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“Nails Done, Hair Done, Everything Did!”:
Consumption and the Creation of Black Feminine Selves

by

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines how race and gender shape the meaning that Black women associate with their beauty consumption practices and spending. Much of the existing feminist scholarship on beauty has been postfeminist, privileging the concept of agency and empowerment over structural realities. However, the materialist feminist frame has more utility to address how beauty operates within the lives of Black women as a form of distinct gendered racial oppression. The concept of aesthetic capital emerges from the materialist feminist perspective and suggests that beauty demands the investment of considerable economic resources and can deliver economic returns. Despite this, aesthetic capital has thus far not been applied to studies on race and beauty. To demonstrate how aesthetic capital operates on the individual level, the current study will focus on meanings, which connect cultural phenomena to structural realities. Through a survey and a series of focus group interviews, this thesis investigates the meanings that Black women associate with their beauty consumption practices with the goal of settling the competing perspectives that view beauty as empowering or beauty as oppressive. I found that the participants thought of beauty as a chore, revealing the existence of a high psychic and financial toll, but also as a requirement, because of its power to shape economic opportunities. These findings represent a challenge to the postfeminist literature's emphasis on "choice" and body image and instead suggest that the materialist feminists' concept of aesthetic capital more accurately reflects the reality that beauty functions as a form of classed and gendered racial oppression for Black women.

Introduction

Beauty is of principal importance for women's social lives. It demands that women invest, time, money, and resources into its cultivation, constituting a nearly \$600 billion global industry (Jeong 2022; Freedman 1986; Kukkonen 2022; Anderson et al. 2010; Poran 2002; Craig 2006). While all women are compelled to spend on beauty, there is evidence to suggest that Black women spend more: Black women spent three times as much on their hair than white women and were more invested in their physical appearance (Patton 2005; Wilson and Russell 1996). In Thompson (2009) and Harvey (2005), Black women participants confessed to spending money on their hair at the expense of other financial responsibilities such as rent. This is likely because Eurocentric conceptions of gender position Black women as the anthesis of femininity (Avery et al. 2021; Bryant 2013; Craig 2002; Craig 2006; Forbes et al. 2007; Freedman 1986; Liebelt 2016; Patton 2006; Poran 2002; Thompson 2009) and this increased spending may be the result of Black women's efforts to claim a higher social status in a society where they are stigmatized as unattractive. Further, given the existence of the wage gap and the economic disadvantages facing Black women (Amott and Matthaehi 1991; Kessler-Harris 2004), their continued willingness to spend on beauty consumption may demonstrate the ways in which beauty holds coercive power over Black women. There's evidence to suggest that beauty can determine access to certain social and economic rewards and acts as a form of capital (Anderson et al 2010; Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Kukkonen 2022; Cavico, Muffler, and Mujtaba 2012; Poran 2002; Thompson 2009; Baird 2021; Adam 2021; Avery et al. 2021). Therefore, the choice to conform may not be freely made. While beauty is a contested social resource for all women, it is of particular importance to Black women due to the impact of gendered racism.

Much of the existing feminist scholarship on the significance of beauty has been located in a postfeminist frame that privileges the concept of agency and empowerment over structural realities (LaVouille and Ellison 2017; Hernandez 2020). However, the materialist feminist frame has more utility to address how beauty operates within the lives of Black women as a form of distinct gendered racial oppression (Craig 2006; Collins 2004). These central frames can be succinctly summarized as favoring a view of beauty as oppressive (materialist) or as empowering (postfeminist) (Kukkonen 2022; Craig 2006). The concept of aesthetic capital, which views beauty as a gatekeeper of success and opportunity, is derived from the materialist feminist perspective and suggests that beauty demands the investment of considerable economic resources; therefore, it can be an oppressive force (Anderson et al. 2021; Kukkonen 2022; Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Drenton 2020). Despite this, aesthetic capital has thus far not been applied to studies on race and beauty. For this reason, this study uses the aesthetic capital concept to examine the meanings that Black women attribute to their beauty consumption practices and spending.

Previous studies situated in postfeminist frames have used meaning as evidence of Black women's choice to conform to Eurocentric beauty expectations as a form of assimilation or to secure self-esteem (Hernandez 2020; Poran 2006; Craig 2002; Thompson 2009; Awad et al. 2005). However, these studies have been weak in describing the coercive elements of a patriarchal, white supremacist society. Meanings continue to be relevant for uncovering Black women's motivations when it comes to their beauty consumption practices and spending. This study will explore the meanings that Black women associate with their beauty practices through a survey and a series of focus group interviews. I found that the participants thought of beauty as a chore, revealing the existence of a high psychic and financial toll, but also as a requirement,

given its power to shape economic opportunities. These findings challenge recent literature's emphasis on "choice" and body image and instead use the concept of aesthetic capital to expose beauty as a form of classed and gendered racial oppression for Black women.

Literature Review

Postfeminist studies of the past decade on race and beauty have rested their analysis of agency on the meanings that Black women associate with beauty and body image (Hernandez 2020; LaVoulle and Ellison 2017; Awad et al. 2005). This perspective, however, does not acknowledge how our choices are constrained by structural realities such as capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, and therefore does not fully capture the lived realities of Black women, a population impacted by systems of oppression (Kukkonen 2022; Freedman 1986; Liebelt 2016; Craig 2006; Collins 2004). Materialist scholars of race and beauty have advanced a strong rationale for the beauty as oppressive framework. Craig (2006) outlines the commitments of the materialist feminist perspective in viewing beauty as a contested, racialized, and gendered resource and critiques the individualistic perspectives at the heart of postfeminist studies. However, Craig (2006)'s analysis rests on the experiences of twentieth century Black women, so it is unclear how these oppressive structures manifest in the present day. Additionally, Craig (2002), Collins (2004), and Baird (2020) similarly considered how Black women in the 1900s used beauty and feminine attributes to communicate their class status, but these studies only made brief considerations about the beauty consumption practices of Black women. While Craig (2006) recognized that women spend on their beauty, the article provided no analysis of increased spending along the lines of race. Therefore, these works that have considered race and beauty within a materialist feminist frame did not engage with the concept of aesthetic capital.

The concept of aesthetic capital recently emerged from the work of Anderson et al. (2010) and has since been utilized by materialist feminist scholars. These scholars have used the aesthetic capital concept within a Bourdieusian model of class reproduction to describe how beauty can allocate resources and rewards in the form of self-esteem, social desirability, social value, credibility, status and power, health, relationships, and employment opportunities (Anderson et al. 2010; Kukkonen 2022; Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Drenton 2020; Bourdieu 1986). For women, accumulating aesthetic capital can lead to economic opportunity and financial stability, but it requires the investment of considerable financial resources towards time-consuming beauty rituals, from hair, nails, eyelashes, and more (Kukkonen 2022). Given the relatively recent introduction of this concept, however, there hasn't been much empirical exploration into aesthetic capital, especially in the context of women racialized as Black. Additional, although these articles admitted that some groups might face greater risks or need to contribute more resources to acquiring aesthetic capital (Anderson et al. 2010; Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Kukkonen 2022), this literature does not meaningfully consider how Black women, positioned outside of normative femininity (Avery et al. 2021; Baird 2020; Bryant 2013; Craig 2002; Craig 2006; Forbes et al. 2007; Freedman 1986; Liebelt 2016; Patton 2006; Poran 2002; Thompson 2009; Spillers 1987; Davis 1983; Oyèwùmí 1997), might be required to invest even more resources into aesthetic capital to avoid negative consequences. Yet, there's compelling evidence to suggest that Black women do invest more resources towards beauty (Wilson and Russell 1996; Patton 2005) and prefer highly feminine presentations (Collins 2004; Hernandez 2020) which allow them to access a form of femininized status (Craig 2002; Craig 2006; Baird 2020; Collins 2004). Therefore, this thesis applies the concept of aesthetic capital

towards an empirical study of Black women to explore how beauty influences access to status and power for Black women.

To uncover how aesthetic capital operates for this population, it is necessary to focus on the meanings Black women associate with their beauty consumption practices. Meaning gives sociologists the tools to evaluate the interconnectivity of structural realities with social constructions (Bartmanski 2018; Keller, Hornidge, and Schünemann 2018; Heiskala 2011). Therefore, a focus on meanings has the power to uncover new forms of culturally specific knowledge, which is especially useful for the current study that focuses on Black women because beauty is culturally specific (Craig 2006; Liebelt 2016). By applying the concept of aesthetic capital to a study focused on meanings, this thesis has the potential to show how social and cultural phenomena on the individual level reflect social structures (Keller et al. 2018) and illuminate Black women's motivations when it comes to investing in their beauty. This approach may clarify which elements of the pursuit of beauty are coerced or freely chosen.

Many previous studies on race and beauty have also focused their work on meanings (Hernandez 2020; LaVouille and Ellison 2017; Thompson 2009; Craig 2002; Awad et al. 2005; Poran 2006), but this work has often been postfeminist or has not meaningfully considered the role of capitalist coercion in the making of beauty for Black women. Therefore, meaning is most useful in empirical studies that explicitly connect individual and group level experiences to wider social structures such as capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Because this research is interested in the beauty as oppressive framework, this study will more explicitly shape its exploration of meaning through the concept of aesthetic capital. Through viewing beauty as capital and power rather than through individual body image metrics, the current study argues that for racialized women, beauty acts as discipline.

Methodology

This study seeks to examine the ways that race and gender influence the meanings that Black women associate with their beauty consumption practices. These practices include the consumption of beauty services such as hair, nails, and eyelashes. Considering the positioning of Black women outside of the bounds of normative femininity, race and gender regulate and define Black women's investment in beauty.

Research Design

Following past research on college age Black women and beauty, I selected a mixed methods approach consisting of a survey and focus groups to investigate the meanings that Black women associate with their beauty practices (Poran 2002; Avery et al. 2021; Awad et al. 2015). The aim of the quantitative data was to contextualize the focus groups and acquire information about the relationship between Black women and beauty on the objective and numerical level. Since this research was also concerned with spending and race, some numerical information was necessary to identify patterns between race and beauty practices. Quantitative data can reach a larger number of participants in a way that qualitative data cannot; therefore, it was particularly useful for this purpose. Thus, the survey acquired comparative data across race to find evidence for the assertion that racial categorization affects meanings and feelings around beauty.

Qualitative methods are effective for studying groups and cultural phenomena (Blackstone 2012); therefore, this study is primarily qualitative due to its focus on meanings. The focus groups allowed me to gain data about the experiences of Black women with beauty and cosmetic services. The qualitative method is uniquely able to assess nuance, thoughts, and

feelings in a way that quantitative methods cannot. Both interviews and focus groups allow researchers to gain in-depth, detailed information on the subject matter. Unlike interviews, however, focus groups allow multiple people to share their thoughts on an issue simultaneously (Blackstone 2012). Because of this, the discussion has the potential to take unexpected directions, and new information and solutions may arise (Kreuger and Casey 2000; Litosseliti 2003). Considering the nature of this research and its interest in issues concerning Black women, focus groups had the potential to serve as a cultural meeting ground for this population, where shared understandings and experiences would facilitate trust and richer conversation. This will allow the current study to assess meaning making, address the discrepancies between the empowerment or oppression frame of beauty, and understand the how aesthetic capital operates on the individual level for Black women.

Research Methods and Data Collection

Survey

There were one-hundred and forty-seven (147) survey respondents. There were sixty-seven (67) incomplete responses which were discarded. Eighty (80) participants completed the survey in its entirety. Each survey response was kept anonymous and confidential. Table 1 shows the reported racial composition of the respondents; 62.9% selected “Black, African American, or Afro-Caribbean” as their race. Approximately 84% of the participants were between the ages of 18-24. There were a few outliers in this category, with the oldest participant being 68 years old. 81.4% described themselves as college students.

Table 1. Participant Race

Race	N	Percent (%)
Black, African American, or Afro-Caribbean	56	62.9
White or Euro-American	22	24.7
Asian or Asian American	5	5.6
Native American	1	1.1
Other	5	5.6
Total	89	100.0

According to 2018 data from the Pew Research Center, middle-income households in the US range from about \$48,000 to \$145,500 and upper-income households were greater than \$145,500 (Bennett, Fry, and Kochhar 2020). Therefore, about 59.3% of this study's participants reported living in households of middle to upper-class income, demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant Household Avg. Yearly Income

Household Average Yearly Income	N	Percent (%)
\$0-\$30k	15	17.5
\$30k-\$50k	13	15.1
\$50k-\$70k	12	14.0
\$70k-\$100k	18	20.9
\$100k-\$300k	19	22.1
Over \$300k	2	2.3
Total	79	91.9

About 89% of the participants described themselves as women and around 89% of participants described themselves as cisgender. Table 3 shows the sexual identities of the participants: over half (57%) described themselves as heterosexual.

Table 3. Participant Sexuality

Sexuality	N	Percent (%)
Heterosexual	49	57.0
Homosexual	4	4.7
Bisexual	15	17.4
Pansexual	6	7.0
Other (write in)	3	3.5
Prefer not to say	1	1.2
Total	78	90.7

Survey participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. I sent recruitment emails to social and cultural Black organizations and groups on college campuses and beyond. I chose organizations with Black and/or feminist focuses to reach participants to who were Black and/or women. These extracurricular organizations were based on college campuses located in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia, including both predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). I also posted physical flyers on the campus of a small, private liberal arts university and its local neighbor, a large, public university. Recruitment flyers were also posted in student

group chats and on social media. All recruitment materials included information about the monetary incentive for focus group participants.

These recruitment tactics facilitated access to a group of relatively socioeconomically advantaged Black women. Given the focus on beauty service consumption and spending that necessarily relies on considerable disposable income, I made the choice to focus on this population. With the resources available for this study, reaching participants outside of the home institution and those outside of the college demographic proved difficult. These barriers contributed to the small sample size of the data.

The Qualtrics platform hosted the survey, which allowed participants to register their consent at the onset. The questions were developed in tandem with the literature on hegemonic beauty standards, conventional ideals of gender, and investment in appearance. Hegemonic beauty standards valorize European features and are a manifestation of anti-Black racism (Avery et al. 2021; Bryant 2013; Craig 2002; Craig 2006; Forbes et al. 2007; Freedman 1986; Liebelt 2016; Patton 2006; Poran 2002; Thompson 2009). Conventional ideals of gender refer to accepted forms of behavior and appearance that reinforce the gender binary (Freedman 1986; Craig 2006; Liebelt 2016). Feminist scholars argue that acceptance of both hegemonic beauty standards and conventional ideals of gender prompt increased investment in appearance (Avery et al. 2021; Awad et al. 2015; Thompson 2009; Drenten et al. 2019; Harvey 2005; Liebelt 2016; Poran 2002). The regular consumption of beauty services is a form of investment in appearance. The questions quantified participant agreement with these concepts through a Likert Scale.

Focus Group

At the conclusion of the survey, participants could mark their interest in participating in the focus group, which had the incentive of \$20 compensation. Of the survey participants, thirty-five (35) indicated their interest, and shared their emails. They were placed on an email list to coordinate the focus groups. The focus groups were scheduled using a Doodle Poll, an online platform that allows people to note their availability. I prioritized the times with the greatest availability. The first focus group yielded six (6) participants, and the second group yielded five (5). The focus group participants all described themselves as Black women. They were all college students or recent college graduates. Following the conclusion of both focus groups, the eleven (11) participants were compensated in the amount of \$43.18. This money was disbursed through the popular mobile payment services, CashApp, Zelle, and Venmo.

The sessions were held virtually to maximize attendance. Zoom, the video conferencing software, recorded and auto transcribed the sessions. The participants' consented to participation and its recording at the beginning of the session. On Zoom, members of a video conference have the option to turn their cameras off. In the session, showing yourself on camera was optional but strongly suggested so that the facilitator and other participants would not miss visual cues. The questions were in tandem with the literature on focus group methodology (Kreuger and Casey 2000; Litosseliti 2003). As the moderator, I first gave an introduction that provided background on the frame of the study and set ground rules for discussion. The focus group was limited to Black women, including myself. The goal of this was to have our shared identity and background facilitate rapport and a deeper understanding of the study's goals. The script was ordered by increasing importance and sensitivity. These questions challenged participants to recall their personal experiences surrounding beauty, including their beauty routines, the meanings they associated with beauty, and how beauty standards have affected them.

Potential limitations of this method were the virtual format, the difficulty of scheduling, and the number of groups hosted. The virtual format might have stifled some of the social aspects of the focus group and rapport is more difficult to build in this setting. The lack of anonymity and the social aspect of focus groups also has the potential to foster bias or dishonesty (Litosseliti 2003).

Coding and Data Analysis

The quantitative data was exported from the Qualtrics platform and analyzed in SPSS, which facilitated the calculation of descriptive statistics, crosstabs, and ANOVAs. I engaged in thematic, deductive coding to analyze the qualitative data from the focus groups. The codebook was developed through the literature on race, gender, beauty, and aesthetic capital. I based further codes on the specific aims of the focus group script. Information that was relevant despite not fitting into existing codes was also captured within a “free code” for reference in the analysis. I then manually sorted the data into codes through an Excel chart. Immediately following the focus group discussion, I wrote analytical memos to capture initial thoughts about the data, which facilitated the data analysis. For the analysis, the names of the participants have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Findings

For the purposes of this study, I conducted a survey and a series of focus group interviews to investigate the meanings that Black women associate with their beauty consumption practices. Findings from this study suggest that beauty serves as an oppressive force in the lives of these women. The focus group brought college-age Black women together

and prompted them to consider their personal relationships with beauty and feeling beautiful. I found that the participants viewed beauty as a chore, but also as a requirement, considering its power to shape economic opportunities. These findings represent a departure from previous research's emphasis on "choice" and body image and instead suggest that beauty is a form of classed and gendered racial oppression for Black women because it comes with a high psychic and financial toll.

Beauty as a Chore and as Achievement

The meanings that the participants associated with beauty centered work and management, revealing their perception that beauty standards for Black women today favor a strictly managed form of femininity. When asked about the beauty standard for Black women, Tasha stated that idealized Black women had "makeup that's, like, on point...you know, long lashes...nails as well...Just, like, everything, I guess, being put together." This sentiment was echoed by Olivia (age 21) and Lynn (age 21), other young women in focus group two, who spoke to an expectation to always be "done up" and "put together." Their language emphasizes that they associate beauty with work, seeing it as an active creation or production rather than an inherent quality. Alicia, age 22, also stated that beauty and Black hair "has to be very particular...it has to be, like, all your t's are crossed, your i's are dotted." Clearly, there was considerable consensus among these participants that Black women's beauty rests in their ability to approximate perfection and that Black women had to contribute more work to compare. When I asked the group to think back to a time when they felt beautiful, Crystal (age 20) said, "last summer, because I constantly had my hair done and my nails done...I did not go a day without them." For Crystal, her beauty practices have the power to augment her self-image, but they also

require her to continuously invest in these services. In this way, beauty is an achievement for Black women, representing a process of maximization that is directly tied to the pursuit of feminine attributes such as makeup, long lashes, nails, and especially hair. These attributes require active financial investment in beauty services. This is consistent with the concept of aesthetic capital which describes how cultivating beauty requires the purchase of laborious and time-consuming beauty services (Kukkonen 2022; Anderson et al. 2010).

Several previous studies noted the significance of hair for Black women as a racialized appearance marker (Thompson 2009; Craig 2002; Harvey 2005; Awad et al. 2015; Baird 2020); the participants in this study reaffirmed this relationship. The survey data provides the first set of backing for this claim. 55.4% of Black respondents preferred hair styles with extensions, such as clip-ins, braids, sew-ins, or wigs (Table 4). This finding demonstrates that Black women prefer their hair when it is styled, which requires the expenditure of financial resources. In this way, appropriate hair is tied to both spending and active work, in agreement with the literature that cultivating aesthetic capital means contributing money and time. The focus group respondents also corroborate the survey findings. Eva (age 18) discussed the apparent expectation for Black women to “always” have their hair done, “in some manner, whether it be, like, in protective styles like braids or [dread]locs or whether it be, like, having like a wig or a sew in.” Tasha, Lynn, and Viola (age 18) also testified to this claim, echoing the idea that for Black women, hair must be altered to be acceptable (Thompson 2009).

Table 4. “I prefer hairstyles with extensions, such as clip-ins, braids, sew-ins, or wigs.”

“I prefer hairstyles with extensions, such as clip-ins, braids, sew-ins, or wigs.” (%)
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	Strongly or Somewhat Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly or Somewhat Disagree	Total
Black	55.4	12.5	32.1	100.0
Non-Black	10.3	13.8	75.9	87.9

Other participants noted the impact of family and community socialization that has helped to inform their perception of beauty as an achievement and as a necessity, thus emphasizing the significance of Blackness and culture in constructing their ideas about beauty. Stephanie (age 18) who grew up in a predominately Black environment stated, “When I’m back home...I can’t go nowhere looking a hot mess...I think that was just ingrained in me since I was young.” Stephanie’s response demonstrates how she perceives looking unpresentable or like “a hot mess” in any context outside of the home as unacceptable. Another participant, Paula, details how ideals of femininity are passed through the family structure, as the primary mode of socialization in early life (Wade and Ferree 2019):

The women in my family, you know, like they really pride themselves on always looking presentable, so they kind of passed that down to me, you know, like, ‘Make sure your hair looks nice or at least decent before you leave the house.’ (Paula, age 21)

Like Stephanie, Paula demonstrates the imperative to always be “presentable.” Female relatives pass down the importance of appearing “presentable,” especially regarding hair, dispensing information about appropriate forms of femininity. Paula’s experience was echoed by Crystal’s story about her mother’s management of her hair in high school:

I did volleyball and I ran track...we would have, like, random, like, pictures ...I had...sweat out the style and [my mom] just did not like the picture. She was, like, “You

need to have your hair done” ...then like I started just doing like feed-in braids or just, like, box braids or whatever...just to have my hair done...she was like, I needed to be presentable at all times.

It was unacceptable, in her mother’s view, to be photographed with hair that wasn’t styled appropriately. Her mother’s displeasure with her hair’s appearance translated into more consistent maintenance of her hair for the sake of being “presentable.” This necessarily comes with the investment of time and money towards managing her hair. For 20th century Black women in the US, straight hair was considered necessary to be seen as respectable and appropriate within the confines of a white supremacist society (Craig 2002; Collins 2004; Baird 2020; Harris 2003). Styled hair and other beauty markers, then, may continue to a part of respectability politics, meaning they represent an effort of a socially marginalized group to redeem themselves in the dominant culture through appropriate behavior and appearance (Harris 2003). Therefore, Paula and Crystal’s stories are illustrative of the broader pattern that beauty services hold much meaning for Black women as a significant part of how they manage their self-presentation and claim belonging in a white-dominant culture. This serves as further evidence that the positioning of Black women outside the bounds of normative femininity works to their detriment: the denigration of Black natural hair is a significant rationale for increased investment in beauty services. As the literature on aesthetic capital suggested, Black women must contribute more resources to cultivate beauty in order repudiate their stigmatized appearances.

The Black women who participated in the focus groups viewed beauty as a process of work and investment. The meaning they ascribe to beauty is heavily impacted by the idea of maintenance and achievement. Olivia, age 21, discusses the necessity of resource investment to

achieve beauty: “In order to attain [beauty], you just always have to be, like, up-keeping and, like, making sure you, like, don't fall short of, like, you know, your maintenance, whether that's like your hair, your eyebrows, your outfit.” This quote demonstrates how beauty demands these women be preoccupied with their personal appearance; to view their bodies as something requiring “up-keep” demonstrates how these participants associate beauty with labor. Eva provided a similarly illustrative quote:

You definitely have to invest a lot of time and money into, like, products and, like, certain services that are offered to, like, enhance your beauty, whether it be, like, doing your hair, like getting your nails done, so things like that.

This quote illustrates the apparent compulsion to purchase items or consume cosmetic services to perform beauty. Again, these young women seem to measure beauty as the sum of services, from hair, to nails, to eyebrows. Like the literature on aesthetic capital describes, beauty is heavily reliant on the availability of financial resources (Kukkonen 2022). Given what the participants said about beauty standards for Black women preferring augmented feminine attributes like hair and nails, beauty is inescapably attached to spending for Black women. These findings confirm the underexplored implication that racialized groups might need to invest more time and labor to achieve aesthetic capital. Stephanie (age 18) discussed how, as a high school student, she would put “away money just, like, to go get my hair done, get my nails, get my eyebrows done, get like everything done...I-I didn't really get a job for like any other reason but that.” From a young age, beauty was a priority, even to become the main motivation for employment. This exemplifies the classed nature of this phenomenon, where a teenager with more household financial responsibility would not have the disposable income to invest into beauty. Lynn provides one

final demonstrative quote of the consequences for funneling money into beauty and cosmetics rather than practical, material needs:

Putting yourself together, like, you can do it, but it costs a lot of money, and if your money is going towards, you know, looking put together, I mean, what are you going to eat...what's on the table for dinner, like, you have other priorities as well if you're going to school, you have to pay for that.

Given these participants feelings about beauty that associate it with work and money, it's clear that maintaining beauty is a chore. The next section will detail how beauty operates as a status symbol as well as a tool, therefore representing a requirement for Black women.

Beauty as Requirement and as Oppression

The meanings and feelings of the participants about beauty reveal its nature as an oppressive, rather than empowering phenomenon. These findings indicate how beauty is a part of a system of external pressure that is exacerbated by race, which is consistent with the arguments made by scholars who draw on aesthetic capital in their work. Crystal described it as “a chore, like, ugh I have to spend the money to do this for this event to look good for...whoever's there.” This reveals her feelings of external pressure to manage her appearance. Beauty services, in this perspective, are not a freely made choice and instead reflect a desire to secure positive perceptions from others. Lynn's perspective demonstrates this further, “Sometimes you do it for yourself, but I think like I said earlier, just, like, a small percentage that you do it for other people to, like, perceive you in the way that you want them to perceive you.” This explains beauty and beauty practices as a compulsive part of identity construction. She went on to discuss

the psychological and emotional impacts of a preoccupation with appearance: “At some point, you get, like, exhausted at how much effort you’re putting into your appearance” (Lynn, age 21).

There was a consensus among the participants that bodywork and cosmetic maintenance came with a huge emotional and financial cost. Viola, Eva, and Tasha all discussed the money, time, and effort involved in being concerned with beauty. By contrast, Olivia had an outlying perspective, saying, “When I, like, invest in my beauty and making sure that I, like, look put together...it's mostly for myself, um, just so that I can feel a little bit more confident.” While on the surface this appears contradictory to Lynn, Olivia’s perspective reveals that beauty holds serious emotional weight for her, determining her level of confidence and comfort. In a similar vein, Alicia (age 22), stated that feeling unhappy with her hair’s appearance translated to general unhappiness, which would prevent her from participating socially: “If my hair doesn’t look good, I don’t feel good and, like, I don’t want to go anywhere, so I will spend a lot of money to do [my hair].” Viola made a similar admission that without her hair done, she wouldn’t feel good. Alicia continued to say that when she does wear her natural hair, she feels like “a spectacle”, the target of “ingenuine” comments and attention that makes her feel uncomfortably scrutinized in the wider society. With so much emotional weight tied to hair, it’s clear why these women might feel compelled to spend their money and resources on it.

The quantitative data further illuminate this relationship between spending and hair: 50.0% of Black survey respondents reported a willingness to spend a lot of money on hair or hair services as opposed to 19.2% of non-Black survey respondents (Table 5). Considering how hair is a racialized aspect of feminine appearance (Craig 2002; Thompson 2009), these findings exemplify how race and gender coincide to produce increased spending on aesthetics.

Table 5. “I am willing to spend a lot of money on hair or hair services.”

“I am willing to spend a lot of money on hair or hair services” (%)				
	Strongly or Somewhat Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly or Somewhat Disagree	Total
Black	50.0	8.9	41.0	100.0
Non-Black	19.2	0.0	80.7	78.8

On the other hand, participants also spoke to the ways that beauty affords women self-esteem, respect, opportunities, and social capital, which is an especially valuable claim to belonging for a racialized population. Alicia testified to this fact, “I think when Black women have their hair done, especially like in largely white spaces, they’re treated better...having it done can make a lot of social interactions go a little bit smoother.” Tasha and other participants seemed to agree that an appropriate or well-groomed appearance could provide essential access for this population: “When you do, you know, look professional or put together and...have, like, the right, like, attire and the right makeup and the right hair, you know, people do tend to treat you better and give you more opportunities.” Aesthetic capital explains how beauty can be an important aspect of social and material power (Kukkonen 2022; Anderson et al. 2010), which is another explanation for the attachment Black women have to their appearance. In addition, Alicia discussed how, when she wore loose curly extensions in her hair, she “got way more tips” as a waitress. Therefore, Black women can also use beauty and their aesthetic capital as a powerful asset for opportunity and personal gain (Warhurst and Nickson 2009; Drenton 2020). However, this is still an exclusive resource, and the uplift of one woman means the downfall of another: if beauty can determine access and power, failing to perform can have significant

consequences. In this way, women experience a compulsion to perform, which can be magnified by race. The response of these participants reveals that beauty is an oppressive, compulsory force in their lives, considering the financial resources it takes to maintain and the consequences for not conforming.

Discussion and Conclusion

The concept of aesthetic capital describes how beauty has the power to allocate resources and rewards as a form of symbolic capital (Anderson et al. 2010; Kukkonen 2022). This thesis' findings confirm the suggestion of the literature on aesthetic capital that some groups of women might have to invest more resources and face greater risks for aesthetic capital accumulation. This thesis specifically focuses on Black women to expand upon this literature to uncover what "more resources" and "greater risks" looks like for racialized groups of women, positioned outside normative femininity and beauty. I found that Black women actively invested in their beauty services to avoid facing consequences from social ostracism to loss of employment opportunities. Thus, beauty operates as a form of capital that demands financial investment and provides financial returns. As an extension of previous materialist feminist research on the relationship between Black women and beauty (Craig 2006; Collins 2004), these findings support a reading of beauty as oppressive because aesthetic capital has a coercive power and is an exclusionary aspect of feminine presentation. They also challenge the beauty as empowerment perspective touted by LaVouille and Ellison (2017) and Hernandez (2020); while aesthetics can be a meaningful claim to power and self-esteem for Black women, it remains inherently exclusionary for the majority of Black women.

Prior to this thesis, the relatively new concept of aesthetic capital had not yet been applied to empirical studies on race and beauty. Thus, to demonstrate the racialized nature of aesthetic capital, this study focused on the meanings that Black women associated with their beauty consumption practices and spending. The focus on meanings had considerable utility to demonstrate social phenomena on both the individual and the structural levels, consistent with the literature on meanings in sociology (Heiskala 2011; Keller et al. 2018; Bartmanski 2018). Previously, postfeminist studies had rested their analysis of agency and empowerment on meanings. Despite this, meanings continue to be useful in empirical studies centered on social and cultural phenomena. Paired with the concept of aesthetic capital, this focus had the potential to uncover the various contentious meanings that beauty occupied for Black women. The findings demonstrated how Black women viewed beauty as both an achievement, as a product of active work and financial investment, and as a manifestation of gendered and racial oppression, because of the significant drain on their financial and emotional resources. The Black women studied felt compelled to spend their money on beauty practices to secure significant social rewards, in accordance with the concept of aesthetic capital. Following this, the participants conceptualized beauty as both a chore and a requirement.

However, this study was not without limitations. The size of the study harmed the generalizability of the findings. The mixed methodological approach attempted to alleviate these concerns. With more participants, it may have been possible to reach stronger conclusions about the racialized character of these phenomena. Finally, the focus on college-age Black women limited this research's generalizability to the wider population of Black women, considering college students or recent graduates might be middle-class or upwardly mobile. Future research should consider the ways that aesthetic capital is specifically a detriment to Black women from

lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially considering Kukkonen (2020)'s statement that the capital accruing subject is inherently middle-class. This might lead to richer findings about the classed nature of beauty practices and aesthetic capital and how beauty may be a tool for middle-class Black women to distance themselves from their less privileged counterparts within the politics of respectability (Harris 2003). In addition, while less-socioeconomically-privileged Black women may not have the resources to spend on their beauty, they may instead contribute their labor and acquire a vast range of beauty-related skills. Beauty services, from hair, nails, and eyelashes, continues to be a source of entrepreneurship among Black women (Harvey 2005).

An additional avenue for future study may be to consider how location and geography can impact the salience of this relationship between Black women and their beauty practices; the participants also suggested that their attachment to beauty changed depending on whether they were in a predominately Black environment versus a white one. The value of aesthetics depends on the culturally specific social context; therefore, the meaning of beauty may shift in different social fields (Kukkonen 2022; Craig 2006). Finally, there is a relationship between heterosexuality and beauty for women (Thompson 2009), therefore it may of interest to consider how queerness and gender identity may also produce alternate relationships between beauty and race. Black trans women, in addition, may experience even greater coercion to invest in their beauty as a form of self-protection, considering the high rates of violence and discrimination they experience in the US (Forestiere 2020).

The purpose of this study was to consider how race and gender impact the meaning that Black women associate with their beauty practices. Through a survey and a series of focus groups, I found that Black women thought of beauty as a chore and a requirement. This study demonstrates more specific consequences of the configuration of gendered racism and describes

beauty as oppression. The consistent expenditure of financial resources into beauty is a coerced reaction to social hierarchies and demonstrates how, for Black women, beauty is contested, political ground. Given the findings, this thesis provides a coherent rationale for rethinking our financial and emotional commitments to beauty as Black women. We experience a double bind, caught between authenticity and the commitments of a white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. When it comes to our self-expression and presentations, it can be a difficult line to walk faithfully. Black natural hairstyles continued to be unprotected by workplace discrimination law at the federal level, but the C.R.O.W.N. Act stands to be the first piece of state legislation contesting this form of discrimination (Thompson 2009; Cavico et al. 2012; The CROWN Act). In this slowly changing landscape, I urge us all to confront our relationship our beauty practices and spending and grapple with the fact of beauty as an oppression.

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