



Examination of hair experiences among girls with Black/African American identities



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ABSTRACT

Negative hair experiences can impact psychological well-being and are an integral part of development through childhood, adolescence, and beyond. The current study utilized a mixed-methods approach to capture the lived experiences of girls relating to their hair. Participants were 105 girls between the ages of 10–15 years old recruited via social media, email, and social organizations with Black/African American, or biracial communities. Satisfaction with natural hair, perceived bullying and teasing relating to hair, social comparisons, and pressure from family and friends were assessed. Approximately, 22% of 10-year olds, 14% of 11-year olds, 54% of 12-year olds, 35% of 13-year olds, and 32% of 14-year olds reported experiencing hair related teasing. Engaging in hair comparison with models/celebrities in the media and peers was significantly associated with less hair satisfaction. Similarly, girls that reported greater frequency of hair-related teasing also had significantly lower scores on hair satisfaction. Finally, having friends who like one's natural hair was significantly associated with higher hair satisfaction scores. Black/African American girls and their experiences around hair have been largely neglected in psychology and body image research, and more research on this topic is required to gain a better understanding of the role it plays in developing young girls.

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1. Introduction

Bullying and teasing in youth perpetuates social stereotypes and negatively impacts youth development (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, 2016). One common form of bullying and teasing is appearance-related which can include hair, skin color, weight, etc. (Armitage, 2021). Research on appearance-related bullying and teasing among girls has found that it longitudinally predicts increases in appearance anxiety over time (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2018) and body dysmorphic disorder symptoms over a 1-year period (Webb et al., 2015). Further, appearance-related teasing predicts psychological distress (Bhutani et al., 2014), body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors (Menzel et al., 2010), and self-esteem both cross sectionally and longitudinally (Kutob et al., 2010). Similarly, race-related bullying and teasing is associated with a host of negative outcomes. For ex-

ample, research documents a positive association between racial discrimination and low self-esteem, psychological distress, emotional distress (Benner et al., 2018; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2009; Lee & Ahn, 2013), anxiety (Douglass et al., 2016), depressive symptoms (Seaton & Douglass, 2014), and academic achievement (Chavous et al., 2008).

1.1. Hair discrimination

Hair discrimination can be defined as unfairly regulating, teasing, bullying, or insulting people based on the appearance of their hair and reflects the foisting of racially-based appearance beauty standards of hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Essien & Wood, 2021; Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Although racial discrimination was formally outlawed by the Civil Rights Act in 1964, hair discrimination is legal and used as a form of cultural violence towards Black/

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African American¹ people in education, work settings, and the media (Essien & Wood, 2021; McWhorter, 2021; Oyedemi, 2016; Powell, 2018). Recently, examples of hair discrimination have garnered national media attention. For example, Andrew Johnson was not permitted to wrestle in a school wrestling match by a white referee unless he cut his dreadlocks, being forced to have his hair cut by a trainer in order to compete, while boys with Eurocentric hair of equal length were permitted to compete (Stubbs, 2019). Another student was suspended for three days for wearing braids in their hair and ordered to cut their hair (Taketa, 2020). A plethora of news stories on the hair discrimination of Black/African American hair can be found where youth are sent home from school (Griffith, 2019; Kai, 2019; Sabino, 2021), threatened with punitive actions (Pulliam, 2016) or not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities (Asmelash, 2020; Griffith, 2019; Sabino, 2021). Stories like this contributed to the creation of the Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act banning discrimination based on hair styles and textures within education and workplace settings, and has been passed across seven states within the United States (Pitts, 2021).

1.2. Historical context and perpetuation of negative stereotypes

“Hair has been wielded as a social tool for racial acceptance or rejection throughout American history” (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020, page 591; Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Historically, hair was styled using braids or patterns that represented connections to African cultural rituals (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Hair was considered sacred and used in healing rituals (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). However, during the trade of African slaves, hair of new slaves was often shaved as a form of dehumanization. On plantations, enslaved Africans were not allowed to engage in hair grooming (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Further, Black/African American women were forced to keep their hair hidden in public spaces because it was deemed unattractive. Post-slavery, hair was often used as justification for keeping Black/African American individuals from public and social settings such as museums and music venues (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). The Black Power Movement of the 1960s and the Natural Hair Movement of the 2000s aimed at increasing the acceptance of natural Black/African American hair in American society and reducing the negative stereotypes associated with Black/African American hair (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020).

Despite the efforts made to support hair acceptance through the Natural Hair Movement, media often reinforces negative stereotypes of Black/African American hair (McWhorter, 2021). Eurocentric ideal beauty standards depict good hair to be long straight and smooth hair, while Black/African American hair that is naturally coiled in texture as bad hair with derogatory descriptions such as “kinky” or “nappy” (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Essien & Wood, 2021). Black/African American hair is diverse, with 4 types and 12 subcategories identified by Andre Walker and commonly used in U.S. society, and ranging from “straight (fine)” to “kinky-coily (tight coil)” (Walker, 1997). In an examination of advertisements of women in magazines, Baker

(2005) found that Black/African American women were featured with lighter complexions and straight hair. Even among magazines geared towards Black/African American audiences, Black/African American women tended to be portrayed with long, straight or wavy hair rather than naturally coarse hair, adhering to Eurocentric standards of beauty (Hazell & Clarke, 2008). These findings have been replicated more recently in both mainstream magazines and those who target Black/African American female audiences (Jankowski et al., 2017). Equally important is the absence of representation of Black/African American women with natural hair (i.e., hair that is free of chemical hair straightener; Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020) in the media (Baker, 2005; Hazell & Clarke, 2008; Jankowski et al., 2017), and a lack of reinforcement that natural hair is beautiful.

The perpetuation of Black/African American hair negative stereotypes is compounded by the hair care industry. It is reported that the Black/African American hair care industry is valued at \$2.5 billion and that Black/African American consumers spend approximately \$1.2 trillion on hair care products every year (Holmes, 2019; Turner & Green, 2018). The hair industry profits from hair dissatisfaction, and promote hair altering products that introduce harsh, biologically altering chemicals to girls’ scalps (Gaston et al., 2020). Hair products such as chemical relaxers (also known as perms, is a chemical treatment that straightens curly hair) and straighteners contain chemicals such as parabens, phenols, and phthalate that are associated with negative and potentially harmful health outcomes (Gaston et al., 2020). These products are used for hair relaxing styles such as perms and can also take anywhere from 15 hours per session every 6–8 weeks. If not maintained or treated correctly, perms can cause irreversible hair damage and other adverse effects (Shetty et al., 2013). With the Natural Hair Movement in the 2000s, companies have developed numerous products designed to address concerns with natural hair care. The underlying message perpetuated is that alteration of natural Black/African American hair into a more socially acceptable Eurocentric hair ideal is preferred. The subsequent efforts to alter the hair results in a substantial investment of time, finances, energy, and emotions.

1.3. Prevalence and consequences of hair discrimination

Current day there is a paucity of research examining the experiences of hair discrimination among Black/African American youth, but across the few studies that do exist, Black/African American youth have described their experiences and emotional pain. For example, O’Brien-Richardson (2019) found adolescent girls of African descent reported receiving negative comments about their hair during physical education classes, unwanted touching of their hair, and boys taking their hair accessories without permission. These experiences impacted their self-image, engagement in physical activity, and emotional well-being. A second study of thirty-three Black adolescent girls reported internalizing Eurocentric hair beauty ideals (Gadson & Lewis, 2022). In response to questions about differential treatment due to their race or gender, girls discussed peer rejection and microaggressions when they wore their hair natural and the preference for some Black boys “to date Black girls with more European physical features (e.g., light skin and straight hair)” (pg. 22). A major theme that emerged from the gendered racial microaggressions experienced by these Black girls was the negative assumptions by White peers related to hairstyles, body type, and appearance, and receiving negative messages about Black girls’ natural hair (Gadson & Lewis, 2022). Further, in a study of 106 parents of Black girls, parents reported youth being teased at school for their hair (Essien & Wood, 2021). In addition, parents reported experiences where teachers made negative comments when hair was worn natural such as afro style, braided, in ponytails or large twists, or kinky, but provided positive comments when hair was

¹ In the U.S., Black refers to people of color of African descent regardless of their nationality, while African American refers to people born in the U.S. and have African ancestry. Our study recruitment materials, sample, and study materials used the term Black/African American; thus we use this term to describe our sample. We did not assess the extent to which participants were Black or African American. We have intentionally chosen to capitalize Black to indicate the shared culture and history of Black and African American people in the United States and to raise awareness about the marginalization of Black identity. We use lower case to refer to “white” because capitalization of the word “white” may in itself be an example of white supremacy (see <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php> for more information)

straightened. Further, parents reported that educators' responses to the teasing of hair was seldom satisfactory and often dismissive (Essien & Wood, 2021).

Studies on Black/African American adults inquiring about childhood experiences of hair discrimination, find that childhood and adolescence are the most frequent time periods selected when hair discrimination occurs, and schools being the setting where the highest number of incidents occur (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). School settings serve as key settings for the socialization and development of children where students can learn about social status and stereotypes. Participants recalled feeling ugly, dissatisfied, and defective due to these negative hair experiences. In addition, they reported sadness, shame, embarrassment and anger as common emotional responses to hair discrimination (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Due to these hair discrimination experiences, participants reported actively chemically or thermally changing their hair texture well into adulthood (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Black adults recalling hair discrimination experiences describe enduring emotional pain as a consequence that included shame, embarrassment, anger, sadness, and increased self-hatred (Mbilishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Further, African American women describing consequences of negative hair experiences in school discuss anxiety, and discomfort in school and relationships as the most common psychological consequences (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020). Collectively, hair-related experiences among Black/African American girls is an understudied topic, yet a culturally relevant experience that may be associated with negative emotional outcomes.

1.4. Current study

The goal of the current study was to capture the hair experiences of girls of Black/African American identities using a mixed method study of self-report measures and focus group interviews. The goal was to assess the girls' satisfaction with their natural hair, extent of bullying and teasing due to their hair, the degree to which they engage in social comparisons, and friends and family's perspectives on their hair. It was hypothesized that girls with more frequent experiences of bullying and teasing, social comparisons, more pressure from friends and family, would report less satisfaction with their hair and potentially less overall self-esteem. In addition, scores on hair satisfaction were compared among girls that live and go to school in predominantly white versus culturally diverse communities. It was hypothesized that hair satisfaction scores would be higher among girls that live in more diverse neighborhoods and schools due to youth with similar hair.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 105 girls between the ages of 10–15 years old ($M = 12.30$, $SD = 1.37$) residing in the U.S. Parents reported the racial/ethnic identity of their daughters via a brief online survey and could endorse multiple racial/ethnic identities. All 105 participants identified as Black or African American, consisting of 32 girls identifying multiracial/ethnic identities while 73 were solely Black/African American. Of those endorsing multiracial/ethnic identities: 10 participants identified as Spanish origin or Hispanic/Latinx, 4 as American Indian or Alaska Native, 3 as Asian American, 1 as Middle Eastern or North African, 11 as white, and 3 as other. Parents also reported their own race/ethnicity with 88% also reporting Black/African American identities, but could also endorse multiple identities. The race/ethnicity endorsement of parents was: 1 American Indian/Alaska Native, 3 Asian American, 92 African American/Black,

11 Spanish Origin/Hispanic/Latinx, 1 Middle Eastern/North African, 9 White/European American, 2 Indian, and 1 Biracial.

2.2. Procedure

A community-based participatory approach (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003) was utilized in this study as this approach can better reflect minority individuals, their lived experiences, and address inequities when designing research studies (Chávez et al., 2008; Israel et al., 2010). Women, mothers, and undergraduate women who identified as Black or African American were involved in the development of study aims, study design, measures and focus group questions selection, and recruitment strategies. Parents were recruited via email and social media targeting social organizations with Black/African American or biracial families between December 2020 to February 2021 to participate in a study exploring girls' negative experiences with hair and body confidence. Eligibility criteria for the families included, identifying as Black/African American or biracial, and having a daughter within the ages of 10–15 years old. Parents who met eligibility criteria signed up for an online Zoom group session with each session capped at 15 participants. There were 152 parents that expressed interest in participating, but 47 parents no-showed, resulting in a sample of 105 girls participating in the study.

A total of 16 focus groups were conducted online via Zoom with group sizes ranging from 3 to 12 girls. Parents did not participate in the zoom focus group. All participants and facilitators had their videos on throughout the zoom session. Parents were provided with electronic consent forms and girls provided electronic assent prior to participation. Girls were provided a 5-minute online questionnaire, conducted an ice breaker, and then asked a series of focus group questions. Given the age range of girls in the study, all questions and survey items were run through five readability software (Flesch-Kincaid, Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning FOG, The SMOG Index, Coleman-Liau Index; Zhou et al., 2017). Instructions, questions, and survey items had a reading level of 3.6 which is appropriate for ages 8–9 years old and the equivalent of a 3rd grade reading level in the U.S. (Zhou et al., 2017). Parents completed a brief demographic questionnaire on their daughter. This study was part of a larger pilot study examining hair confidence in girls. All sessions were audio-recorded to facilitate transcription of participant responses to the focus group questions. Parents were paid \$50 for their participation. This study was compliant with all ethical guidelines and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Hair Satisfaction Scale (HSS)

To our knowledge, there are no validated measures that assess children's satisfaction with their hair. Thus, 10 items from the Body Esteem Scale (Mendelson & White, 1982) were adapted (e.g., 'It's pretty tough to look like me' was changed to 'It's pretty tough to have hair like mine'). Five items were worded in the positive direction (e.g., 'I really like my hair'), and 5 items in the negative direction (e.g., 'I wish my hair were different'). Consistent with previous research, participants could endorse either 'yes' or 'no', with higher scores indicating more satisfaction (Mendelson & White, 1982). Psychometric properties of this adapted scale are examined in the analysis section.

2.3.2. Hair Teasing (HT)

Girls were asked 'how often do kids make fun of your hair?' to assess the frequency of hair teasing, and 'how often do others touch your hair without your permission' to assess hair touching. Responses were on a 3-point Likert scale from 'never', 'sometimes', to 'a lot' with higher scores indicating more frequent teasing.

2.3.3. Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale for Children (RSES)

The RSES for children measures global self-esteem using a 4-point Likert scale (Wood et al., 2021) and is adapted from the original Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale has demonstrated good validity, reliability, and measurement invariance across gender and age in a sample of children (Wood et al., 2021). Higher mean scores reflect higher self-esteem. For the current sample, Cronbach's alpha = .74.

2.3.4. Social Comparison to Models and Peers Scale (SCMPS)

The SCMPS is a six-item scale that measures the extent to which individuals compare themselves to models/celebrities, same-gender peers, and same-gendered family members with respect to their weight, body, and face (Jones, 2001). The scale has been previously used with children (Diedrichs et al., 2015). This scale was adapted to assess the extent to which children compare themselves to models/celebrities, peers, and family members with respect to their hair and overall appearance. Responses were scored using a 3-point Likert scale, ranging from 'never' to 'a lot' with higher mean scores indicating greater appearance-based comparison. For the current study sample, Cronbach's alpha = .84.

2.3.5. Family and Friends Perspective (FFP)

To gauge the extent to which girls feel pressure from friends and family, girls were asked the extent to which 'my family wants my hair to look a certain way,' 'my family likes my natural hair,' 'my friends pressure me to make my hair look a certain way,' and 'my friends like my natural hair.' Responses were on a 3-point Likert scale including 'yes,' 'sometimes,' and 'no.' These items were analyzed individually.

2.3.6. School and neighborhood characteristics

Parents were asked to describe the school their child attends and neighborhood in which they live in with response options including 'predominantly white,' 'predominantly Black or Brown,' or 'multiculturally diverse (there are individuals of other ethnicities).' Parents were asked to endorse all that applied to their children.

2.3.7. Focus group questions

Girls were asked to describe 'what is good hair,' 'what is bad hair,' and 'where do these ideals come from?' Girls were also asked to raise their hand if they or a friend has ever been bullied or teased because of their hair. Girls were then invited to share any experiences of bullying/teasing if they were comfortable. Finally, girls were asked 'when they have negative experiences what do they do to feel better?' All responses were transcribed and used for analyses.

2.4. Data analysis

Missing data ranged from 0.9% to 2.8% on only four items of the HES and all other items had complete data. There was one item on the HES where 17% of the sample skipped the item 'I have a high opinion about the way I look.' Mean imputation was conducted on the missing data. There was one missing value for friend pressure and liking, and family pressure and liking where listwise deletion was used. For all other study variables, there were no missing data. There were three parents that did not report neighborhood demographics and 4 parents that did not report school demographics. Listwise deletion was used in analyses with school and neighborhood demographics. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine the hair satisfaction scale factor structure using maximum likelihood estimation. Factor retainment was based on eigenvalues greater than 1 and visual inspection of a scree plot (Cattell, 1966; Kaiser, 1960). Items with loadings below .40 were removed. Spearman correlations were used to examine the associations between the study variables. Hierarchical regression was computed to

assess which variables are significantly associated with hair satisfaction while controlling for age. Finally, a univariate ANOVA was used to examine mean level differences on hair satisfaction across girls that live in predominantly white, predominantly Brown or Black, or multiculturally diverse neighborhoods. A second ANOVA was computed to examine mean level differences across girls that attend a predominantly white, predominantly Brown or Black, or multiculturally diverse school. Finally, a thematic content analysis was used to analyze and code the focus group responses following the recommendations by Braun and Clarke's (2006) and step-by-step procedures of Vaismoradi et al. (2016). Interview data was transcribed and semantically coded into themes by two authors, with a third author resolving discrepancies until 100% consensus was met.

3. Results

3.1. Hair satisfaction

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the factor structure and item loadings of the HSS since this scale was adapted from the BES. Using SPSS 26, an EFA was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, which is the degree of common variance among the items was 0.79, above the recommended 0.70 (Cerny & Kaiser, 1977). The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(45) = 301.61, p < .01$. Using Kaiser's eigenvalue rule of thumb (Kaiser, 1960), three factors had eigenvalues greater than 1.0 which was confirmed further by visual inspection of a scree plot (Cattell, 1966). The three factors accounted for 61.72% of the variance. However, items 'It is pretty tough to have hair like mine', 'I have a high opinion about the way I look', and 'Other people like my hair' had item loadings significantly below .40 and were removed. Further, the item 'Other people make fun of my hair' was the only item loading onto factor 3 and was removed. An EFA was re-computed removing the 4 items. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .84. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(15) = 207.04, p < .01$. Only one factor emerged as having an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 and accounted for 53.91% of the variance. As Table 1 displays, item loadings ranged from .45 to .80. All item-level correlations were significant and ranged from low to moderate ($r_s = .31$ to .66). McDonald's categorical omega for internal consistency was .83.

3.2. Prevalence of teasing

Girls were asked 'how often do kids make fun of your hair?' Approximately, 22% of 10-year olds, 14% of 11-year olds, 54% of 12-year olds, 35% of 13-year olds, and 32% of 14-year olds reported experiencing hair related teasing some of the time. The sample included two 15-year olds, but neither reported teasing. Only one 12-year old reported experiencing a lot of teasing. Girls were asked 'how often do others touch your hair without permission.' As can be seen in Table 2, hair touching was endorsed at higher rates; 78% of 10-year olds, 50% of 11-year olds, 81% of 12-year olds, 65% of 13-year olds, and 70% of 14-year olds reported at least some hair touching experiences.

3.3. Cross-sectional associations between HSS and other variables

Table 3 displays the Spearman correlations, means, and standard deviations for relevant variables. Age was significantly related to hair satisfaction where younger girls reported more hair satisfaction than older girls. In addition, as age increased, engagement in appearance comparisons increased as well. Hair satisfaction was negatively and moderately associated with hair comparisons, appearance comparisons, and hair-related teasing such that higher scores in those

Table 1
Item Loadings and correlations for the Hair Satisfaction Scale (HSS).

Items	Item Loadings	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. My hair makes me unhappy.	0.71		0.52**	0.43**	0.57**	0.53**	0.25**
2. I wish my hair was different.	0.68			0.49**	0.47**	0.54**	0.27**
3. I do not like my hair.	0.58				0.41**	0.41**	0.31**
4. My hair makes me happy.	0.78					0.66**	0.34**
5. I really like my hair.	0.80						0.38**
6. I have good hair.	0.45						

Note. Negatively worded items are reverse scored such that higher scores mean more satisfaction.

Table 2
Frequency of hair touching by age.

Age	Never	Sometimes	A lot	Total
10	2 (22%)	5 (56%)	2 (22%)	9
11	12 (50%)	11 (46%)	1 (4%)	24
12	5 (19%)	10 (39%)	11 (42%)	26
13	7 (35%)	8 (40%)	5 (25%)	20
14	7 (30%)	11 (48%)	5 (22%)	23
15	2 (100%)	0	0	2

variables were associated with lower hair satisfaction scores. Interestingly, hair satisfaction and general self-esteem were not significantly related. As hair satisfaction scores increase, scores on family and friends liking natural hair increase as well.

A hierarchical regression was computed where age was entered at Step 1, and hair comparisons, appearance comparisons, hair-related teasing, general self-esteem (RSES), family pressure, friend pressure, family liking natural hair, and friends liking natural hair were entered at Step 2 and regressed on hair satisfaction scores. At Step 2, the overall model accounted for 47% of the variance on hair satisfaction scores and was significant as Table 4 displays. Engaging in hair comparison with models/celebrities in the media and peers was significantly associated with less hair satisfaction. Similarly, girls that reported greater frequency of hair-related teasing also had significantly lower scores on hair satisfaction. Finally, having friends who like one's natural hair was significantly associated with higher hair satisfaction scores, but family liking one's hair was not significant.

A univariate ANOVA was computed to examine if there were mean level differences in hair satisfaction among girls within different school environments. While controlling for age, there were no differences in hair satisfaction among girls whose school was predominantly white ($M = 2.06, SD = 0.35$), predominantly Brown or Black ($M = 2.19, SD = 0.31$), and multiculturally diverse ($M = 2.14, SD = 0.40$), $F(2101) = 0.90, p = .41$. Similarly, there were no differences in hair satisfaction among girls whose neighborhood was predominantly white ($M = 2.20, SD = 0.36$), predominantly Brown or Black ($M = 2.22, SD = 0.29$), and multiculturally diverse ($M = 2.08, SD = 0.40$), $F(2102) = 1.27, p = .29$.

Table 3
Spearman correlations between hair satisfaction and study variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age		-.27 **	.19	.23 *	.04	-.12	.01	.08	-.14	-.07
2. HSS			-.57 **	-.51 **	-.47 **	.11	-.07	-.02	.28 **	.25 **
3. Hair Comparisons				.75 **	.36 **	-.19	.12	.07	.16	-.17
4. Appear. Comparisons					.26 **	-.16	.20 *	.05	.14	-.10
5. Hair Teasing						-.27 **	.18	.02	.06	-.22 *
6. RSES							-.02	-.12	-.18	.01
7. Family Pressure								-.17	.05	-.14
8. Friends Pressure									-.16	-.09
9. Friends Liking										.08
10. Family Liking										
M	12.30	2.13	1.73	1.77	1.31	2.43	2.63	2.20	1.36	1.10
SD	1.37	0.37	0.54	0.60	0.49	0.33	1.08	0.67	0.95	0.51

3.4. Focus group interview

As displayed in Table 5, girls were asked six different questions in a group format related to hair stereotypes, bullying and teasing, and ways of coping with negative experiences. When asked 'what is good hair' the most common response was long flowy hair that is soft, straight or wavy reported in 75% of the groups. The second most frequent response was a rejection of ideal stereotypes by providing responses similar to 'all hair is good hair' with this response emerging in 44% of the groups. The third response theme that emerged was hair positivity response around natural hair being good hair in 38% of the groups.

When asked 'what is bad hair' the most common response was short, nappy, kinky, hard to comb through hair with this response emerging in 94% of the groups. Across 13% of the groups, they provided responses stating 'there is no such thing as bad hair.'

When asked 'where do these ideals come from' the strongest theme that emerged was a discussion of how models, the media, and lack of representation and celebration of Black/African American women with natural hair in the media were the most frequent sources of perpetuating hair stereotypes in 81% of the groups. The second most common theme was people at school providing negative comments about natural Black/African American hair as another source of perpetuating hair stereotypes in 75% of the groups. Finally, social media as a source of hair stereotypes was also raised across six groups in 38% of the groups.

In each group, girls were asked to raise their hand if they or a friend had been bullied or teased due to their hair with 22 girls across 81% of the groups raising their hands. There were three groups (19%), where no girls raised their hands. In those groups where girls disclosed bullying and teasing, a follow-up question was asked if they were willing to share their experiences with the group. The most common experience were peers making fun of their hair or providing negative comments about their hair (69% of groups). The second most common response was people touching the girl's hair without their permission with these responses emerging across 25% of the groups. In addition, two girls across two different groups mentioned receiving compliments when they straighten their hair but not receiving compliments when they wear their hair natural.

Table 4
Hierarchical regression on hair satisfaction.

Variables	adj. R ²	SE	F	df	B	t	r _{partial}
Step 1	0.03	0.36	4.56 *	(1103)			
Age					-.21	-2.13 *	-0.21
Step 2	0.47	0.27	11.28 **	(9103)			
Hair Comparisons					-.30	-2.60 *	-0.26
Appearance Comparisons					-.09	-0.83	-0.09
Hair Teasing					-.37	-4.74 **	-0.44
RSES					-.10	-1.31	-0.13
Family Pressure					-.05	-0.70	-0.07
Friends Pressure					-.02	-0.33	-0.03
Family Liking					.14	1.87	0.19
Friend Liking					.23	3.06 **	0.30

Note. adj. R² is adjusted R²; SE is the standard error of adjusted R²; B is the standardized coefficient Beta; RSES is the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

Finally, two girls in one group mentioned being made fun of for wearing a hijab.

Girls were asked what they do to feel better when they have negative experiences. The most common response that emerged across 88% of the groups, was thinking positive thoughts such as thinking about the things you like about your hair, ‘I love me,’ or ‘tomorrow is a new day.’ The second theme that emerged was seeking family support to cope across 25% of the groups.

4. Discussion

4.1. Prevalence

Hair discrimination experiences is an understudied topic and has associated outcomes such as anxiety, appearance dissatisfaction, and impaired mental health (Mblishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Using a mixed-method approach, the current study aimed to amplify the voices of Black/African American girls’ hair-related experiences. Consistent with the existing literature, a majority (81%) of the girls reported hair discrimination by experiencing or witnessing hair-related bullying or teasing, with these experiences occurring predominantly in school settings by both peers and educators (Essien & Wood, 2021; Gadson & Lewis, 2022; O’Brien-Richardson, 2021). As age increased, prevalence of hair discrimination increased with approximately 22% of 10-year olds, 14% of 11-year olds, 54% of 12-year olds, 35% of 13-year olds, and 32% of 14-year olds reported experiencing hair related teasing. Also, consistent with the literature, bullying and teasing experiences consisted of negative comments or hair touching without permission (Essien & Wood, 2021). Further, the higher the frequency of hair bullying and teasing, the lower the hair satisfaction and general self-esteem. These findings corroborate the existing literature on the retrospective recall of Black/African

American adults experiences with hair discrimination during childhood (Mblishaka & Clemons, Hudlin, et al., 2020). Our findings indicate schools need to directly address hair-related bullying and teasing, and should consider banning hair discrimination within their environment.

4.2. Negative stereotypes and consequences

The current study found that media, family, and peer influences were related to how girls’ felt about their hair, and can promote Eurocentric beauty ideals and negative stereotypes of Black/African American hair. All groups demonstrated an awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with natural Black/African American hair, lack of representation of natural Black/African American hair in the media, and the pressure to conform to Eurocentric hair ideals, while simultaneously wanting to embrace their natural hair, and not be bullied or teased for it. Notably, girls with lower hair esteem reported greater hair-related comparisons. Engaging in more hair-related comparisons may lead to a greater propensity to conform to stereotypes, especially those related to Eurocentric beauty ideals. Eurocentric beauty standards depicting specific images of “good” and “bad” hair have bolstered and perpetuated the hair care and beauty industry (Holmes, 2019; Turner & Green, 2018), which profits from hair dissatisfaction and promotes the use of physically (Gaston et al., 2020) and psychologically (Bhutani et al., 2014) harmful products to alter hair appearances. In a society where “good” hair is depicted as long, straight, and smooth even in media images of Black women (Hazell & Clarke, 2008; Jankowski et al., 2017), Black girls and women are faced with a seemingly impossible comparison between their natural hair and the much-promoted Eurocentric beauty ideals of their society. Hair comparisons may mediate the relation between social influences and hair satisfaction and may be a

Table 5
Themes from focus group discussions.

Focus Group Question	Theme	# of Groups (%)
Good hair is...?	Long, flowy, wavy, soft, straight	12 (75%)
	All hair is good hair	7 (44%)
	Natural hair	6 (38%)
Bad hair is...?	Short, nappy, hard to comb through	15 (94%)
	No hair is bad hair	2 (13%)
Where do hair ideals come from?	Models/media, lack of Black women with natural hair in media	13 (81%)
	People at school making negative comments about natural black hair	12 (75%)
	Social Media	6 (38%)
Raise your hand if you or a friend has ever been bullied or teased because of your hair.	22 girls raised their hands	13 (81%)
Experiences of bullying and teasing	Negative comments and making fun of hair	11 (69%)
	Touching hair without permission	4 (25%)
	Comments on straightening hair	2 (13%)
	Wearing a hijab	2 (13%)
When you have negative experiences, what do you do?	Think positive thoughts: “tomorrow is a new day; say I love me; I love my natural hair; think about what they like about their hair”	14 (88%)
	Rely on family support	4 (25%)

valuable target for efforts to increase hair self-esteem in girls, but additional longitudinal research is needed to examine these questions.

4.3. Coping with negative hair experiences

Overall, the findings support the existing literature: Hair-related experiences are an important part of development among Black/African American girls and adolescents, and hair represents an expression of culture, individuality, and confidence (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). In the focus groups, 88% of the groups discussed various coping strategies such as thinking positive thoughts ('I love my natural hair'), listing the positive attributes of their hair, or relying on family support. Approximately, one-fourth of the girls reported utilizing family support as a coping mechanism. Indeed, existing research demonstrates that relying on family support can strengthen resilience among Black/African American adolescents facing discrimination (Ayres & Leaper, 2012). However, in the context of the current study, it is important to consider that reliance on familial support may be influenced by sample bias; more supportive families may have been more inclined to enroll their children in the current study. Prevention programs aimed at building the body confidence of Black/African American girls may consider strengthening existing coping strategies and familial support to buffer negative hair-related experiences. In addition, learning about others' negative experiences and discussion around ways to cope, may strengthen resiliency and foster coping in girls. Future research needs to explore these ideas more thoroughly.

4.4. Developmental considerations

This study recruited a sample of girls who varied in age from 10 to 15 years. We observed that in focus groups with girls of diverse ages, initially, younger (10–11-year-old) participants were more likely to not endorse experiencing or witnessing hair-related bullying and teasing. However, upon hearing older girls describe their experiences in the focus groups, they often realized they had similar experiences but had not conceptualized them as negative or derogatory. Developmentally, children enter the formal operational period (Piaget, 1964) around the age of 12, where they develop logical thought, deductive reasoning, and begin to grapple with abstract concepts such as love or justice (Piaget, 1964). Similarly, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development purport that around age 12, children begin to develop social expectations, values, and a more personal integration into their society and culture (Erikson, 1994). Thus, unsurprisingly, the 12–15-year-old girls in the study conveyed a stronger sense of agency and were more likely to categorize negative hair comments as rude, inappropriate, and disrespectful compared with younger girls. The data from the online survey supports this as younger girls reported less frequent hair teasing relative to older girls. However, more concrete experience such as hair touching, yielded more consistent prevalence rates across the ages. This is a post-hoc observation of the focus groups with diverse age, future research needs to systematically examine the categorization of hair experiences within cognitive development.

4.5. Limitations

It is important to recognize and discuss the limitations of the current study. First, the study is a small sample and it is unclear how this sample generalizes to broader populations of Black/African American girls or even Black/African American boys within the U.S. There is also limited research on hair satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and esteem among girls between the ages of 10 and 15 years and cross-study comparison is difficult. Relatedly, due to limited existing research on this topic, there are no existing empirically supported

measures assessing children's hair satisfaction at this time. The current study utilized two novel measures of hair satisfaction and hair-related teasing, however, these need to be validated in other samples and more work is needed to develop psychometric assessments of hair satisfaction and related experiences. Although participants were recruited via social media and community connections, it is important to recognize that this study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected potential participants' willingness to enroll in the current study. It is unclear how this major global event and recruitment information may have impacted recruitment. Additionally, recruitment materials advertised the study as exploring girls' body confidence and negative experiences with hair, which could have introduced a selection bias in the families who enrolled. Finally, this is a preliminary study and replication with larger and more diverse samples is needed.

4.6. Conclusion

This study aimed to highlight the importance of hair satisfaction and esteem within the broader field of body image research. Black/African American girls and their experiences around hair have been largely neglected in psychology and body image research, and more research on this topic is required to gain a better understanding of the role it plays in the overall wellbeing of developing young girls. These findings highlight the need for implementation of training and education regarding the reinforcement of Eurocentric hair-related beauty ideal standards for educators and other school staff. Further, bullying and teasing prevention programs within schools should consider incorporating hair-related bullying and teasing role plays and scenarios to bolster resiliency, coping, and improve self-esteem and confidence among Black/African American girls. Following a social ecological model of health (Solar & Irwin, 2007), future research should explore the environmental factors that can be modified at various levels (i.e., policy, media, communities, teachers, etc.) to facilitate change.

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Ethics Statement

All aspects of the study comply with ethical standards and were approved by Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board. Written informed consent was obtained from parents and assent was obtained from youth.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Taryn Henning: Project administration, Methodology, Software programming, Writing – review & editing manuscript. **Mel Holman:** Methodology, Data curation, Visualization, Writing and editing manuscript. **Layla Ismael:** Methodology, Data curation, Writing and editing manuscript. **Kimberly Y. Yu:** Methodology, Validation, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Lesley Williams:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing and editing manuscript, Mentorship. **Stacie J. Shelton:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Writing and editing manuscript. **Marisol Perez:** All aspects of the study, Administration, Funding acquisition, Data analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Stacie J. Shelton is employed by the funding agency and was involved in the development of study aims and design. Due to this conflict of interest, she had no access to the data, and was not involved in the data analysis and results section. All other authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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