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## **Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube**

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The YouTube experiences of Black women may reveal much about the ‘subtleties and nuances of black women’s lives’ (Bobo, 1995: 2). Interviewing young Black women in Britain about YouTube, quickly gravitated to stories about their hair, including the Black beauty and hair vloggers my participants engage with. Natural hair journeys proved to be a nexus to issues concerning identity, authenticity, community and a sense of belonging. Engaging with depictions of Black women on YouTube more generally, turned out to be a key way that the 21 young Black women in Britain who were interviewed, took up forms of identity and ideological work. This paper scrutinises how, by watching YouTube videos, young Black women in Britain challenge the dearth of diverse images of Black women in mainstream media, whilst nurturing themselves and each other in the process. Through analysis of interviews, this paper reflects on ‘the gaze of Black women’ (hooks, 1992: 35) and self-exploratory encounters in the online setting of watching YouTube.

The seminal work of Malik (2002: 1) elucidates how British media is ‘a key site of contestation and cultural negotiation in matters of race and ethnicity, where we, as the viewing nation, both publicly and privately struggle to make meanings around Blackness’. In recent years, shifts in the landscape of media platforms, namely those enmeshed in digital culture, have altered various power relations involved in producing and accessing on screen images of Black people. Video blogging (vlogging) is significant in present day consumer culture. Unsurprisingly, YouTube activity has been a source of academic interest (Daniels et al., 2016), yet few studies focus on the resistant sentiments it can involve (Dhaenens, 2012), or the YouTube experiences of Black women (Williams, 2016). Influenced by

research on racialised regimes of representation (Hall, 1997; Malik, 2002), media, culture, and the lives of Black women (Ahmed, 2012; Bobo, 1995; Dhaenens, 2012; Essed, 1991; Hermes, 2005; Hermes and Kooijman, 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013; hooks, 1995; Johnson, 2016; Kavoori, 2011; Saha, 2012), this paper examines under-explored elements of YouTube activity. It reflects on what these reveal about the lives of young Black women in Britain in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Methodology**

In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 Black women aged 19–33 years old. Each interview was approximately 1–3.5 hours long and participants chose pseudonyms. Individuals aged 18–34 years old are often referred to as belonging to ‘the millennial generation’ and are typified as being digitally savvy and frequent online users (Kaklamanidou and Tally, 2014). The age range of those interviewed would therefore appear to make them suitable participants in research about YouTube activity. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they ‘are widely held to be a fundamentally useful way to understand informants’ beliefs, experiences and worlds’ (Mann, 2016: 2). Recruitment emails were sent to organisations and groups concerned with issues to do with gender, race and African and Caribbean people. The ‘snowball technique’ (Berg, 1983) was also used by emailing information to friends and family to circulate. Of the total number of participants, 12 are living in Scotland and the others live in England. All of the participants self-identified as being Black and African-Caribbean, and six also identified as mixed-race.

Subsequent to interview transcription, open coding involved identifying recurrent expressions and sentiments that emerged when participants described images of Black women and their experiences as media spectators. After intertextual analysis of the main points of discussion, five interconnected themes

arose. They are self-image, self-education, authenticity, frustration, and diasporic community. These will be discussed below, with reference to the codes and quotations they are based on. The five themes are linked to the sense of ‘belonging’ that young Black women in Britain may strive for, the ‘authenticity’ that they may or may not ascribe to on screen images of Black women, and the ‘frustration’ that can drive them to source alternative images to those in mainstream mass-media. Although the interviews involved conversation about various media, including television and film, online media had a strong presence in the lives of all participants. Content-sharing and social media platforms such as Instagram, Vine and Twitter were mentioned. Of the online platforms discussed, YouTube was the one that most participants passionately spoke about engaging with.

The theme of (1) ‘self-image’ connects self-referential comments about the physical appearance of participants and the women in images that they referenced. Associated terms used by participants included ‘natural’, ‘unapologetically Black’ and ‘representative’. Remarks that indicated the educational quality of some of the YouTube content mentioned, resulted in discussion of (2) ‘self-education and knowledge-sharing’, the second theme, with related words including ‘learn’, ‘teach’ and ‘gurus’. Mention of the authenticity of certain images, led to analysis of how perceptions of (3) ‘realness and relatability’ factor into YouTube activity. Linked words included ‘real’, ‘raw’ and ‘unfiltered’. Given the anger, sense of injustice and power dynamics that can fuel activism, terms used by participants such as ‘dictated’, ‘resist’ and ‘reclaim’, are grouped under (4) ‘(medi)activist sentiments’. Finally, phrases such as ‘our own’ and ‘for ourselves’, indicate that despite being individualistic, participants’ media spectator experiences are part of a wider (5) ‘digital diaspora’ phenomenon (Everett, 2009) and bespeak a wish for community and belonging.

Certain characteristics and experiences are shared by the participants. All study or had studied at further or higher education level. This sparked aside comments about being Black women in higher education, which are not explored in this article. In addition to this and to my surprise, 12 participants had sought out YouTube vlogs to help them care for their natural hair. Discussion of this became central to the research. The narratives of Temi, Nymeria and Okra, are considerably drawn on, as these participants have sought out such videos for several years. The names of certain natural hair and beauty vloggers repeatedly came up in interviews, which suggests that an actual Black women's digital diasporic community thrives amidst YouTube.

As a Black and mixed-race woman living in Britain, I am part of the story told here, although it is 'a story that is not mine alone' (Boylorn, 2006: 653). The interviews were approached from a reflexive angle, which is characterised by introspective self-disclosure and how a researcher 'shares personal experiences with the topic at hand or reflects on the communicative process of the interview' (Ellis and Berger, 2001: 854). This was particularly pronounced when participants referenced certain phrases and topics that were familiar to me, due to my Black and Nigerian diasporic identity. This included discussion of Nigerian and Yoruba terms, such as 'juju' and 'dada', the latter of which is associated with dreadlocked hair and stigma.

Jokes and experiences were shared, such as when discussing the challenges of finding appropriate hairdressers in Scotland. 'The dynamics of turn-taking' (Mann, 2016: 3) were important in the interviews. Being asked questions by most participants, such as 'have you experienced that too?', 'where are your parents from?', 'have you been to Africa?' and 'do you remember that as well?' contributed to 'more egalitarian power relations between researcher and researched' (Kilomba, 2010: 46). These interactive moments will be further explicated below.

## **Self-image, self-education and knowledge-sharing**

Interview participants who emotively discussed their use of natural hair vlogs, included Temi, Nymeria, Miss Africa, Okra, and Rachel. Their experiences and anecdotes point to how YouTube may be used to build self-esteem, develop diasporic identities and community, while boosting a sense of belonging. In this section I will discuss interview quotes that related to the themes of self-image, self-esteem and knowledge sharing. They present the affirmative socio-political impact that YouTube usage may have. In the subsequent sections, I will turn to authenticity and the more recognisably political themes of frustration, infuriation and the Black diaspora.

Frustrated with the lack of hairdressers in Scotland that cater to Black women, Temi took matters into her own hands and searched for natural haircare tips. She started sourcing YouTube content in 2010, and found the vlogs of *Naptural85*. Temi is a 26 year old postgraduate research student in Scotland:

I wanted to understand how to look after my hair. That's what kicked it off. Now I follow so many people [on YouTube] and I literally take time out during the week. Like, I save videos and then just watch them [...] like whenever I've got a chance. It's something that I actively do. (Temi)

Natural hair vlogs serve as a practical tool that enable Temi's self-education in terms of caring for natural African-Caribbean hair. On a more emotional level, they provide self-affirming experiences of feeling represented on screen (Bobo, 1995; Warner, 2015). For Temi, television only offers restrictive images of Black women wearing 'wigs and weaves, Peruvian and Brazilian, and it doesn't seem like it is how Black women actually are'. Temi consistently made statements such as 'I want to see somebody who looks like me'. For this reason, she favours YouTube over television. Such engagement with the vlogs of Black women has

been so influential that Temi has considered becoming a vlogger and was involved in establishing a natural hair collective.

Temi indicates how engagement with the vlogs of Black women may include self-educational elements related to the diasporic identities of young Black women in Britain. Another participant, named Annie, spoke about her disinterest in YouTube, when explaining why she still uses it to watch makeup tutorials. Annie, who is a 19 year old business undergraduate student in England, said ‘with makeup, I can’t watch one with white or [...] when I say Black women, it has to be dark-skinned Black women’, who are infrequently depicted in mainstream makeup campaigns. Nymeria, who is a 27 year old artist and arts graduate in Scotland, made comparable comments:

I think about what I need at the time, so my YouTube channels kind of guide me [...] I’ll be like ‘do I need to feel better about myself sometimes, emotionally, physically?’ [...] Trying to find makeup as a Black woman [...] it’s such an endeavour [...] sometimes you’re like, ‘I just want to find a good foundation!’ [...] then you go on YouTube and someone goes ‘oh here you go’ and that’s that exchange that you’re having with these people. (Nymeria)

The fervent remarks of Temi, Annie and Nymeria, indicate that they sought out Black women’s vlogs to gain inclusive advice which is glaringly absent in mainstream media and markets. Their comments illustrate how highly practical needs and daily frustrations (tips and advice are abundantly available for light-skinned women) may segue into the ideological and political. YouTube is available to young Black women in Britain as a socio-cultural source of knowledge shared amongst Black women. It affords collaborative forms of self-construction and allows for a collective sense of resistance against dominant mass media.

Practical everyday concerns turn out to be an amalgam of anger and wistfulness, and an implicit wish for community and belonging that require a vehicle or a medium to be voiced. This seems to be precisely what vloggers such

as *Naptural85*, whose videos have been viewed over 70,000,000 times, supply. She is both a celebrity and a micro-celebrity. As a celebrity she is a ‘useful resource in the always ongoing work of identity construction’ (Hermes and Kooijman, 2015: 487) and has the capacity to ‘determine “normality” and the boundaries of acceptable behavior and self-presentation’ (idem.). She is also typically a micro-celebrity who acquired her fame online (Marwick, 2015), and who conveys a ‘commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good’ (Senft, 2013: 346).

Temi’s experience, detailed above, shows how YouTube micro-celebrities may be entangled in the sense of normality that Black women ascribe to their natural hair, as well as how such micro-celebrities may be entwined in processes of ‘diasporic cultural production’ (Saha, 2012: 737), by documenting haircare advice for Black women online. This is emphasised by the words of Okra, who is 33 years old and works in the Scottish health sector:

Try a mud or a clay wash [...] you’ll be shocked at what your hair looks like afterwards. You understand why the ancestors used to do that [...] so much has been lost in transmission [...] I’m grateful that we are actively trying to remember how to do this, so that our children [...] the babies [...] are ok [...] don’t have to go through *this* part anyway. It’s a small thing but it’s a big thing. (Okra)

Throughout history, knowledge-networks ‘have been passed down over generations of people’ (Harrison et al., 2015: 306), and which have ‘come to represent the meaning of racial, ethnic, and cultural or national identities’ (ibid.). Various ways that culturally specific information about Black women’s haircare is transmitted, have changed with the rise of online content-sharing platforms (Johnson, 2016).

Before delving into more focused interview questions, Okra and I spoke about our hair for 15 minutes. This included Okra remarking upon seeing I was wearing a headscarf. What initially seemed to be interview preamble, was



inevitably part of the substantive interview meaning-making process, which included Okra offering her opinion of my hair texture: ‘I think you’re probably a 4B, with some 4A [...] I think when your hair gets longer, it’ll clump into a bigger curl [...] I don’t think it will be as tight as mine’. Such knowledge exchange, over Skype video in this instance, mirrored the very online dynamics being discussed.

To merely interpret the YouTube activity under analysis as being an exchange of practical questions and advice, would be to omit complex issues which link the practical and everyday care of the self, to the ideological work involved in identity construction and community. Turning to natural hair vlogs includes support of the endeavours of other Black women, as well as potentially ‘making connections, promoting human connectedness and community building’ (Van Dijck, 2013: 3) within a Black digital diaspora (Everett, 2009). Nymeria’s comments affirm this:

Like many other Black women, I didn’t really know what the hell to do with my hair, so it was amazing to find a community of natural hair gurus on YouTube. There are *literally* thousands and thousands of Black women in all these different parts of the world, doing this. We consider them beauty bloggers but I feel as if they live within their own little niche, which is particular to Black womanhood [...] some, they’re just really small channels [...] and sometimes I just like to give a girl a chance, you know? [...] it’s kind of soothing to me at this point, because I’ve been doing it so long and I feel like it’s such an amazing thing that we created that for ourselves. (Nymeria)

Interviews with participants such as Nymeria and Okra, reiterate how interpretive research can manifest as ‘a sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up conversations about how we live and cope’ (Ellis and Berger, 2001: 853).

It was only weeks prior to Nymeria’s interview that my own ‘natural hair journey’ commenced. This was distinctly influenced by the words of interview participants, some of whom actively shared tips with me. I found myself sourcing

natural hair vlogs, and wearing my hair in its natural state for the first time for over a decade. Consequentially, Nymeria and I discussed different hair products, hairdressers and hairstyles that we had tried. My own lived experience as a Black and mixed-race woman in Britain, was undoubtedly being shaped by and was shaping this research (Dawes, 2013; Hill Collins, 2008; Kilomba, 2010).

Even passive participation in the comments section of Black women's vlogs can provide young Black women in Britain with a sense of belonging, which may otherwise be hard to access when situated in primarily white contexts. Rachel remarked, 'you'll see stuff in the comment section and be like, "oh yeah! That's me too. That happens to me too."' You can really relate'. Rachel's words illustrate how it is not simply the content of Black women's vlogs that yields relational experiences, it is also the commentary and sense of community they stimulate.

The self-affirming sentiments that participants attributed to YouTube activity, may challenge feelings of being 'made into a stranger' (Ahmed, 2012: 177) that diasporic people can experience (Adriaens, 2014; Back et al., 2012; Kalra et al., 2005). When speaking more about her YouTube habits, Temi detailed how vlogs provide the opportunity to learn from other Black women and Black people:

I would even go as far as to say, on my YouTube subscription list there are very few white YouTubers I actually follow. I don't think that it is anything to do with racism or being prejudiced in any way. I think it's just growing up I had never been taught by any Black teachers [...] all of my teachers at primary school up until high school. The very first time I was ever taught by an African or Black lecturer, it was one class. It was a lecturer at undergraduate and she was Black and it was like, wow! It was a massive deal. I just want to know more and learn more about what the history is and experiences are of people who look like me. (Temi)

Miss Africa, who is 27 years old, involved in activist work and plans to train as a counsellor, had a slightly different story to offer that underlines both the practical and socio-political realms of such YouTube activity. Miss Africa lost her

sight in recent months but spoke about how the importance of natural hair vlogs relates to much more than visual signification:

My friends, when I was in hospital [...] used to play these videos for me because I like to listen to them, because even if you can't see them, you can hear what they use for their hair [...] which is quite nice because you need that. (Miss Africa)

Miss Africa's comments were one of many which involved implicit and sometimes explicit references to a sense of connection and solidarity. Like Temi, Nymeria and Miss Africa, Rachel who is 21 years old and works in England, alluded to this element of kinship when speaking of her love of natural hair vlogs:

I just felt like [...] it's just nice to see [...] it sounds really bad but it's nice to see other people struggling like you, or going through the same stuff. Like, growing up I'd say since secondary school [...] my secondary school was quite mixed in terms of race [...] but I could only think of one other Black girl that had natural hair, so I didn't have anyone to talk to about like [...] what it's like to care for natural hair. Like, saying 'oh yeah so I'm getting my hair done today' or 'what kind of grease do you use?' [laughs] random stuff like that. (Rachel)

It has been noted that 'black women's texts nourish and sustain their readers' (Bobo's, 1995: 6) and in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, such texts include user-generated YouTube vlogs. Engaging with the vlogs of Black women has the capacity to become part of 'strategies of representation or empowerment' (Bhabha, 1994: 2), such as by enabling self-affirming feelings and forms of collective self-education.

### **Authenticity and the threat of commercialism and celebrity culture**

Discussions with the interview participants suggest that part of the pleasure that they derive from viewing the vlogs of Black women, relates to how authentic they seem. The ascent of digital technology has increasingly blurred boundaries between perceived public and private lives (Gregory, 2016). Micro-celebrity

vloggers may project authentic images in comparison to more conventional types of celebrities, partly due to the ‘do it yourself’ (DIY) online platform that vloggers appear on and the everyday feel of their images. This is not to deny that these are also ‘conscious acts of self-staging’ (Van Dijck, 2013: 4) that may be involved in the pursuit of a profitable self-brand (Kavoori, 2011; Senft, 2008). Also, vloggers may symbiotically follow unwritten YouTube community rules, such as by adopting certain editing styles and video formats, and at once, challenge traditional codes of celebrity construction. As the identity politics of following Black hair and beauty vloggers rest on how these vlogs convey an authentic sense of being a Black woman, it is important to reconstruct how my participants understand and use these texts.

Temi associates the relatability of vlogs with the opportunity to view backstage aesthetic work of the vlogger’s front stage self-presentation (Goffman, 1959):

They’re so real in comparison to what you see on TV and stuff like that. It’s just *that* [TV images] is something that the director wants you to see, but with YouTube, although it’s also staged as well, I feel like it’s so real. The mere fact that you’ll have a Black woman with natural hair, short length and in its natural state, just freshly washed and curly [...] the mere fact that you’ll have a Black woman in front of the camera videoing herself like that [...] is a massive deal [...] there is a stark difference between how YouTube bloggers and vloggers are shown, and how people on TV are shown. I think that there is a realness to it because people are willing to say ‘get ready with me’ or they are willing to say ‘I’ll be without makeup on, I’ve just had a shower, you’ll see me attach my wig on’ or ‘you’ll see me stack my hair so I’m ready to go out for work the next day’. (Temi)

Temi’s perception of the realness of certain vlogs by Black women, was echoed by Plantain Baby, a 22 year old artist living in England: ‘before these things get

picked up [by mainstream media] they're still in their original raw state and I think it's kind of more authentic'.

Temi and Plantain Baby recognise the commercial aspects of YouTube vlogs (Kavoori, 2011), but emphasise that images of Black women on YouTube still seem more authentic than those in mainstream mass-media. Witnessing vloggers partake in everyday tasks such as doing their hair after showering, breaks the imagined boundary between their public and private image. This, paired with the lack of diverse images of Black women in mainstream media (Warner, 2015), may result in Black women's vlogs seeming more authentic and intimate than images of them on television. Jennifer describes this as the ordinariness of images of Black women on YouTube. She is a 21 year old sciences undergraduate student in England:

I guess I'm just watching them doing the most mundane tasks, so yeah, I guess I do follow them, so yeah [...] not necessarily celebrities but YouTube people, cause it just seems like they're one of you. It's easier to kind of [...] yeah [...] follow their content.  
(Jennifer)

Jennifer's remarks imply a division between who and what actions she feels constitute celebrity, in comparison to 'YouTube people'. The word 'people' in the latter term, underlines the more relatable connection that Jennifer experiences when engaging with YouTube content and micro-celebrities featured in it (Senft, 2008).

The participants' use of YouTube indicates how 'commodification is a process that is both enabling and constraining' (Saha, 2012: 740). Plantain Baby for example says: 'there's still a bit of an issue because Black people can produce any kind of content that they want [on YouTube] but the people that are behind YouTube and the film industry, it's still white dominated'. At the same time, Plantain Baby, Temi, Rachel, Miss Africa, Nymeria and Ola, also feel that a draw of the vlogs of Black women for young Black women in Britain, is the opportunity

to see Black women in control of their depiction. Ola is a 19 year old business undergraduate student in Scotland and when speaking about Black women vloggers she said, ‘it’s just great to see Black women being successful in the media I guess, yeah. They just have such great personalities as well and they offer so much advice online to other women’. For Ola, the symbolic value of Black women’s vlogs includes inspiration yielded by their success, regardless that the vlogs may also net the vloggers income (and thus suggest commercial or even mercenary interests). Issues regarding ownership, authorship and ‘themes of bodily and monetary control’ (Weidhase, 2015: 129) are not ignored by my participants but appear to have only minor salience, such as when Nymeria said ‘there’s this amazing YouTuber I watch and who makes a lot of this stuff herself [...] she’s not even asking for any money’.

When explaining processes of communication, Hall (1993: 10) outlines that ‘the degrees of “understanding” and “misunderstanding” in the communicative exchange – depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the “personifications”, encoder-producer and decoder-receiver’. Black women who are vloggers, may be both the producer and subject of their vlogs. Regarding the experiences of the participants in my research project, the visible agency and self-possession of Black women as content producers, is a big part of the appeal of these vlogs. In the intersection of issues concerning race, gender, power and commodification (Bobo, 1995; Crenshaw, 1989; Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013; Hill Collins, 2008; Kooijman, 2014; Malik, 2002; Saha, 2012), young Black women in Britain, as 21<sup>st</sup> century media spectators, feel strengthened rather than manipulated by Black women’s vlogs. This is in contrast to the downright sense of alienation, misrecognition and neglect they often experience when watching mainstream television.

### **(Medi)activist sentiments, fuelled by frustration, and digital diaspora**

Sobande, F. (Forthcoming) “Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube” – to be published in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

The online experiences of my participants may be viewed as an example of how young Black women in Britain engage with alternative media (Couldry and Curran, 2003), rather than what is offered in mainstream British mass-media. However, whilst talk of alternative media involves reflecting on media that ‘provide divergent points of view and cultural choices’ (Lievrouw, 2011: 1) to those available in mainstream markets, such discussion is often associated more with news and current affairs, than entertainment and lifestyle based media. Moreover, the word ‘alternative’ does not fully capture the proactive, resistant and political sentiments involved in some of my participants’ digital activity. This includes how Okra spoke of turning to the online content of Black people, as part of efforts to ‘decolonise my mind’. These ideological underpinnings of the digital activity of some Black women in Britain, signal varying degrees of (medi)activism.

Influenced by Dhaenens’ (2012: 446) exploration of ‘the resistant potentiality of texts’ on YouTube, and in line with how vlogs speak to Black women’s sense of identity and self-esteem, ‘(medi)activist sentiments’ as a concept can be used to grasp how my participants voice their often implicit, yet ostensibly resistant media experiences. Comments made by Temi exemplify the active avoidance of mainstream mass-media in favour of YouTube:

I don’t necessarily watch TV any more. Most of the TV that I watch is mainly YouTube channels. Essentially that’s my new TV because it’s content that I want to see, not content that is dictated by white, middle class and middle aged men, who are trying to figure out what the majority would maybe like. Then, when you say that you’re going with what the majority would maybe like, minorities are always left out.  
(Temi)

Temi’s remark is an explicit political statement. It indicates her perception that ‘black bodies are expelled from the white social body’ in mainstream media as Ahmed (2000: 39) would put it, and it underlines the ‘predominantly *white* aesthetic and cultural discourses’ (Hall, 2010: 269) there. The political importance

of Temi's observation is at least partly in the fact that such criticism of mainstream media can be expressed by pointing to a positive alternative, which can be found on YouTube.

Engaging with YouTube turns out to be a strong means to embrace your identity as a Black woman. Temi, as do the others, frames the importance of her use of YouTube by detailing some of the everyday and structural racism (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015; Essed, 1991) Black women in Britain commonly experience:

In the 90s there weren't that many other Black people around you [...] if you got on a bus, you were often the only Black person on a bus and people wouldn't necessarily want to sit next to you. That's what you feel. People would be standing and literally, it happened to me so many times. I'd be on the bus going to primary school and no one would want to sit next to me, even though the seat was there [...] it affected me, yes. Not having that access to other people who look like you [...] you crave it more, so you end up closer to the sort of Black or African side. The identity that you feel that you ascribe to [...] it becomes okay. This is the way that I see myself [...] that's exactly what happened with me. In high school we talked about the Jacobites, Mary Queen of Scots, yeah [laughs] and there was no Black history [...] I was fighting [...] resistance to not just be the status quo and let that be my identity, knowing that there was so much more to me [...] I went and found that for myself. [...] actively seeking specific mediums that *actually* relate to who I am [...] because the depiction of Black people on TV in the UK is very few and far between. (Temi)

Seeking out images of Black women on YouTube thus becomes more than finding practical advice. It is part of a shift from implicit underground unease to a more openly political stance. This may range from being critical of mainstream television to 'fighting' the absence of Black history, as Temi does by sourcing specific vlogs. Seeking out the vlogs of Black women can be stimulated by entertainment-based motivations, but can also be a very openly resistant online activity (Dhaenens, 2012). This can involve the (medi)activist sentiment of trying



to ‘strengthen one’s identity’, as Temi puts it, while facing discrimination and having limited opportunities to learn from Black people first-hand.

Although the remarks of other participants are more general, similar patterns can be discerned. For instance, Jennifer speaks about dismissing televised images because she feels they (mis)represent Black women:

Actually I would say, instead of television, I tend to watch YouTube videos more. There’s you know, with YouTube videos, you tend to get people more representative of yourself [...] ‘cause it’s just any person can go on there and make content that’s more truthful. (Jennifer)

As hooks (1995: 115) observes, ‘black people have in both the past and present challenged how we are presented in mass media’. Traditional examples of resistance include public protests, boycotts and ‘turning off the television set’ (ibid.). Rather than discount the resistant and oppositional intention (Bobo, 1995; hooks, 1992) of simple acts such as choosing not to watch television, I prefer to follow hooks’ lead and include this form of everyday political protest. This preference is undergirded by the fact that in the interviews, participants talked about the wide range of their YouTube use. They specifically included how they search for and view content by Black women activists, unearthing further ways that their YouTube use involves (medi)activist sentiments:

When I started looking at Black activists [...] I was being educated at the same time [...] one of my favourite channels is Kat Blaque [...] she is a trans African American woman who is basically just [...] fighting the good fight. (Nymeria)

Nymeria’s comments reflect the extensive range of political uses to which YouTube viewing is put, including by enabling her to engage with images of Black women with a range of gender identities. Plantain Baby also emphasises how mainstream mass-media primarily promote white and heteronormative identities (Bobo, 1995; Dhaenens, 2012; Hall, 2003) that Black women may not relate to:

There are loads of Black queer women here but there's not space for us [in mainstream media] which is maybe one of the reasons why you don't hear about us enough [...] because we're having to do things on our own. (Plantain Baby)

Engagement with YouTube videos created by and featuring Black women, provides young Black women viewers with a stronger sense of ownership over their media spectator experiences. Shelby, who is 21 years old and due to start a medic-related role and postgraduate degree in England, summarised this when saying, 'I think it's about going out of my own way, looking for my own sort of media, looking for what I want to see, or like [...] looking for people that I can really relate to'. Additionally, Plantain Baby hinted at ideologically influenced reasons behind her dismissal of television:

I haven't watched television properly in years. I mean, as a Black person, there's nothing really entertaining. There's nothing there that references anything to do with my Blackness. If anything, it's going to be on the news in some sort of negative way [...] I kind of don't pay attention to the media but I would say, do they even think Black British women even exist here? You know, is that even an identity to explore? I also feel like there is a constant negative stigma and stereotypes about Black women. There is a lot of misrepresentation. A lot of unreliable sources. The people who are recording these Black experiences are not Black! They're not Black women! You're not hearing from the horse's mouth. (Plantain Baby)

Plantain Baby is involved in a creative collective that shares the narratives of Black women in Britain, and as part of that, has produced YouTube content. This further reveals how young Black women in Britain may use YouTube in ways that challenge their (mis)representation.

Self-determined and (medi)activist sentiments that may spur the production and spectatorship of online content by some young Black women in Britain, was also spoken about by Ruby, who is a 24 year old screen writer/script editor in England:

I just think it's very DIY. Like, I hate the term 'millennial' but I think we're in this time when we don't want to wait anymore. We don't want to have to wait for Lenny Henry to be like, 'we need to hire more Black people' [laughs] like, we're making our own spaces, being DIY savvy with our iPhones, doing our own iconography and making our own content. (Ruby)

This research elaborates upon Warner's (2015: 34) persuasive claim that creating online 'content is a necessary act of agency for women of color, who strive for visibility' in predominantly white societal settings. YouTube does not exist outside of capitalism, white supremacy or patriarchy, as Plantain Baby pointed out. To conceive of digital 'technology as innocent or neutral misunderstands the social relations of technology and its very real material consequences in our social world' (Emejulu and McGregor, 2016: 1). In addition, taking a political stance and protesting against discrimination and exclusion can take a wide variety of forms. It would not do to overlook the range of ways that my participants are critical and seek alternatives to mainstream media, in order to construct their identities and build a sense of community.

Racism 'scars symbol making and the cultural industries that disseminate information and entertainment to audiences' (Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013: 179). Awareness of the racism, sexism and heteronormativity that underpin mainstream media, shapes how Black women in Britain "'take up" space' (Ahmed, 2007: 149) as media producers and spectators. Content generated by YouTube vloggers is typically 'situated at a crossroads between the popular and the margins' (Dhaenens, 2012: 444) which my participants feel is fertile ground for the spectatorship of images of Black women, created for and by them. Ola's remarks below about how she does not feel the need to follow Black women vloggers when in Nigeria, and the situatedness Plantain Baby refers to in her remark about the Black diaspora, reveal watching YouTube to be an ideologically charged activity that relates directly to experiences of disconnection and exclusion.

Whilst living in Britain, Ola sources images of Black women on YouTube, and connects this with the African diasporic element of her identity. When in Nigeria, Ola does not feel an impetus to actively seek out images of Black women on screen:

Well when I was younger [...] well, we were in Nigeria so there was lots of Black women on TV. Yeah, because of all the Nollywood films and shows and stuff like that, so yeah it was a normal thing I guess. It was when I came here [UK] that I realised that it wasn't so [...] like, not normal [...] but it wasn't often that you'd see a Black woman on TV when I came here. (Ola)

Online platforms provide enabling technology here. Everett (2009: 20) asserts that since 1995 there have been 'swelled ranks of black people throughout the African diaspora connecting to the Internet' and through it. Ola is eager to remain connected to a Black African experience and keeping up with the vlogs of Black women is one way of doing so.

Similar online diasporic activity occurs as part of the YouTube habits of Shelby, who references the work of a Black British woman and film-maker named Cecile Emeke, whose video series entitled 'Strolling', documents the experiences of Black people across Europe and beyond:

The fact that she just talked to Black people all over Europe and she's now gone to Jamaica, I just thought it was nice to hear that there are people going through the same troubles. There are people. It's not just you. It's like everywhere! So wherever she went, there were people sort of talking about the same sorts of things. (Shelby)

Plantain Baby also emphasised how content-sharing platforms facilitate such a sense of connection:

I feel like you are able to see and kind of understand narratives from different Black people all over the world. It is an outlet for Black people in the diaspora to talk about their experiences and share their narratives. (Plantain Baby)

YouTube activity here becomes a form of diasporic ‘collective mobilization’ (Kalra et al., 2005: 3). It cultivates and communicates the narratives of Black women. The interviews in this regard speak to the ‘subversive capacity’ of Black women as media spectators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context of online YouTube habits, as Bobo (1995: 5) maintained earlier in relation to movies, novels and other content carriers.

## **Conclusion**

Two decades ago, Jacqueline Bobo wrote that despite ‘critical discussions generated by black women’s texts that achieve any degree of success, little attention is paid to their significance for black female cultural consumers’ (1995: 1).<sup>1</sup> Such a statement is especially applicable to the media experiences of Black women in Britain, who despite being considered as part of the compelling research of scholars such as Malik (2002), remain often overlooked amidst broader conversations about issues pertaining to identity, ideology and present day media. This article furthers discussion of the negotiation of the identities of Black women in Britain, at a point in time when the everyday use of YouTube videos can play a prime role in such activity.

Across 21 interviews, young Black women in Britain expressed how their use of YouTube, particularly natural hair vlogs, catered to their need for a sense of agency and reclamation of diasporic identity. Commonalities across the interviews point to a pattern in how Black women make sense of their representation in mainstream media, versus the videos of Black women vloggers. It is the difference between exclusion and neglect yielded by mainstream media, and the opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> Since Bobo’s (1995) statement, analysis of media depictions of Black women in the US has been the subject of more research, including work by scholars such as Means Coleman (1998) and Del Guadalupe Davidson (2017). However, much less attention has been paid to the representation of Black women in British media, as well as the experiences of Black women in Britain as media producers and spectators.

to engage in resistant and self-empowering activity when building an identity influenced by the online voices of other Black women.

Clearly, navigation of identities in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is an intricate process. Important for young Black women in Britain is that through online activity they can transcend geographical barriers and connect with one another. Being a Black woman in predominantly white places will often involve dealing with everyday racism and striving for a sense of belonging (Ahmed, 2000; Emejulu and Bassel, 2015; Essed, 1991; Kilomba, 2010). This does not directly or immediately translate into a political stance. Digital habits can appear to be more coincidental than intentional, due to how YouTube recommends videos, and what happens to be on the social media profiles of friends. That said, the digital habits of my participants, including their engagement with images of Black women on YouTube, were often purposeful and encouraged by feelings of marginalisation, that participation in a Black digital diaspora (Everett, 2009) was felt as remedying.

To return to the words of Rachel, ‘I could only think of one other Black girl that had natural hair, so I didn’t have anyone to talk to about like [...] what it’s like to care for natural hair’. For young Black women in Britain, YouTube allows the perusing and production of images of Black women as a means of self-actualisation, self-care and support. Evidently, the proliferation of content-sharing platforms will make how diasporic people connect with each other increasingly digital in nature. Importantly, the experiences of my research participants also indicate that whilst for them too, YouTube is ‘a key element in the way we think about our on-line experience and (shared) digital culture’ (Kavoori, 2011: 3), it is also an integrated component of how individuals live their lives offline.

Black people have historically challenged their (mis)representation in mass-media (hooks, 1995) and today they also do so through digital technologies (Warner, 2015). As ever, more research ‘that can illuminate and enrich our understanding of the social formations of black identity’ (hooks, 1990: 8), as well

as ‘the commodification of “blackness” is needed’ (ibid.). While I saw little evidence of this commodification in the vlogs discussed in the interviews, at some point they may well become an interesting business proposition for product manufacturers and other businesses, particularly as ‘the desire to market Black hair care products and services on these various venues, with such enormous access, is quite popular in the twenty-first century’ (Johnson, 2013: 79).

Further studies of how Black women’s online activity influences mainstream media, last but not least, can play an important part in challenging the ‘lack of attention to race and ethnicity in the booming research field of cultural production studies’ (Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013: 179). Online platforms such as YouTube will feed mainstream television, yet restrictions apply there. As Dhaenens (2012: 444–445) observes, ‘where the margins allow more freedom, the popular is submitted to social and cultural conventions’. Therefore, when young Black women in Britain want to see images of Black women that are rarely represented, for the time being, their chances are much better when they turn to YouTube vlogs, than when switching on the television. Such alternative images will be crafted and sought out by young Black women in Britain in a myriad of ways, ranging from accidentally to actively and ambitiously. Regardless of this diversity of strategies and tactics, the vlogs of Black women have become connected with the identity formation and community building of young Black women in Britain, some of whom are creating and carving out their own media experiences and in turn, themselves.

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