

The Impact of Hashtag Communities: #MelaninMagic & Black Identity

A Grounded Theory Approach

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Cultural identity provides a sense of belonging to communities of people around the world. It influences self-identity in ways that continue to manifest across social spaces online and offline. Communicative patterns form culture, and they are shared among groups of individuals within social networks. People build relationships around shared experiences that may be rooted in cultural practices. Some of the ways we express culture are in clothing items we may choose to wear and in specific language we use on a daily basis. Social media platforms serve as cultural marketplaces where billions of people share personal and public experiences to connect with others. Mobile users gain access to these experiences whenever they login to social media accounts or browse through posts on sites. Nowadays, all you need is data or a Wi-Fi connection to take a peek into the lives of others with the swipe of a finger.

Communities of color continue to challenge stereotypes and social inequities by communicating how they view their own cultures with pride and authenticity in social media networks. They express culture to oppose leading narratives portrayed in mass media campaigns. These posts encourage others to communicate their sense of self in communal digital environments. Hashtag communities exist on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media networks where people engage with millions of posts. You are able to ‘follow’ these hashtags now as you would ‘follow’ a person, and they have become an important source of information about related posts. They are organizational tools that make this information accessible more quickly than ever before.

The #MelaninMagic hashtag on Instagram specifically hosts hundreds of thousands of narratives of people who identify as Black or as members of the African diaspora. Photos, videos, comment threads and profile biographies are filled with responses to this movement created by various social media influencers who continue to impact how members of these groups view their self-identity. I chose to focus on this hashtag community because, Remy Ma, a popular hip-hop emcee, released a track entitled “Melanin Magic” in January 2018. She and her team encouraged others to use the hashtag in order to highlight individuals for the promotion of her work. The inspiration for this song was personal. She was ridiculed for having dark skin and was told that this is why she was not as successful of an artist as she could be. She countered this assumption with the viral response of a hashtag community.

Literature Review

According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018), 43% of adults who identify as Black use Instagram. Black individuals are more likely to use Instagram versus members of other ethnic groups (Krogstad, 2015). Social media platforms continue to be bridges for communication, bringing members of affinity groups together through presentations of facts and perspectives that are often showcased by social influencers and organizations. Individuals take the time to craft their story in profile descriptions with a focus on personal and brand identity, for example. Some of them use profile biographies to express their cultural and ethnic identities. A significant amount of social media users of color share unique experiences in these moments when choosing to produce and engage with content. The context of this communication must be analyzed with critical attention placed on past histories, current social issues and identity politics. This paper will focus on how the social identity of individuals who identify as Black or

African American influences their social media activity, specifically their approach to media production on Instagram in the #MelaninMagic community.

Rak & Poletti (2013), Means Coleman (2002) and Miller (2016) identify the communal aspects of identity in social networks in terms of empowerment with a narrative approach. They explore the self in reference to community identity. The presentation of self on social media influences how others perceive information provided in posts. Over 800 million people use Instagram to share photos, and time spent watching videos has significantly increased in the past few years (Balakrishnan & Boorstin, 2017). Each post empowers individuals, allowing them to reach thousands of people by incorporating the use of popular hashtags. They categorize their level of engagement in these hashtag communities by opting to include them so that others with similar interests can view their posts. This encourages dialogue that can lead to action outside of digital networks due to the personal connections made in these instances. Cultural bonds form over time as people choose to follow the posts of others who share aspects of their identities.

Social Identity in Digital Networks

Individuals who identify as Black or African American continue to encounter media in digital networks that reflects a history of marginalization and oppression. This impacts how some individuals in this group choose to communicate and interact with others in social media networks. For example, viral videos portraying incidents of police brutality influence how members of cultural groups respond to social issues related to this. Sometimes this can be detrimental to the mental health of those who can identify with victims in these cases: "...police brutality videos may be especially damaging to the mental health of African-Americans" (Adetiba and Almendrala, 2016). This prompts a range of responses from communities of people

online and offline. This assertion can also be used to guide research on the impact that ethnic and social identity has on social media engagement in networks comprised of Black or African American individuals.

The misrepresentation of movements in digital spaces can also contribute to how we view their impact. For example, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was manipulated by a person outside of the United States. A white Australian male created a fake page on Facebook to gain followers and raise funds for ulterior motives unrelated to BLM. In fact, it “...had almost 700,000 followers on Facebook, more than twice as many as the official Black Lives Matter page” (O’Sullivan, 2018). Social identity is a powerful force in which many people seek to take advantage of for political and economic gain. The identities of millions in digital networks can be mishandled as lucrative investments. Digital communication is based in these identities.

Racial identity politics influence how many of us choose to interact with media. These actions are also products of cultural trends with much historical significance, especially for individuals who identify as Black: “African Americans and Blackness have, in part, become defined within the symbolic media culture and hence are a product of American mass media—an industry and institution that is similarly informed by this society's histories, politics, and ideologies” (Means Coleman, 2002, p. 3). These portrayals impact communication among racial groups. They also promote misinformation in some cases, reiterating stereotypes and narratives that accomplish the goals of mass media campaigns. This continues to present a great danger in the age of ‘fake news’: “The information environment will not improve because technology will create new challenges that can’t or won’t be countered effectively and at scale” (Anderson & Rainie, 2017). However, authentic interactions in digital spaces can counter this misinformation

with the expertise of strategic communicators. These outlets allow individuals across diasporas to share information pertaining to identity whether it be formal or informal in style. This dialogue symbolizes the power of digital networks in the establishment of identity formation. This fluid dynamic promotes collectivity as people offer their insights and attention. Their self-esteem is rooted in community which is based in shared experience.

Self-Identity on Social Media

The existence and success of social media networks continues to be a major catalyst for communities of color as they project their ideas and their power through self-identity: “Social media sites seemed to be useful for having their marginalized voices heard through blogs, sharing articles and joining affinity groups online, perhaps in attempt to balance out their lack of power and status in online networks” (Tassie & Givens, 2015, p. 17). Marginalization presents a detriment to these communities of individuals, but outlets such as Instagram, for example, allow them to shape their own narratives. They are able to present themselves in such a way that does not reflect the reiterations of stereotypes and stigmas associated with their identity. Indeed, “Some self-presenters consider themselves as primarily embedded within online collectivities; that is, they are part of a group of actors speaking as a homogenous ‘we’” (Rak & Poletti, 2013, p. 84). They commit to their actions for the sake of community. They recognize their self-identity with regard for their collective group identity.

More active social media users are becoming open to sharing their ethnic identity. They also reflect on their self-identities after encountering how other people express their cultural identity: “...people are moving towards a self based upon a more self-conscious narrative about

themselves” (Miller, 2016, p. 74). Their expressions in these digital networks are based in self-awareness. They project positive images in photos and in comments to portray a more authentic image compared to those projected in mass media campaigns.

Hashtag Communities

The narratives of women of color in particular are reflected in hashtag communities that focus on self-esteem with reference to their physical features and their common challenges with racial and patriarchal paradigms. They build communities of their own on Instagram to express pride and support amidst the struggle against oppressive institutions: “Through Kaur’s narratives shared online, Kaur connects to a cyberspatial sisterhood and demonstrates that healing through narrative is necessarily collective” (Kruger, 2017, p. 15). Rupi Kaur, a woman of color and poetess, shares posts on Instagram to promote self-love among marginalized communities. This is the direction that many artists and activists are taking to mobilize those who share their cultural identity in digital networks across Instagram.

The #MelaninMagic hashtag on Instagram specifically hosts hundreds of thousands of narratives of people who identify as Black or as a member of the African diaspora. Photos, videos, comment threads and profile bios are filled with responses to this movement created by various social media influencers who continue to impact how members of these groups view their self-identity. I categorize this hashtag community as a social movement because it has shifted and will shift racial paradigms beyond assumptions. Indeed, “In a way, modern media have always constituted a channel through which social movements not only communicate but also organise their actions and mobilise their constituencies” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 4). These hashtag communities present a more focused environment for dialogue to occur and for actions

to take place. Business owners, social activists and health care specialists communicate in these spaces to promote unity by offering services while tying their ventures to their racial or cultural identity. They form partnerships and build brand awareness within these communities as well.

Using the grounded theory method of inquiry, I intend to answer the following research questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i.) What themes, if any, emerge from a content analysis of the #MelaninMagic hashtag community on Instagram?
- ii.) What do these themes suggest about the broader practice utilizing social media for local/and/or global strategic communication?

Methodology

The data set that I used for this research included posts and comments that can be found when searching through the #MelaninMagic hashtag community on Instagram. The date range for this collection of data is from January 19, 2018 to March 30, 2018. I aimed to analyze the context of the conversations behind this hashtag as they relate to identity politics within these communities. Over 300,000 posts exist in this hashtag community. I targeted 100 posts that included photos, videos, and captions. I chose posts where people discussed their ethnic identity and social issues. They all incorporated the use of the #MelaninMagic Hashtag.

For this project I used grounded theory to guide my process. To begin my research, I avoided making any personal connections to this data by reviewing the premise of my research questions and using them to guide my initial search. Indeed, “We do not force preconceived

ideas and theories directly upon our data. Rather, we follow leads that we define in the data, or design another way of collecting data to pursue our initial interests” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17). I focused on allowing the data to represent itself before analyzing what it meant in the overall context of my project. I selected photo and video posts with extensive caption descriptions in order to analyze more relevant information from individuals represented in my data set. I also aimed to gather personal posts that reflected their lifestyles.

Next, I completed a series of coding on my data set. I took screenshots of posts I chose and copied them into a Microsoft Word document where I performed open coding. I typed out general notes about the data at first glance. First, I used line-by-line coding to establish the meaning of captions in my data set: “Line-by-line coding works particularly well with detailed data about fundamental empirical problems or processes” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 65). I created codes in the margins that included relevant words that came to mind as I read through each caption. I used this to understand the actions made by individuals in these texts and the topics addressed by them in their personal posts. People elaborate on their experiences with using the hashtag and how the community response has empowered them to embrace their cultural and ethnic identities. I determined what language is commonly used among the individuals’ posts that comprise my data set and noted their relevance to communication in this space. The following step I took was the process of memo writing. I used this information to better understand what I overlooked in the initial coding process. I composed these notes to determine whether or not my codes best represented my data. I revisited some of the codes because they did not communicate the essence of the material. I edited a few of them after establishing their meaning in relation to my research questions.

The next form of coding I implemented was axial coding, a “...strategy for bringing data back together again in a coherent whole” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 75). I formed five categories to identify my data more specifically with trends I noticed during initial coding. I revisited my notes from open coding, and I developed ‘major categories’ to establish relationships between data based on the context of this research which is rooted in the identities of the actors. I named these categories and defined their components in general terms of the posts associated with them. I realized that I used similar codes for different posts so I grouped them together based on these codes. This led me to theoretical coding, which “...[specifies] possible relationships between categories you have developed in your focused coding” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). There were ten posts that did not seem to fit in any of the categories so I reviewed my initial coding and axial coding notes to determine their relevance. Once I established their meaning, I was able to separate them into the appropriate categories after realizing their theoretical depth. I continued to consider new ways to approach the concepts revealed by this collection through comparative analysis until I exhausted the properties of the patterns I determined in earlier stages.

Results

The #MelaninMagic hashtag community on Instagram can be defined by five distinct recurring themes based on my research of 100 posts made by business owners, artists, educators along with other community members. The themes include ethnic identity and heritage, creative expression, community outreach, self-care/awareness and women’s empowerment/motherhood. I formed these categories as I noted trends in memos while coding general and specific information I gathered from each post. I will detail some of my key findings from each category and explain their relevance to my data research.

Ethnic Identity & Heritage

The majority of posts that comprise my data set address group identity in relation to ethnicity, culture and heritage. Forty posts fit in this category. Identities associated with the #MelaninMagic hashtag, specifically those that form the African diaspora, are the focus of this research. This shared identity is highlighted in videos, photos, captions and comments. Instagram users in this group reference quotes from political activists and social influencers to express pride and community. They give credit to their ancestors and group members for inspiring them to embrace identities that are often shunned in mass media campaigns. They also cite the impact of history and the use of it to understand their positions in society as individuals.

Four examples from my data set best demonstrate the qualities of this theme. One made on March 19, 2018 included the following quote: “‘The Black skin is not a badge of shame, but rather a glorious symbol of national greatness.’ --Marcus Garvey” (@afrolicious). It was a repost from another user with an image of a Black woman and a Black man. It also included other tags such as #blackisbeautiful, #blacklove, #loveyourself among other similar ones.

Another post on March 23, 2018 from @blackisbeautiful111 features an image of a Black man in a suit looking up to the sky with a confident smile. The caption reads: “Let’s not forget our Black Kings!! WE ARE BEAUTIFUL!!” (@blackisbeautiful111). Other individuals in posts in my data set make statements that resonate with this particular message. They single out specific members within ethnic groups to place more attention on their attributes and contributions to society.

Individuals also greet their Instagram audiences with affirmations to begin their day:

“Dripping with melanin this morning. How’s your morning going?” (@enza_accessories). They describe their skin complexion with words like this to express their confidence with photo posts to emphasize the meaning of the caption. Other posts address the exclusivity of blackness through words such as “Black No Extra Additives” (@sweetreeta). They post photos with stern expressions as proof of the caption and their identity.

Creative Expression

Individuals in my data set identify as artists with talents ranging from experienced musician to novice painter in twelve posts. They share moments from their creative process in videos and photos. They use the #MelaninMagic hashtag to pair their talents with those of others who identify with this hashtag community. They offer their talents and attribute them to their lineage. Posts for this category include children and adults who showcase their craft from live performances to rehearsals. They provide support to other artists by featuring flyers for future events and by ‘reposting’ their original material.

One of the posts that best exemplified this category’s meaning came from @__bradlee’s video post. She expressed her overall feelings about performing at organizational events for a group she identifies in the caption:

A year ago, I attended Word Play Wednesday’s open mic too scared to sing but with encouragement from the intimate audience there I mustered up the courage to perform. Last week, I performed my original song #Overdoz at WPW at a bigger venue & with a bigger audience. Beyond thankful for the platform and constant support @word_play_wednesday & @sso.la provide. Love y’all, keep

building, See y'all next month. Listen & download #Overdoz NOW on all streaming services! #bradleeblooms #melaninmagic (@__bradlee).

This candid expression of a performing artist's experience shows the importance of support and belief in artistry given by platforms created by individuals who identify with their art. This growth was noted over the course of a year. Another post in this category was made in support of an artist who is a friend of this Instagram user: "While you're here, go follow my baby! Another amazing artists and activist for black/women rights!! Go check out @s.he.theartist @jerlll! Ya can see my painting peeking through the back, whose excited to see the finished product?! I am too, stay tuned!" (@aishalissette). This artist promoted her friend and herself with a photo of their art by encouraging others to follow their journeys.

Fashion plays a major role in the hashtag community as well as a form of creativity. Students at a hair school wear their wigs that they created in a video with this caption: "Fun day at the @empirebeautyschool with our Janet Collection Wigs" (@janetcollection). Each woman also wears a smile on their face. This collective expression of individual achievement focuses on creativity. The next post included a video of a woman walking down a runway with an audience surrounding her: "My girl having fun on the runway. It's going down in the red pumps. I see you" (@__chills4). This person is supporting their friend while they partake in a fashion show. They include content from the actual moment in order to show their audience what this experience looked like from their view.

Community Outreach

Community outreach is the following category because it addresses the more integral aspect of enterprise and audience engagement. This is a powerful tool used by some of the

individuals in posts from my data set. Twenty posts belong in this category. They reach out to specific audiences through the #MelaninMagic hashtag to connect individuals with their services and products. Authors, hair stylists, fashion designers and makeup artists promote themselves in a variety of ways. They aim to engage their followers as well as potential clients by posting photos and videos of themselves at work along with client testimonies. They incorporate culturally relative material from music to dance. They also focus on collaboration and teamwork inside and outside of their organizations.

An Instagram user from my data set posted a flyer for her show with featured performers. They advertise this event by opening the invitation up to their followers:

I am very excited to be introducing this amazing celebration and show again with @cdcc_shows! Come join me and some of my talented friends as we slay the stage and celebrate women of color next Wednesday 8pm at @iochicago!

Featuring: Xu @momosapeach @stephaniebrancoo And an amazing mashup of women from @mattdamonimprov @peachimprov and @stirfridaynight (@mariakonopken).

They give credit to those involved with coordinating it by tagging several individuals. They encourage others to 'join' in celebration of these individuals who identify as women of color. Another post was made in support of an entrepreneur: "My friend looking like a beautiful queen. Support her by following her business page @flavainyaears!!! She makes the dopest statement earrings! Check out her page and shop away!" (@thatcaligirlnani). Community support comes in the form of reposts from family, friends and associates, not just from the business owners themselves. This category is based in a variety of this support and outreach.

There were several profiles dedicated to the support of black owned businesses. One sought the participation of Instagram users: “Tag a black woman in business below who inspires you” (@blkwomeninbiz). In the comments below the post, people tagged business owners in order to promote individuals within their network. The same applies to a post a woman created to refer others to a business she supports: “It’s always about Black business SUPPORT!! Sistahs in Philly make sure you check out @beigethabizness at @koconails” (@touchofoshea). This caption serves more as a review than a photo description.

Self-Care/Awareness

People choose to share thoughts about their personal journeys. Eighteen posts from my data set fit in this category. They detail skin and hair care routines. They also offer perspectives on spirituality and emotional attachments. They explore this through the lens of cultural identity with an emphasis on hair texture and skin complexion. These physical features are highlighted because they are often associated with negative perspectives of cultural groups.

Self-empowerment is at the root of each post in my data set. Posts in this category target mental health, fitness and self-development. The #MelaninMagic hashtag serves as a collection of these moments in the lives of individuals who identify with others who share their experiences with this ethnic identity and self-awareness.

One woman describes her journey with her natural hair. She includes a photo of herself with her eyes closed and the finished product, the hairstyle she aimed to achieve:

I always braid my own hair whenever winter approaches, to protect my natural hair. I always try to braid with yarn because it doesn’t cut my hair like hair piece does. So I decided to do my hair and try out yarn twists and they didn’t turn out

too bad for a first try. And not to forget that there is a lot of self love going on in her mayyyynnnn (@sapien_stone).

The Instagram user provides a glimpse into her experience with her natural hair and how she is embracing a cultural style that she completed all on her own. She also expresses self-confidence. Commenters affirm her experience with details of their own or by sharing her happiness. The following is a caption from a post where a woman affirms her natural hair: “Sometimes you just gotta let the fro out. Good morning!” (@goddesspj). Another woman documents a personal achievement in her life as she recognizes her growth in a post:

The same way I love to smile is the same way I love growth and that is why I’m keen about personal development. I wasn’t like this four years ago and even last year. I’m grateful for growth, knowledge and opportunities. I’m even grateful for all of you that even trusted me in this journey of personal development (@kozamski).

Close to half of individuals represented in my data set could fit in this category with the application of a broader definition. They note milestones and express joy in their progress. They also share other aspects of personal development as it relates to their cultural identity.

Some Instagram users in this category mark turning points in their lives as well as personal achievements. They use photos to track this progress: “A smile is the prettiest thing you can wear. Good morning darlings, pls swipe to the left to see the transformation” (@hautefemmeattraction). This person shares her experience with appreciating her smile over time with three photos to support her journey. Other individuals used inspirational words to communicate their feelings about self: “Today’s affirmation: ‘I am full of inspiration and creativity’” (@shakeleseaton). They iterate positive qualities that highlight personal traits.

Women's Empowerment/Motherhood

The majority of posts in my data set were made by women who identify as Black. They connect their posts to aspects of womanhood and motherhood as they apply to their own lives. They communicate their individuality when citing achievements and recognize their ethnic identity along the process. They describe their relationships with their children through storytelling. They express what maternity means to them with the help of photos to serve as visual representations of their journeys. They also encourage other women to cherish self-acceptance. They identify that women and children are the future.

One mother describes hopes for her parenting style in a few lines accompanied by a photo of herself and her two daughters: “Just tryna raise my girls to be Jesus lovin’, afrocentric, natural hair handmade soap using, vegans that smell like cocoa butter, tea tree oil, and turmeric and listen to gucci mane #veryblack #melaninmagic” (@besttishever). She offers a vision of what she expects of her daughters as they grow because she wants their habits to mirror those of her own. She expresses self-confidence through her children with hope and strength as a mother. The next post honors law school graduates from Howard University, a historically Black university: “Who run the world? GIRLS. #WCW...” (@tanyachanel92). A photo of three women throwing their graduation caps up in front of building columns with huge smiles on their faces is one filled with positivity on different scales. Racial, ethnic and gender-based stereotypes are addressed in the form of confidence and completion. It generated much response in the comments section from congratulatory remarks to personal references.

Women use shots of side profiles of their face to recognize their beauty and to symbolize

potential. Ten posts comprise this category. Their captions communicate pride in being a woman:

“Woman tapped into her power. Your confidence terrifies them” (@kestrelambrose). They reference how others respond to their being. Other Instagram users focus on the idea of sisterhood as a form of women’s empowerment: “Sun kissed sisters come together and glow! Let the world see us shine, we’re brighter together! stay close queens” (@eysis_c). The photo includes two women who are hugging and smiling with their eyes closed. They are promoting unity among other groups of women.

Discussion

The #MelaninMagic hashtag community can be identified as a social media movement with ethnic identity at its center. Several themes related to cultural symbols and expressions surfaced in my study because individuals in this community communicate their identities each day through a photo or video post. Those themes included ethnic identity and heritage, creative expression, community outreach, self-care/awareness and women’s empowerment/motherhood. This discussion section will explore the impact of identity formation in social media networks as it relates to culture and individuality with a focus on my data set toward its conclusion.

Personas are recreated in social media networks to gain and maintain audience engagement. In these spaces we assume that others share authentic versions of their identities: “...two embedded assumptions of such SNS [Social Networking Sites] are 1) that people have authentic or essential identities that exist offline and 2) that these authentic identities can be expressed online (Kimmons, 2014, p. 95). Shared identities and experiences authenticate the narratives of these individuals who communicate through the use of this hashtag. They blindly

support one another because their commonalities appear to outweigh their differences in this social media network and outside of it. Their perceived distance allows them to develop a trusted communication dynamic that could only exist in a digital community. From physical features to pop culture references, individuals who identify as African American or as members of the African diaspora connect with these iterations and build relationships to foster community as a form of self-empowerment.

Social media networks can be viewed as cultural tools that provide people with opportunities to reflect and act on their power by communicating their existence. Space in a literal and figurative sense continues to be contested by political groups along with social activists. Marginalized groups claim their identity which is often seen in opposition to those of dominant groups: “Social media offer new ways to break through alienation. Through social media, individuals can align themselves with people they would not have otherwise known, and this creates a new political possibility-and a useful space for postcolonial intervention” (Koh, 2016, p. 6). This spatial aspect of identity can be viewed as one of the positive aspects of social media, and posts in the #MelaninMagic hashtag community support this. Claims have been made that social media ‘cannot solve inequality,’ but much can be gained from intracultural communication on an individual and group basis. A sense of collective identity can bolster self-esteem and communal ties, making global connections more authentic. This social engagement can be translated into political action on a local, national and international scale.

Identity formation is a theoretical framework that could be used in application to my data set because much of the dialogue that makes up these posts addresses the construction of identity. This is a social response to counter harmful, dominant narratives. Social identity

determines how people interact within this hashtag community, and this identity is relative.

People communicate their identities in captions and use photos to support their words. Analyses of my data set reflect a larger theory that asserts the ongoing role of social identity formation through personal posts on Instagram. This manifests in media production that leads individuals to post photos with captions to complement this experience. They record moments to express their involvement in projecting a positive image of their social identity with an intimate twist. The focus is on aspects of their lives including the business they conduct and the children they raise. People choose to interact with posts that resonate with their beliefs in a familiar language. They seek to affirm who they are across networks online and offline.

Challenges & Limitations

Many social justice issues cause individuals to make references in hashtags during heights of tension. This channeled energy may have caused a surge in posts on dates between January 9 - March 30, 2018. Most of the people who used the #MelaninMagic hashtag and were represented in my data were women. Black History Month, Women's History Month and the Women's March could have also influenced engagement with this tag during the beginning of the year. At this point next year, there may not be nearly as many new posts from people all around the world. Ten countries were represented in my data set, and this is a small fraction of all places where members who share this ethnic identity reside. Therefore, this data set is not inclusive of all regions or dialects. People voluntarily use this tag so much more of the global community who share this identity are not represented in this data. A new social media movement that is similar to the #MelaninMagic hashtag may emerge in the near future so its use could decline sooner than expected.

Conclusions and Future Study

The #MelaninMagic hashtag is a global movement that features individuals from each corner of the world. This community continues to grow as more people join the Instagram community and use the tag in their posts. Identity formation and affirmation are at the core of interactions in this space for organizational and individual brands. As I completed data collection, the amount of posts increased by the thousands over the course of a few minutes, hours and days. More people are engaging with the tag as social influencers continue to use it as a tagline.

The impact that identity has on lifestyle choices and audience engagement reflects a more intimate connection with self. People tend to post in larger hashtag communities, and we often witness exponential growth if they become digital movements. Using the grounded theory to explore one of these communities helped me to realize how people choose to interact with the hashtag. I explored their intentions through specific words they used and by the images they chose to associate with them. I also examined their meaning by contextualizing their entire posts as they related to posts outside of my data. This collective representation of social and ethnic identity contains creative, insightful, informative and personal dialogue.

However, I believe that this study limits conversation around this hashtag community. New categories can be formed that are more inclusive of diverse identities in the Black or African American community. Sexual politics and social justice can and should be explored in

the posts that make up my data set. Similar hashtag communities that resonate with #MelaninMagic such as #BlackLivesMatter can be used in comparative research to further understand the role that social identity plays in social media production.

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