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BREAKING THE CHAINS: THE CROWN ACT'S STRUGGLE AGAINST MEDIA-PERPETUATED HAIR TEXTURE BIASES AND INTERNALIZATION

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Abstract

This abstract examines the impact of one-dimensional beauty standards perpetuated by the media on women's perceptions of beauty, particularly focusing on the intricate relationship between beauty ideals and hair texture in African American (AA) women. The pervasive influence of a white-dominant culture has historically rendered the natural, tightly coiled texture of black hair a source of shame and discomfort for AA women, contributing to a complex narrative shaped by external representations (Collins, 2002; Bekk et al., 2017; Montle, 2020; Gentles-Peart, 2018).

Within this context, the abstract delves into the phenomenon of internalization, exploring how representations of beauty that diverge from natural, tightly coiled black hair often lead to the internalization of rejecting such hair as inherently "natural" (Banks, 2000). This internalization, rooted in Eurocentric ideals, compels AA women to varying degrees towards hair-straightening and weave wearing. These practices, deemed imperative within the Eurocentric beauty paradigm, reinforce the narrative that tightly coiled, kinky hair is unacceptable, unkempt, and unsightly (Collins, 2002; Montle, 2020).

The narrative seeks to unravel the intricate dynamics at play in the intersection of beauty standards, hair texture, and cultural identity for AA women. By scrutinizing the historical and contemporary implications of these beauty ideals, the abstract aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by AA women in navigating societal expectations and embracing their natural hair texture.

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Introduction

One dimensional views on beauty and hair in the media shape the way women view other women, and themselves. In a white dominant culture, hair texture has been a source of shame and discomfort for African American (AA) women (Collins, 2002; Bekk, M., Spörrle, M., Völckner, F., Spieß, E., & Woschée, R., 2017; Montle, 2020; Gentles-Peart, 2018). Representations of beauty that are in opposition to natural, tightly coiled black hair often result in an internalization of images of beauty that have rejected natural hair as "natural" (Banks, 2000). African American women have internalized, in varying degrees, a Eurocentric ideal of beauty that has made hair-straightening (and weave wearing) imperative, which serves to reinforces the notion that tightly coiled, kinky hair is unacceptable, unkempt, and unsightly (Collins, 2002; Montle, 2020).

Although the "Black is beautiful" message of the Civil Rights movement encouraged women to embrace their natural textured hair, beauty products continue to be advertised specifically targeted toward "relaxing" naturally coily hair. It has been speculated that products such as these can be psychologically damaging to AA women (West, 1995) because they send the message that these women are not acceptable as they are and should instead try to alter their natural hair to become beautiful. Though it is noted by Banks (2000) that not all AA women straighten their hair from a desire to look white. For many AA women, the reason they straighten their hair is "manageability." For many, it begs the question why one has not learned to manage what in fact is genetically their own. The cry of "manageability" is also steeped in cultural oppression. However, it should be noted that straightening one's hair is also an aspect of versatility, fashion, and style.

The recent Crown Act of 2019 was enacted to assist Black women in warding off discrimination based on hairstyle and hair texture and dually serves to promote acceptance and embody a sense of hair texture pride. However, the majority of mainstream media continues to tell women what they should look like and who they should aspire to be, while at the same time often representing women in a stereotypical, biased, and discriminatory way. The lack of visibility of AA women and the stereotypical manner in which they are represented greatly limit one's conception of themselves and ideas about what it means to be beautiful and accepted. African American women, who rarely experience the full range of images that truly represent them in diversity of skin tones, hair textures, shape and size will begin to think that who they are is not acceptable (White, 2008) and unconscious internalized thoughts, perhaps not even known to them, will begin to fester.

Since the Clark and Clark Doll Study (1947)—in which AA children internalized feelings of inferiority and damage to their self-esteem due to segregated schools in which they attributed negative characteristics such as bad or ugly to Black dolls that looked like themselves, and positive characteristics such as good and pretty to White doll that looked nothing like them—it is evident that representation matters (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2018). There is no difference when it comes to matters of hair texture, as hair is merely an extension of one's appearance, and is used as a means and method of classification in the world of beauty, looks, and appearance. This is why hair is a multi-billion dollar industry (La Mar, 2018).

One's ability to successfully and strategically navigate the world depends largely on how they are perceived and a great deal of that is hinged upon how we look. Hair is no different from a nose, or lips, or skin color. Hair is a defining feature and what shape or texture it takes impacts how we see the world and how the world sees us. Hair, like skin tone or complexion, will never be "blind" because one sees hair, even if one chooses not to acknowledge that sight. People see hair shape, hair color, hair texture, hair length, and what they see in connection with all other attributes of physical appearance, will be the deciding factor of how they form an opinion and assessment of an individual. That in turn, leads to what category one belongs to, how one will be treated, spoken to, or what expectations, if any at all, will be placed on an individual solely based upon hair texture and associated attributes.

Based on this, the minority, by majority influence, will have a say as to what AA women, based upon hair, can and cannot achieve and arbitrarily prescribe limits and cap heights. Hair, like beauty, is power (La Mar, 2018).

Media Influence

The mass media (Internet, television, newspaper, magazines, and radio) are one of the most influential transmitters of information in American society (Allen, 2001; Rohlinger, 2019). Statistics show that 6.9 million gigabytes of media flow into individuals and households per year, translating into 33 gigabytes per consumer daily (Riggott, 2013). In 2008 Americans consumed various types of media for 1.3 trillion hours, and average of 11 hours per person daily. By 2012, the total media consumption had increased to 1.46 trillion hours, an average of 13.6 hours per person daily. By 2015 data indicated that Americans would consume media for 1.7 trillion hours, an average of 15.5 hours per person daily (Riggott, 2013). As it pertains to Facebook, one of the most widely used media platforms today, statistics indicate that Facebook is accessed 8 times per day, 6 minutes per login, and an average of 15 days per month (Khew, 2016). In a 2015 study, where 10,000 AA adults were surveyed, AAs were said to watch the most television of any group. Television time, not including other social media platforms, was estimated at 20 hours per month, about 60 more hours than the total viewing audience combined (Loechner, 2015). These numbers have risen since COVID19. AAs are the largest consumers of media and the least represented in a Eurocentric American culture that propagates and bolsters white beauty, silky smooth hair textures, and light skin.

The media is a profound source of cultural teaching with an unmatched power to reach millions quickly and conveniently (White, 2008). It is a "dominant force of socialization" that influences the social, emotional, and conscious being of its viewers (Kellner, 1995). The power of the media to transmit popular ideology goes beyond the ability to inform and entertain. The media is a transmitter that has been used as a tool of oppression (White, 2008). The various popular media mediums of today (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat, et cetera) house a bombardment of images selling, teaching, and pushing out advertisements about how one should look, feel, dress, live, and think. The consumer culture in which we live makes it difficult to truly locate the origins of our own values and assumptions. Our values and assumptions appear to be a part of our natural world but are inevitably shaped by the subtle messages we consume (White, 2008).

Visual images play an important role in shaping perception. Images are understood as a representation of how one experiences the world, which one attaches ideas and give meaning to (White, 2008). The media tells women what they should look like and who they should aspire to be; while at the same time often representing women in a stereotypical, biased, and discriminatory way.

These messages directed at women are magnified for AA women due to the absence of images that look like them and reflect their cultural heritage (White, 2008). The lack of visibility of AA women and the stereotypical way they are represented greatly limit ones conception of themselves and ideas about what it means to be beautiful and accepted (White, 2008). When in fact AAs are represented, content analyses reveal that the majority of media depictions of AAs women (in Black-oriented media and mass media) are those with light skin, straight hair, and small noses and lips (Capodilupo, 2010).

Beauty has become so normalized that it no longer seems social, political, or racial in nature but "our entire cultural ethos in the contemporary United States seethes of white beauty" (Hunter, 2013). Hair is an important beauty determinant for American females (Gottschall, 2008; Weitz, 2004), and the connection of hair to female beauty intersects with race and gender, placing a particular burden on Black females whose natural hair textures and lengths are low on the beauty continuum (Badillo, 2001; Patton, 2006; White, 2008). Good and bad hair perceptions and hair valuations based on texture or length illustrate Black females' everyday struggles to fit Black hair textures into white beauty standards (Robinson, 2011).

Internalized Racial Oppression

Internalized racial oppression (IRO), also internalized racism, is one of the most common features of racism and yet the least studied (DiAngelo, 2016). It is the "individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and or oneself" (Pyke, 2010). In other words, it is the adoption of racist messages by ethnic minorities that result in self-hatred and hatred toward their respective racial and ethnic group. Hall defines it as the "subjection of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them". In literature and scholarly discourses, it is also referred to as "internalized White supremacy," "internalized whiteness," and "racial self-hatred" (Pyke, 2010). W.E.B. Du Bois (1989) described White domination effects on Black Americans as a "double consciousness" in which AAs are born into "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself though the revelation of the other world." He further explained, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1989). Nearly three decades later, the words of W.E.B. Du Bois still ring true. In a society where racial prejudice thrives in institutions, communities, politics, law enforcement, and popular culture it is extremely difficult for ethnic minorities to avoid absorbing and internalizing racist messages that constantly bombard them on every media medium. In the United States, racial hierarchies celebrate a single standard of beauty—a standard that devalues and excludes African hair textures, forcing Black females to fit into Eurocentric beauty paradigms that span social circles, family, peers, partners, work environments, and even personal headspace that has only served to ultimately work against them.

To develop effective methods of resistance against IRO, it is necessary to understand how oppression is internalized and reproduced (Pyke, 2010). Minorities suffering from internalized racism subscribe to the belief, constantly transmitted to them, that Whites are superior to people of color. Minorities suffering from internalized racism may despise their own physical characteristics such as facial features, skin color, or hair texture. Others may stereotype individuals from their own ethnic group and refuse to associate with them, while some may refuse to identify with their group at all and identify as white. Internalized skin tone bias in communities of color is often spoken about, but there is also the unspoken internalized hair texture bias in communities of color that captures the "…pain and trauma of individuals who are reckoning with their own internalized racism or their experiences with internalized racism of others in their racial group, such as family members" (Pyke, 2010, pp. 553-554). The pain and trauma individuals suffering from internalized racism undergo result in actions and expressions such as "cosmetic surgery, hair straightening, skin lightening, and similar means of creating a more White-like appearance" that only reproduces the oppression of Blacks (Pyke, 2010, p. 554).

Though an uncomfortable topic for many, internalized racism must be talked about in order to strategize against it (Pyke, 2010). This is "…a topic that despite being pivotal to understanding racial inequality has been understudied for far too long" (Pyke, 2010, p. 553). There is also the "tendency to misconstrue internalized oppression as a reflection of some problem of the oppressed" (Pyke, 2010, p. 553). It is not the result of a cultural or biological characteristics of the subjugated; nor is it due to any weakness, inferiority, psychological defect, gullibility, ignorance, or other shortcoming of the oppressed (Pyke, 2010). The internalization of oppression is a multidimensional phenomenon that takes on various forms and sizes across situational contexts and intersections of multiple systems of domination (Padilla, 2001; Pyke, 2010).

It is an inevitable condition of all structures of oppression and cannot be reduced to just one form or type; or assumed to affect similarly located individuals or groups in precisely the same way (Pyke, 2010; Schwalbe et al., 2000).

Method

Participants:

The sample for this study consisted of adult females, 18 years and older, who were raised in the United States of America, and identified as AA or Black. The total sample population consisted of 322 participants. More than half of the sample, 52%, identified ethnically as AA (N = 168), 37.5% identified as Black (N = 121), 6.2% identified as Biracial (N = 20), and 4.3% identified as being Multiracial (N = 14). The participants were recruited, after obtaining IRB approval, through QuestionPro, a small university in Southwest Michigan, and Facebook.

Procedure:

The sample consisted of 322 participants. Participants were recruited via QuestionPro, a small liberal arts university's student population, and social media, specifically Facebook. A total of 200 participants were recruited from QuestionPro and 122 from Facebook and a small literal arts university's student population in Southwest Michigan via email and sharing the research survey link.

Upon opening the survey, participants were introduced to the study and informed of any potential risks and benefits. They were also informed of their right to discontinue the survey at any time. By clicking on a particular button, at the end of the informative section, participants acknowledged that they had read and understood the introductory information, were consenting to take the survey, and that they met the requirements, including being female, age 18 and over, growing up in the United States, and identified as AA or Black. Following this, demographic information was gathered including age, education level, income, marital status, employment status, country of birth, where they were raised in the United States, ethnicity, parental ethnicity, and various questions pertaining to conformity, skin tone, and hair texture. Participants then responded to the SATAQ-3 *Modified* and IROS.

Measure:

A demographic and hair questionnaire consisting of various questions related to age, education level, income, marital status, employment status, country of birth, where they were raised in the United States, ethnicity, parental ethnicity, and various questions pertaining to conformity, skin tone, and hair texture was administered. A modified version of the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearances Scale (SATAQ-3) composed of 30 items was used to measure one's endorsement of societal appearance ideas (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004) was administered.

The Internalized Racial Oppression Scale (IROS) for Black individuals composed of 28 items and intended to measure the degree to which racial oppression is internalized and replicated by Black individuals in the United States. An exploratory factor analysis suggested a five-factor solution: Belief in the Biased Representation of History (BRH), Devaluation of the African Worldview and Motifs (DAW), Alteration of Physical Appearance (APA), Internalization of Negative Stereotypes (INS), and Hair Change (HC) (Bailey, Chung, Williams, Singh, & Terrell, 2011). Participants are asked to read questions about their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors and then respond to them using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument's subscales—BRH, APA, INS, and HC—evaluate four dimensions of IRO.

Results

To determine if there was a correlation between participants who have been highly influenced by media messages about hair texture and their level of internalized racial oppression, crosstabs were performed on the data. Table 1 shows the correlation among overall high media influence about hair texture and its positive correlation to IROS. Meaning the greater the media influence the higher the level of internalized racial oppression. In this sample, these numbers indicate that higher levels of media influence about hair texture increase feelings of internalized racial oppression in AA and Black women.

The Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire-3 (SATAQ3) modified is a tool that measures multiple aspects of societal influence as it relates to appearance including two dimensions of internalization of appearance, pressure, and information. In this study the tool was specified to address sociocultural attitudes towards appearance as it relates to hair texture. Relative to the SATAQ3, a higher score on each subscale indicates a greater tendency of one to endorse societal appearance influence of ideas and beliefs.

SATAQ3 scores are positively correlated, where higher scores indicate higher measures of internalized racial oppression in participants. Table 1 shows that 61.4% of those that had high SATAQ3 scores had high IROS scores. Which means that there is a significant relationship between high SATAQ3 scores and high IROS scores (X^2=16.105, df=1, p=0.000). About 22.4% of the variance in IROS scores can be explained by the variance in the SATAQ3 score. These statistics demonstrate in this sample, and explain, that greater exposure to media influence about hair texture in the participant's life, the more they will internalize and accept stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs about themselves held by members of the White majority group.

Table 1

Chi Square of SATAQ3 and Internalized Racial Oppression

			IROS						
			Low Scores	High Scores	Total	X^2	df	p	ETA
SATAQ3	Low Scores	Count	100	64	164	16.105[a]	1	0.000	0.224
		% within SATAQ3	61.0%	39.0%	100.0%				
	High Scores	Count	61	97	158				
		% within SATAQ3	38.6%	61.4%	100.0%				

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that media messages do influence how AA and black women view themselves. Results show that AA and black women are negatively impacted by media messages regarding hair texture. Further, the results indicate that the relationship between media influence and hair texture leads to increased feelings of internalized racial oppression of AA and Black women. By virtue of association–my hair is a part of me. These findings lend support to the idea that the media serves as a powerful tool for information, knowledge, and societal messages. Mass media permeates society and impacts women's perception of hair and themselves. The results of this study further indicate bias towards hair texture perceived through media portrayals of white women's hair as beautiful and black women's hair as the antithesis of that–a societal message which has an impact on the esteem, worth and wellbeing of black women.

Why The Crown Act Simultaneously Promotes Necessary Change and Yet Familiar Defeat

In 2017, Dove launched a body wash ad campaign that sparked widespread criticism for showing a black woman removing her brown shirt to reveal a white woman in a white shirt. The ad premiered to wave after wave of outrage from consumers and backlash ensued. Calls to boycott Dove were all over social media. Consumers protested how the ad was racist in depicting black women as dirty and white women as clean. Despite many public relations apologies from the company, using recycled buzz words like "racially insensitive," "missing the mark" and "diversity and inclusion," Dove seemed on the brink of financial disaster because their ad messages stirred up centuries-old stereotypes comparing black women to white women in a disparaging manner. But 2017 wasn't the first time or the first incident for Dove regarding discriminatory and racist advertising. Fast forward to 2019, and Dove is heavily involved in leading the charge, research, and promotion of The Crown Act. The history of the United States is entrenched with themes of racial disparity and power differences that have contributed to how womanhood is constructed in this country. Historically white womanhood has been framed by puritanical ideals of virtue and innocence (Jonsson, 2021; Sullivan, 2017; Teutsch, 2017). In contrast to their white counterparts, Black women have been "othered" as dirty and evil (Lindsey, 2017).

She has been othered in reductive terms such as "mammy," "Jezebel," and "welfare queen" (Lomax, 2018). This dual femininity persists as promoted by marketing from companies like Dove that continue the narrative that black women are less valuable, less beautiful, and altogether less human than white women. The message is that white womanhood is superior.

Dove is a clear example of how media influence brings harm to black women by design. Companies like Dove reveal a clear bias towards Eurocentric beauty standards with power to support these beliefs. To counteract what some media outlets (CSNBC, 2017) called a "nightmare," Dove does/did what many corporations do when confronted with imminent ruin: spin the narrative. A few years later they helped launched The Crown Act, an initiative that bans discrimination against natural hair. According to the Dove's website, they have conducted "hair discrimination research" titled Dove CROWN studies and are now partnering with The Official Campaign of The CROWN Act Led by the CROWN Coalition, founded by Dove, National Urban League, Color Of Change, and

Western Center on Law & Poverty. In their words, The CROWN Act which stands for: *Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair*, seeks to ensure that no black woman is punished for wearing her natural hair. The Act was first introduced in January 2019 by California State Senator Holly Mitchell and is the first bill in American history to outlaw hair discrimination. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act of 2022 (CROWN Act), which prohibits racial discrimination of employment or educational opportunities based on a person's hair texture or hairstyle commonly associated with a particular race or national origin (American Bar Association, 2022). Now that the CROWN Act has passed in Congress, it builds momentum at the state and local level. So far over a dozen states have signed legislation to protect and uphold the rights of persons to wear their natural hair. Critics hit back that it is the zenith of performative allyship in partnering with black women's movements to clean up their image and sway public perception. Further, the company appears committed to "diversity and inclusion" for profit (Vallius, 2019; Maas, 2022). Dove's past tone deaf and racist campaign ads put them on the number one spot for "canceling" and now they have (re)positioned themselves as an "ally" in regard to the 2019 Crown Act. This is not a coincidence. The black dollar has power (Chui et al, 2001; Hale, 2022). Hence, it could be argued that the motivation was not because black women are valued and seen as equal but to appease African American consumers because of the acknowledged value of black business.

While The CROWN Act ostensibly appears to be a win, (if one looks closely) its origins are tainted by its affiliation to the Dove brand. Moreover, do we really need The Crown Act? Do we really need a bill that says you cannot discriminate against someone's hair? Or is this a smokescreen for the larger issues. It can be interpreted by the public as pandering and still dismissing black women's humanity. How does this parallel the larger civil rights movement? Proponents of CROWN Act legislation argue that Title VII which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin falls short of protecting the rights of black persons to wear their natural hair (Goodman, 2021; Kennedy, 2021). To move away from Eurocentric conformity, the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960's was strategically set out to celebrate Afrocentric culture. Pedantic to single out black hair? Or is it a microaggression? And where does it end? Where do we draw the line in acceptance of every aspect of black women as good, as beautiful, as human? Does this challenge the context of civil rights? It seems truly ironic that the very systems put in place to "help" are also the showcase for racial oppression. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the forerunners and promoters of The CROWN Act is the Dove brand, a company that clearly has a history of engaging in discriminatory practices and racist advertising that only aid to hurt the black community and Black women. It brings forth the question of who stands to benefit most from the CROWN Act. Are these reparations without fully acknowledging and admitting wrong? Based on their history, Dove as a forerunner and promoter of The Crown Act appears to be a conflict of interest.

For Black women, the intersection of gender and race is conflated with how the world interacts with them more than any other group (Pietri et al, 2018; Dickens et al, 2019). Based on their double minority status, black women experience forms of intersectional discrimination and oppression that influences how they view themselves and their hair in its natural state, particularly in the workplace (Coles & Pasek, 2020). Black hair, as a part of a black women's identity fails to meet white beauty norms in the push towards unachievable standards. The CROWN Act is a reminder of how black women's hair has been policed and is now politicized and monetized. The legislative intervention is dedicated to protecting Black persons from hair discrimination at work and school. When Black women embrace their natural hair, it can be viewed as an act of defiance, rebellion, or an uplifting and liberating decision. These factors are a reminder that discrimination, internalized and otherwise, continues to be a real and present danger to Black women, putting their health, wellbeing, esteem, and overall happiness at risk through perpetual oppression (Berkemeyer, 2019) while denying them access to equal employment opportunities and promotions (Dawson et al, 2019).

Now we see through the lens of The CROWN Act a partnering with a company that attempts to hand us over something in aid (and defense?) that in the past it aimed to take away from us–our health, our wellbeing, our esteem, our dignity, and our overall happiness. It is a paradox that can only be seen as the familiar defeat we have long known and experienced time and time again.

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