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# STRONGER: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN NARRATIVE THROUGH THE LIFESPAN OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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STRONGER: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF THE STRONG BLACK  
WOMAN NARRATIVE THROUGH THE LIFESPAN OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

by

VERINIQUE D. BAILEY

Under the Direction of Patricia Davis, PhD

ABSTRACT

The Strong Black Woman narrative and characteristic fosters both positive and negative representations of African American women. This study explores the lived experiences of African American women and their encounters with stereotypes, particularly the Strong Black Woman narrative and characteristic, through their lifespan. By examining three dominant age groups (young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults) this study analyzed the level of endorsement to the Strong Black Woman narrative in connection to self-care and help seeking behaviors. The article and supplemental documentary contribute to existing research and support the idea that African American women become stronger when they practice self-care and help-seeking behaviors.

INDEX WORDS: Strong black woman, Stereotypes, Self-care, Mental health, Mental health awareness

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WOMAN NARRATIVE THROUGH THE LIFESPAN OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

by

VERINIQUE D. BAILEY

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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## **DEDICATION**

To Mommy, thank you for teaching my sisters and I to be **STRONG!** I love you!

May we be **STRONGER** because we care for ourselves!

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank each of the wonderful women who contributed to my research and my committee who supported me throughout the process.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

African-American women face obstacles associated with overcoming various struggles, forms of oppression and negative stereotypes that threaten their social well-being. As a result, black women have learned to embrace the “Strong Black Woman” (SBW) narrative and characteristic. Dating back to slavery, the SBW was developed as a coping mechanism for black women who were oppressed and forced into strong, less traditionally feminine roles. Watson and Hunter (2015) explain, “scholars have traced the origins of the SBW race-gender schema to slavery and have suggested that the schema persists because of the struggles that African American women continue to experience, such as financial hardship, primary care-giving responsibilities, racism and sexism” (p. 604). Enslaved women laid the foundation for the SBW, which has transcended generations of African American women. “The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining black women’s subordination” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p.72). The SBW prides herself as being a superwoman in an attempt to combat the oppression that comes from the intersectionality of being both black and female, to maintain a role as a self-reliant, self-sufficient caretaker, and to combat the negative stereotypes that have haunted black women for generations. “The Strong Black Woman archetype is a culturally salient ideal prescribing that black women render a guise of self-reliance, selflessness, and psychological, emotional and physical strength” (Baker, et al., 2015, p. 51). The SBW is praised for her resilience and strength in a variety of measures, including keeping the house, working harder than everyone else, or being the glue that holds her family together.

Though it could be interpreted as both a positive stereotype and characteristic of Black women, the tensions with the SBW occur in its reinforcement of pressure for Black women to remain strong and manage their responsibilities, emotions, and other factors without the help of others. Watson-Singleton (2017) explained, “[The] SBW schema may have implications for both actual and perceived social support. Women who internalize the SBW schema may adhere to its prescribed behaviors, like self-reliance, and not request support from others” (p. 779).

The constant pressure to remain strong and to hold herself together can be extremely stressful for the SBW and have negative effects on both her physical and psychological well-being. Barnes (2017) explained, “Black people are 10% more likely to report experiencing serious psychological distress than white people, according to the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health” (p. 7). In fact, “Black women are especially vulnerable to wrestling with their mental health, consistently reporting higher feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness and the sense that everything is an effort... [and] are frequently pillars of our community, taking care of everyone’s health but our own” (Barnes, 2017, p. 8). The SBW often identifies with qualities that include caring for others over herself, often sacrificing her own needs to fulfill the needs of others. She is also known for taking on more roles than most and in some cases, being everything to everyone. As a result, self-care, self-nourishment, and other self-help mechanisms are frequently avoided by the SBW.

Existing literature about the SBW narrative and characteristic supports the idea that women who endorse and/or embrace the “Strong Black Women” label usually reject or simply do not prioritize self-care, self-nourishment, or seek social or psychological help because they do not make time for it and/or because accepting those types of help could be perceived as weaknesses. Watson and Hunter (2016) explained that a participant in their study “did not fully view herself

as a strong Black woman because she attended counseling for her depression. Thus, using mental health services was inconsistent with strong black womanhood, and as a result, disqualified her full SBW status” (p.435). Nelson, Cardemil, and Adeoye (2017) describe the SBW’s management of illnesses like depression from a perspective of, ““dealing with it’, rather than conceptualizing their experience[s] as depression and seeking treatment” (p. 553). Both articles support the notion that many black women deal with their stressors alone and do not seek help with these issues. Walker-Barnes (2017) explained:

Symptoms of some mental and physical health disorders have become so widely prevalent among black women that they are not seen as pathological. Even women who recognize their pain are less likely to attribute it to role strain and more likely to associate it with weakness and insufficiency in meeting the demands that life has placed upon them. And yet, that black women are facing a health epidemic cannot be understated. Black women are disproportionately affected by diseases such as heart disease and hypertension, diabetes, some forms of cancer, and HIV/AIDS (p. 5).

Many women who identify as SBW maintain a façade of strength at any cost. Even in cases where “strength” contributes to the harming of mental and physical health, SBW suppress their emotions, feelings and symptoms of illness.

This study addressed how the SBW narrative and characteristic impacted the health of African American women through their lifespan and what they’ve done to overcome. The interests of this research study were to conduct interviews (a) to explore the lived experiences of African American women through their lifespan, specifically their experiences with stereotypes, if any, (b) to analyze their opinions of and experiences with the SBW narrative, if any, and whether they feel it has affected their health and life as a whole, and (c) to serve as a “how-to”

method, including a documentary, to encourage the support of and practice of self-care, self-nourishment, and health help-seeking behaviors as a means of overcoming. This study intends to determine how women's notions of strength evolve or devolve with intersectional factors such as age. Existing research presented issues with Black women's endorsement of the SBW narrative and characteristic, but this study contributed to existing literature by examining black women's experiences with the SBW narrative and characteristic over their lifespan, shifting the focus to the normalization of help-seeking behaviors and the practice of finding "strength" in self-care. The supplemental documentary aids in expanding the awareness of the research and findings to a wider audience of women.

## **2 A REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Defining the Strong Black Woman**

Existing literature about the SBW narrative suggests that as a result of the attempt to overcome both intersectional oppression and negative stereotypes, African American women adopted alternative images of themselves such as this perceived positive stereotype and characteristic. According to Melissa V. Harris-Perry (2011):

The strong Black woman is the most pervasive and widely accepted of these self-constructions. By its idealized description, black women are motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs while anticipating those of others...

The strong Black woman serves as a constructive role model because Black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles. She offers hope to people who often face difficult circumstances. Independence and self-reliance can be crucial to building and maintaining a positive image of blackness in a society that often seeks to negate and vilify it. African American women do not define

themselves as Jezebels, Mammies, or Sapphires; instead they call themselves strong and proudly drape the mantle of self-denying independence across their shoulders... But there are dangers to allowing this symbol to remain unchallenged at the center of African American understandings of womanhood. When Black women are expected to be super-strong, they cannot be simply human” (p. 184).

Endorsement of the SBW as a positive stereotype and/or characteristic of oneself empowers Black women, while also promoting self-reliance and independence. The reinforcement of strength and caregiving leaves little to no room for Black women to be vulnerable, which can be perceived as a weakness, or to care for themselves, which is often last on their to-do list. The label of SBW can negatively affect a Black woman’s openness and practice of self-care and help seeking. In this role, Black women maintain what may sometimes be considered a façade of strength at any cost and oppose anything that doesn’t align with qualities of strength in an attempt to combat the negative stereotypes that represent the dominant images of them. According to Etowa, Beagan, Eghan, and Bernard (2018), the construct of the SBW is described as:

[Having] unmet needs, [being] a caretaker who always puts others ahead of herself, [who] denies her own needs or weaknesses, [being] self-reliant and self-contained and has the role to nurture and preserve family. As well as having internalized the message early in life that [she] should not expect to rely on others for [her] needs, [and being] the glue that holds her family and her community together against the onslaughts inflicted by poverty and racism” (p. 2-3).

The idea that Black women are more than the negative stereotypes and characteristics that have haunted them, makes the SBW narrative and characteristic easy to endorse in an attempt to

recover the controlling images. Though the SBW can be perceived as both a negative and positive stereotype, its origin is linked to defending the harmful images associated with Black women.

## **2.2 Origins of Stereotypes**

Origins of stereotypes in African American women date back to slavery, at least. Even then, the emergence of the Strong Black Woman narrative served as a “savior” to the perceived negative stereotypes of Black women. “The schema persists because of the struggles that African American women [experienced and] continue to experience, such as financial hardship, primary caregiving responsibilities, racism, and sexism” (Watson & Hunter, 2015, p. 604). Being both African American and a woman makes the position of the Black woman in American society one that is intersectional and oppressed. Through both racism and sexism, African American women have had to overcome since “the beginning of time,” as we know it, in America. Black female slaves were forced to exhibit characteristics of strength because of their various leadership positions. From their roles as laborers and caretakers who could endure physical strain and survive with unmet needs emerged the practice of “strength through struggle”, which remains a key practice for SBW. “The Strong Black woman passes on the values and traditions of her family and community to the next generation” (Etowa, et al., 2018, p. 7). The deep-rooted SBW narrative and characteristic has been culturally ingrained in the lives of many Black women through generations and still prevails in the present day. “The SBW was created during slavery as a survival response to an existence rife with violence, exploitation, and oppression, and it has been passed inter-generationally through parents’, particularly mothers’, socialization of Black

girls” (Donovan and West, 2015, p. 386). Though dominant stereotypes of Black women emerged during slavery, many of those images still affect how Black women are perceived in the present day.

### **2.3 The Reclamation of Stereotypes**

“Four prominent controlling images of black women include (1) the nurturing, asexual, overly selfless ‘mammy’; (2) the argumentative, highly hostile, emasculating ‘sapphire’; (3) the lazy, dependent ‘welfare queen’; and (4) the sexually promiscuous ‘jezebel’ (Nelson, et al., 2016, p. 552). Hill-Collins (2004) adds:

Images of working-class Black femininity that pivot on a Black women’s body politics of bitchiness, promiscuity, and abundant fertility also affect middle-class African American women. In essence, the controlling images associated with poor and working-class Black women become texts of what not to be. To achieve middle-class status, African American women must reject this gender-specific version of authenticity in favor of politics and respectability. They must somehow figure out a way to become Black ‘ladies’ by avoiding these working-class traps. Doing so means negotiating the complicated politics that accompany this triad of bitchiness, promiscuity, and fertility (p. 138-139).

Stereotypes like these have affected and skewed the perception of African American women and as a result, black women have adopted images of strength to circumvent the traps of negative stereotypes. “Even the name changes depending on the writer, with similar images to SBW labeled Superwoman, Modern Mammy, Black Lady, and Sojourner Syndrome... regardless of the name, most scholars ascribe two central tenets to those overlapping images (henceforth termed just SBW): strength and caregiving” (Donovan and West, 2015, p. 385). “African



American women must deal with the constant fear that their behavior will be viewed in light of the stereotypic images of the Mammy, the Jezebel, or the Sapphire, thus leading to emotional and behavioral inhibition in order to avoid acting out these stereotypes” (Walker-Barnes, 2009, p. 7). As a reclamation of Black women’s independence, strength, and success, the “Strong Black Woman” serves as a means of combating the negative stereotypes often associated with them by combining the best qualities of each. For instance, the once-labeled “Mammy” still exists in the SBW if she is a caretaker, but she isn’t necessarily asexual. Qualities of the “Sapphire” also exist in the SBW, if she takes control of her own life, but that doesn’t necessarily mean she’s loud or rude. In short, SBW seek to reclaim the negative stereotypes that once labeled them by using some of the qualities of the images to their benefit. For SBW, weakness and vulnerability have little to no space to thrive and are often suppressed in an attempt to maintain the image of strength.

#### **2.4 The Suppression of “Weaknesses”**

“Even in the presence of extreme pain and fear, Black women have little room to express their emotions because emotional displays are considered signs of weakness and inadequacy” (Abrams, et al., 2014, p. 504). Even care related to mental and physical health is often neglected or perceived as a weakness for a SBW. “Moreover, the SBW race-gender schema promulgates beliefs that African American women should handle situations alone and not depend on others for help... [and] African American women may perceive professional psychological services to facilitate emotional expression, a consequence that is inconsistent with the expectation of strength, self-reliance, and self-silence” (Watson and Hunter, 2015, p. 605). Because of their desire to be independent and strong, Black women who endorse the SBW narrative and characteristic often suppress their emotions and underutilize health and therapy related services.

Their perception of weakness is often associated with anything that requires their dependence on others. As a result, Black women often struggle to balance their strength and independence with things that don't particularly align with it.

## **2.5 A Failing Act of Balance and False Empowerment**

According to Watson and Hunter (2016), African American women who adopt the SBW narrative face the following tensions: "(a) [they have to] be psychologically durable yet not engage in behaviors that preserve psychological durability, (b) be equal yet oppressed, and c) be feminine yet reject traditional feminine norms" (p. 433). The perceived SBW and characteristic can in turn be negative because of the failing act of balance and false empowerment that those who endorse it face. Holmes, White, Mills and Mickel (2011) suggested that SBW, "evaluate their beliefs on doing things for themselves [because] some may experience guilt for doing things solely for their benefit... and learn there is no need to feel guilty as they attempt to take care of themselves. It is not considered being selfish to take care of one's self" (p.81). Since self-care is often last on the list for a SBW, her life is likely to lack balance. Her desire to care for others over herself prompts her to neglect her own mental, physical, and emotional well-being, thus pouring from an empty vessel.

## **2.6 The Wings of Support**

Another issue with the SBW, according to Holmes, White, Mills, and Mickel (2011), is that, "Strong Black Women learn to minimize their feelings, wants, and desires to accommodate the needs of others. The ability to express genuine fear, hurt, and inadequacies is lacking" (p. 74). Their roles as mothers, wives, and community leaders and more influence their positions of strength and require them to support everyone around them. According to Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, and Belgrave (2014):

Black women who internalize... suffer quietly, as they work assiduously to meet the expectations of their families, their jobs, and larger society. Rather than seeking help, these women turn inward – beating themselves up and experiencing excessive feelings of guilt and worthlessness when they have sacrificed too much of themselves or become unable to meet unrealistic expectations that have been bestowed upon them... their psychological turmoil is masked by the appearance of unparalleled strength, the unifying commonality among all of the previously described constructs (p. 504).

African American women's "I'm every woman" mantra encourages them to assume roles that reflect their support of others and to volunteer for extreme tasks in order to maintain this façade of strength and independence. The struggle lies in their attempt to support everyone around them, but not to support themselves or seek support from others. "Perceived behaviors, like self-reliance, and not requesting support from others," stems from her desire to be independent as a factor of strength" (Watson-Singleton, 2017, p. 779). Endorsing the SBW stereotype or characteristic can have detrimental effects on the long-term physical and mental health of a Black woman.

## **2.7 Health Consequences**

One of the main drawbacks to the SBW narrative as both a stereotype and characteristic is its underlying reinforcement of independence and self-reliance that discourages African American women to practice help-seeking behaviors. "Concerns about being negatively judged by others for using mental health services may be more closely associated with feelings of worry and apprehension, characteristic of anxiety, than with feelings of sorrow and hopelessness, characteristic of depression" (Watson and Hunter, 2015, p. 610). By putting others before themselves, yet not depending on others, the SBW is less likely to practice self-care or seek help

for mental and physical health wellness. “Falling apart, being ‘human’, is not easily incorporated into the SBW persona” (Etowa, et al., 2018, p. 13). SBW find it difficult to talk with others about their feelings, emotions, overload of stress, weaknesses or need for dependence, for fear of being perceived as something other than strong; therefore, SBW often suppress their feelings or emotions. As a result, the long-term effects of the seemingly positive SBW narrative and characteristic can consequently be negative to both, “physical and psychological well-being” (Baker, et al., 2015, p. 55).

### **3 METHODS**

The current study examined the lifespan of Black women’s lived experiences with stereotypes, specifically the Strong Black Woman narrative, to determine whether or not their encounters with perceived positive and negative stereotypes affected the participants’ mental and physical health and what they do to overcome through self-care, self-nourishment, and help seeking. The current study sought to address whether or not participants feel the SBW stereotype and characteristic has affected their health and will analyze the participants’ experiences across the lifespan of African American women, considering intersectional factors such as age. It contributes to existing literature by focusing on the SBW narrative and characteristic through varying age groups of African American women. The study also aimed to promote normalizing self-care and help-seeking behaviors in black women.

#### **3.1 Participants**

The sample included 15 women who identified as African American and were between the ages of 28 to 71 years old. Following their individual interviews, the data from each was examined together and then categorized into three developmentally different age groups. The three groups were younger adults (age 28-37), middle-aged adults (age 38-59), and older adults

(age 60+). The average age of the participants was 46 years old and there were four younger adult participants, eight middle-aged participants, and three older adult participants. The selected age ranges cover the lifespan, whereas younger adults are the youngest cohesive demographic group to be old enough to be in the workforce and older adults are the eldest. Of the sample, four participants were younger adults, eight were middle-aged adults, and three were older adults.

To diversify the sample, the participants' highest level of education and professions varied in the fields of beauty, business, communications, health care, law and education. Nine of the participants graduated from college. A variety of participants were selected to examine whether intersectional factors such as age, level of education, and/or profession have any effect on a participant's experiences with strength, self-reliance, independence and the endorsement of the SBW stereotype and characteristic.

### **3.2 Procedure**

This study was approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were recruited from a convenience sample of African American women. Participants were required to complete a copy of the IRB approved consent form and each of them received a copy to keep for their records. Once participants affirmed consent, they participated in a semi-formal interview with the researcher. The interviews were filmed and voice recorded for later transcription, then used for the research paper and documentary. The interview times ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. Each interview occurred once and was held at a location that was most convenient for the participants, such as at home or work.

Participants were asked the following questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your highest level of completed education?

3. What is your occupation/job title?
4. Do you have children? If so, how many?
5. Tell me a little about yourself and your background.
6. Tell me about your upbringing and who your role model going up. Explain.
7. Describe the ideal Black woman.
8. Describe the status of Black women in America.
9. Have you ever experienced being stereotyped? Tell me about it.
10. What are the negative stereotypes associated with Black women?
11. What are the positive stereotypes associated with Black women?
12. What comes to mind when you hear Strong Black Woman (SBW)?
13. Do you consider yourself a SBW? Why or why not?
14. Has there ever been a time when you had to be a SBW? Explain.
15. Are there any consequences to being a SBW?
16. Tell me about something that you recently had to overcome. Who/what helped you?
17. Do you feel that you have help if you need it? Why or why not?
18. Could having someone to talk to like a physician, therapist or counselor have helped you through it? And are you open to these types of help?
19. Do you feel that stereotypes, like the SBW, has affected your mental or physical health in any way? Explain.
20. How do you practice self-care? Explain.
21. Is it important to practice self-care? Why or why not?
22. Do you have any advice for younger Black women who aspire to be Strong Black Women?

23. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Follow-up questions were asked, as necessary, for clarification of vague responses. Questions 1-3 sought to gain intersectional information from the participants; 4-6 solicited information about the participants' background; 7-12 inquired about participants' understanding of stereotypes and the SBW narrative; 13-16 inquired about participants' personal experiences with the SBW narrative, if any; 17-22 shifted the focus to self-care and help-seeking practices; 23-24 served as wrap up questions to allow the participants to add advice and/or additional thoughts.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The interview data was analyzed to determine findings and contribute to existing literature. Following the interviews, the researcher manually transcribed each interview and used thematic data analysis as well as the constant comparative method to find commonalities and differences in the experiences of the participants. Interview transcriptions were examined as a whole for common themes and within each age group to determine lifespan themes.

It is key to note the benefits of interview research. According to Rallis and Rossman (2012), "interviewing entails asking people questions and eliciting detailed responses... [to gain] their shared perspectives on the topic" (p. 128). "In-depth interview studies are intended to understand individual perspectives about a phenomenon... [and] such studies rely on often deeply personal face-to-face 'conversations'" (Rallis & Rossman, 2012, p. 122). This study used face-to-face interviews as a means of gathering information from the participants that are detailed and narrative for the purpose of learning their perspectives and experiences with the topic. Interviews with the participants in this study not only captured their personal stories, but participants better understood themselves as a result of their experiences or stories about everyday life.

The themes that occurred were constructed into both a research paper and a documentary that featured several video clips from the interviews as well as narration from the researcher, infused with creative film features that support each of the themes. By completing both a creative and research thesis project, the researcher intended to organize the findings in both an informative and insightful manner. While the written version of the study can be published to a number of academic journals such as *The Howard Journal of Communication* and *The Journal of Black Psychology*, the digital version of this study can be published on *YouTube*, where it can be easily shared on other digital platforms and social networks.

## 4 RESULTS

Each of the participants in this study was familiar with the Strong Black Woman narrative and characteristic. Many of the participants endorsed the idea of being SBW and identified strength as a positive characteristic and stereotype associated with African American women based on their experiences in life. Others reluctantly endorsed the idea of being SBW and felt it limited the opportunity for Black women to be vulnerable, display emotion, or need the help of others. The interview findings are organized to reflect the themes that occurred overall and those specifically pertaining to the varying age groups (younger adults, middle aged, and older adults).

### 4.1 Common Ground

The participants in this study each listed one or more stereotypes associated with African American women. The most common negative stereotypes that they experienced were that Black women are seen as angry, bossy, and loud. "...they skew towards sort of umm... the sapphire, you know hypersexualized or the mammy, you know overly mothering, taking care of everybody..." (Anoa – Director of Marketing & Communications, 59 years old).



The participants explained that the positive stereotypes that they'd associated with Black women concerned strength and resilience. "I think we're strong..." (Aimee - elementary school teacher, 35 years old). Participants in this study associated strength as a characteristic of both themselves and other black women and as learned behaviors their African American female relative and other role models taught them. "My mother is my number one role-model. She worked diligently every single day. I don't know if I ever remember her taking a day off. Umm... she made sure we got to every extracurricular activity that we had. And I pretty much model myself as a mother after her" (Adrienne - Attorney, 38 years old). The participants' identification with overcoming stereotypes and their endorsement of strength that they learned through generations, supported existing research about the SBW narrative and characteristic. Though each of the participants associated with being SBW, each age group endorsed the narrative and characteristic differently.

The stigma surrounding self-care and help seeking behaviors was highly recognized by many participants in this study. "If you're going to be ridiculed for it, it's just easy to keep it to yourself and let anger and depression and stuff build up. And that's why we have a lot of dysfunctions" (Veronica – Private Caregiver, 50 years old). Many of the participants also noted how generational teachings of strength impacted their endorsement of it. "I think that falls back on being raised to be strong... I was raised to take care of myself and not to depend on anyone for anything. So, I think that's where that comes from" (Calandra – Document Management Records Keeper, 48 years old). Passed down through many generations, the SBW narrative and characteristic was adopted by all 15 of the participants in this study in a variety of ways. Examining the results through age group led to more cohesive findings of how the SBW narrative and characteristic effected the participants through their lifespan.

## 4.2 Older Adults

Older adults viewed the SBW narrative and stereotype as something that was integral in the life of an African American women. The participants in this age group more closely reflected the existing ideas of the SBW narrative and characteristic. They fully identified with being a SBW at all times. “In all instances, you need to be a strong Black woman” (Gloria – Private Caregiver, 71 years old). Many of them were taught that asking for help was associated with weakness and they must depend solely on themselves.

I think that Black women have not been taught to go get psychiatric help when they need it because there is a stereotype on it that when you go get it, you’re crazy. People just automatically say you’re crazy. It’s not umm being taught that it’s help for your mind or it’s relief or that it can help you take tension off... it’s only taught the bad part... ‘Oh she’s crazy... She’s going to see a psychiatrist... She’s a nut!’ You know it’s all the bad parts are being taught to the black woman (Gwendolyn – Retired Clerk, 65 years old).

As a result of being taught that help seeking behaviors were a sign of weakness, women in this age group initially struggled with the idea of asking for help, yet recognized that their perceptions of help-seeking behaviors needed to change. “I think that has to do with a little pride that each and every one of us has within us when it comes to asking for help... and like I said, it’s seen as a sign of weakness, but that’s something that I am working on myself, to improve” (Paulette – Retired Production Control Manager, 66 years old). Though older adults identified mostly with their strength as reflecting independence, each of them supported the idea of other Black women seeking help from others for mental and physical health and the practice of self-care. “I mean I think I’m beginning to think more of an idea of if you seek professional help, it’s just trying to get your mind back on the right track again” (Paulette – Retired Production Control

Manager, 66 years old). None of these women in this group felt that the SBW narrative and characteristic, nor other stereotypes, affected their health in any way. The themes that occurred in the interviews with the older adult women suggested that their upbringing, a few generations removed from the slavery era, may have influenced their heavy endorsement of the narrative and characteristic which was consistent with previous literature. As the study examined younger age groups, their levels of endorsement for the SBW narrative and characteristic changed.

### **4.3 Middle-Aged Adults**

Middle-aged adult participants with varying backgrounds and occupations identified with the SBW narrative and characteristic nearly as much as older adult participants. Like the older adults, middle-aged women agreed that being strong was a positive stereotype associated with black women. “We are strong and resilient” (Veronica – Private Caregiver, 50 years old). This group of women identified with wearing many hats as caretakers and working women and they endorsed strength as a means of overcoming negative stereotypes and balancing their many roles. Middle-aged women also did not feel that the SBW narrative and characteristic, nor other stereotypes, affected their health in any way. The main difference between middle-aged and older adult participants was their perception of help-seeking and self-care. While the middle-aged group agreed that there was a negative, society-based stigma surrounding mental healthcare and help-seeking for black women, the group advocated for a more positive viewpoint.

I think seeking help as a black woman can be perceived as a weakness by some women because we’ve watched our moms and we’ve read our history about how we’ve done all kinds of great things without any help. From our Sojourner Truths to many other great women in our history who just had nothing, and we have a lot more resources here in this millennia to do what we want to do and a lot more freedoms. So, a lot of times we will

say, ‘No we can’t do it with help. We can do it on our own.’ So, yea we can say that, but I think that umm... we should be willing to seek the help that’s there, whether it be professional or non-professional” (Jill – Vice President of Communications, 48 years old).

Women in this group endorsed the idea of not only seeking help from a support group of family and friend, but from professionals.

I think there are professionals for a reason and sometimes you need go to talk to the professionals and I think there’s no stigma added to that. I think it makes you an even stronger woman when you do (laughs). And so, I think women fail to realize, you know, sometimes it’s good talking to your friends, its good having that support system and that network system, but sometimes you need even more professional help” (Barbara – Director for Women and Non-Traditional Student Center, 45 years old).

“We have to love ourselves enough to say, ‘I’m important, too” (Marilyn – Project Manager, 45 years old). The women in this group recognized self-care as a means of self-help and refueling.

#### **4.4 Younger Adults**

Younger adult participants reluctantly endorsed the idea of being SBW. This group of participants felt that the idea of strong black womanhood, consistent with existing literature, created an unachievable pressure for black women to be strong.

I feel like that’s who we’re forced to be a lot of times, but I wouldn’t necessarily say it’s ideal. Like being a black woman myself and always feeling like I had to be strong made me feel like I wasn’t able to be vulnerable or have weak moments like everybody else or like I couldn’t just have a couple of days where I didn’t care about stuff... I felt like no

matter what I had to put my game face on and be the best at everything (Toshé – Visual Content Manager, 28 years old).

This group of participants was most resistant to behaviors associated with strong Black womanhood, while also feeling obligated to endorse those behaviors.

It's our only option, a lot of times, to be strong. We don't often have an option unless you choose to fail and I'm not choosing to fail. So, when I see strong a lot of times I just naturally associate that with black women because that's... we have to overcome daily (Vanessa – Email Marketing Manager, 28 years old).

Unlike both the older and middle-aged participants, the younger adults endorsed the SBW narrative and characteristic out of a sense of obligation and resisted many of the behaviors associated with it. Like other groups, younger adults recognized the stigma associated with help-seeking for black women and challenged it by participating in behaviors that supported mental healthcare, help-seeking, and self-care. Participants in this group felt that the pressure to maintain strength and to overcome stereotypes like the SBW narrative and characteristic did impact their mental and physical health. “Mentally, yeah... it's exhausting. It's just hard because you're just always expected to have it together and nobody has it together all of the time. (Vanessa – Email Marketing Manager, 28 years old). Younger adults challenged the SBW narrative and characteristic more than older adults and middle-aged adults, but overall each of the groups supported it.

#### **4.5 “How-To” Overcome Through Self-Care and Help-Seeking**

Participants in this study recognized the SBW narrative and characteristic as both a positive and negative association of African American women, nevertheless, they each endorsed it. Many of the participants acknowledged the negative stigma surrounding mental healthcare

and help-seeking behaviors, which is consistent with existing literature. Participants challenged both their experiences with and what previous literature suggested about the negative stigma associated with help-seeking and counseling, through their personal experiences. “I’ve definitely been through counseling, so I know it helps” (Jasmine – Master Cosmetologist, 29 years old). Many of the participants in this study advocated for help-seeking behaviors, such as professional counseling, and shared their views of how participating in those types of behaviors can make a person stronger.

Though the stigma often situates help seeking behaviors as a form of weakness, participants in this study pushed back against it.

Going to therapy is a sign of weakness in the black community. You know, it’s just like, ‘You need somebody to help you think and be?’ You know like... I went to therapy. I’m an advocate for therapy, that’s the only reason why I’m so free today (laughs) is getting out of that and getting out of having to be so strong for everyone all the time (Toshé – Visual Content Manager, 28 years old).

Their practice of self-care, experience with help-seeking and mental health counseling and/or their support of those behaviors challenged the idea that women who are strong can’t rely on others. “It’s showing that you are strong. You’re strong enough to know when it’s time to get help and that you want to get help, so it’ll help you be a better person and help you to deal with things better” (Calandra, Document Management Records Keeper, 48 years old). The different groups viewed help-seeking, mental healthcare, and self-care differently, but still supported the idea that it is useful and sometimes necessary for black women.

Participants’ descriptions of how they practiced self-care promoted the benefits of it. “My practice for self-care involves a lot of solitude... spend a day at the spa... self-pampering or

getting away at some spa resort to just be with myself and be with my own thoughts” (Jill – Vice President of Communications, 48 years old). They listed practices such as healthy diets and exercise, self-pampering behaviors such as manicures, pedicures, and massages, social activities and taking mental health days as ways they engage in self-care behaviors. By noting the benefits of it, they encouraged other women to practice self-care. “I think self-care is so important. We have to have self-care because if you don’t, you can get overwhelmed with all of the responsibilities that you have” (Barbara – Director for Women and Non-Traditional Student Center, 45 years old). Self-care was practiced as an outlet and a refueling mechanism for many participants in this study. Participants’ endorsement and practice of self-care and help-seeking behaviors can be used as a “how-to” method to and a means of encouragement for other women to participate in those behaviors.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The first purpose of this qualitative study was to conduct interviews to explore the lived experiences of aging African American women through their lifespan, specifically their experiences with stereotypes. The participants in this study listed many positive and negative stereotypes that were associated with African American women and felt that their experiences with overcoming hardships and negativity prompted their endorsement of strength. Each of the participants in this study endorsed the SBW narrative and stereotype.

This study’s second purpose was to analyze the participant’s opinions of and experiences with the SBW narrative and characteristic, if any, and whether they feel it has affected their health and life as a whole. Older adult and middle-aged adult participants felt that their experience with the SBW narrative and characteristic had not affected their health in any way; however, younger adult participants did feel affected by it. Younger adult participants described

the unrealistic pressure that stems from endorsing the SBW narrative and stereotype, yet adopted SBW behaviors anyway out of feelings of pride, obligation or simply because they felt they didn't have another option.

Finally, the study intended to serve as a "how-to" method, to encourage the support of and practice of self-care, self-nourishment, and health help-seeking behaviors as a means of overcoming, based on the participants lived experiences. Overall, participants in the study supported the idea of self-care, mental healthcare, and help-seeking behaviors. Older adult participants showed a higher level of endorsement to the SBW narrative and characteristic and a lower level of help-seeking practices whereas young adult participants identified with a lower level of endorsement to the SBW narrative and characteristic and a higher level of help-seeking behaviors.

This study contributes to existing literature by focusing on how lifespan and age influence the SBW narrative and characteristic in African American women. The findings of this study reflected the impact of the SBW narrative and characteristic through the lifespan of black women, in relation to their endorsement of it and their attitudes toward self-care and help-seeking behaviors. "The Emergence of Endorsement" and "The Evolution of Resistance" both offer detailed discussions of how the SBW narrative and characteristic is customary to--yet resisted by--black women.

### **5.1 The Emergence of Endorsement**

This study argues that as some African American women age, they endorse the SBW narrative and characteristic more strongly and thus do not feel affected by it. Based on the research, older adult participants felt that being strong was simply a quality that black women possess and did not feel like it affected them mentally or physically. When asked if she felt that



stereotypes, like the SBW, has affected her mental or physical health in any way, one participant stated, “No, because it is what it is. I am a strong black woman. I believe in strong black women. There are a lot of strong black women in this world, so I’m not affected or offended by it. So, no.... I don’t feel like that...” (Gwendolyn – Retired Clerk, 65 years old). Their long-term experience with the strong black women narrative and characteristic established their views of strength. Older adult women were open to help-seeking behaviors, but were less likely to participate, which could also be linked to their normalization of strong behaviors. One could infer that this group of participants’ closeness to slavery impacted their endorsement of strength and the strong black woman narrative and characteristic. Middle-aged participants, who also did not feel affected by the strong black woman narrative and characteristic, have also become accustomed to the norms of strength. “I don’t think that it’s affected my mental health, no... not that I can think of. I feel like I’m strong. I feel like I’m mentally strong and I’m emotionally strong” (Calandra – Document Management Records Keeper, 48 years old). Another participant added:

Being a strong black woman, I don’t feel like having that designation has impacted me in any physical or psychological way. Umm... I think it’s because of who I am and whose child I am that I don’t feel that way. Maybe because very early in my career I felt it but being the adult that I am and the mom that I am and the career professional that I am now, I don’t sense any issues. I am very confident and comfortable with who I am (Jill – Vice President of Communications, 48 years old).

The perspective that it affected her then, but not now, supports this idea that as some women become more accustomed to the strong black woman narrative through their lifespan, with age

and experiences, they are not as affected negatively by it. This theory also supports the younger adult participants' reluctant endorsement of the strong black woman narrative and characteristic.

## **5.2 The Evolution of Resistance**

This study also argues that as our culture evolves black women are beginning to resist the SBW narrative and characteristic and are more attracted to self-care and help-seeking behaviors. Younger adult participants in this study more closely aligned with this idea, as they endorsed the strong black woman narrative and characteristic less than other age groups. Older adult participants were less likely to engage in self-care and help-seeking behaviors, whereas middle-aged and younger adult participants heavily endorsed those behaviors. The idea that the strong black woman narrative and characteristic produces an unattainable pressure in the lives of black women is the main reason that it is resisted by younger age groups. If examined through the lifespan, as new generations evolve, the heavy endorsement of the strong black woman narrative and characteristic and the negative stigma surrounding help-seeking behaviors is less accepted.

One participant said:

There were so many things about me that changed positively once I let this 'I have to be strong' thing go a little bit. Once I started letting it go, because it was so rooted in every single situation... it almost helped me reset. And I don't feel like I can't be vulnerable and that I have to hide what I've been through (Toshé, Visual Content Manager, 28 years old).

The study supports the idea that as our culture evolves, the strong black woman narrative and characteristic is less associated with negative views of help-seeking and self-care and endorsed as a means of practicing those behaviors as an act of strength.

There was not enough information gathered to accurately determine whether or not education, as an intersectional factor, was linked to the participants' endorsement of the SBW narrative and characteristic. Future research should consider how education, religion and financial factors may influence self-care and help-seeking behaviors and examine how each may impact or limit one's endorsement of or participation in those activities.

### **5.3 STRONGER: The Documentary**

An 19:26 minute documentary was produced to extend awareness about the findings from the qualitative study. The creative documentary is non-fiction and supports the research gathered during the study. The visual style of the film features clips from each of the interviews of each of the 15 participants. The supporting documentary can be found on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/mGwO8IqEKhk>. The intended target audience for the film is African American women age 16 and older who identify with or who have experienced stereotypes associated with Black women, particularly the Strong Black Woman narrative and characteristic. The short film is intended to support the research by extending the findings to an audience beyond Georgia State University and/or other academic institutions or publications, who would not normally have easy access to this type of research. The film also intends to note the benefits of self-care and help-seeking behaviors.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

The Strong Black Woman narrative and characteristic fosters both positive and negative representations of African American women. Though the level of endorsement for the SBW narrative and stereotype varies, usually through age groups, it is evident that there are some links to strength being a positive representation of African American women throughout their lifespan. The participants in this study represented both the middle and upper middle classes and the

results of the study may not reflect the results of women in lower and working classes. “The stigma associated with having a mental illness is pervasive and can yield a host of detrimental consequences. Mental illness stigma has many dimensions that include negative beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviors towards mental illness and its treatment” (Wong, et al., 2018, p. 299). Negative perceptions about mental illness are common and effect more than just African American women. It is important to shed light on the efforts being made to alleviate the stigma normalize help-seeking behaviors. The article and documentary both contribute to existing research and support the idea that African American women become stronger when they practice self-care and help-seeking behaviors.

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