

5-2-2018

# #Melanin: How Have Dark-skinned Black Women Engaged In Social Media Hashtags To Affirm, Validate and Celebrate Their Beauty?

Ololade S. Hassan

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#MELANIN: HOW HAVE DARK-SKINNED BLACK WOMEN ENGAGED IN  
SOCIAL MEDIA HASHTAGS TO AFFIRM, VALIDATE AND CELEBRATE THEIR  
BEAUTY?

by

OLOLADE S. HASSAN

Under the Direction of Lia T. Bascomb, PhD

ABSTRACT

There is a growing body of scholarship on the nature of social media and its ability to contest racial identity. Research has greatly focused on hashtag activism and the role of Black Twitter in raising consciousness and constructing counterhegemonic presentations of self. However, there is relatively little academic literature surrounding the ways in which dark-skinned African American women are engaging in hashtags to counter colorist ideologies about darker skin tones. Two focus groups and a qualitative content analysis of Tweets containing the hashtag #MelaninPoppin were conducted to explore the ability of social media hashtags to affirm beauty, and encourage powerful self-defining expressions for dark-skinned African American

women. Utilizing bell hooks' notion of "homeplace" as a theoretical framework, this study examines how social media hashtags act as digital sites of resistance; where the wounds of colorism can be healed and renewed.

INDEX WORDS: Social media, Hashtags, African American women, Dark-skinned, Colorism,  
Homeplace

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OLOLADE S. HASSAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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May 2018

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my three beautiful sisters. Take me back to the days when we'd spend our summers sitting at the top of the stairs with our hair braided, eating ice cream, and playing *Ludo*, because nothing else mattered.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, *Ogo ni fun Oluwa fun aseiyori işe yi* [Glory be to God for the accomplishment of this thesis]

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Lia T. Bascomb for her unwavering support and patience throughout this process. I could not have asked for a better chair.

My appreciation also extends to the rest of my committee; Dr. Tiffany King and Dr. Jamae Morris. Thank you for your time and continued support. It's been a pleasure learning from three phenomenal women.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>DEDICATION.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Background.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Significance of Study .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.3 Research Questions .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.4 Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.1 Colorism: An Epidemic in the African American Community .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.2 The Wounds of Colorism.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>2.2.1 The Perpetuation of Hegemonic Dominant Ideologies .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>2.2.2 Colorism in the Media.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<b>2.3 Healing the Wounds.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>2.3.1 Social Media: A Digital Homeplace.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>2.3.2 Black Twitter .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<i>3.1.1 Data Collection.....</i>	<i>25</i>

3.1.2	<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	27
3.2	<b>Focus Groups</b> .....	29
3.2.1	<i>Participants</i> .....	33
3.2.2	<i>Data Collection</i> .....	33
3.2.3	<i>Data Analysis</i> .....	34
3.2.4	<i>Reliability and Validity</i> .....	36
3.2.5	<i>Limitations</i> .....	36
4	<b>FINDINGS</b> .....	38
4.1	<b>Content Analysis</b> .....	38
4.2	<b>Categories</b> .....	39
4.2.1	<i>Category 1: Self-affirmation</i> .....	39
4.2.2	<i>Category 2: Advertisements</i> .....	41
4.2.3	<i>Category 3: No textual information (other than hashtags)</i> .....	42
4.2.4	<i>Category 4: Celebrity Reference</i> .....	42
4.2.5	<i>Category 5: Natural Hair Reference</i> .....	43
4.2.6	<i>Category 6: Quotes</i> .....	43
4.2.7	<i>Category 7: Discussing the Hashtag</i> .....	44
4.3	<b>Theme 1: (Re)definition</b> .....	44
4.4	<b>Focus Groups</b> .....	45
4.5	<b>Hashtags as a Site of Injury</b> .....	46

4.5.1	<i>Problem 1: The “Token” Dark-skinned Girl</i> .....	47
4.5.2	<i>Problem 2: “My skin color is not a trend”</i> .....	51
4.5.3	<i>Problem 3: Approval-seeking</i> .....	53
4.6	<b>A Site for Remedy</b> .....	54
4.6.1	<i>The Younger Generation</i> .....	54
4.6.2	<i>Constructing an Online Community</i> .....	56
5	<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	60
5.1	<b>Addressing the Research Questions</b> .....	60
5.2	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	68
	<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	70
	<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	87
	<b>Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer</b> .....	87
	<b>Appendix B: Phone Screening Questions</b> .....	88
	<b>Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol</b> .....	89

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1- Stages of Categorization .....	28
Figure 2- #MelaninPoppin Findings .....	39
Figure 3- Focus Group Participants .....	46
Figure 4- Participant Engagement with Social Media Hashtags .....	46

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“The slavemasters taught us we were ugly, less than human, unintelligent, and many of us believed it” (Assata Shakur 2001:116).

### 1.1 Background

In a society where whiteness is esteemed a marker of idealized beauty, African Americans with darker skin complexions and Afrocentric features are highly disadvantaged. In the United States, colorism is preserved by a system of white racism (Feagin et al. 2001). Black women in the United States are constantly exposed to the idea that white beauty is the cultural standard, that Anglo facial features such as straight hair, light eyes, narrow noses and white/lighter skin are the cultural ideal (Hunter 2007). For this reason, darker-skinned black women continue to seek ways of embracing whiteness, in which a great deal of black girls in the United States “share the fantasy of being white” (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993:41).

Colorism, sometimes referred to as the “color complex” or the “last taboo” (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993) among African Americans, functions both interracially and intrracially (Herring 2004). Interracial colorism involves members of one racial group making distinctions based upon skin color between members of another racial group. On the other hand, intraracial colorism involves members of a racial group making distinctions based upon skin color between members of their own race. It is contingent on white supremacist ideologies. Hence, color preferences are measured against white standards. However, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s, *Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women*, suggests that in the context of Hip Hop, women who are fairer-skinned, ethnically mixed or ethnically ambiguous are typically portrayed, because these women (“Ascriptive Mulattos”) represent the ideal. The configuration of “black” and “white” is appealing as it is the “perfect blending of skillfulness in matters of sex

(read: black) and physical beauty (read: white)” (Sharpley-Whiting 2007:27). Thus, in this case, she found that whiteness is not the standard, rather, the “exotic” was the appeal. Darker-skinned black people are discriminated against because they epitomize the most visible connection to a “fertile African heritage,” an identity that remains suspect in our culture (Dyson 2004).

Particularly, black women with darker hues have been and still are exposed to “extreme victimization” (Ross 1997). The word “dark” has various symbolic loaded meanings in which darker skin is linked with savagery, ugliness and inferiority. On the other hand, white skin represents civility, beauty and superiority. These powerful symbolic messages have created a destructive divide within the African American community. Interestingly, the dominant aesthetic is so deeply embedded in Western culture that many people fail to recognize their preferences for lighter skin (Hunter 2007). With discrimination from their own race mirroring the oppressor, dark-skinned black women are forced to endure the remnants of slavery, colonialism and white supremacy.

Colorism is part of the everyday reality of Black women. Studies have found that messages from the media, peers and family members, show a preference for lighter skin tones (Thompson and Keith 2004). Since the standard of beauty is intrinsically associated with lighter skin, where does that leave the darkest of black women? Despite the fact that colorism has been central to the black experience in the United States, black people are often reluctant to discuss the issue. Discussions of colorism among black people have often been “swept under the rug” as many have considered it to be “airing dirty laundry” (Wilder 2015:25).

According to Patton (2006), in order to be a liberated self, dark-skinned black women must challenge white hegemonic beauty and must not succumb to these arbitrary standards. Challenging oppressive hegemonic beauty standards can have a positive influence on

women's self-esteem (Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay 2016). Black women are employing social media platforms to discuss their oppression and attempt to debunk the myth that darker complexions are unattractive and unworthy. Given the popularity of social media among black users-64% (Pew Research 2017), this research is interested in exploring the digital spaces that black women construct to affirm, validate and celebrate their beauty. More specifically, this study examines how darker-skinned African American women use hashtags to create a digital "homeplace" to somewhat reclaim their scrutinized and discriminated bodies, due to the pervasiveness of colorism in the African American community. Homeplace is defined by bell hooks (1990) as a site of resistance for black women where the feeding of black women's bodies and the nurturing of their souls takes place. Thus, a digital homeplace acts as a site for self-recovery where dark-skinned black women can heal the wounds of colorism and for some, internalized self-hatred.

Social media provide black women with the opportunity to form meaningful online communities that address cultural issues specific to the black community. Black women are skillfully using blogs, social networking sites and chat rooms to construct community, which act as "locations" for the purpose of, but not limited to, entertainment, "safe spaces," locating resources for support, building networks and relatability. According to Tassie (2015), social media provide women of color tools for developing and/or honing one's strategies for enduring the pressures that come with being a "double-minority" in society. Although black women are using social media to achieve a variety of goals, their creation of poignant hashtags have been the hallmark (Bradford 2017).

To name a few, hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic, #MelaninPoppin and #MelaninQueen aim to transform preconceived notions of darker skin tones and to promote diverse black beauty.

Moreover, #MelaninOnFleek and #FlexinMyComplexion are other popular hashtags that black women are adopting to resist hegemonic beauty standards. However, the process of disrupting dominant colorist ideologies does not include the circulation of other hashtags such as #TeamLightskin and #TeamDarkskin, which further reinforce the division within the black community and perpetuate internalized racism (Wilder 2015). This is similar to tweets that perpetuate the assumption that dark skin is unattractive. In her discussion of colorism and the politics of beauty, Aisha Phoenix (2014:97) argues that tweets along the lines of “all dark skin girls aren’t ugly, and all light skin girls aren’t cute” fail to counter colorist ideologies, instead, it “reproduces it by using the same terms, rather than rejecting them in favor of something like: “skin shades does not determine beauty.” In the same fashion that #BlackLivesMatter seeks to accomplish for black political rhetoric, hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic attempt to imitate this for black aesthetic politics, and black women’s empowerment. Social media have the ability to empower the voices of Black women, thus dark-skinned black women are given the opportunity to present best versions of themselves.

Although colorism is present in many communities across the globe, including Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean (Tharps 2016), this study is interested in focusing on colorism within the African American community, from the viewpoint of dark-skinned African American women. This decision was based on the role colorism has played in creating a “destructive divide” among African American women (Hall 2008). As Fultz (2014: iv) notes, “the phenomenon of colorism is not exclusive to African American women, but the manifestations on this group are diverse, and the effects are unique.” Thus, dark-skinned African American women make an interesting study. The phenomenon of colorism within the African American community has been extensively examined and the narratives of darker skinned black

women have been documented in film (Spike Lee's *School Daze*, *Dark Girls*, *Good Hair*), fiction (*The Blacker the Berry*, *The Bluest Eye*) and empirical research (Wilder 2015, Russell et al. 1993). However, there is relatively little academic literature surrounding the ways in which dark-skinned African American women are engaging with social media hashtags, particularly examining their ability to affirm beauty and encourage powerful and self-defining expressions. Thus, this research can serve as a starting point on how social media may (or may not) be in the process of healing the wounds of colorism within the African American community.

## **1.2 Significance of Study**

This study is interested in making the case for the needed spaces of affirmation, redefinition, and healing that dark-skinned African American women attempt to construct through social media. As well as shedding light on the ways in which African American women are engaging with social media hashtags, the exploration of the concept of "homeplace" can contribute to the larger conversation on community and resistance. Given the development of new social media platforms and online tools, this research can center the spaces of resistance that are often overlooked. Moreover, this research provides further insight into how the wounds of an old phenomenon, colorism, are being dealt with in the 21st century.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

This study aims to explore the following questions: (1) How are dark-skinned African American women constructing a digital "homeplace?" (2) In what ways are dark-skinned African American women using hashtags to validate, affirm, and celebrate their beauty? and (3) To what extent are social media hashtags healing the wounds of colorism within the African American community?

## 1.4 Theoretical Framework

As a result of patriarchal sexist notions about gender roles, women have been delegated the role of creating and sustaining a nurturing home environment (hooks 1990). Historically, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct homeplace; a site of resistance where black people do not directly encounter white racists' aggression. According to hooks (1990), domestic households were assigned as spaces of nurturance in the face of racist oppression where African Americans could affirm one another and heal the wounds of inflicted racist domination. hooks argues that creating a homeplace that "affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another was necessary resistance" (hooks 1990:46). She articulates the subversive value of constructing a private space that resists colonial mentality, and contends that African Americans experience a deep sense of yearning when homeplace does not exist or cannot be constructed. Reflecting on past legacies, she states that contemporary black women can begin to reconceptualize ideas of homeplace. It is not simply a matter of black women providing service. Rather it is about the construction of a safe space and a community of resistance.

In an analysis of Black women's hair blogs, websites and vlogs, Lee (2015) examined the extent to which these spaces act as a virtual homeplace, that allow Black women to redefine and recreate an alternative aesthetic that places their bodies at the center. In her investigation, she found three ways that these hair-specific blogs act as a virtual homeplace: (1) a site of affirmation, (2) a site of networking and economic freedom/dependency, and (3) a site of healing. Furthermore, she found that these blogs allow black women to share knowledge, and recreate a renewed self-identity. Therefore, blogs can act as a homeplace; a site of resistance where affirmation, healing and recovery can take place.

By placing homeplace in conversation with hashtags that center black women and challenge negative ideologies regarding darker skin tones, this study will (1) examine the manifestations of homeplace on social media, (2) explore how dark-skinned African American women affirm, validate and celebrate their identities with social media hashtags, and (3) describe how dark-skinned African American women work to construct counterhegemonic presentations of self using digital spaces.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

“...unless the question of colorism - in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color - is addressed in our communities and definitely in our Black “sisterhoods” we cannot, as a people, progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us.”

(Walker 1983:290)

### 2.1 Colorism: An Epidemic in the African American Community

Colorism, a term coined by Alice Walker (1983), is a form of internalized racism that values lighter complexions over darker complexions, which has “stratified” (Wilder 2010:185) and somewhat spawned tension within the African American community for generations. Although the term was first coined in 1983, Zora Neale Hurston's “Color Struck” (1926) addresses the issues of colorism in which Hurston highlights the insecurities surrounding the black body. The protagonist, Emma, internalizes and lives with an insecure, and belittling identity: “Oh, them half whites, they gets everything, they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs—everything! The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones” (Hurston 2008:44). This quote illustrates Emma’s frustration with the skin color hierarchy that is so overtly present in society.

The systematic discrimination against darker-skinned black people is primarily a product of the skin color hierarchy that became established and institutionalized with the transatlantic slave trade and has embedded itself into the core values of African-American culture. Colorism is an extension of racism, and the history of colorism in Black America begins with the history of slavery and racial oppression. Historically, lighter-skinned African Americans received better

treatment than those of darker complexions (Esmail and Sullivan 2006). During the American colonial period, there was the development of the “one drop” rule, a racial assignment to protect the notion of “whiteness” (Herring 2004) which has ultimately wounded the black community’s solidarity (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993). Slave owners demonstrated a preference for mixed-race slaves by allocating them indoor assignments that were more manageable compared to the tasks in the fields. They were favored due to the popular belief that racial superiority was biological (Tharps 2016). As they were believed to have more “white blood,” they were considered to have greater intellectual capacity. For this reason, lighter skinned slaves were valuable commodities during the buying and selling of slaves at auctions (Tharps 2016).

Chromatic differences played an important role within the African American community, particularly after the Civil War and Emancipation (Mirmasoumi and Roshnavand 2014). During this time, mixed-raced off-springs acquired more power. Due to their advantageous status in society, Biracials (White-Black) allied with white people and separated themselves from black people, which eventually gave rise to a three-tiered racial system; white, honorary white and collective black. Dark-skinned black people were reduced to a “double-marginalizing process” (Mirmasoumi and Roshnavand 2014:60), in which they were denied acceptance into mainstream white society, and were discriminated against by biracials. The word “dark” has acquired the loaded meanings of undesirable and unworthy, in which dark skin signifies an inferior status. Thus, over a period of time, these socially weighted skin-color messages led to a preference among black populations for lighter-skin colors over darker skin colors (Bond and Cash 1992), and the scrutiny of darker skin tones. Due to the higher status that biracials were granted, African Americans began to internalize the idea that the whiter you are, the more rewarding life is. It was

the social hierarchy that positioned white people at the top and black people at the bottom that generated internalized divisions among African Americans.

Today, African Americans continue to place a "premium" on lighter complexions in which different shades of brown represent different degrees of "status, acceptance and achievement" (Wilder 2010). Regardless of years of the "black is beautiful" rhetoric (established in the 1960s), negative ideologies and stereotypes about dark-skinned black women continue to persist. For example, the association of dark skin with physical unattractiveness. Studies have suggested that black people themselves have defined dark skin as undesirable compared to lighter skin shades (Udry et al. 1971), a result of the perpetuation of negative attitudes about darker skin complexions. According to Dyson (2004), this poisonous self-hatred is evidence of African Americans unresolved racial anxieties about their beauty and self-worth.

## **2.2 The Wounds of Colorism**

"The tragedy of her life was that she was too black" (Thurman 2012:2).

Skin tone is a form of "social capital" (Hunter 2004), that affords greater levels of achievement. As a result of symbolic racialized meanings, darker-skinned African Americans are more likely to face greater barriers to achievement (Maddox & Gray, 2002). For example, studies have shown that there is an earning gap between lighter and dark-skinned African Americans (Herring 2004). Empirical research has found that there are considerable disparities in both social and economic status among dark-skinned African Americans and their lighter counterparts. This is evident in the areas of education (Loury 2009; Hunter 2016), employment (Johnson et al. 1995; Harrison and Thomas 2009), mate selection (Goode 1982, Wade 1996; Wilder 2015), self-esteem (Hill 2002; Hunter 1998; Thompson and Keith 2004), and cognitive representations (Hall 2005; Maddox and Gray 2002). Keith and Herring (1991) found that skin

tone had a significant impact on stratification outcomes such as education, occupation and income. Their findings are consistent with the notion that the continuing disadvantage that darker skinned black people experience is due to the persisting discrimination against them in the United States. Moreover, Hughes and Hertel (1990) concluded that light-skinned African Americans were more likely to have spouses with higher socioeconomic statuses than their darker counterparts. All these studies are consistent in finding that the valuing of skin color has a significant impact on African Americans social interactions and socio-economic experiences.

However, the impact of colorism extends far beyond socio-economic status, rather it plays an integral role in shaping the life experiences of black women and has an impact on how black people evaluate and define themselves. Colorism is often gendered (Hill 2002) and has a tendency to have more significant consequences for women in comparison to males; a double standard in which the expectation of attractiveness is more demanding for women. In comparison to men, women seek to validate their selves through the appraisal of others (Thompson and Keith 2004). Moreover, women are assessed by their physical appearance based on culturally constructed norms of beauty (Hunter 2004). Freedman (1986:1) suggests that beauty is “asymmetrically” assigned to femininity, moreover, “women are defined as much by their looks as by their deeds.” Phenotype has become an indicator of social standing and moral character (Hill 2002). Studies have suggested that black women tend to prefer lighter skin tones and believe that lighter-skin tones are considered as most attractive by their black male counterparts (Bond and Cash 1992; Chambers et al 1994).

The idea of beauty is largely based on European ideals, hence, “the closer one is to white skin, the closer one is to being treated with an elevated status” (Norwood 2015:593). Complexion, in addition to other physical features such as eye color, nose shape, hair texture and

lip shape have become powerful symbols of beauty and merit (Hill 2002). Blue eyes, straight hair and narrow noses have been accorded higher status compared to Afrocentric features, such as kinky hair, broad nose, and full lips. Thus, black women have been deeply affected by the "prejudicial fallout surrounding the issues of skin color, facial features and hair" (Neal and Wilson 1989:328).

### ***2.2.1 The Perpetuation of Hegemonic Dominant Ideologies***

Whiteness has become recognized as virtuous and beautiful, conversely, blackness is identified as sinful and unattractive (Hill 2002). Moreover, the notion of womanhood and femininity in the United States is associated with whiteness (White et al. 2014). As black women do not fit with normative standards of beauty, these symbolic racialized meanings are central to the lived experiences of black women. Colorism plays a role in the black consciousness of what it means to be beautiful, successful and valuable. Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay (2016) argue that there can be serious "emotional costs" associated with the pervasiveness of a European standard of beauty. Colorism is detrimental to black women's self-esteem and self-worth (Hill 2002, Hunter 1998, White et. al 2014). Comparing oneself to an unattainable beauty standard has social and psychological affects (Rockquemore 2002), which can lead to lower levels of self-esteem, self-concept and self-acceptance.

A study conducted by Thompson and Keith (2004) found that the impact of skin color on self-esteem and self-efficacy is different for black men and women. For men, skin color is an important predictor of perceived efficacy, while, skin color predicts self-esteem for black women. Their study complies with traditional gendered expectations. However, they state that the relationship between skin color and self-esteem among African American women is controlled by socioeconomic status. Darker skinned black women with the lowest incomes

display the lowest levels of self-esteem. This is because the combination of classism and colorism stereotypes foster a destructive context for self-esteem development. Thompson and Keith's research helps to reassess our understanding of the triple oppression, a theory that highlights the connection between class, race and gender. Their data suggests that dark-skinned African American women experience a "quadruple" oppression based on gender, class, race, and color (Thompson and Keith 2004).

Oppressive messages are reinforced by social institutions (media, education, politics), as well as individuals (family, teachers, friends). Aesthetic oppressions function by perpetuating dominant ideologies that associate beauty with whiteness (Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsey 2016). As a result of primary socialization occurring in childhood (Wilder 2015), skin color preferences develop on the grounds of early experiences (Jablonski 2012). It is in the early stages of life that individuals associate negativity with darkness, and "goodness" with lightness. When children view the treatment of others (bad or good) based upon having lighter or darker skin, particularly within their own family unit, they internalize skin color messages (Celious & Oyserman 2001; Hill, 2002). Wilder's (2015) research on colorism in the 21st century, found that colorism is first introduced to black women by family, school, relationships and the media. The majority of her focus group participants cited their family as the most influential factor in constructing their views about themselves in relation to their skin tone. Historically, the black family represents survival, resilience, community and serves as a safeguard against external forces of racism (Wilder 2015). Within the black family unit, black consciousness and pride is learned, however at the same time, the black family can operate to indoctrinate skin color bias ideologies. According to Wilder, the black family is the point of origin for skin color hierarchy, particularly

black female family members play a fundamental role in the socialization of a skin color hierarchy within their families.

Furthermore, colorism is institutionalized in school settings, where black women begin to understand how skin tone makes a difference in their lives (Wilder 2015). Wilder's study found that educational experiences shape, reinforce and redirect black women's views about skin tone. Findings from her analysis show that both classmates, and teachers reinforce the stratification and hierarchy of colorism. Other studies corroborate with this notion, such as Hannon et al. (2013) study on the relationship between skin tone and school suspension among African Americans. They found that the likelihood of suspension was 3 times greater for African American girls with darker skin tones compared to those with lighter skin shades. Moreover, Hunter (2016) theorizes the classroom-level interactions between students, teachers, parents and administrators that is responsible for color-based discrimination in schools, and found that this discrimination has an impact on the educational trajectories of African American and Latina/o children. Moreover, colorism has an impact on black women's intimate relationships, as well as their everyday experiences with black men (Wilder 2015).

### ***2.2.2 Colorism in the Media***

Wilder's (2015) study found that family, school and relationships have more of an influence on the ways in which the participants view themselves as it relates to their skin tone compared to media representations. However, we should not minimize the significance of media in perpetuating dominant colorist ideologies. Media-driven messages are considered the most influential force in modern culture; they accentuate existing societal preferences, promoting the idea that beauty, success and worth is directly associated with white/lighter skin. With successful black women being portrayed in the media as lighter in complexion than they actually are, and

darker skinned black women being underrepresented in all forms of media, it is no surprise that a large percentage of dark-skinned black women in the twenty-first century continue to be shameful of their skin color (Norwood 2015). Despite the fact that images of black women in the media have become more diverse over the years, the discrimination of black women based on their physical appearances such as skin tone and facial features persist. The media tend to perpetuate a limited white definition of beauty, and as a result, darker-skinned black women have struggled for fair representation (Norwood 2015).

Media outlets, such as television, film and advertisements typically feature white women as both the cultural ideal and cultural imperative (Hunter 2007). Advertisements in popular media typically exclude black women. However, if they are featured, the black women presented are those with Eurocentric features (i.e. straight hair, narrow noses), as opposed to distinct African features (i.e. kinky hair, broad noses). The glorification of the white standard of beauty not only affects how black women view themselves but also how other group members view black women based on the shade of their skin. Johnson and Bankhead (2014) note that the absence and misrepresentation of black women send messages about what it means to be beautiful, and also who is in control of these beauty standards. They suggest that black women must resist oppressive messages that lead them to believe that their hair and skin tone are inferior. Furthermore, Patton (2006) argues that white hegemonic beauty standards need to be challenged, and suggests that black women must demand the recognition of diverse black beauty. However, not all recognition of darker skin in the media is beneficial. In Arogundade's (2000) analysis of supermodel Alek Wek, he describes her as a fashion anomaly, one that was chosen because she was "shockingly African." She represents an image that both white people and Black

people least like to relate to, hence, she is a decoy selected for the purpose of contrast, and not for the need of feminine aesthetic equality.

### **2.3 Healing the Wounds**

“We can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole” (hooks 1990:49).

hooks defines “homeplace” as a site of resistance; a space created to resist racism and a colonial mentality that promotes internalized self-hatred. Recounting memories of childhood visits to her grandmother's home (her example of “homeplace”), hooks describes a bittersweet journey from her segregated black community into a poor white neighborhood. During her journey, she would be confronted by “terrifying whiteness” before feeling the “sweetness” of arriving at her grandmother's home (hooks 1990). Homeplace acts as a safe haven where black women can find comfort and shelter, and discuss political issues that affect their daily lives. In these spaces, one can freely confront the issues of humanization and restore the dignity denied to them in the public world. Homeplace, according to hooks, is where the feeding of black women's bodies and the nurturing of their souls take place. In this space, black women learn to have faith, dignity and integrity of being. hooks emphasizes the importance of the existence of homeplace, suggesting that when there is no longer access to construct homeplace, black women cannot build a meaningful community of resistance.

#### **2.3.1 *Social Media: A Digital Homeplace***

Although hooks refers to a specific location, Lee (2015) suggests that homeplace can be considered any space that provides shelter for black women. Lee (2015) puts forward a digital homeplace, a site that serves to re(create) and re(define) individuals sense of self by challenging dominant ideologies of racial bias. She found that black women are using particular social media

sites, such as hair-specific blogs for site of affirmation, a site of networking and economic freedom/dependency, and a site of healing. This is no surprise as women and African Americans are significantly greater users of social media compared to men and white people (Pew Research 2013). Overall, 73% of African Americans are internet users, and 96% of those age 18-29 use social networking sites (Pew Research 2014). According to Nicholson (2014), 3 out of 4 black women use at least one social networking site. These figures suggest that black women are using social media sites at high rates. Moreover, research has found that social media is transforming the ways in which it can be used. For example, African Americans are significantly more likely than white people to consider social media as a source to disseminate information about a social issue or cause (Ogilvy PR 2011). Furthermore, Pew Research (2016) found that two thirds of black social media users express that the majority of the posts they see on social media are about race or race relations.

Social media are "web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build a community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible" (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase 2017:23). Social media functions as a public sphere where people of color are well-equipped to achieve some degree of power over public discourse to voice their experiences and perspectives (Carney 2016). Therefore, social media serves as a space to confront and challenge dominant ideologies, and offer counter-narratives (Nakagawa and Arzublaga 2014). As social media facilitates a globally connected society, where one has the capacity to create, share and exchange user-generated content, it has the ability to empower the voices of black women against all systems of oppressions (Savali 2014).

Social media can be used as a tool to create and build “best self” identities (Harris 2015) or ideal versions of one’s self. Examples of social networking sites that enable the construction of “best self” identities are Twitter and Instagram. Harvey (2014) suggests that photographic agency is an essential method to establish an image that is user-generated, rather than a mainstream media representation. Due to the accessibility and influence of Instagram, it is an attractive social media platform for African American women (Harris 2015). Instagram provides a “quiet resistance” to the promotion of white global beauty standard images that black women are exposed to everyday (Harris 2015:138). Hashtags are crucial on Instagram in building community, and mastering the tool can be effective for African American women in raising awareness of a collective message (Harris 2015). Harris (2015) concludes that in order to draw attention to social issues and build community, African American women need to understand the importance of hashtag keyword selection. Therefore, social media allows users to create their own reality (Nicholson 2014), one that challenges the scripts that have been historically presented. Thus, social media has the ability to present user-generated narratives that reject the dominant standard of beauty.

### **2.3.2 *Black Twitter***

Black Twitter, a cultural identity on the social media platform Twitter, affords a space to discuss social issues regarding the Black community. Wilder (2015) defines Black Twitter as the “social mouthpiece” of the black community, which has been responsible for raising consciousness and public awareness on crucial racial issues. It allows African Americans to create their own narratives, and in some cases, influence the media and the public agenda. Black Twitter dismantles the perception that white is the standard, and everything other than white is the “other” (McDonald 2014). It is through the creation of ironic hashtags that users are able to

challenge oppressive ideologies (Lee 2017), and thus, the creation of whimsical hashtags serves as a platform for activism and resistance (Wilder 2015). Twitter affords users the space for “signifyin,” a series of verbal tactics used to resist hegemonic narratives, such as hashtags (Rosenbaum 2017:29). They function to disrupt dominant ideologies, and can offer different representations.

Hashtags can be racialized and allow users to self-curate the web, by attaching a tag on their content with semantic annotations. The characteristics of hashtags allow for a ubiquitous community, whereby individuals using a hashtag can be visible to one another, as well as the dominant public. Hashtags are responsible for the macro-level connections on Twitter (Rosenbaum 2017) and reflect a “heterogeneous community of many voices” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015), which works to consolidate conversations surrounding a given topic or theme.

It is important to discuss Black Twitter as it is in these spaces where such hashtags are created, and housed. Apryl William’s (2017) study, “On Thursdays we watch scandal,” contextualizes Black Twitter as a community, and uses *Scandal* as a case study. Williams argues that Black Twitter is an entity that can inspire change. She suggests that it has the ability to cause meaningful change, both on- and offline. According to her findings, a hashtag as trivial as #ScandalThursdays evokes discussions around social issues, along with other cultural topics within the confines of the online community. Hence, her research found that Black Twitter discusses social justice 6 times more than non-Black Twitter. She concludes that Black Twitter serves as a space for resisting racial prejudice and overall systematic racism. This is similar to Monique Liston’s (2017) “Black Twitter and Black Feminist Epistemology,” which examines the relationship between Black Twitter and the show *Scandal*, in order to prove that Black Twitter is a loosely constructed *mbongi*-a space where knowledge is created, validated and critiqued. The

Bantu-kongo term, “Mbongi” translates to “a room without walls,” a term applied to the democratic political system of the Bantu-Kongo communities in West Africa. Mbongi allows everyone to voice their concerns without mediation, and Liston argues that Black Twitter functions in the same manner. Black Twitter allows individuals to dialogue about their shared experiences concerning race and gender “through ethics of care,” and according to Liston, this is Black feminist epistemology in practice. She argues that Black Twitter relies on Black feminist epistemology to create and preserve a “sphere of freedom for Black women’s social and political discourse” (Liston 2017:72). Thinking about Black Twitter as a democratic system for Black women’s voices is relevant to this study in many ways. Marc Lamont Hill’s “Thank you Black Twitter” (2018) highlights the ways in which Black Twitter operates as a digital counterpublic that provides new and transgressive methods of organizing, pedagogy and resistance. He demonstrates Black Twitter as a counterpublic actively contesting dominant anti-black narratives about whose life is worth protecting. Though his article primarily focuses on hashtags like #SayHerName, his examination of Black Twitter is relevant to this study, as it demonstrates that Black Twitter is creating spaces for black individuals to present counternarratives.

Rosenbaum (2017) found that Twitter is a space for users to celebrate their African American identity. In her analysis of the hashtag, #BeingABlackGirlIsLit, Rosenbaum found that Twitter became a space for African American women to build their self-confidence and reaffirm their beliefs. Hashtags like these allow African American women to share a sense of pride of their African American womanhood. #BlackGirlMagic is a shortened version of the original hashtag (#BlackGirlsAreMagic) created by CaShawn Thompson in 2013. Thompson explains that the term “magic” is used to illustrate how black women and girls have excelled in many

ways despite the odds they face. #BlackGirlMagic has been pervasive among black women across Twitter (Bradford 2017) and has crossed over to other social media platforms.

Referencing the melanin pigments on skin is a popular trend on social media for black women. For example, #MelaninPoppin is a declaration indicating that the melanin pigments on darker skin are immensely evident. Placing emphasis on the pigments of their skin is an attempt to assert and celebrate their dark complexions. Other popular hashtags that aim to celebrate darker shades include #MelaninQueen, #Melanin and #MelaninGoddess. Moreover, #FlexinMyComplexion is a trending hashtag that became popularized by @PoCBeauty in 2015. @PocBeauty is a Twitter account dedicated to people of color, celebrating their beauty in all forms. Other hashtags include #MyBlackness, #BlackIsBeautiful and many more. Twitter can function to raise one's own consciousness, as well as being in conversations with other black women who are committed to similar achievements. Black Twitter enables genuine dialogue to occur among black women (Liston 2017). Moreover, black women engaging on Twitter create, validate and challenge existing knowledge about their identities (Liston 2017).

However, in Rosenbaum's (2017) analysis of the hashtag #HowItFeelsToBeABlackGirl, she found that, Twitter also creates a space for African American women to express their frustrations at social standards; how society makes it difficult for African American women to feel accepted or beautiful. Therefore, Black Twitter has quickly become a digital destination for people in the African American community to address pertinent issues affecting black people. Although this study is interested in examining how hashtags are being used to affirm, validate and celebrate, it is important to recognize how African American women are using hashtags to address other social problems within the African American community. Black women and other

women of color are employing Twitter to amplify their voices, moving their voices from “the margins to the center of public feminist discourse” (Gunn 2015:21).

Black feminist hashtags are providing a space for black women to talk about sexual violence (#FastTailedGirls), sexual harassment (#YouOkSis?) and domestic violence (#WhyIStayed). #FastTailedGirls is a hashtag started by Mikki Kendall and Jamie Nesbitt Golden of @HoodFeminism in 2013, to shed light on how black girls are hypersexualized and often held accountable for sexual violence that befalls them. The African American community often blames black women for their own assaults and rarely confront the perpetrators (Bradford 2017). #YouOkSis was created by Feminista Jones, who stated in an interview that “a lot of the conversation about street harassment in the mainstream media only show white women as the faces of victims. Rarely do you see black women as the face of the victim” (Workneh 2014). The idea behind the hashtag is to encourage others to intervene when they witness incidents of street harassment. Asking the question, “you okay sis?” indicates a “reassurance of alliance” among black women (Conley 2017). Therefore, these hashtags can be viewed as a consciousness-raising technique.

Wilder (2015) suggests that in order to debunk falsehood about light and dark skin tones, black women must work as everyday activists and become vehicles of their own transformations. According to her, everyday activism could involve engaging with social media tools, such as creating hashtags to challenge and bring awareness to the issues of colorism. From this review of literature, it is evident that social media is being utilized as a tool for centering the marginalized voices of black women, as a site for affirmation, as a platform to resist global standards of beauty, and as a space to heal and build community. Therefore, as black women continue to grow in numbers on social media, their engagement in digital spaces is deserving of extended

scholarly attention and research. This research is entering into these discourses by shedding light on the ways in which hashtags could function as “homeplace,” as sites of resistance for dark-skinned African American women, attempting to heal the wounds of colorism.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The study sought to examine the ways in which dark-skinned African American women are engaging in the hashtag, #MelaninPoppin. It aimed to explore how social media hashtags operate as a digital "homeplace," a site of resistance where affirmation, healing and recovery can take place. In order to obtain a large and diverse set of data, this research employed both qualitative content analysis and implemented focus groups, and aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) how are dark-skinned African American women constructing a digital "homeplace?" (2) In what ways are dark-skinned African American women using hashtags to validate, affirm, and celebrate their beauty and, (3) to what extent are social media hashtags healing the wounds of colorism within the African American community?

This chapter addresses the design of the study, illustrating how both the qualitative content analysis and the focus groups were conducted. It highlights the characteristics of both methods, indicating why they are particularly appropriate for this research, and the population studied. It first introduces qualitative content analysis and proceeds to discuss the data collected and analyzed. It then discusses the design of the focus groups, the participants involved in this study, and how the data was analyzed.

#### 3.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative research provides scholars the opportunity to examine the practices of a particular user group or a specific community, producing knowledge far beyond quantitative data (Marwick 2013). Qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of textual data through coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). It examines the characteristics of language, specifically focusing on the contextual meaning of the text, as well as visual communication messages.

### **3.1.1 Data Collection**

Social media has become both a "fruitful area of research" and a promising tool for retrieving data (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase 2017). McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017) propose that social media data provide researchers the opportunity to address new types of questions and to highlight existing research problems from a different angle. Researchers can address questions relating to social media use itself and questions that inform our understanding of social phenomena. McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017) identify seven elements of social media engagement; (1) presentation of self, (2) action and participation, (3) uses and gratifications, (4) positive experiences, (5) usage and activity count, (6) social context, and (7) platform characteristics. They state that these elements of social media engagement can be examined through a variety of methods and methodological approaches. This research best aligns with the first and third element, as this study sought to examine the adoption and use of a particular hashtag (#MelaninPoppin), in order to understand how dark-skinned African American women are using such hashtags.

Twitter provides a "rich" environment for examining social and material practices within the digital sphere (Stewart 2017). Marwick (2013) argues that the majority of studies on Twitter to date have been quantitative, despite the fact that any qualitative method can be better used to understand Twitter. Simply focusing on quantitative data overlooks important information, such as how people do things with the platform, why they engage in those things, and how they understand them. This is relevant to the purpose of this research. The decision to examine hashtag engagement specifically on Twitter, rather than focusing on any other social network was based on four reasons. The first, compared to any other social platform, Twitter is the largest observational study of human behavior (McCormrick et. al 2017). As Boyd (2009) argues, we

need to stop dismissing Twitter as a source of data, as Twitter users are participating in a mix of “social grooming” and “peripheral social awareness.” Boyd states, Twitter users “want to know what the people around them are thinking and doing and feeling, even when co-presence isn’t viable. They want to share their state of mind and status so that others who care about them feel connected.” Therefore, if Twitter is being used in this way, it makes it an apt terrain of study to understand how users are engaging with hashtags, and how they are using such hashtags to connect with each other, and construct digital homeplaces. Second, hashtags were created for, and are primarily used within Twitter compared to other social media networks (Harvey 2014).

Third, Twitter information is a combination of public and private, compared to its counterparts, such as Facebook, where users disclose information mutually. On Twitter, the information is shared among networked individuals, some of whom have reciprocal ties to the users themselves, and some of whom do not (McCormic et al. 2017). Due to this, Twitter is a better platform to explore how users are engaging with hashtags beyond their close friends and family. Rather, we are able to explore how such engagement is occurring among imagined audiences and networked publics. Boyd (2010) defines networked publics as publics that are “restructured by network technologies.” They are both the space fashioned through networked technologies, and the “imagined collective” that forms as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Twitter affords a feasible space for such networked publics to emerge, thus a better platform to explore how users are engaging with hashtags within these environments. The Fourth reason Twitter was specifically chosen was because this research is interested in contributing to current research on Black Twitter. Much has been written about the ways in which Black Twitter acts as a counterpublic, allowing individuals to interact, contest racial identity and resist hegemonic narratives. However, there is insufficient research primarily

focusing on the ways in which dark-skinned African American women are using the platform to contest colorist ideologies. For these reasons, Twitter is a felicitous focal point for this particular research.

Utilizing Twitter's standard search application program interface (API), tweets containing #MelaninPoppin over the span of one week (February 25<sup>th</sup>-March 4<sup>th</sup> 2018) was retrieved. These dates were selected using random.org. NCapture, an extension of NVivo, was used to gather content from Twitter and import the content into NVivo as a dataset source.

### **3.1.2 Data Analysis**

Previous knowledge of the context could affect the process and/or outcome. Therefore, it was important that the data was considered from a neutral perspective. The first unit of coding involved arranging the data into thematic categories. The second unit of coding involved contextualizing how #MelaninPoppin was used in conjunction with other hashtags. Using inductive reasoning, "the process of developing conclusions from collected data by weaving together new information into theories" (Bengtsson 2016:9), and employing latent analysis, interpreting and finding the underlying meaning of the text – 10 categories were identified. Bengtsson's (2016) four main stages of content analysis was performed in this study: (1) decontextualization, (2) recontextualization, (3) categorization, and (4) compilation. Decontextualization involved identifying meaning units and then labelling them with a code. While analyzing the tweets, NVivo's color codes were used to distinguish each meaning unit. During the recontextualization phase, unimportant information was excluded and extended meaning units were condensed. The categorization stage consisted of identifying themes and categories. Moreover, the compilation stage involved presenting a summary of the categories and

themes in a chart and table format (presented in chapter 4). Figure 1, *stages of categorization*, is an example of how the data was analyzed using Bengtsson’s (2016) four stages.

Tweet	Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Code	Categories	Themes
	<p>“I remember I use to hate how dark my skin was how I always wanted to have lighter skin. But now that I have grown to love myself more I’m loving this skin of mine. #Melaninpoppin #wakandaforever #queenofwakanda</p>	<p>Used to hate dark skin.  Wanted lighter skin.  Grown to love Skin.</p>	<p>Loving this skin.</p>	<p>Self-affirmation</p>	<p>Using the hashtag to declare one’s love for one’s skin</p>
	<p>“The Black skin is not a badge of shame, but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness!” - Marcus Garvey</p>	<p>Black skin is not badge of shame.  Glorious symbol.  National greatness</p>	<p>Black skin. Greatness</p>	<p>Quote reference</p>	<p>Using the hashtag to declare one’s love for one’s skin</p>
	<p>“there was a time when “lightskin-ness” was a trend and dark skin was referred to as unattractive. But now that #AfricanPride #MelaninPoppin...are making global waves, the same</p>	<p>Lighter skin was a trend. Dark skin referred to as unattractive.  #MelaninPoppin making global waves.  Queen.</p>		<p>Discussing the hashtag</p>	<p>Using the hashtag to discuss the redefinition of dark skin</p>

Figure 1- Stages of Categorization

### 3.2 Focus Groups

Through focus groups, this study allows fourteen African American women, who identify as dark-skinned, to express their attitudes regarding their personal experiences with colorism and their engagement with particular social media hashtags, exploring how they are constructing a digital homeplace. Focus groups are useful methods for exploring the depth and nuances of participants' attitudes, producing fluid discussions and thick descriptions of personal experiences and interpretations. Focus groups are "collective conversations" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2008:375) between participants who share similar experiences. It is a collectivistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' experiences, beliefs and attitudes. Thus, researchers are able to capture shared lived experiences and obtain a large amount and a diverse set of data.

As opposed to other research methods, focus groups allow researchers to "enter the world of participants" (Liamputtong 2011:5), and permits researchers to uncover aspects that remain hidden in other conventional research methods. Moreover, research has shown that people are more likely to share personal experiences in group dynamics, rather than dyadic settings (Farquar and Das 1999). The open nature of focus groups encourages a range of responses and provides the opportunity to obtain rich data from the participant's own interpretations and perspectives on a topic through interaction (Litosellti 2003). It allows the researcher to examine the ways in which people view their own realities (Ivankoff and Hultberg 2006:126) in their own words. Therefore, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of their individual and collective lived experiences.

Madriz (2000) argues that focus groups are particularly suited for exposing women's quotidian experiences, particularly women of color. She states that focus groups facilitate women

of color "writing culture together," by uncovering the layers of oppressions that have silenced them (2000:836). Too often, the experiences of women of color- as researchers, as well as subjects of research are neglected in the social sciences, thus focus groups contribute to the process of "tearing down the wall of silence" that have hidden women of color's intersecting marginalized identities: being female, being of color, and usually being lower class (Madriz 2000:841). Focus groups are particularly effective when conducting research involving black women for various reasons. The first reason includes uncovering narratives of resistance and collective stories. Wilder (2008) contends that focus groups are ideal to understand individual and collective experiences of survival and resistance strategies from women of color. As this study is interested in understanding how social media hashtags, such as #MelaninPoppin aim to counter dominant ideologies on skin complexions, conducting a focus group will produce significant and meaningful knowledge on darker-skinned African American women's possible resistance strategies.

The second reason focus groups are particularly effective when conducting research involving black women is because this form of sharing has been an important mechanism for African American women to deal with their oppression (Madriz 2000:842). Focus groups mimic the daily experiences of talking to family and friends, in which the focus group itself may be seen as a "social context" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2014). Multivocal conversations have been adopted by women for generations in the form of conversations with their mothers, sisters, friends and neighbors (Madriz 2000). These exchanges have traditionally been a way in which women have faced their oppression and social isolation. Historically, black women have gathered in a range of social settings, such as church, the beauty salon and family homes to resist white supremacy. For example, the beauty salon, was not only a black space, but exclusively, a

"woman's space" (Gill 2010:3) where African American women gathered to share "political insights and gossip" (Jaynes 2005:389). In the same manner that these black social spaces empower African American women, focus groups give a voice to these women, who have long been silenced.

Moreover, focus groups allow for group support and reassurance, and offer a safe environment for participants to comfortably discuss issues and experiences they all share (Liamputtong 2011). According to Madriz (2000), the collective nature of focus groups empowers the participants and helps them make sense of their everyday experiences of subjugation. The multivocality of the group validates their experiences and their voices, which helps them reclaim their humanity, in which Madriz states that "focus group participation has often been empowering for women, especially women of color" (Madriz 2000:843). As such, these groups operate to help women, especially women of color, to find their own unique and powerful voices.

Third, conducting focus groups is an ideal methodology in understanding the lived experiences of marginalized and vulnerable people. Liamputtong (2011) categorizes the vulnerable as "children, young people, older persons, ethnic minorities, immigrants, sex workers, the homeless, gay men and lesbians, and women" (2011:108). Feminist researchers have argued that focus groups are an ideal methodology for research involving oppressed, marginalized and vulnerable groups because they "decenter" the authority of the researcher. They have the potential to shift the power from the researcher to the participants (Pollack 2003, Wilkinson 1999) and, reduce the imbalance of power between the researcher and the participants (Liamputtong 2011). This leads to a greater emphasis on the participants' point of view and

reduces the researcher's influence. Liamputtong (2011) further argues that focus groups allow the participants to be in control and give a voice to those who have little or no societal voice.

The structure of focus groups empowers marginalized and vulnerable people, to share their views, and is especially crucial when examining sensitive topics. This is because vulnerable and marginalized people are closely related with sensitive topics (Limaputtong 2011). Sensitive topics are defined as opinions, attitudes or behaviors that would typically be kept private. As stated earlier, the discussion of colorism in the African American community is a taboo, as it is considered as "airing dirty laundry." However, creating a safe environment where participants can share their experiences, beliefs and attitudes in the presence of like-minded people who are from the same socio-economic, ethnic, and gender backgrounds, will encourage them to speak on sensitive issues.

Fourth, focus groups are effective when conducting researching involving black women because they have the ability to empower and foster social change (Johnson 1996). They have the potential to lead to consciousness raising or to the articulation of solutions to women's problem (Wilkinson 1999). Madriz (2000) suggests that communication among women can be an "awakening experience," as the commonality of experiences validates their own experiences. Participants in a focus group "take differing individual experiences and attempt to make 'collective sense' of them" (Morgan and Spanish 1984:259). For the participants, the realization of similarities in what they had previously considered a personal problem will produce a deeper understanding of the social and political processes that construct their experiences, and can possibly lead to a desire to organize against these systems (Wilkinson 1999). Therefore, focus groups are an important tool for the advancement of an "agenda of social justice for women" (Madriz 2000:836).

### **3.2.1 Participants**

A total of 14 participants were recruited across two focus groups. Participants were recruited using flyers posted on social media (Twitter), around Georgia State University's campus and local coffee shops in Atlanta. Participants who met the following criteria were recruited for this study: African American women who identify as dark-skinned, and between the ages of 18-25. To partake in this study, participants had to be users of social networking sites, however, engagement with hashtags was not part of the criterion. While it was important that participants understood the nature of social media and the practices exhibited in digital spaces, it was not necessary for them to be actively involved in such practices. Acquiring information from individuals who are active engagers with hashtags and those who are not, provides a wider perspective on the role hashtags play on social media for dark-skinned African American women. All participants were Georgia State University students currently pursuing undergraduate degrees.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection**

Two semi-structured focus groups were conducted in a classroom, a familiar and relatively safe environment for the disclosure of the experiences and behaviors of the participants. It is imperative that a safe space was created, in which similarities between the participants, and the researcher aid in achieving this. Participants were provided with a consent form and a participant information sheet at the beginning of each focus group, to reduce the anxiety of self-disclosure. The consent forms highlighted participant confidentiality, articulating that the information provided will go no further than for the purpose of the research. They were also informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, reminding them that they could withdraw at any time. The questions were formed using Krueger's (1998) categories of questions

which all have a distinct function in the flow of a focus group interview: opening, introductory, transition, key and ending questions. A group task was assigned whereby the participants were asked to pair up and define what colorism meant to them. This was executed to obtain a clear understanding of what the participants understood the term to be. Klitzinger and Barbour (1999) suggests that collective tasks such as these encourage participants to focus on one another, rather than the researcher, ensuring interaction between research participants. Moreover, Morgan (1997:50) states that allowing the participants to write things down "reinforces" their commitment to contributing those thoughts to the group, "even in the face of apparent disapproval." This task allowed for a smooth transition into the discussion of participants' experiences with colorism. The questions (appendix C) consisted of open-ended question, beginning with the discussion of colorism, and moving on to participants' engagement with social media hashtags. The length of both focus groups were approximately 60 minutes. Focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed.

### **3.2.3 Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using Emotion coding. Saldana (2009) suggests that Emotion coding is appropriate for studies that aim to "explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions" (Saldana 2009:86). For the focus group, Emotion Codes provide a deep insight into the participant's life condition and help develop an understanding of their resistance strategies (for example, engaging with hashtags). As Corbin and Strauss (2008:7) state, one cannot separate their emotion from their actions, "they are part of the same flow of events, one leading into the other." Thus, coding their emotions provides further insight into the actions they choose to take.

Furthermore, Values Coding was utilized as a concurrent method in order to gain additional information regarding their values, beliefs and attitudes. Our emotions are interlinked with our attitudes and belief systems, and therefore coding these allow for the exploration of their opinions about social media hashtags as a digital "homeplace," where the wounds of colorism can be healed. Saldana (2009) defines "belief" as a component of a system that includes our values, attitudes, "personal knowledge, experience, opinions, prejudices, morals and other interpretive perceptions of the social world" (Saldana 2009:89). Following Saldana's recommendation to explore the V (value), A (attitude) and B (belief) was crucial as they are part of an interconnected system. Exploring all three provided further insight to reflect on a collective meaning. Saldana states "values within an individual are influenced and affected by the social and cultural networks to which he belongs" (2009:92).

Additionally, by employing Values Coding, it conveyed participants' unique experiences with colorism and its influence on their engagement with social media hashtags (or not). Their values, beliefs and attitudes have been influenced by social and cultural networks and have had an impact on the decisions they make in life. Hence, one's beliefs, values and attitudes have a significant influence on the actions they choose to take, such as engaging in hashtags as a form of resistance. From Saldana's second cycle coding methods, Pattern coding was chosen as a method in order to identify emergent themes and configurations. According to Saldana (2009), the main function of Second Cycle coding is to "develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes" (Saldana 2009:149).

### **3.2.4 Reliability and Validity**

Utilizing two research methods, focus groups and qualitative content analysis, sought to reduce researcher bias. In order to increase validity, a person who was not involved in the study observed the original tweets collected, and the results found, and judged whether the interpretations were reasonable. This was also accomplished to identify any missing gaps that could be addressed. Moreover, focus group participants were provided with transcriptions to ensure interpretations were representative of their beliefs.

### **3.2.5 Limitations**

Limitations of this study include (1) the absence of demographic information, (2) #MelaninPoppin as the primary focus, (3) small sample size and short time period, and (4) the heterogeneity of hashtags. The content analysis faces several challenges. The first limitation is the absence of explicit demographic data, as users provide no, or little self-reported characteristics on Twitter, such as race, age, and gender. Due to this, it is difficult to identify who is being represented, which is vital in any research study. For this reason, this study is not representative of all dark-skinned African American women. This is one of many challenges that has been documented in various studies regarding data collection from Twitter (McCormick et al. 2017, Gayo-Avello 2013). The second limitation is the analysis of one hashtag (#MelaninPoppin), which is among various hashtags that have emerged within the Black Twittersphere. Therefore, the findings are not representative of all hashtags that are adopted in such digital spaces, and it is possible that other hashtags could produce different results.

Moreover, another limitation is the small sample size for both the content analysis and the focus groups. Overall, there was 14 focus group participants, and a total of 411 tweets were retrieved from Twitter. Thus, such small sample sizes make it difficult to make generalizations of

the larger population. Furthermore, this study consisted of analyzing tweets over a period of one week, which is insufficient considering the popularity of such hashtags emerged in 2015.

However, retrieving data through Twitter's Application Programming Interface (API) brings about several structural limitations that can misrepresent the data sample. Twitter's API provides access to a limited portion of public data and therefore, presents restrictions in the amount of information that can be retrieved. Not all tweets are made available through the search interface. As Caliandro and Gandini (2017) note, the only way to access all the public tweets available on Twitter is through Firehose tools which are not public per se- they are conditional upon specific agreements with Twitter Inc. Due to the little time range Twitter's API offers, this makes it difficult to conduct a historical analysis, and retrieve information over a long period of time. Furthermore, Twitter's API makes it impossible to replicate the same data. Hence, a second data gathering with the same keyword (hashtag) search and time stamp will provide different data. Again, this makes it harder to construct a representative sample to acquire generalizable results.

The fourth limitation is the heterogeneity of hashtags. Hashtags on Twitter entail different meanings from their counterparts, such as Instagram (Caliandro and Gandini 2017). Hashtags on Twitter are used to establish a common space of discussion (Zappavigna 2011). On the other hand, hashtags on Instagram are used as tools to better interpret the context in which photos are taken (Carah and Shaul 2016). Therefore, the results found can only be used to describe users' engagement with such hashtags specifically on Twitter, and cannot be representative of hashtag engagement on other social media platforms. Thus, as hashtags work differently across a wide array of social media platforms, future research should focus on the ways in which online users are engaging with hashtags on other social media platforms, and compare the results.

## 4 FINDINGS

This chapter addresses the results obtained from the qualitative content analysis and the focus groups.

### 4.1 Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was utilized to examine the ways in which dark-skinned African American women are engaging with the hashtag, #MelaninPoppin. Ultimately, this research intends to explore how social media hashtags are operating as a digital "homeplace," a site of resistance where affirmation, healing and recovery can take place.

NVivo's "Ncapture" generated 571 tweets over the span of one week, February 25<sup>th</sup>-March 4<sup>th</sup> 2018. The dates were chosen using random.org. As this research intends to examine the ways in which the hashtag #MelaninPoppin is being used, only original tweets from users were taken into account, while a re-posting of a tweet (retweet) was filtered and disregarded from the data. This generated a total of 411 tweets. Seven categories were identified; #MelaninPoppin was used for (1) self-affirmation (2) advertisement (3) no textual information (4) making reference to celebrities, (5) making reference to natural hair, (6) citing quotes, and (7) to discuss/make statements about the hashtag itself. From these categories, 1 main theme was identified; using the hashtag for redefinition. Furthermore, the content analysis was used to examine the ways in which other hashtags that center black women in general, are in conversation with #MelaninPoppin, such as #BlackGirlMagic, #MelaninQueen etc. From the findings, 245 (59.6%) tweets commonly used #MelaninPoppin in conjunction with other hashtags. This suggests that such hashtags are assumed to work collectively to simultaneously achieve the purpose of the tweet, whether it is for self-affirmation or to advertise. The chart

below represents the identified categories of tweets containing the hashtag #MelaninPoppin and other hashtags over the span of one week, February 25th-March 4<sup>th</sup> 2018.

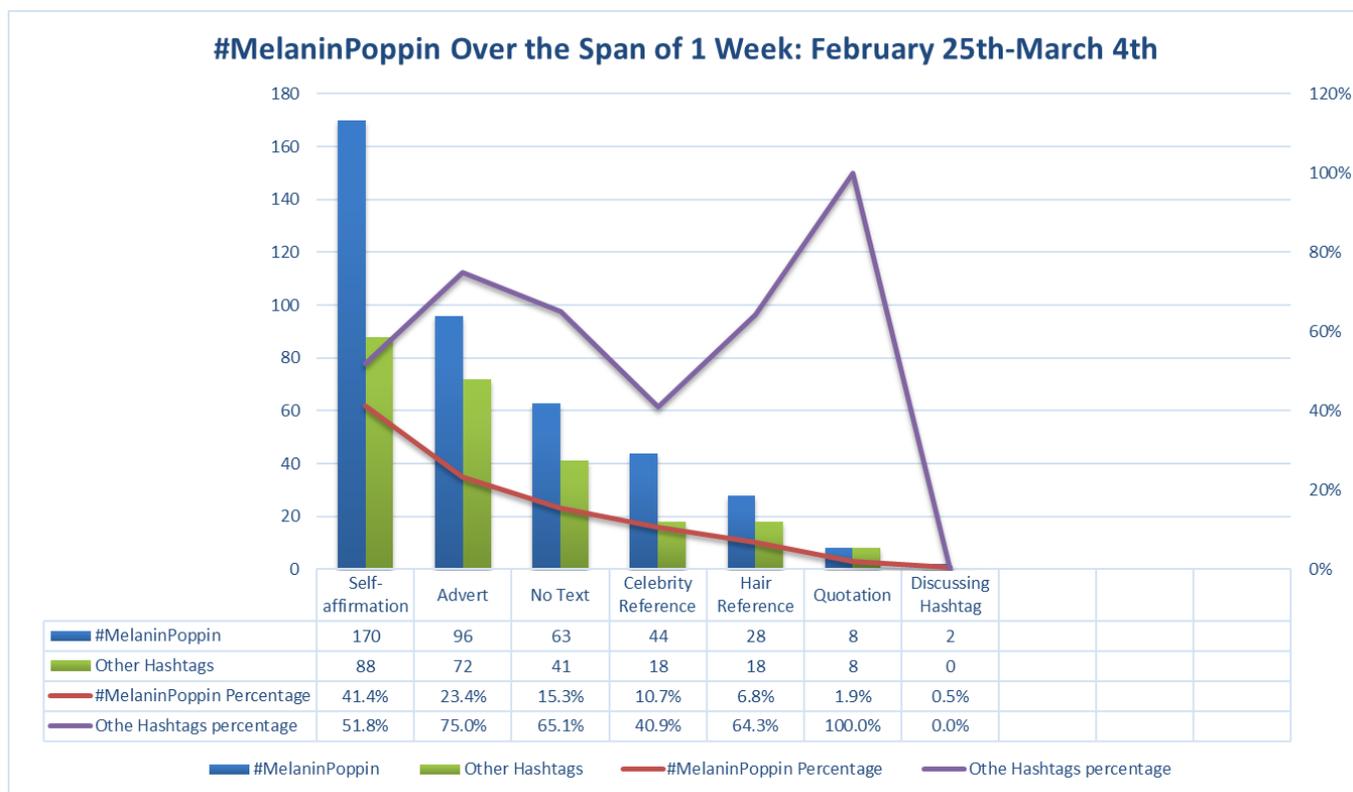


Figure 2- #MelaninPoppin Findings

## 4.2 Categories

### 4.2.1 Category 1: Self-affirmation

One hundred and seventy tweets (41.4%) containing the hashtag #MelaninPoppin were used for self-affirmation. For the purpose of this research, self-affirmation is defined as “the recognition and assertion of the existence and value of one's individual self” (Oxford 2010:1614). Twitter users publicly honored, showed appreciation for, and declared love for one’s skin, beauty, character, and the black race in general. More than half (84.1%) of the tweets in this category contained images, such as users personal images or other visual images pertaining to black culture. Tweets that consisted of Twitter users personal images allude to the idea of

redefinition, specifically redefining what beauty and blackness means to them. Twitter users attempted to present counternarratives of what is considered undesirable in the realm of mainstream media, and thus, contested mass-mediated ideologies. For example, in addition to posting a digital drawing of a dark-skinned black woman, this tweet highlighted the users celebration of both their skin color and the black visual art itself:

@Belle\_aNoir: “this image is too dope not to post. Can we be anymore magical?! Yes we can #BlackGirlMagic #magical #melaninpoppin.”

Other examples include:

@ThaArchitect: “Black is beautiful. Melanin is magnificent. #blackisbeautiful #blackgirlmagic #melaninpoppin,”

@POCAREAMAZING: “#MelaninMagic #MelaninPoppin #melaninalgoddess #darkskin #beauty #poc #BlackGirlMagic #BlackGirlsAreMagic I knew I was powerful when I realized the color of my skin made others uncomfortable.”

@WaKandaQueenx: “I remember I use to hate how dark my skin was and I how I always wanted to have lighter skin. But now that I have grown to love myself more I’m loving this skin of mine.”

@nicolenoirhair: “be your own kind of beautiful. #melaninqueen #melaninpoppin.”

These examples reflect how the hashtag is allowing individuals to acknowledge their self-worth, and affirm themselves, and other dark-skinned black women. Twitter users are promoting positive perceptions of dark skin tones, as well as dismantling colorist ideologies. They convey messages about self-love, and act as markers of resistance. Within this category, more than half

(51.8%) of the tweets contained other hashtags that place black women at the center of conversation. This demonstrates that the hashtags are used to work collectively to simultaneously achieve the purpose of affirming themselves, and others. Moreover, it is interesting to note that 57.1% of the tweets in this category made reference to the sun. User's typically made comparisons of themselves with elements of the sun, in which codes such as "glow," "sun" and "sun kissed" frequently occurred. For example:

@LaAsiaaax3: "My skin is the Sun's #1 fan #MelaninPoppin"; @tieseah\_lyn: "sunkissed. #Melanin #MelaninMagic #BlackGirlMagic #NaturalBeauty #MelaninPoppin."

@esecryssie: "melanin glow #melanin #MelaninPoppin."

#### **4.2.2 Category 2: Advertisements**

Ninety-six tweets (23.4%) used the hashtag for advertising purposes. The hashtag was used to promote black-owned businesses and products, specifically targeting black women. They used the hashtag as an effective tool to target their target audience (customers), as they understood the potential influence of such hashtags to expand their reach. For example:

@gypsyPRgirl: "Are you ready to unbox the best plant-based beauty curated for brown girls? #MelaninPoppin #BlackGirlMagic #MyBlackisBeautiful"

@NeveenDominic: "Our juba foundation is made with dark skin women in mind. It's a must have for every makeup artists. #mua #darkskin #melaninpoppin #blackgirlmagic."

Out of the 96 tweets identified, 72 adopted other hashtags along with #MelaninPoppin. This further demonstrates how companies, particularly, the beauty industry, are taking advantage of such hashtags to promote diverse beauty for dark-skinned black women.

### 4.2.3 *Category 3: No textual information (other than hashtags)*

The fourth category consists of users simply posting the hashtag, with no other textual information. Sixty-three (15.3.1%) were identified in this category. These tweets typically contained other hashtags (65.1%) that center black women. Thus, these hashtags possibly serve to make statements on their own, without the need of explicitly affirming, or celebrating themselves. 82.5% of the tweets posted personal images, and therefore, used the hashtag to present maximized perceptions of themselves. This alludes to the idea of presenting “best self” identities (Harris 2014), and user-generated content that rejects dominant standards of beauty.

### 4.2.4 *Category 4: Celebrity Reference*

Fourty-four tweets (10.7%) made celebrity reference(s). This was accomplished to validate their own identities, by mentioning particular celebrities who are dark-skinned, successful and redefining beauty in mainstream media. For example:

@BoxBeautyco: “The @VogueArabia cover featuring @ImaanHammam [Imaan Hammam] and @the\_real\_iman is beyond gorgeous [Zara Mohamed Abdulmajid]. #Melaninpoppin.”

@trueartists83: “Much respect @Lupita\_Nyong and your true beauty lies deeply in that Goddess Substance with added greatness you exude effortlessly. #Womenshistorymonth #getyousomemelanin #BlackPanther #Melaninpoppin.”

@BlkRoyalTee: “Queen Viola [Viola Davis]-stunningly Beautiful- Naturally. #BlackQueen #RoleModels #BlackGirlMagic #MelaninPoppin.”

These example tweets present black women in both the beauty and the film industry, who dismantle dominant ideologies of what it means to be beautiful.

#### 4.2.5 *Category 5: Natural Hair Reference*

Twent-eight tweets (6.8%) pertained to natural hair. For example:

@lafrancecachee: “my skin absorbs the sun’s rays and my hair defies gravity. You can’t tell me I’m not magical. #blackgirlmagic #blackgirlrocks #melaninpoppin”

@Panda\_Ash: “the Sun is so nice to me and my hair today!! #naturalhair #naturalgirls2018 #melanin #NaturalHairTwitter #MelaninPoppin”

@assiduous\_hope: “girls with curls. #melanin #melaninqueen #naturalhair #melaninpoppin #blackgirlmagic.”

These examples illustrate how the hashtag is being used to redefine what it means to possess a specific hair type that is often depicted as undesirable.

#### 4.2.6 *Category 6: Quotes*

Eight tweets (1.9%) cite quotes from famous black influencers, in order to uplift the black race. For example:

@MelaninHeaven: “the Black skin is not a badge of shame, but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness! - Marcus Garvey. #MelaninAngels #Melanin #MelaninMagic #MelaninPoppin #Black #AfricanAmerican #African #BlackGirlsRock #BlackGirlMagic.”

@MelaninHeaven: “We are the women who marched from cotton fields of medicine, entertainment, and the White House- @Jadapinkettsmith #MelaninMagic #MelaninPoppin #BlackGirlsRock #BlackGirlMagic.”

#### 4.2.7 *Category 7: Discussing the Hashtag*

Two users (0.5%) utilized #MelaninPoppin to discuss the hashtag itself. For example, this particular user tweeted:

@RashelleBlue: “There was a time when “lightskin-ness” was a trend and dark skin was referred to as unattractive. But now that #AfricanPride #MelaninPoppin...are making global waves, the same people who once called us ashy Africans are coming through like “Hey Queen...” Society for you.”

This tweet highlights the user’s frustration with hegemonic beauty standards, though also comments on the ways in which the hashtag has shaped and redefined what it means to be dark-skinned. Another user tweeted the hashtag to convey their appreciation for the hashtag:

@Willie\_B :“I live [love] this hashtag. Yesss. #MelaninPoppin #IssaVibe.”

### 4.3 **Theme 1: (Re)definition**

Within all of these categories, 1 key theme was identified: hashtags serving as a site for redefinition. The findings indicate that such hashtags are influencing discourse about beauty, though, not just discussing the concept itself, but attempting to redefine it. This theme was present in all the categories, suggesting that Twitter users are attempting to construct their own meanings from dominant messages, and then, employ these appropriated meanings accordingly. As the examples have shown, they are using #MelaninPoppin and other hashtags to redefine existing notions about what it means to be black, and for some, what it means to be a dark-skinned black woman. As the media tends to perpetuate unrealistic unattainable beauty standards for black women, particularly, dark-skinned black women, these hashtags are allowing Twitter users to dismantle such limited definitions of beauty.

Such hashtags are redefining, and recreating individuals' sense of self, by encouraging self-affirmation, testimonials, thought-provoking quotes by influential black leaders, and allowing users to present images of their “best” selves - whether it is their personal images, celebrities, or images pertaining to the black race in general.

#### 4.4 Focus Groups

Simply relying on qualitative content analysis makes it impossible to specifically focus on the ways in which dark-skinned African American women are engaging with the hashtag (as there are a range of Twitter users with various demographics), which is why both the content analysis and the focus groups collaborate well to investigate this phenomenon. Thus, this section delves into the ways in which the hashtag is being used as a whole. In contrast to the content analysis that primarily examined the use of the hashtag, #MelaninPoppin, in the focus groups, there were no limits to the discussion of merely one hashtag, rather, participants discussed various hashtags that dark-skinned black women adopt on social media. A brief overview of the participants is presented in figure 3. For the sake of anonymity, participants have been given pseudonyms.

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2	
Name	Age	Name	Age
Jessica	22	Victoria	22
Chantelle	23	Abigail	19
Kim	21	Lauren	21
Crystal	18	Samantha	20
Rasheeda	21	Evelynn	20
Alex	22	Olivia	23
		Maya	22

		Tasha	18
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*Figure 3- Focus Group Participants*

First, it is important to establish participants' engagement with these social media hashtags (e.g. #MelaninPoppin, #MelaninQueen, #FlexinMyComplexion etc.). Fifty-seven percent of participants stated that they actively engage with such hashtags. Seven percent declared that they did not particularly post hashtags online, but occasionally scrolled through the hashtags, and 36% stated that they did not interact with such hashtags at all.

	Active Engagement with Social Media Hashtags	Little Engagement with Social Media Hashtags	No Engagement with Social Media Hashtags
Participants	57%	7%	36%

*Figure 4- Participant Engagement with Social Media Hashtags*

The focus groups revealed a general consensus that hashtags that center black women have played a role in celebrating darker skin tones, functioning as a space for affirmation. However, such hashtags can also possibly function to further perpetuate certain notions about darker skin tones when used in specific contexts. The data from the focus groups highlight two main emerging themes: hashtags as a site of injury, and also hashtags as a site for remedy. For the first theme, hashtags as a site of injury, there were 3 sub-themes: the “token” dark-skinned girl, dark skin as “trending,” and the problem with seeking approval. For the second major theme, hashtags as a site for remedy, there were two sub-themes: the younger generation, and hashtags as constructing online communities.

#### **4.5 Hashtags as a Site of Injury**

All participants highlighted their concerns with the circulation and the engagement of such hashtags. They believed that these hashtags are problematic as they can function as a site of

injury, one that can transform the significance of the hashtags. The first problem they addressed was the possibility of such hashtags perpetuating negative and hypersexualized stereotypes about dark-skinned black women. According to the participants, the portrayal of dark-skinned black women in media, such as Hip-Hop music videos, have had a significant influence on the ways in which dark-skinned black women are represented on social media. They believe that there is a correlation between mass mediated representations and representations on social media, despite the fact that social media allows users self (re)presentation. For example, they note that Hip Hop music videos are promoting a standardized image of dark-skinned black women, which they describe as “token” dark-skinned black women. According to the participants, the idea of a “token” dark-skinned black woman in music videos are having an influence on the ways in which these hashtags are being used and received on social media.

The second problem they addressed was the trivialization of such hashtags. Participants expressed discontent with the ways in which their skin tone is currently being treated as a “trend,” one that has incited the commodification and the trivialization of such hashtags. The last problem that was raised was the dependence of these hashtags for some women. Participants were concerned with the ways in which some have adopted such hashtags for the approval of their lighter counterparts, and other races, rather than as a means for self-expression and celebration. According to participants, these issues demonstrate that such hashtags can have injurious effects on the representation of not just dark-skinned African American women, but dark-skinned black women as a whole, and thus attitudes about beauty and their self-worth.

#### ***4.5.1 Problem 1: The “Token” Dark-skinned Girl***

All participants acknowledged that there is a lack of dark-skinned black women represented in mainstream media, although, they specifically focused on Hip Hop music videos.

According to the participants, when dark-skinned black women are casted, Eurocentric and ethnically ambiguous features and hair textures are the benchmark. Moreover, they suggested that there is a criterion for body size/shape, for dark-skinned black women to be considered, in comparison to other complexions and races. In other words, they believed it was harder for dark-skinned black women to be represented in Hip Hop music videos in their natural form, compared with other women. However, dark-skinned black women who do meet the arbitrary standards, or those who are sculpted to meet such standards are what Lauren describes as “token” dark-skinned women, because they are strategically placed in music videos to create a false sense of diversity. Lauren stated: “they put them in music videos to act like they have a diverse set of complexions in the video but they really don't. They'll put light skinned girls with different features, like curly hair or straight hair, slim or curvy. But dark-skinned girls have to have a specific look - she can't have her natural hair and she has to be curvy.” In this sense, participants discussion of “token” dark-skinned women refer to both the lack of diversity in the number of dark-skinned black women represented in Hip Hop music videos, and in the lack of diversity in physical appearance (there is a favored image portrayed).

Participants expressed that, in these music videos, “token” dark-skinned women are sexualized, whereby their bodies are the main focus of attention. Participants acknowledged that generally, women in Hip Hop music videos are sexualized. However, they believed that dark-skinned black women are not only sexualized, but their skin complexions are also sensationalized. For example, Olivia stated:

when you do see darker skinned women in media, they are either naked, oiled up or dipped in chocolate. Especially in music videos, which I think has an impact on the way dark-skinned women are also portrayed online, on social media. Even though dark-

skinned girls are being acknowledged more often than before, now, they have to be shown in such an exaggerated way.

Moreover, Evelyn expressed similar views: “dark-skinned girls are hypersexualized, so we can’t be taken seriously. They are hypersexualized in music videos and on social media.” Using Remy Ma’s music video, “Melanin Magic” as an example of how dark-skinned black women are presented in music videos, Chantelle states: “I like the fact that dark-skinned girls are shown, but there’s no variety, they all have one look. Not all dark-skinned girls look like that, so why is this the only image that is shown? It’s frustrating because the song is supposed to be a celebration of all shades of brown, but they only show one type of dark-skinned girl.”

All participants believed that this “one size fits all” representation of dark-skinned black women is problematic, because it has an impact on the ways in which hashtags such as #MelaninPoppin and others are being used and received by dark-skinned black women, and even black men on social media. All participants believed that such hashtags can function to perpetuate existing hypersexualized and sensationalized representations of dark-skinned black women that is present in Hip Hop music videos, particularly when they are used in conjunction with famous dark-skinned celebrities or social media socialites that fit the specific criteria that is often portrayed. Lauren used Instagram model and video vixen, Bria Myles, as an example of a “token” dark-skinned black woman whose image is often posted on social media with reference to such hashtags. She stated: “when I think about those hashtags, I think about Bria Myles because she is always associated with them. Her image is always used with those hashtags. I’m not saying, she shouldn’t be able to use the hashtag, or others can’t use the hashtag when posting her image, it’s just that it’s a problem when she becomes the face of the hashtag.” Furthermore, Samantha reinstated this notion: “when you see those hashtags being used in certain ways, to

promote a specific image of what dark-skinned girls should look like, it doesn't really feel like a celebration of darker skin tones. It more like a reminder of what is considered ideal. I'm fed up of seeing naked oiled dark-skinned girls on social media.”

All participants worried that using the hashtags to promote what has become an exclusive, standardized mass-mediated representation of dark-skinned black women, potentially trivializes these hashtags and reinforces hypersexual images of dark-skinned black women, thus, reduces darker skin to existing stereotypes. Participants observed that due to the promotion of “token” dark-skinned black women, it encourages individuals to emulate this particular image, while posting and sharing such hashtags. Rather than using the hashtags to sincerely celebrate and empower darker skin tones. The discussion of “token” dark-skinned black women also initiated a conversation around Instagram pages dedicated to dark-skinned women-these pages are often inclined to use such hashtags. According to the participants, these pages shamelessly promote an exclusive image of what dark-skinned black women should look like, again reinforcing archetypical “token” dark-skinned black women, rather than sharing images of diverse dark-skinned black women. A conversation about specific Instagram pages, such as @darkskinwomen and @darkskin.blackgirls occurred. Participants believed that though these pages aim to celebrate darker skin complexions and perhaps offer counternarratives, they in fact reinforce hypersexualized and sensationalized representations of dark-skinned black women. Alex expressed that such pages need to promote diverse images of dark-skinned black women, rather than melodramatic photo shoots that accentuate their complexions. She stated: “I think they [instagram pages dedicated to dark-skinned black women] do more harm than good. They all post the same girls, and it's nothing exciting. The same girls, the same photoshoots, the same concept. I'm tired of the oil.” Though Alex's comment induced laughter and prompted

humorous commentary about oil and black bodies, her observation indicates that such Instagram pages that adopt hashtags like #MelaninPoppin, fail to use the hashtag in beneficial ways, which can have adverse effects on the ways in which the hashtags are received, as well as effects on its overall significance.

#### **4.5.2 Problem 2: “My skin color is not a trend”**

Another emergent theme that occurred was the idea that dark-skinned black women are “trending” on social media. All participants believed that this is problematic, as it could possibly shift the intentions of the hashtags. In other words, because the hashtags are feeding into the “trend,” it reverts the process of using the hashtag to celebrate darker skin complexions in a healthy fashion, rather it reinforces the fetishization of darker skin tones. Olivia states: “sometimes these hashtags annoy because it’s becoming a trend to be dark-skinned. My skin color is not a trend.”

Furthermore, participants note that this trend has transcended the digital sphere, and has entered the world of retail. They articulated that hashtags such as #MelaninPoppin are being commodified; such hashtags are being priced, sold and bought. They believe that when retailers begin to capitalize off of the hashtag by placing them on T-shirts, baseball caps, bags, mugs, and other items, it reduces their skin color to a trend, and ultimately trivializes the hashtag. Interestingly, participants came to an agreement that both dark-skinned black women and men are trending. According to Evelyn, “the dark body in general, regardless of gender is hypersexualized. Dark men are trending just as much as dark women. It’s unhealthy, so these hashtags can fuel this fetishization.” Furthermore, Victoria concurred and stated: “Yes, I agree. Dark skin is fetishized. But I think it works in the favor of men. They like it because they get the attention they want.”

One participant raised concerns about the circulation and engagement of such hashtags, in term of raising consciousness and spreading awareness of the issues regarding colorism. According to Kim, these hashtags can be superficial, as they only encourage individuals to post images of themselves, rather than making distinct political statements or sparking any form of action/organizing for social change. For example, she spoke about the lack of people using the hashtag to evoke discussions on the issue at hand, colorism, or its effect on the African American community, and society as a whole. Moreover, she compared it with the Black Lives Matter hashtag, stating that when individuals tweet #BlackLivesMatter, they fuel discussions around the issue (police brutality), make concrete statements, and raise consciousness. According to Kim:

Their cool [hashtags that center black women] but it's mainly about pictures, and doesn't do much for addressing colorism. If people are using them to highlight the beauty of their skin tone that has been criticized for so long, I think it will make sense to actually talk about the issue -discriminating against skin tone. It's more concerned with appearances than discussing the problem.

However, Rasheeda provided a counter argument, and stated that perhaps these hashtags are making an implicit statement rather than an explicit one:

I think the hashtag speaks for themselves. I don't think we need to add pressure on people to make a statement each time they use the hashtag. If that's the case, people won't use them anymore because there will be too much pressure. It's supposed to be a fun way to celebrate us. I don't think we can compare them to #BlackLivesMatter.

Nonetheless, they all came to an agreement that there should be a development of a new hashtag/digital campaign/movement that probes discussion around colorism and ignites social

change, while hashtags such as #MelaninPoppin and #FlexinMyComplexion should remain lighthearted.

#### **4.5.3 Problem 3: Approval-seeking**

An interesting topic of discussion occurred concerning the constant validation or approval that some dark-skinned black women are in search of by engaging in social media hashtags. Kim, who initiated the conversation, worried about individuals' intent with adopting such hashtags:

I struggle to fully embrace these hashtags. I feel that they are proof that we are constantly seeking approval from others, even those in our own race. Why are we always trying to prove ourselves, prove that we are just as beautiful as them? Why can't we just be? Why do we have to use a hashtag to uplift ourselves?"

Moreover, Jessica agreed with this notion and expressed that "using the hashtag to validate yourself is dangerous because, what happens when those hashtags fade away, and something else is the new thing. What happens to your self-esteem then?" This stirred up a conversation about women who solely depend on the approval of others to empower themselves, which such hashtags can encourage. 43% of participants were displeased with the overuse of the hashtags. They believe that the African American community has a tendency to overuse certain hashtags or trends on social media. Tasha declared that "black people like to find things on social media, learn new meanings and run them into the ground. It's just another thing that will get overused and then disposed of." Tasha's comment alludes to the idea that such hashtags are temporary and short-lived. How then, could they function as sites of resistance if they are fleeting?

## **4.6 A Site for Remedy**

This section will discuss the conversations that occurred around hashtags functioning as a site for remedy. Although participants addressed the issues that could arise with the engagement and circulation of such hashtags, they also made observations about the ways in which they can operate to heal, and affirm individuals, specifically the younger generation. Furthermore, they discussed the potential of hashtags to serve as online communities for dark-skinned black women around the globe, encouraging a collective international affiliation.

### ***4.6.1 The Younger Generation***

The idea that such hashtags are impactful for the younger generation of dark-skinned black girls was an emerging sub-theme. Participants shared their personal experiences with colorism, which they were all first introduced to during their childhood. A total of 92% shared similar stories about growing up disliking their skin tone due to discrimination they faced early on in their childhood. They spoke of the influence family, school friends and the media had in shaping their attitudes about darker skin tones and their perception of beauty. Lauren, who was first introduced to colorism by her classmates, stated that she was not aware that she was particularly dark until it was mentioned to her by her former classmates: “I didn't know I was dark-skinned 'til someone told me in high school. I grew up in a mainly white area, so I didn't realize my skin tone as much. I was just black around them. Not until I got to high school was I made aware of my darker shade.” Similarly, May noticed her darker skin tone when she was in high school, after not receiving the same attention from the opposite sex like her lighter-skinned friends: “it's silly now, but I remember the guys will always go for my light skinned friend. It made me feel like I wasn't not good enough, and made me question my skin tone, and made me want to be lighter.” Participants expressed similar accounts of their experiences with colorism,

discussing how it affected their relationships with black men, their self-esteem and their overall perception of beauty. They identified that the source of their negative attitudes towards their skin tone stemmed from both the lack of representation of darker skinned black women in media, and also, the lack of anyone assuring them of their self-worth, especially at such young ages when they were developing and constructing their identities.

Participants highlighted that social media hashtags could possibly serve as a site of affirmation for the younger generation of dark-skinned black girls, as they all expressed that they would have felt differently about their skin tone if such hashtags existed when they were growing up. Given the popularity of social media among younger people today, and the easy access to social media tools, the participants communicated that it will provide the younger generation of dark-skinned black girls with the necessary tools they need while they are constructing their racial and individual identities. According to the participants, these hashtags allow young girls to foster positive attitudes about their skin color, even in the face of colorism within school or family dynamics. Samantha stated:

If I saw these hashtags when I was growing up, and saw people actively celebrating their darker skin, and embracing it, then I probably would have to. I think they [hashtags] are helping the younger generation of girls that have come after us. I think they will appreciate it more than we do because we already feel good about our skin, but we haven't always felt that way. So, they don't have to have the same experiences we did.

They can see these hashtags and embrace their skin tones.

Similarly, Lauren shared a story about her younger cousin who struggled with accepting her skin color, and how such hashtags have aided in her confidence:

I enjoy seeing them [hashtags], because it's not really for people our age, like she [Samantha] said, it's helpful for younger girls. I would often show my younger cousin how people are using these hashtags online because she's always had issues with accepting her skin tone. I would show them [hashtags] to her, to uplift her, so she doesn't grow up resenting her skin and then later realizing the beauty of it. It would be better for her if she could realize it at a young age.

According to Chantelle, "these hashtags can be a good thing. I've seen people's confidence grow when these hashtags became popular. Especially, among girls that are younger than me. If you look through their Instagram pages, you can see their confidence grow. So, I like that it's helping younger girls to love themselves more." Most of the participants spoke of an internal conflict of feelings about their identity, whereby they shifted between believing their skin tone was unattractive to beginning to embrace their skin tone later on in life. However, 86% of the participants stated that this shift was not due to the circulation of such hashtags, even though they acknowledged and appreciated the empowering nature of them. However, Crystal stated that the shift between feeling unhappy with her skin tone, to accepting it, was due to seeing others embrace their skin tone online, specifically through the promotion of such hashtags. Crystal, 18, was the youngest in the focus groups, and perhaps this had an influence on the ways in which hashtags had an impact on her attitudes toward her skin tone. Overall, participants believed that these hashtags could potentially serve as a site for remedy, though, specifically for younger girls, whereby they could use such hashtags to aid in their identity construction.

#### ***4.6.2 Constructing an Online Community***

The idea of constructing an online community transpired in the focus groups. Participants highlighted that engaging, adopting and sharing (e.g. retweeting) such hashtags builds online

communities for not just dark-skinned African American women, but dark-skinned black women across the black diaspora. According to participants, these online communities transcend geographic boundaries and constraints, where black women from different cultures, who share similar experiences as black women, and as dark-skinned women, can come together and empower one another. They are creating a culture of connectivity. Chantelle said: “black women are using these hashtags everywhere, and it is uplifting and powerful to see these hashtags appear in different parts of the world. We face the same experiences, and relate to each other in ways that others don’t.” Moreover, Crystal stated “I like that black women have their own thing on social media. When I use those hashtags, I feel included and part of a group of women embracing their skin tone. It makes me feel part of something.” Abigail pointed out that “by liking or retweeting tweets with those particular hashtags, it’s like I’m involved in their celebration or affirmation. I’m celebrating with them, even if I don’t particular use the hashtag myself.”

Interestingly, participants suggested that it is also creating an online community for black women in general, as such hashtags are not simply exclusive to dark-skinned black women. Participants appreciated the fact that these hashtags were inclusive, where all shades across the spectrum could be celebrated. Therefore, they suggest that it is creating a united front where all black women can come together, rather than reinforcing the destructive divide that colorism has created throughout history. May highlighted that such hashtags are bridging the gap between dark-skinned African American women, and their lighter counterparts. According to Crystal, “these hashtags are not just used by dark-skinned women, so it’s great to see other black women with different shades being celebrated. Because we are all supporting each other, we leave behind the competition between light and dark skin, and instead, celebrate a range of shades.”

Victoria also made similar comments, stating that “it’s promoting new ways of appreciating all the shades black people come in.” Therefore, participants are expressing that as colorism has had a greater impact on the lives of black women, this construction of community promotes a sense of unity between black women, and promotes black beauty in all shades, one that they believe has been absent for so long within the African American community.

Furthermore, participants spoke of hashtags that hold more “weight” than others (a response to Kim who spoke about raising consciousness and spreading awareness). While discussing the hashtag, #IWillNotApologizeForBeingDarkSkin, which went viral in 2015, Alex expressed that it was the circulation of this hashtag that evoked feelings of community:

seeing everyone tweet that hashtag [#IWillNotApologizeForBeingDarkSkin] and actually using it to empower themselves, and using it to discuss colorism, made me feel part of a united front. A community fighting for the respect and acknowledgement of dark skin. But not all of them make me feel that way. Some of them don’t make me feel like I’m part of a larger community, or making an impact. Not all of them are movements. Some are just for fun.

When asked to provide examples of “fun” hashtags that do not elicit a sense of community, she failed to think of some at that moment, though, her sentiment remained the same. Alex’s comments suggest that hashtags carry different values or “weights,” whereby some construct a sense of community more than others.

All participants who made reference to the injurious effects of such hashtags were among the 36% that did not engage with hashtags. However, their lack of engagement with such hashtags was not entirely due to the injurious effects that participants mentioned. Rather, they spoke of a lack of general interest in interacting with hashtags. For example, Samantha expressed

that she did not engage with hashtags because she did not feel compelled to. That being said, Samantha also stated the possibilities of hashtags acting as sites of affirmation for young girls. This was similar to other participants among the 36%, who all shared conflicting views about the circulation of such hashtags. They all contributed to the discussion of hashtags acting as a site of affirmation for young girls, and expressed similar views to those who were active engagers in the focus groups. Thus, despite their lack of engagement, they still believed the nature of such hashtags construct digital communities, and could act as sites of affirmation for the younger generation of dark-skinned black girls. To conclude, participants spoke about the possibilities that engaging with hashtags have on dark-skinned black women in general, and not just dark-skinned African American women. Their discussions allude to the idea that hashtags are working in the same fashion for all dark-skinned black women, whether they are African American, Africans in America, Caribbeans in the US, and even black women across the globe.

## 5 DISCUSSION

This section draws comparisons between the data from the content analysis and the focus groups, and will address the research questions as follows; (1) how are dark-skinned African American women constructing a digital “homeplace?” (2) In what ways are dark-skinned African American women using hashtags to validate, affirm, and celebrate their beauty? And (3) to what extent are social media hashtags healing the wounds of colorism within the African American community?

### 5.1 Addressing the Research Questions

(1) How are dark-skinned African American women constructing a digital “homeplace?”

Both the focus groups and the content analysis revealed that such hashtags can be understood as functioning as “homeplace.” bell hooks asserts that the task of constructing homeplace is “making home a community of resistance” (1990:43). The findings from the focus groups coincide with this notion, as the traits of constructing homeplace are present in the participants’ social media practices. From the focus groups, one of the emerging themes was the idea that hashtags were constructing a digital community. Codes, such as “resistance,” “solidarity,” “pride,” and “community” all point towards the characteristics of homeplace. Participants spoke of the construction of an international dialogue, where dark-skinned black women could form a collective alliance/resistance against systematic bias and inequality. According to the participants, these hashtags served as community for not just African American women, but black women in general. Caliandro and Gandini (2017) note that an online community exists if its members experience a shared sense of belonging and recognizes the space as a common milieu, which is evident from the findings in both the content analysis and the focus groups. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) have identified three core elements that

characterize a community: a sense of common identity or “we-ness,” shared rituals and traditions, and “a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community” (Muniz and O’Guin 2001:413). From the findings, we can understand such hashtags as constructing community, as they meet the four conditions that Quentin Jones (1997) sets for defining an online community. First, it is a public space where members can interact. Second, there are more than two communicators. Third, communication is dynamic. Fourth, membership is sustained over time.

The participants in this study believed that engaging with such hashtags constructed a community that transcended geographical boundaries. Gatson and Zweerink (2004:97) state that “as much as community may be about the ties between people, it is often understood to be both a grounded place, as well as a thing whose grounded experiences may be carried along in the imagination.” This idea of an imaginative community is interesting when placing it in the context of this research. The participants spoke about *feeling* part of a community, rather than *being* part of one. The difference between the two terms emphasizes the distinction between the metaphysical and the physical. Thus, perhaps this community serves as an imaginative space that lies in their consciousness. According to Gatson and Zweerink, there is a connection between the physical and the symbolic, which highlights “community as a metaphorical concept, an amorphous one often standing in for specific place and space boundaries” (2004:97). Therefore, these hashtags are in fact constructing a homeplace both digitally, and one that can shelter black women, even while they are offline, as this sense of homeplace now lies in their consciousness.

According to hooks, the devaluation of the position black women have played in constructing homeplace cripples their efforts to resist colonizing mentality, one that encourages self-hatred. That being said, findings from the content analysis and observations from the

participants revealed that dark-skinned black women are not using the hashtags to actively discuss the root of the problem, colorism. This research intended to examine how dark-skinned African American women are engaging with such hashtags, more so than specifically investigating how colorism is being discussed in conjunction with hashtags. However, hooks argues that homeplace “should provide a framework where we can discuss the development of black female political consciousness” (hooks 1990:46). Only 1 tweet out of 411 alluded to discussions around skin tone bias, thus, to what extent can it be argued that dark-skinned black women are constructing homeplace in its entirety? Moreover, hooks proposes that black women who have “essential wisdom to share” (1990:48) provide the foundation black women need to bond with one another in ways that renew their solidarity. She believes that black women can renew their political commitment, and construct homeplace by “sharing insights and awareness, sharing feminist thinking and feminist vision” (1990:49). Findings from the content analysis and the focus groups do not reflect this, as such hashtags are not being used to share such insight. Therefore, not all components of homeplace are present in the ways dark-skinned black women are engaging with hashtags and constructing sites of resistance. However, hooks notes that constructing a homeplace that affirms black women, their blackness, and love for one another is a “necessary resistance” (1990:46), which is exhibited in the findings. This notion will set the tone for the rest of the discussion.

(2) In what ways are dark-skinned African American women using hashtags to validate, affirm, and celebrate their beauty?

Results from both the content analysis and the focus groups indicate that dark-skinned African American and black women are engaging with such hashtags to validate, affirm, and celebrate their beauty. Reflecting on the categories that emerged from the content analysis speak

to the ways in which Twitter users are interacting with such hashtags to validate, affirm and celebrate their beauty. For example, Lupita Nyong'o frequently appeared in category 4 (citing celebrities). When thinking about Nyong'o's status in the industry, and her title as *People* magazine's "most beautiful person in the world," it is no wonder that twitter users are adopting the hashtag to reference her skin tone, her success, and the ways in which she has broken Hollywood's "white" beauty standards. She is also relatable to many dark-skinned black women, as she shares similar experiences to the narratives that have been documented in studies about colorism. This is illustrated in her speech presented at *Essence's* Black Women in Hollywood Luncheon: "I remember a time when I too felt unbeautiful. I put on the TV and only saw pale skin. I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin. And my one prayer to God, the miracle worker, was that I would wake up lighter-skinned" (Essence 2014).

This is similar to Viola Davis, who often was cited in tweets containing #MelaninPoppin. Due to the success of her hit show, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and the ways in which she has redefined what it means to be beautiful in Hollywood, Viola Davis becomes a mouthpiece for dark-skinned black women. She has previously stated in an interview "we have to take back everything that people said about us that was negative....Being objectified for your beauty but not being appreciated for it in the same way caucasian women are. Taking back the light skin/dark skin thing. If you're lighter than a paper bag, you're cute. If you're darker, you're less attractive" (Wilbur 2016). Therefore, using the hashtag in reference to particular celebrities who are "movers and shakers" in the industry, those who have openly discussed the issues of colorism, and those who have dismantled global beauty standards, perhaps allows users to validate their own identities.

Category 5 also reveals similar findings, in that twitter users are attempting to dismantle negative perceptions of natural hair. As Russell, Wilson and Hall (1993) argue, the politics of hair is parallel to the politics of skin color. “Good hair,” a term used within the African American community is hair that mirrors Eurocentric hair textures- long, straight and silky hair. Thus, “good hair” has become a “code for white” (Johnson and Bankhead 2014:91) and is typically associated with the light-skinned middle class (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993). Among black women, straight European hairstyles have been considered as more feminine and short hair as unfeminine (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993). While, “bad hair” is perceived as short, kinky, coarse and “nappy,” it indicates less social capital and is typically associated with dark skin. Therefore, twitter users are adopting the hashtag to attempt to construct their own definition of beauty in regards to skin tone and hair type that is not often associated with beauty. They are presenting their “best” selves, which according to them, is in their natural hair form. This is similar to the category 2 , advertisers are adopting such hashtags to promote the versatility of shades in make-up, a problem that dark-skinned black women have often faced in the past which has been noted by Gordon and Fugate (1998:66): “until recently, many major cosmetics companies did not even sell products for darker skin.”

Furthermore, the content analysis reveals that the majority of tweets that contained #MelaninPoppin were utilized for the affirmation of their beings, and also (re)definition. This suggests that such hashtags are operating to provide black women with the tools they need to validate, recreate and redefine their identities. The results also suggest that Twitter users are finding it useful to use the hashtag to post images of themselves, while affirming their humanity and recognizing their worth. bell hooks suggests that with the construction of homeplace, “we can address the needs and concerns of young black women who are groping for structures of

meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition” (1990:48). The participants in the focus groups acknowledged what social media hashtag movements are accomplishing for the younger generation of dark-skinned black girls who they assume are seeking self-definition. Meeta Jha (2016:69) states in her book, *The Global Beauty Industry. Colorism, Racism, and the National Body*, “young people are the most vulnerable to media messages,” thus, young girls engaging with or simply witnessing dark-skinned black women empower themselves online, can aid in their own affirmation. Participants noted how such hashtag movements can aid in shaping their perception of beauty - how they understand, negotiate, reject and/or accept notions of their gendered racialized identity, especially while they are in the early stages of forming their identities. As a large body of research has concluded, colorism influences identity formation (Quiros and Dawson 2013), thus, hashtag movements that encourage positive dialogue about dark-skinned black women, and encourage self-affirmation are crucial.

However, the focus groups also revealed extensive information on the ways in which such hashtags can also revert this process. Findings from the focus groups uncovered the injurious effects that can occur from the circulations of such hashtags, in which participants expressed their concerns with the trivialization of them. According to the participants, hashtags can function as a site of injury, one that can (1) perpetuate hypersexualized, and sensationalized images of dark-skinned black women, (2) reinforce skin color as a trend, and thus they become subject to commodification, and (3) encourage approval-seeking, rather than self-expression. Therefore, it can stifle the act of presenting counternarratives in various ways. The participants’ idea of such hashtags serving as site of injury for black women is congruent with Righter-McDaniels and Hendrickson’s (2013) study. Conducting a content analysis of the hashtag

#becauseofhoes, they found that “social media discourse can reinforce the hegemonic agenda of the patriarchy by empowering men and devaluing women” (2013:186). Thus, their research contends that a space that challenges hegemonic ideologies about race and gender is absent from social media.

The link between Hip Hop culture and social media frequently occurred. Participants expressed that Hip Hop has a direct influence on visual and textual content that is posted, shared and discussed on social media, particularly on Black Twitter. Findings from the focus groups revealed that dark-skinned black women are subject to idealized standards of beauty, both in the realm of mainstream media (specifically Hip Hop culture), and on social media. There is extensive research examining Hip Hop culture, and its overt dissemination of skin color bias, whether it is embedded within lyrical content or exhibited in music videos. For example, Maxwell et al. (2016) found that colorist messages in rap music are perceived as influential and persuasive, resulting in skin color dissatisfaction among adolescent girls. Therefore, it is important to understand Hip Hop as a medium for transmitting such messages, and its potential influence on the colorist ideologies maintained on Black Twitter. Participants’ observations suggested that such hashtags can preserve rigid standards of beauty that are present in Hip Hop culture, thus, they can do more harm than good. Their sentiments on Hip Hop music videos choice of “interest girls” is congruent with T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s writing on Hip Hop culture and the appeal of the “exotic.” However, participants note that dark-skinned black women in such music videos promote exclusive and hypersexualized images of dark-skinned black women. They highlighted that such standards of beauty can have an influence on the ways in which dark-skinned black women engage in and receive hashtags, and subsequently, have an impact on dark-skinned black women’s self-esteem, perception of beauty, and identity formation.

(3) To what extent are social media hashtags healing the wounds of colorism within the African American community?

According to bell hooks, “we can make homeplace that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal the wounds and become whole” (1990:49). Results from the content analysis comment on the ways in which twitter users are using the hashtag for celebration and self-affirmation. However, this does not necessarily provide sufficient information to draw definite conclusions about the healing mechanisms of hashtags. When asked whether social media hashtags were healing the wounds of colorism, participants did not have a clear-cut response. They believed that social media hashtag movements provide the building blocks necessary for this healing, and suggested that, though we are yet to accomplish a full recovery, we are perhaps in the early stages of this healing.

As Wilder (2015) contends, black women must work as everyday activists and become agents of their own transformation, which she believes include using social media tools to bring awareness to the issue of colorism. Wilder proposes starting a viral movement with the hashtags #ColorStories, #EndColorism and #AllBlackisBeautiful, which she believes will allow black women to challenge colorism at all levels. The findings of this study coincide with Wilder’s proposal, as participants spoke about creating hashtags that: encourage counternarrative representations, allow for self-expression, serve as sites of resistance, and promote the discussion of colorism head-on. These are integral components that current hashtag movements are failing to achieve wholly. Participants’ sentiments about the overall trivialization of such hashtags suggests that it is hindering the possible healing mechanism of such hashtag movements. Moreover, they expressed that not all hashtags hold the same “weight,” some encourage feelings of community/solidarity, while others do not. Therefore, the creation of a hashtag campaigns that

performs all the above is necessary to afford dark-skinned black women with the tools they need to make a full recovery.

## 5.2 Conclusion

The purpose of this study sought to examine the digital spaces that black women construct to affirm, validate and celebrate their beauty. More specifically, this research explores how dark-skinned African American women use hashtags to create a digital "homeplace" to somewhat reclaim their scrutinized and discriminated bodies, due to the pervasiveness of colorism in the African American community. Conducting two focus groups and a qualitative content analysis, this study sought to obtain a large set of data to understand how dark-skinned African American women are engaging with the hashtag #MelaninPoppin and other hashtag movements that place them at the center of conversation.

From the data, we can conclude that African American women, black women in general, and Twitter users are utilizing social media hashtags as a tool to affirm, validate and celebrate black beauty and identity, in an attempt to combat, reject and disrupt the dominant narrative that frames darker skin tones as unattractive. These hashtags act as a defense against attacks on their self-esteem. However, such hashtags are a contested territory, sites of competing meanings, values and politics; considered as functioning as both a site of injury and one for remedy. The findings reveal that hashtag movements acquire particular attributes that reflect bell hooks' notion of homeplace, where, like the home of hooks' grandmother, African American women can construct a community of resistance. This coincides with current research (Harvey 2014, Bradford 2017) that argues that belonging and community are recurring themes illustrated among black media users, as it "comes natural" (2017:83) for black women. The nature of social media hashtags provide African American women, and black women in general, the opportunity to

renew their political commitment to homeplace where they can affirm their beings, and celebrate one another. These spaces allow dark-skinned African American women to contest colorist ideologies, in the form of uplifting themselves and fostering a sense of community, rather than discussing the issue at hand. While the participants raised concerns about the trivialization of such hashtag movements, they also indicated that such hashtags are necessary for resistance, healing, and self-definition.

To fully comprehend the landscape of these digital spaces, this research should serve as a starting point for further investigation. Future research should focus on other ways dark-skinned African American women are attempting to combat colorism using tools located in the digital sphere. As Black Twitter continues to adapt in terms of structure, ideologies, and practices (creating and engaging with “blacktags”), the examination of spaces of resistance and spaces of affirmation is crucial. Not only will it spawn conversation around African American women’s engagement with hashtags, but it can also introduce new possibilities of a digital homeplace, and allow for us to reimagine spaces of resistance that are overlooked.

As previously stated in the literature review, the experience of colorism has detrimental effects on the lives of African American women, yet it is not given enough attention within the African American community. Conversations about colorism tend to take a back seat to conversations about racism, and due to this, dark-skinned African American women’s voices are often silenced. However, this research intended to make visible, and audible the voices of the women in the study, to understand how the wounds of an old phenomenon (colorism) is being dealt with in the 21st century, an era that is profusely influenced by social media.

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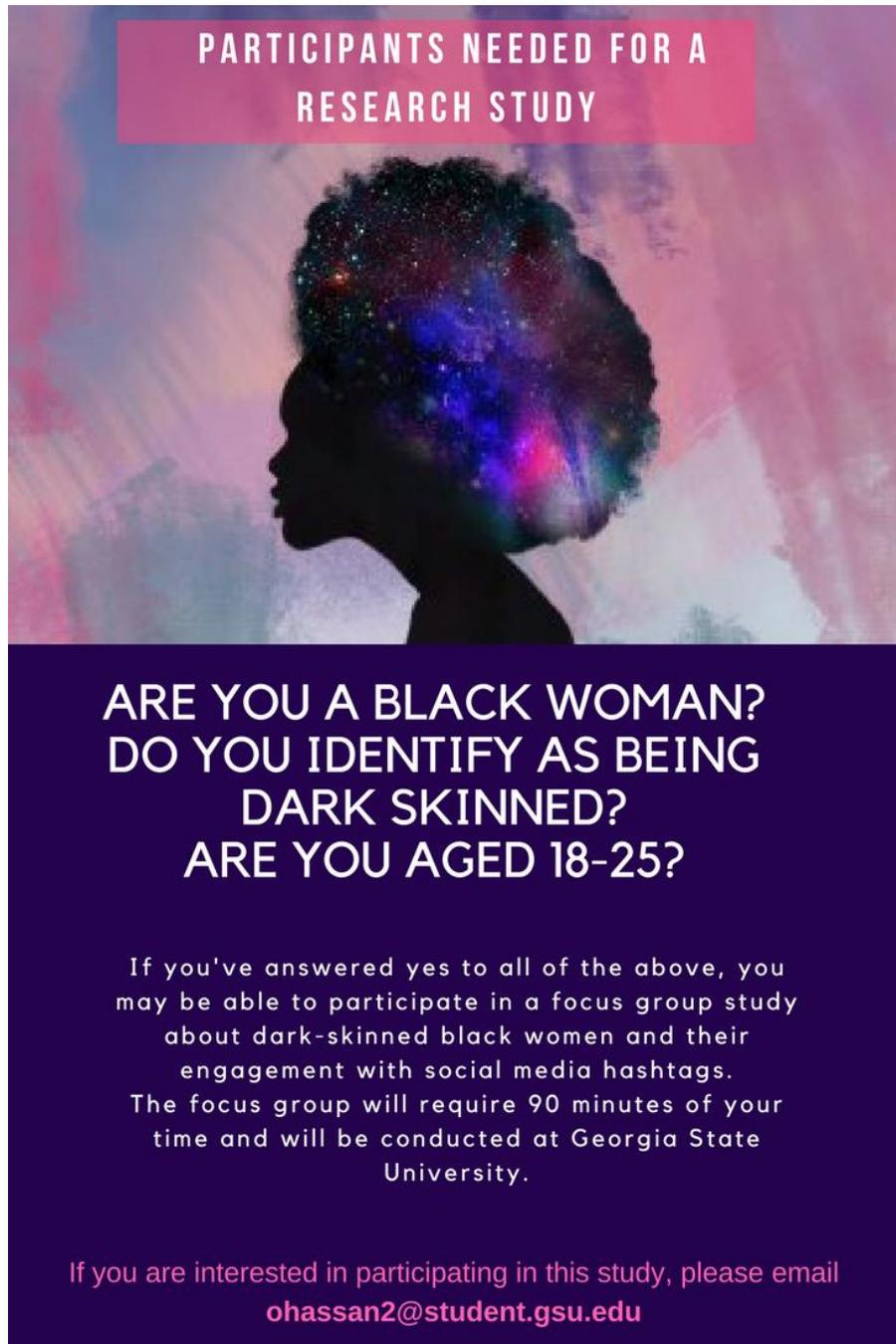
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A  
RESEARCH STUDY**

**ARE YOU A BLACK WOMAN?  
DO YOU IDENTIFY AS BEING  
DARK SKINNED?  
ARE YOU AGED 18-25?**

If you've answered yes to all of the above, you may be able to participate in a focus group study about dark-skinned black women and their engagement with social media hashtags. The focus group will require 90 minutes of your time and will be conducted at Georgia State University.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email [ohassan2@student.gsu.edu](mailto:ohassan2@student.gsu.edu)

## **Appendix B: Phone Screening Questions**

1. How old are you?
2. Were you born in the U.S?
3. Were your parents born in the U.S?
4. Do you identify as African American?
5. Do you identify as dark-skinned?
6. Do you use any social media platforms?
7. What social media accounts do you have?
8. What is your education level? (If in education, what school?)

## **Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol**

### **Focus Group Protocol**

(Reminder to participants: Please do not use any names or share information that can identify other people)

#### **Introduction**

- A brief overview of the study and the goals for the focus group
- A reminder of audio recording and confidentiality
- Collection of consent forms

**Group Task: Pair up, describe what colorism means to you, write it down, and then share it with the group.**

#### **Focus Group Questions:**

##### **I. Colorism**

- When were you first introduced to colorism?
- How has colorism affected you? (in general, your relationships/friendships, your self-worth etc.)
- How has colorism influenced your views on beauty? (past and present)

##### **II. Participants engagement with social media hashtags**

- Discussion of Content Analysis Results (how hashtags are used to validate/celebrate/affirm) and the discussion of popular hashtags/social media movements for dark-skinned girls.
- What are some examples of other hashtags that dark-skinned girls use on social media?
- If at all, how often do you engage with such hashtags?
- What are your views about the circulation of such hashtags?

- How are they working for dark-skinned African American women?
- What do you hope to gain from using them?

### **III. A digital site of resistance**

- Do you believe they are offering counternarratives about darker skin tones, if so why/how?
- How has your attitude about your skin tone changed (if at all) from engaging in such hashtags or seeing other people use them?
- Do you believe these hashtags are healing the wounds of colorism within the African American community? (if so, why?)

### **IV. Closing Questions**

Final thoughts?