Black women confused if they do not have a healthy self-esteem, value system, and positive role models and relationships.

Commodification and Normalization of Natural Hair

Oftentimes when Black women talk about their physical bodies, it’s in contrast to normative standards of beauty. Yet, the dominant culture looks at their preoccupation with beauty at surface level and thinks they are just consuming products in a similar fashion to how White women consume products. However, it’s generally driven by deep-seeded feelings of being deemed as unattractive. Thus, the findings reported in Chapter Four and Five indicate how these women recognize the danger of popular culture creating and perpetuating a public pedagogy of dominant ideologies, such as the commodification and normalization of natural hair in order to achieve a certain aesthetic.

The big deal with blogging while Black (and natural). As stated in Chapters Four and Five, the blog content and interview data indicate that Black women understand they own the natural hair movement, and they want proper recognition. Such adamant ownership stems from the popularity of the natural hair movement being commodified and reimagined as a mere trend. Noelliste and several commenters speak to the influence of Black women within popular culture,
as Noelliste asserts that Black women are “style taste makers,” who deserve to be recognized as such. Likewise, BGLH reader, KissOfDanger’s (2016), quip: “I say let’s charge royalties” has implications for the White gaze that looks at Black bodies as object and not subject (hooks, 1989). Additionally, Brianna perceives White people view her hair as if she’s “making some edgy fashion statement.” Thus, Brianna alludes to the dominant culture viewing Black hair outside the context of history, which relegates Black women’s hair to an aesthetic that anyone can purchase. Accordingly, blog content data, as indicated in Chapter Four, indicates that bloggers and commenters use abstract nouns when referring to Black features, as if Black skin, hair, and various other body parts are tangible objects that women can possess. Such abstraction speaks to the fetishization of Black women’s bodies and how, void of history, the media extracts the features of Black women (i.e., buttocks, full lips, skin color) as a profitable tool. Thus, Stella argues that Black women spend more on hair products than their White counterparts; however, she is baffled as to why a Black-owned company like Shea Moisture would begin to cater to the White demographic, as she states, “There is no reason financially to switch your market, unless there’s some type of prestige that comes along with, you know, marketing your products a certain way.” Additionally, Amelia speaks to the Black consumer’s obsession with hair care products, which have White-owned companies making billions of dollars in profits. These findings support the work Gooden (2011), Sandlin and Maudlin (2012), and Johnson (2013), who all assert that marketing tactics are based on what advertisers think Black women value and desire; thus, ads are limited to beauty and style.

Moreover, the findings from the blog posts and interviews indicate that Black women often get bombarded with products, which can lead to them becoming product junkies, which are people who consumes a high level of natural hair products in a never-ending attempt to find the
best product for their hair. However, Whitney argues that this quest for the “Holy Grail” of hair
products is a result of “big blogs” promoting a certain aesthetic that makes their readers want to
emulate the “popular girl” and buy the same products she is endorsing. The findings, as reported
in Chapters Four and Five indicate that most women recognize they must stick with products that
work for their hair, since products endorsed by bloggers do not have the same results.

Additionally, the findings from the blog posts and interviews indicate that numerous
women seek information on hair care tips and styling techniques to achieve a collectively-valued
appearance, and such interest has led half of the participants in this study to form their own brand
of blogging. These findings are supported by the work of Craig (2006), who asserts Black
women’s hair care routines (i.e., straight, braids, dreadlocks, weaves) can lead to
entrepreneurship, friendship, and a collectively-valued female appearance. However, Whitney
and Amelia spoke to the skepticism they feel toward popular bloggers, as Whitney adds that
these bloggers are paid marketing _influencers_, who will promote a product they are not even
using because they signed a contract that specifies what they need to say. These findings speak
to the assertion of Lovink (2011), who argues that those who engage with blogs “are caught in a
web of stimuli and feelings that are channeled in specific ways” (p. 95), which are predominately
influenced by the media. Thus, the expressions posted by these big-name bloggers may not be
their own, as oftentimes their words are commodified by the media. Likewise, these findings
affirm the work of Van Cleaf (2015), who asserts that the personal experiences of blogging have
the potential to shift to for-profit production due to increased site traffic and advertising. Thus,
the commodification of BNHCBs may, in fact, be leading to depoliticizing Black womanhood by
the hands of a media that takes their love for their community and uses it for profit. Such
commodification, as seen in the findings of Chapters Four and Five, support the work of
Paracharissi (2002), Maratea (2008), Lovink (2011), and Morozov (2011), who argue that the potential for social media to be politically disruptive is often undermined by the existing political and structural forces that inevitably strong arms its authoritarianism to maintain the status quo. Hence, seemingly banal media can be quickly commodified.

**Normalization of (coily and kinky) natural hair.** The findings from the blog posts and interviews, as reported in Chapters Four and Five, indicate the reasons for going natural varied, but the participants clearly indicated their choice was not “political.” Well, at least not in the traditional sense. For instance, Heather states, “I don’t think any part about our bodies should be political.” However, when discussing Walton’s mainstream appeal, she stated she was hoping “more political things would be talked about and not that natural Black hair is just a vanity for Black women.” Moreover, Anissa states she went natural to be a “role model” for her children. Additionally, Walton (2008) states on her “About Me” page that natural hair is “neither a political statement, nor a ‘back to nature’ movement” (para. 3). Furthermore, several women state they believe other naturals should not force those who relax their hair to go natural, as it must be a personal choice. These findings support the work of Zukiswa et al. (2017), who found that, despite the desired norm of straight hair Black African women’s hairstyle choices were not tied to the women disavowing their African roots. Likewise, this study affirms the work of Awad et al. (2015), who argue that “Black women’s aesthetics are not considered normative” and wearing natural hair is often stereotyped into women expressing a political ideology (p. 546). Moreover, the findings from my study align with the work of Caldwell (2003), who contends that Black women have to come to terms with the significance of their hair through personal experiences, which are often linked to specific sociopolitical contexts.
Additionally, Stella, Heather, and Amelia share similar hopes of natural hair becoming so normalized in our society to the point that straight hair will be more of a surprise among Black women. Additionally, Amelia hopes for the day when advertisers will glamorize Black women with tightly coiled natural hair to sell mainstream hair products, and the women watching will say, “Wow, she’s beautiful! Where can I get that shampoo?” However, the data indicates that the women critique the media for displaying a narrow view of Black women, which typically includes a woman with light skin and loose curls as a representative of Black women. Additionally, Whitney attests that advertisers often use the “racially ambiguous girl” and a dark skin woman with “short, kinky hair,” but they never show a black woman with long hair with a looser curl pattern or a light skin woman with coarse hair. Likewise, several women revealed that they typically see the light skin, looser curl woman as the representative for natural hair companies and becoming more popular than their dark skin counterparts. These findings affirm the work of Sandlin and Maudlin (2012), who found mainstream network beauty commercials typically feature light skin Black celebrities, if any Black celebrities at all.

With such a narrow representation of Black women, especially in terms of their hair, media messages perpetuate an aesthetic of looser curls. Thus, women with hair not resembling that texture modify their hair to align more with the visual images they constantly see. Hence, the data from Chapters Four shows the most commented posts penned by CN are overwhelming related to hair care tips and tricks. Amongst all the praise and ravenous consumption of Walton’s hair content, NaturalHAIR (2014) acknowledges the hegemony when she criticizes Walton for “still buying into eurocentric [sic] standards.” This critique seems to be in reference to Walton recommending hair tutorials and products to help Black women achieve “stretched hair” that gives the appearance of a looser curl pattern (Walton, 2014a), which is more
acceptable in our society. Thus, such hair grooming practices brings new meaning to the work of Rooks (1996), Thompson (2009), and Gooden (2011) who all speak to the phenomenon of Black women manipulating their hair in order to ascribe to White norms of attractiveness. However, in this case, those with natural hair are altering their hair curl pattern to be more presentable.

**The Merging of the Personal and the Collective**

Based on the premise of this study, the notable gap of the potential for online learning communities, such as blogs, to engender resistance through facilitating Black women’s identity development and critical consciousness online provided a framework for the participants to begin examining their identity development and modes of resistance both online and offline. According to Lovink (2011), blogs are primarily used by an “introspective individual who reflects on his or her thoughts and impressions…blogs are expressions of free speech, of an individualism that believes each is entitled to his or her own opinion and should be brave enough to say it” (p. 97). Hence, the results from the blog content and interviews indicate that these Black women’s engagement with BNHCBs and other Black-centered blogs helps them be part of a collective of co-creators that add to the content the bloggers share, all while speaking from their personal perspectives.

**Readers reimagined as co-content creators.** The blog posts and participant interviews specifically show evidence for those who choose to engage in blogs, not simply by *lurking* (i.e., consuming content but not commenting) but also by creating content in a collective of people with shared interest. More specifically, the findings in Chapter Four highlight how CN readers maintain an ongoing dialogic exchange where they assume the role of expert by offering advice and support to other women on how to manage product recommendations from Walton. Within this context and the scope of this analysis, the readers typically begin by directing their questions
to Walton, yet she rarely responds. However, readers will answer questions on her behalf. For instance, Adeola feels very strongly about meeting the needs of those who are seeking help, as she will often step in and answer questions when she notices the blogger is not responding. Thus, these embedded comments support the blogger’s posts, and thereby do not identify the blogger as the only person able to give advice. Additionally, Walton often ends her posts with a comment or a question that encourages dialogue, such as “I’m taking suggestions so leave some in the comments below” (Walton 2014b, para. 9). Such solicitation for advice garners readers the opportunity to talk about their personal experiences and techniques and lends itself to behavior more typically seen on discussion boards. Such tactics speak to the work of Hardy and Kukla (2015), who contend that discussion boards allow for more dialogic exchanges in real-time among a group of people who have equal authority. Additionally, the findings support the work of Kavada (2013), who argues that a more dialogic exchange of information allows readers to also produce and circulate knowledge, which garners greater participation and interactivity. Likewise, these findings affirm the work of Thomas and Brown (2011), who envision social learning environments as a communal process, where “people learn through their interaction and participation with one another in fluid relationships that are the result of shared interests and opportunity” (p. 50). Moreover, Atton (2014) contends that activists use blogs as a way to seek communities that valorize their interests and gain voice. Thus, sharing lived experiences contributes knowledge to the larger community; thereby, allowing them to assume the position of the educator. Likewise, these findings affirm the work of Wright and Sandlin (2017), who argue that learning from everyday life occurs within a social context and not strictly within formal education settings. Thus, the utility of blogging can be considered as an alternative site of
learning, as these findings support the work of Dennis (2015), who contend that those who engage with blogs recount learning occurring outside the classroom in “everyday life” (p. 293).

Moreover, data from the blog posts and interviews, as reported in Chapters Four and Five, also shows how these women provide very detailed information regarding hair techniques. For example, Adeola posts images to complement her detailed instructions for her hair care routines. Other readers detail their process and upload photos to show the end result. These findings align with the work of Reitsamer and Zobl (2014), who assert that blogging communities are a site not only for information exchange but also for exchanging skills, as well. Additionally, these findings support the works Papacharissi (2002), boyd (2008), and Kavada (2010), who all emphasize that blogs are resources for the retrieval and storage of information that is not only searchable but replicable.

Conversely, the data from this study indicates that Noelliste and the staff of BGLH are more engaged with their readers than Walton. For instance, Noelliste crafted a post to address criticism from her readers and defend one of her staff writers. As a result, her staff writer maintained a dialogue with readers in the comment section to give voice to her work. When Walton herself faced such criticism among her readers, she chose not to respond to them directly, but she did pen an open letter to the Ebony.com editor that publicized the issue. This lack of reciprocity from bloggers was a frequent criticism among participants, as Amelia equates the experiences of vying for feedback from big-name bloggers to that of “just watching as part of the [TV] audience.” These finding supports the work of Schneider and Simonetto (2016), who argue that those who maintain a public presence limit their dialogic exchanges to those within their discipline, while rarely engaging with those in the public.
The personal is political. Tatarchevskiy (2011) argues that blogs have expanded the potential of the ordinary citizen as one who is capable of shaping the public image. Hence, the findings in Chapters Four and Five demonstrate the influence of BNHCBs. For instance, Walton (2014e) asserts, “I and other bloggers have been working hard to make the natural hair movement popular” (para. 4). Such popularity has led to increased visibility in the media of women with natural hair. However, such visibility extends beyond celebrities, as many of the participants state they feel affirmed just by looking at images of other Black women with natural hair that looks similar to their own hair. For instance, Whitney contends Black women “want to see themselves reflected in the examples [media] gives.” Likewise, Chloe was drawn to BGLH because she was able to see other women with hair that looked like hers. Additionally, Walton (2014e) herself acknowledges the importance of self-ethnic reflectors, stating “I’m a dope black chick, and so I made the site in my image. This is the main reason why it mostly features other dope black chicks” (para. 5). These findings affirm the work of Cleveland (2010) and Smith (2010), who contend that Black women’s bodies within White dominated spaces disrupts the traditional views of Black womanhood. Moreover, the high visibility of Black women within BNHCBs, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, supports the work Bradley (2015), who asserts social media has become a revolutionary space that allows Black women to “visualize themselves, establish communities and share/document their experiences online” (p. 149). Such visualization leads these women to define and redefine their identities (Patterson-Faye, 2016).

Accordingly, several women spoke to feeling empowered and confident in wearing their natural hair. For instance, Brianna states she feels “more positive and empowered” since she has gone natural because she can disregard the societal “box” that once constricted her. These results affirm the work of Hardy and Kukla (2015), who assert, “Dedicated discursive
communities can be places where such stories are built and shared, making new narrative possibilities recognizable” (p. 124). Likewise, the active process of identity development seen within the findings, supports the work of Wright (2007) and Wright and Sandlin (2009), who assert that adults are capable of reaching levels of self-actualization through unmediated means.

Moreover, Chapter Five also shows how Danita and Whitney envision their hair as a way to challenge their employers’ perceptions of professionality. These findings affirm the work of Weitz (2001), who contends that Black women are consciously aware of dominant expectations regarding their hair, which the author argues gives them power in deciding to accommodate, resist, or combine the two tactics. Likewise, these women’s decision to wear their hair natural supports the work of Wright and Sandlin (2017), who assert that everyday living experiences provide opportunities for resistance.

Additionally, the findings reported in Chapters Four and Five speak to the ubiquity of natural hair, especially in terms of hair product choices seen within the booming natural hair care market. For instance, Walton (2014d) asserts that the popularity of the natural hair movement “has led to good outcomes like a crap load more product options, and a warmer reception among friends, family and colleagues” (para. 4). These findings affirm the work of Guy (2007), who contends that popular culture can be “a vehicle for challenging structured inequalities and social injustices” (p. 15). Likewise, the plethora of choices Black women now have in terms of hair care products also speaks to the work of Dennis (2015), who conceptualizes public pedagogic space, such as blogs, as affinity spaces that promote social movements. Thus, claims made by women, such as Walton in her highly-visible space also affirm the work of Maratea (2008), who asserts that claims from marginalized voices can, at times, force the press to react to such claims.
Moreover, the blog comment section, as reported in Chapter Four, displays examples of women recommending various natural hair products, while also telling women where they can purchase such products. Additionally, Chapter Five also gives evidence of women who have inspired some of the women in their family to go natural. However, Brianna, Whitney, and Adeola all claim that their mothers have no intention of wearing their hair natural, despite their successful transition from relaxed to natural hair. These findings support the work of Caldwell (2003), who contends, “The relationship between hair and consciousness further suggests that Black women’s hair is a key site for mapping and reflecting internal struggles and transformations related to race and gender” (p. 27). However, the blog content and interviews indicate that Black women engage in these spaces to connect with others who share similar lived experiences. For instance, BGLH reader, Riak (2016), expresses how Noelliste validated her experience with colorism, as she proclaims, “Amen to all this. This made me cry.”

Additionally, in Chapter Five, Erica states she typically responds to blog posts that personally connect with her, which in turn compels her to share something about herself, such as “I kinda went through something like this.” These results support the work of Harrison (2014), who asserts that blogs can be places of hope amongst those with similar issues. Likewise, these findings affirm the work of Maratea (2008), who contends that a blog’s success is, in part, due to the “tight-knit blogging communities” that allow for personal narratives (p. 143).

However, as found within this study, such personal narratives do not only focus on hair woes, as women that predominately engage with CN identify. Conversely, those that primarily engage with BGLH have heavily commented on posts that focus on: (a) Black women’s bodies as a form of resistance; (b) the otherness of Black women; (c) fetishizing Black features; (d) Black affinity spaces; and (e) colorism. Although many criticized Noelliste for her narrow focus,
these topics expand the idea of Black women just being concerned about their hair and beauty to a deeper sociopolitical context that recognizes the foundational issues that affect many of them. Thus, these findings, as indicated in Chapters Four and Five, create new forms of knowledge that demonstrate the multidimensionality of the Black female experience (Berry, 2010) and affirm the work of White (2011), who contends that personal narratives and lived experiences “demonstrate how the personal is both political and theoretical” (p. 196). Such personal narratives, as discussed in the findings, affirm the work of Steele (2016), who contend that Black blogs are an extension of the Black oral tradition that “demonstrate solidarity and resistance and urge uplift” (p. 13). However, the latter issue of uplift is still a work-in-progress for Noelliste, who has recently modified her content to be more celebratory. It’s important to find a healthy balance between celebrating Blackness and critiquing anti-Blackness. Nevertheless, these findings affirm the work of Rossing (2016), who asserts that this form of critical public pedagogy has the potential to develop critical consciousness and communities by affirming group identities.

**Implications for Theory and Practice**

The results of my research have important implications for theory building in regard to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, which guided my study. With the notable gap of Black women’s identity development, consciousness-raising, and social action in relation to online learning communities, I combined critical public pedagogy with Black feminist thought, womanist identity development theory, and the theory of connectivism to create a conceptual foundation for this study. Together, they provide a framework for Black women to begin examining their identity development and modes of resistance as they relate to their online and offline actions and the media representations that currently marginalize their multifaceted ways of being. My research may allow us to view some of the components of critical race theory and
critical public pedagogy from a Black feminist perspective grounded in Black feminist thought and the womanist identity development theory. Additionally, my study may give space for critical perspectives of adult education to play a more significant role in the informal learning process of Black women. Lastly, my study adds knowledge to the intersection of social media and adult identity development, particularly with regard to online learning communities within blogging sites. Furthermore, it adds to the small body of literature that draws attention to the potential influence of blogging as a method of resistance. Ultimately, my work is a counternarrative to the traditional analysis and implementation of adult learning and development (Sandlin et al., 2013), while giving voice to the lived experiences of Black women. My work relies on a multidisciplinary research approach to “seek a better understanding of the ways human beings learn every day via interactions with the popular culture within which we are steeped” (Wright & Sandlin, 2017, p. 79). Thus, the utilization of critical public pedagogy and the importance of unmediated learning within digital spaces is an example of moving beyond traditional adult learning theories, which the Wright and Sandlin (2017) argue often neglect the cultural context of learning within cultural spaces.

In addition, my study is a response to the work of Sandlin and company (Wright & Sandlin, 2009; Sandlin et al., 2011a, Sandlin et al. 2011b, Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; Wright & Sandlin, 2017), who argue that more research needs to be done to add to the body of work on critical public pedagogy, particularly as it relates to adults who engage seriously with popular culture. Moreover, the findings of this research address the argument by Sandlin, O’ Malley, and Burdick (2011a) that most of the literature on public pedagogy supports the use of educators as interlocutors for optimal learning in a public space. Hence, these Black women’s narratives, online engagement, and subsequent learning stretches the bounds of the public intellectual (i.e.,
educators within public spaces) to include, as Sandlin et al. (2011a) argue, politically engaged communities that decenter academic theory and research. This decentering, Wright and Sandlin (2017) contend, is a much-needed direction of adult and lifelong learning, as “traditional theories in the field often neglect [the] existential element of adult learning,” which help adult learners develop their identities through mediated or unmediated means (p. 80).

Moreover, the findings support Black women operating within the realm of an organic intellectual, who have the empathetic capacity to understand the marginalized group because they too are members of the same group. However, the profitability of black natural hair care has catapulted Walton and Noelliste into an elite status, which seems to create some disillusionment as to their capacity to engage in acts of resistance. This adds meaning to Brookfield’s (2005) argument that it is “so difficult for well-meaning middle-class radicals to become organic intellectuals” (p. 109). Brookfield’s assertion coupled with Maratea’s (2008) argument that claims made by blogger activists are influenced by the intersectionality of their culture and political beliefs. Thus, the claim-making power of Walton and Noelliste, in relation to the culture and political beliefs of their audience can lead to their readers discounting their claims. Evidence for reader critique is found in Chapters Four and Five, where readers remain skeptical of blog posts that they see as clickbait (i.e., content created to attract attention). In light of all these findings, I will elucidate what they mean in light of the following conceptual and theoretical frameworks that guided my work: (a) a feminist perspective of critical race theory; (b) critical public pedagogy, informed by Black feminist thought; (c) womanist identity development theory; and (d) connectivism learning theory.
A Feminist Perspective of Critical Race Theory

The findings indicated in Chapters Four and Five are guided by the five basic tenants of critical race theory, which include: (1) racism is pervasive in our society; (2) critical race theory is multidisciplinary; (3) civil rights law and educational theories do not focus enough on race-based issues; (4) commonly accepted ideas (e.g., color blindness) serve the interest of the majority; (5) the experiences of ethnically diverse groups in both a historical and social context should be valued (Isaac, Merriweather, & Rogers, 2010). The blog posts and participants both spoke to the anxiety they feel as a result of exposure to microaggressions (e.g., angry Black woman trope) and the narrow representation of Black women in the media, which is a result of the myth of color blindness (Taylor, 1998; Howard-Hamilton, 2003). However, the engagement of these Black women with BNHCBs is a demonstration of counter-storytelling that challenges the colorblind ideology and, as Brookfield and Holst (2011) argue, challenges what is valued as scholarship. Thus, my study highlights how Black women create counterstories within safe spaces, or counterspaces, such as BNHCBs, which allow them to examine the personal effects of racism, classism, and sexism. Moreover, the voices of the women in this study support a Black feminist critical race theory perspective, as their collective identity is shaped by a shared pain tied to an ancestral history that is often silenced, a process hooks (1989) identifies as “self-recovery” (p. 12). Consequently, these women’s stories help to dismantle the interlocking system of race, class, and gender oppression (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

However, several women addressed concerns regarding the dominant culture perceiving a focus on racial injustices as divisive and leading to victimization. However, the findings suggest that posts penned by Noelliste speak to the lived experiences of Black women, particularly by using their bodies to tell the tale of their history (Cleveland, 2010; Smith, 2010; Carey, 2011;
Griffin, 2012). Thus, these concerns support hooks’ (1994) argument that a focus on differences should move beyond the fear of conflict to an exploration “to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth” (p. 113). The potential is there, as Amelia stated in Chapter Four, but it has yet to be fully realized.

**Critical Public Pedagogy Informed by Black Feminist Thought**

The findings in Chapters Four and Five give evidence for Black women critiquing media representations of them as a means of challenging hegemonic media narratives (Wright, 2000). Such critique of popular culture is imperative when looking at the Black subject because it helps shape our actions and identity, as Hall (2000) contests, “[H]ow we ‘see’ ourselves and our social relations matters, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices” (p. 272). These culturally hegemonic images and representations, Giroux (1994) argues, “produces meanings mediated through claims to truth represented in images that circulate in an electronic, informational hyperspace which disassociates itself from history, context, and struggle” (p. 4). Such disassociation is easy because of the underrepresentation of Black women in the media; thus, those who have the power, create a caricature of Black womanhood that ignores the multiplicity of their existence (Gilley, 2005, Johnson, 2013). Such imagery is an effective tool for the media to narrowly teach Black women about their identities; however, what can be learned can also be (un)learned. “Thus, unlearning itself becomes the means not only for the acquisition of agency but for the concept of social change itself” (Giroux, 2000, p. 354). Miller, Armstrong, and Edwards (2005), who assert that “seeking to be different through consumption means buying into a (sub)cultural identity shared with others” within society (para. 14).

In terms of the findings, issues emerged regarding narrow representations of Black women. For instance, as reported in Chapter Five, Erica has boycotted television shows that
perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black women. She states she made this decision to set an example for other Black women to “set themselves apart.” Additionally, Amelia spoke to feeling invisible in the media. However, Brianna suggests an increase in television shows that are presenting a broader view of Black womanhood. Despite some progress, various women assert that media representations of Black women are either stereotypical portrayals or the Black woman typically has light skin with loosely curly hair. These Black female critiques within the BNHCB learning community adds to the growing body of critical public pedagogy research within adult education, and is a response to Wright and Sandlin’s (2009) call to study culture through this lens. Consequently, the findings reported in Chapter Four and Five bring meaning to the significance of blogs as important spaces for critical pedagogy, as the women’s engagement with BNHCBs facilitate their identity development through “cultural critique and activism” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010, p. 351). Thus, by choosing to wear their hair natural and engage with a community that supports this endeavor, Black women reimagine the natural hair aesthetic and the emotions that surround it as a way to critique the oppressive intersectional identities of Black women (i.e., the matrix of domination) within popular culture, the media, and cultural institutions (Sandlin et al., 2011a, p. 352; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011b; Andersen & Collins, 2013). Within this framework, wearing natural hair and engaging in dialogue surrounding its implications for Black womanhood is a method Black women use to contest their internalized oppression, which is as a consequence of the pervasive Eurocentric beauty standards (Weitz, 2001; White, 2005; Thurman, 2012).

Moreover, the engagement of the online commenters and the participants in this study demonstrate how BNHCBs are also considered important sites of learning that extends beyond typical hair tutorials into more substantive issues that allow Black women to shape their
identities and acquire agency (Giroux, 2000; Kincheloe, 2002; Guy, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Likewise, the women in this study engage in discourse that, according to Guy (2007), challenges “structured inequalities and social injustices” (p. 15). Moreover, many of them engage in discourse that is focused on uplifting Black women, which supports Collins’ (2000) notion of a “focused education” that “demonstrates the significance of self, change, and empowerment of Black women” (p. 216), while also supporting Berry’s (2010) argument that Black female narratives are counterstories to the dominant discourse. Thus, from a critical public pedagogy perspective informed by Black feminist thought, BNHCBs can be considered a form of public pedagogy, a counterstory to the dominant narrative of female beauty. Within this context, Black natural hair care bloggers tell their stories from a Black female experience. They are no longer silenced, as their blogs can take the form of an online diary.

**Womanist Identity Development Theory**

Helms’ (1990) womanist identity development theory informs the unique identity development of Black women by paralleling the Black racial identity development process (Cross, 1981) and addressing the issue of race and class-based oppressions, particularly for Black women (Walker, 1983). As discussed in Chapter Four, BGLH and CN’s mission statements help to define who Noelliste and Walton consider their readership. Correspondingly, Noelliste’s target audience seem to be focused on Black women who are secure in their womanhood and embracing their natural hair, yet utilize BGLH as a space to affirm their identities outside of the dominant culture. However, the CN reader base seems to be more focused on the frustrated, new natural who is in the learning phase of managing her natural hair. These findings are further supported by Helm’s (1990) womanist identity development theory. Namely, BGLH’s targeted audience are within the immersion-emersion and internalization stages, which are defined by
those who reject societal norms and define themselves through self-affirmations and shared experiences with knowledgeable women (Ossan et al., 1992). Conversely, CN’s targeted audience is in the encounter stage of development, which is defined by women beginning to question their gendered and racial assumptions when challenged by new experiences and/or information. The findings from the blog content and interviews demonstrate how engaging with communities like BNHCBs help develop a healthy identity in some Black women who decide to go natural and engage with the learning community. Such engagement may lead those from an external definition of womanhood to an internal definition that is shaped by their own values and attitudes. Overcoming such tensions associated with Black womanhood, such as society devaluing and delimiting their contributions was noted in the findings in Chapters Four and Five, which aligns with this theory. Moreover, findings indicate many of the women engage with BNHCBs to rearticulate their existence and construct their own meaning of womanhood.

**Connectivism Learning Theory**

The true power of learning from online learning communities manifest in the personal intersecting with the collective in meaningful ways to produce a new culture of learning immersed in imagination and experimentation. Hence, Siemens (2004) asserts that the learning process is situated within the social network itself. Thus, his theory of connectivism situates learning within a rapidly changing environment that connects diverse, current sources of digital information to facilitate lifelong learning that is responsive to shifting contexts. With this framework, lifelong learning is the result of preserving our digital connections—not accumulating knowledge, as Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) argue, “Owning a given information is less important than knowing where and how to retrieve it” (p. 3). Based on connectivism, learning is strengthened by online users’ ability to create, share, and manage content.
Based on the foundations of this theory, the findings reported in Chapters Four and Five support many of the foundational tenants of connectivism. However, all the data I collected derived from Black women who are commenters and not lurkers (Rubin, 2014), as they actively engage in content creation by posting blog comments. Chapters Four and Five provide evidence of various forms of commenter participation that “shape and augment the stream of information” (Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 52). For instance, Heather states she likes to “offer alternatives” to hair care techniques. Additionally, when she comments on more political posts, she states “I’m confident in what I’m saying, even if you don’t like it or accept it…I have historical facts, you know, to back what I’m saying.” Yet, such active engagement with the content, according to Tschofen and Mackness (2012) is not the only legitimate and full participation that can occur within online learning communities. They authors argue that connectivism can be valued as a medium through which learning can occur, but it can also enable followers (i.e., those who post and those who lurk) to be both producers and consumers of content.

Although this study focused on the participatory form of blog posters, there was evidence of the importance of the lurker, which reimagines the lurker as an “autonomous individual” capable of self-determination through what Siemens (2004) considers nonparticipation and denying a sense of community (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012, para. 23). Whitney’s observations speak to the learning of the lurker. She attests that White women are often lurkers on BGLH, as they rely on Black women and those who post as the experts from whom they gain their knowledge. Additionally, she also spoke to the underground community of wavers, males who wear their hair natural, as they enter BNHCBs and take the information they learn back to the waver community. Whitney identifies White women and males as the identified outgroups, which is why she believes they choose to keep their learning hidden.
Moreover, this study supports the importance of “positive group membership,” as the Black female commenters value collaboration and learning activities from those who share similar lived experiences (Pettenati & Cigognini, 2007, p. 13). Additionally, the vitriol that many women speak to seems to be directed at those whom Black women consider non-Black or biracial. Hence, women who fit this demographic do not have the “mutual understanding,” trust, and respect of the community (Pettenati & Cigognini, 2007, p. 13). Consequently, the various dynamics of social interactions on BNHCBs expands the connectivism theory of learning that recognizes the social connections that foster learning within BNHCBs that aids in current and ongoing learning activities that gives those who engage (through posting and lurking) a choice in their learning.

**Critical Perspectives of Adult Education**

Adult education’s origins are firmly established in social action, specifically with regard to teaching with multicultural competence, challenging power dynamics, and decoding a racialized discourse (Guy, 1999; Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010; Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative to apply critical race theory to the field of adult education, as it brings to task the dynamics of race and racism within critical adult education curriculum to “forge better understandings of various forms of discrimination” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000, p. 63). Thus, viewing adult education through a critical theory lens challenges the Western educational traditions of exclusion by promoting equity through the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Hence, this study is a demonstration of giving voice to Black women to legitimize their lived experience within the field of adult education (Omolade, 1987; hooks, 1994; Freire, 2000; White, 2011). Therefore, the findings of my study
have implications for Black women’s identity development and diverse methods of teaching and learning within informal and formal learning environments.

Moreover, my study is also a demonstration of the diverse ways of teaching, as I relied on multiple conceptual and theoretical lenses to examine the phenomenon in my study more comprehensively. These frameworks include (a) a Black feminist perspective of critical race theory, (b) critical public pedagogy informed by Black feminist thought, (c) Black feminist theory, (d) womanist identity development theory, and (e) connectivism learning theory. By relying on these multiple conceptual and theoretical lenses, my study answers the call from Wright and Sandlin (2017) to rely on an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research approach to gain a deeper understanding of adult learning via their engagement with popular culture. In particular, my study examines the utility of critical public pedagogy, as a means to connect informal modes of learning and public activism to a radical understanding of adult development that can lead to better educational praxis.

Moreover, the findings from the blog content and interviews, as reported in Chapters Four and Five, demonstrate how adults seek information and find a sense of community online. The participants’ engagement with the blog’s online learning communities created space for them to “reconcile new experiences and information” by engaging with social media, Wright and Sandlin (2017) argue, is “often more impactful” than learning in more formal settings (p. 78). More specifically, the findings illustrate how adults facilitate engagement in a dialogic exchange of information; thereby, leading to co-creating content. The dynamics of these exchanges, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, underscore the work of Wright and Clark (2013), who argue, “[C]ontrary to the ideas of traditional adult learning and development theories, individuals are embedded in cultural contexts that shape who they are and how they learn” (p. 17). Thus, the
adult identity development and online learning of these women is further shaped by how they navigate their cultural experiences as Black women within a shared online community that challenges the dominant culture. Hence, adult identity development and learning can be shaped by social media engagement (Dennen, 2008; Kohls & Nagy, 2012; Birnbaum, 2013). This concept of learning beyond formal education continues to be explored within the field of adult and lifelong learning, as adult educators like Wright and Sandlin (2017) are exploring the significance of public pedagogies as sites of learning and adult identity development.

Ultimately, the meaning-making discovered on these BNHCBs supports a Black feminist approach to adult education that connects learning with the lived experiences of the learner to not only make the learning more meaningful and enjoyable but also to recognize the multidimensionality of Black female narratives as counterstories to dominant discourse (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Berry, 2010). The benefit of such an approach brings recognition to the learner and minimizes the impact of the “cultural silencing” that is a consequence of the hegemony within our society that also permeates the classroom (hooks, 1994; Florence, 1998; Freire, 2000). However, the findings illustrate how such hegemony is pervasive, as the BNHCBs analyzed succumb to capitalism. In his critique of social media and public pedagogy, Reid (2010) argues that the pervasiveness of social media leads those who engagement with these digital spaces to believe that they have a choice, as public and private spaces are “interpenetrated by social media” (p. 198). Therefore, it is imperative to critical analyze social media, as it is no longer filtered through a library and editorial review boards (Reid, 2010). Today, social media has a broader reach beyond academia, which has the opportunity for public pedagogues to reach a broader audience in digital spaces. However, such emerging technologies are now being commodified by the mass media market, which was a significant theme from this research.
Therefore, a healthy dose of skepticism is warranted when engaging with digital spaces like BNHCBs, as the content Walton and Noelliste post is heavily influenced by driving traffic to their site as social media influencers and their connections with larger corporations that add to their wealth. Blog commenters like Whitney and Amelia continuously scrutinize these spaces due to the commodification of Black natural hair care. However, such scrutiny cannot rest with the blog followers, as the bloggers have a responsibility to publically scrutinize their positionality.

As such, the findings I reported in Chapters Four and Five, affirm the work of Brookfield (2010), who contends that adult educators must publicly scrutinize their own racism and their complicity in perpetuating racism, which will help create a liberatory space (i.e., a counterspace) for educators and students to engage in collaborative teaching and learning practices that promote the inclusion of multiple perspectives. Hence, the collaborative teaching and learning approach that is observed within these BNHCBs, as reported in Chapters Four and Five, support the need for a similar approach within the classroom, which will aid in legitimizing the knowledge of Black women. However, returning to the scrutinization Brookfield argues White educators must execute, also necessitates a similar level of scrutiny for Black female educators. To this aim, White (2011) contends that Black female educators must engage in critical self-reflection and be cognizant of the impact their identities and physical bodies have on the classroom dynamic. Hence, my study shows evidence of this level of scrutiny coming from Noelliste and Walton, as they penned open letters and responses to those that criticized their actions and perspectives. However, such responses were met with greater criticism from their readers, as some of them believed their responses were excusatory. Conversely, it appears that Noelliste’s response regarding the negativism of her blog is more of a model for the public scrutiny Brookfield envisions. Additionally, this level of self-reflection was evident by the
women within this study, as they spoke to their early experiences with their hair and how that translated to their new sense of empowerment. These findings bring broader meaning to White’s (2011) argument for Black women educators to engage in critical self-reflection while being aware of their identities and physical bodies.

Accordingly, the findings from my study also shed light on how some Black women learn in online spaces, which can inform their learning in the classroom environment. Undergirded with the connectivism learning theory, the findings reported in Chapters Four and Five suggest that Black women within online spaces learn from the following ways: (1) seeking a safe space to test out and confirm ideas; (2) contesting naysayers and those considered from the outgroup; (3) offering alternative facts and acknowledging skepticism of claims; (4) relying on personal experience (i.e., trial-and-error learning) as a means of knowledge; (5) gathering information from other online sources to supplement disseminated information; (6) adding hyperlinks to respective sites that offer additional information; and (7) centering learning within a sociopolitical context of Black women’s bodies. Thus, my study has implications for creating safe spaces for Black women to engage in the learning process. Namely, such spaces must be collaborative spaces that speak to the unique experiences of Black women, since their Blackness is envisioned from the duplicity of anti-Blackness. Such hyperfocus on anti-Blackness can lead to internalized oppression and stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Consequently, it is imperative for educators, especially non-Black educators to do the public level of scrutiny Brookfield (2005; Brookfield & Holst, 2011) recommends, as such vulnerability and focus on positionality helps create a level of intimacy that allows the educator to connect with their whole person, mind and body (hooks, 1994). Thus, utilizing bell hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy within digital spaces, in particular BNHCBs, provides a safe, democratic space for learning by
giving Black women a place to “voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why” (p. 38). Equally important to hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy, is her aim to use adult education as a means to transgress the boundaries of education in order to achieve feminist consciousness-raising. Thus, bloggers and blog followers who adopt an engaged pedagogy within digital spaces can build trust, which is a necessary component seen within this study, as nearly every participant engages with online content specific to the Black community. Community is key, but it is more difficult to attain in such racially-segregated spaces as higher academia. Additionally, allowing Black female learners to engage in effective and collaborative learning requires a level of autonomy for them to add their level of knowledge from their lived experiences, a foundational principle of adult education (Knowles, 1980). Ultimately, Black women’s learning and identity development is inextricably tied to their physical bodies and their community.

Conclusion

Although my study adds several insights to the field of lifelong learning and adult education, as it relates to Black women and their overarching identity development, there is much more work to be done. Namely, questions still arise in terms of the intersectionality of informal learning and self-directed learning with critical public pedagogy in online spaces. As such, I am hopeful that future research will help test and confirm the four principles of Black womanhood within digital spaces I derived from the literature review. Since my study is very specific to Black women who engage in the co-creation of online content by posting comments, it may be difficult to see how this work has implications for the broader community of online learners in informal setting. Therefore, I will examine the limitations of this study, while also providing suggestions for future research in this area. It is my hope that others will continue this
work to expand on my findings and help reimagine what it means to be political, since the personal is political.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research and Action**

One of the main limitations of this study is the same limitation of all qualitative research, generalizability. Since this data is based on the meaning-making of the individual, it cannot be assumed to reflect the perspective of other Black women who engage with BNHCBs. The participants all had a Bachelors degree, except for Chloe (two years of college) and Heather (Associates Degree). Anissa has earned a Masters degree. Additionally, most women were American; however, two were born in other countries before coming to the states (Anissa and Adeola) and one is born and raised in the UK (Amelia). Moreover, only one participant (Stella) expressed a queer, gay identity. However, Black women who engage with BNHCBs encompass a diverse background of experiences and demographics. This distinction is important, especially in light of the controlling images that often stereotype Black women’s actions and values. Future research could further examine how class, ethnicity, demographics, sexual orientation, or geographic location intersects to inform participants understanding of Black womanhood and resistance through engagement with BNHCBs.

A second, and most frustrating, limitation of this study is the lack of rich, thick description from the voice of Noelliste and Walton. It was my intent for this research to conduct in-depth interviews with both these bloggers; however, after a series of emails, Facebook messages, and Instagram posts, I never received a response. No, not one. This lack of reciprocity was a major theme of this research, so I should not be surprised. Future research could revisit this topic by using other bloggers, who value reciprocity.
A third limitation is that this study specifically focused on data from BGLH and CN because they utilize the Disqus comment platform, but nearly every participant engages with other BNHCBs and other lifestyle blogs, predominately those that are Black-centered. Additionally, during the interviews, all of the women mentioned other bloggers they endorsed as experts within the field. Future research could examine if any differences exist between blogging subject areas and future probe why these women engage with various other blogs. Based on the scope of this study, I could only speculate.

A fourth limitation is that this study specifically focused on Black women, but several participants and data from blog content mentioned Black men. Future research might delve deeper into the role of gender, especially the “waver” community within the natural hair community.

A fifth limitation is that this study specifically focused on Black women, but most of the women identified the significance of White women and biracial women. Future research could examine the engagement of White and biracial women with Black women on BNHCBs. Due to the scope of this research, I was only able to make mention of this often volatile dynamic.

A sixth limitation is that this study specifically focused on the blogging platform, but a number of participants mentioned they gain knowledge from YouTube. Some even indicated they prefer watching a video over reading, and one even said blogging seems like a lost art. Future research could explore vlogging (i.e., video blogging) and compare it to blogging, especially since many bloggers utilize multiple social media platforms to drive traffic and increase visibility. Additionally, this desire to engage with media that is not static (e.g., video) was a suggestion Amelia made due to her being inspired by our Skype chat. Subsequently, she
suggested a video chat platform to build deeper connections within the natural hair community, as she states:

I would love to see that connection going on. Building community, where people are actually talking [face-to-face over video chat], rather than in some sort of site. Imagine a site where you could log on and connect and chat in this way. Sometimes you see commenters and you think, ‘She’s interesting. I’d really like to talk to her.’ To me that’s the real relationship. Not the gurus that they’ve got up on the pedestal, but talking to their people in that way. I would definitely go on a site that did that.

**Final Reflections**

Can I be real for a moment? This writing process has been grueling, and at times I found myself contemplating the intersectionality of my contestation of hegemony with the hegemony that I have been so engrossed in to complete this work. I mean, how is that for a paradox? Yet, this process has been one of self-discovery and internal willpower. As I step back and look more broadly at my experiences within this program, I can confidently see how my knowledge has been broadened. I have always had an advocacy spirit, but this program has given me the language and an identifiable lens that has validated how I see the world. Now armed with the arsenal of critical public pedagogy and Black feminist perspectives of critical race theory, I set out to traverse this newfound space to be a vessel to exchange knowledge with those who do not have access, either due to economic hardships or due to the blindness of their privilege. It is an important work, as I will forever carry the voices of these women in my heart. They are brilliant, yet as Black women, they do not fit into the mold of the White male gaze. Therefore, many of them will never be heard. However, it is my prayer that their voices, and the voices of other Black women will be justified.
Appendix A

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT
Dissertation Research
The Pennsylvania State University
January 31, 2017

Title of Project: The Merging of the Personal and the Collective: Reimagining Black Natural Hair Care Blogs as Sites of Critical Public Pedagogy

Principal Investigator: Amber M. Sessoms

Use: In written form (i.e., text placed within an email or contact form) to potential candidates.

Script: I'm working on my dissertation at Penn State, and I have been following you and reading your posts. I was hoping that we could connect for an interview to talk about your perspective of Black female identity and social action. You have a unique perspective that I would love to hear more about! Can you please email me at naturalinclination828@gmail.com, so I can provide you with more information?

Thank you,

Amber
Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Request permission to audio record.

1. Could you spend just a few minutes telling me about yourself? (Confirm age, race, education, background, occupation, and other demographic information or interests)

2. What was your early experience with your hair and how has it changed since going natural?

3. Why did you decide to go natural? What were your family and friends’ reactions?

4. What is your view of the Black female community and what is your vision for this community in the future?

5. Some people would say that women who wear their hair natural are trying to make a political statement. What would you say to them?

6. What motivated you to follow this blog about Black natural hair care?

7. Do you view this blogger as an expert and/or role model for Black natural hair care?

8. Tell me about a typical online session on this Black natural hair care blog. What are you likely to view first when you access this blog?

9. What did you know about Black natural hair care prior to engaging with this blog? What have you learned?

10. What is your level of engagement with this blogging community? What factors contribute to your level of participation?

11. What have you learned from this particular blogging community?

12. What is your opinion as to whether Black natural hair care bloggers should also call for social change and activism? Do you consider the blogger you follow to be socially conscious? Do you consider her to be a social activist?
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