

Social Media Contributions to Strong Black Woman Ideal Endorsement and Black  
Women's Mental Health

Alexis G. Stanton, Morgan C. Jerald, L. Monique Ward

University of Michigan

Lanice R. Avery

University of Virginia

Author Note

Alexis G. Stanton, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan; Morgan C. Jerald, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan; L. Monique Ward, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan; Lanice R. Avery, Departments of Psychology and Women, Gender, and Sexuality, University of Virginia.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alexis G. Stanton, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan, 1415 Washington Heights, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. E-mail: [agstan@umich.edu](mailto:agstan@umich.edu)

### **Abstract**

Although research findings highlight the complex dualities of the Strong Black Woman ideal and demonstrate its effects on Black women's mental health and well-being, there is less understanding of the role that social media may play in Black women's negotiation of this ideal. To what extent might Black women's engagement with race-related social media, such as the use of Black-oriented blogs and hashtags, contribute to their well-being and potentially buffer contributions of the strong Black woman ideal? To investigate this question, we tested 412 Black women who completed online survey measures assessing their general social media use, Black-oriented blog and hashtag use, mental health, and self-esteem. Correlational and regression analyses revealed that, as expected, greater endorsement of the strong Black woman ideal and higher levels of general social media use was each associated with adverse mental health and lower self-esteem. Contrary to our expectations, Black-oriented blog use was also associated with more symptoms of depression and anxiety, and did not moderate effects of strong Black woman endorsement on well-being. Clinicians, instructors, parents, and media activists should be mindful of how the use of both traditional and race-related social media may be both liberating for, and detrimental to, Black women's well-being.

*Keywords:* social media, Black women, self-esteem, mental health

## Social Media Contributions to Strong Black Woman Ideal Endorsement and Black Women's Mental Health

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) ideal is a complex, culturally grounded ideology that is rooted in Black women's strength, tenacity, and caretaking abilities. Although embracing this ideal is believed to be helpful for Black women's survival and self-efficacy, it may also be detrimental to their self-care behaviors, as it expects Black women to prioritize others' needs above their own (Watson & Hunter, 2016). Acknowledging this paradox, scholars have begun exploring the ways in which SBW and other stereotypes affect Black women's development; they have reported links between the SBW ideal and diminished mental health and physical well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Mullings, 2006; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). At the same time, Black women are using social media to create new cultural narratives, images, and definitions of "Black womanhood" (McArthur, 2016). Through the use of hashtags such as: #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackGirlsRock, and #CarefreeBlackGirl on various social media platforms, Black women may be aiming to self-empower, provide support to one another, and challenge oppressive, stereotypic media portrayals (McArthur, 2016). It is possible, then, that engagement with positive, race-oriented social media (i.e., social media that embraces broader and more diverse perspectives on Black womanhood, in comparison to the narrower conceptualizations offered by traditional media) could help diminish or counteract the negative effects of Black women's endorsement of the SBW ideal. In the current study, we investigated SBW ideal endorsement and its connection to Black women's mental health, and explored the ways in which participating in positive social media may moderate this association.

### **Strong Black Woman Ideal**

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) construct is a salient gendered ideology that is believed

to represent a central aspect of Black womanhood. Its origins are rooted within slavery, and it was created to benefit White slave owners by justifying their maltreatment, abuse, and sexual violence against Black women (Morgan, 1999; Wyatt, 2008). The SBW ideal reflected beliefs that African women were superior in physical and psychological strength compared to White women (Harris-Perry, 2011) and could more easily withstand pain and harsh conditions. Today, the SBW ideal is characterized by perceived obligations of Black women that they should suppress fear and weakness, showcase strength, resist appearing vulnerable or dependent, and constantly put others before themselves (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014). Black women's access to "strength" is often perceived as a defining characteristic of their womanhood and, furthermore, a means for survival (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

Historically, the SBW ideal has been viewed by Black women and by the larger society as a positive alternative to foundational, denigrating tropes and controlling images, such as the domestic Mammy, hypersexual Jezebel, and verbally aggressive Sapphire (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1993; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016; Romero, 2000; Wallace, 1990). However, during the past 30 years, research conceptualizations of the potential effects and implications of internalizing the SBW construct have shifted. Specifically, the critiques of many Black feminist thinkers have shed light on the limitations of the SBW ideal as a controlling image in the lives of Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981). These critiques argue that the SBW ideal paints Black women as superhuman and draws them away from their emotions, needs, and humanity.

Why might Black women embrace a self-silencing ideal that requires them to be stoic and emotionless? Many argue that endorsement of the SBW image provides some benefits: it serves as a positive coping mechanism in response to oppression and adversity (Shorter-Gooden, 2004); it mediates trauma recovery (Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010); and it helps to preserve

one's self and familial image in the context of the greater Black community (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). For example, drawing on qualitative data, Woods-Giscombé (2010) finds that calling upon the SBW ideal encourages Black women to persevere in times of hardship and increases their motivation to succeed despite limited resources. Thus, it is believed that SBW is a cultural ideal that may serve as a protective factor for Black women (Woods-Giscombé, 2010) by assisting in their coping with gender and racial marginalization, and by facilitating and reasserting Black women's independence (Baker et al., 2015).

At the same time, however, endorsement of this ideal has been connected to negative physical and mental health outcomes for Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Harrington et al., 2010; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Romero, 2000; Watson & Hunter, 2015; Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Lobel, 2008). For example, Black women high in SBW endorsement are more likely to be obese (Wang & Beydoun, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), report more emotional avoidance or suppression, engage in binge eating (Harrington et al., 2010), and experience disproportionate rates of cardiovascular disease (Thom et al., 2006). Qualitative research also finds that Black women who are more accepting of the SBW ideal are at a greater risk for depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Donovan and West (2015) further examined the relation between SBW and mental health, illustrating that SBW endorsement moderates the relation between stress and depressive symptoms, such that at moderate and high levels of SBW endorsement, the link between stress and depression was stronger. The intergenerational expectations, as well as the psychological distress often associated with embodying SBW ideals, are both illustrated in the following excerpt:

I honestly believe we're so accustomed to delivering the strong Black woman speech to ourselves and everyone else that we lose our ability to connect to our humanness, and thus our frailty. We become afraid to admit that we are hurting and struggling, because

we fear that we will be seen as weak. And we can't be weak. We've spent our lives witnessing our mothers and their mothers be strong and sturdy, like rocks. We want to be rocks. (Pickens, 2014, p. 4)

Because of these dualities, negotiating the SBW ideal is complex and challenging in the lives of many Black women, who must reconcile both its liabilities and benefits.

### **Social Media: A Source of Alternative Identity Construction?**

As Black women confront the problematic aspects of expectations of the SBW ideal and of prominent cultural stereotypes, one technique that some might use in response is to embrace and promote alternative images of Black womanhood. In modern society, social networking sites (SNS) or social media are common sites of self-presentation and identity construction. Social media are defined largely as any social networking site that offers online spaces where people can construct profiles that can be connected to others to create a personal network (Cheung & Lee, 2010). Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr are widely used by today's youth, especially Black youth. Social media use is highest in young adults (Duggan & Brenner, 2013) and, according to Pew Research (2014), 67% of African American adults online used Facebook, and 27% of African American adults online used Twitter— rates that were significantly higher than rates for all other groups measured (Whites: 21%, Hispanic: 25%; Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

Research across several fields indicates that social media may indeed provide a place for racial or ethnic minority youth to engage in positive racial identity formation, self-presentation, and social activism. Facebook, for example, represents a medium through which Black college students both explore and enhance their understanding of their racial self and identity (Lee, 2012). Lee (2012) found that Black college students are active users of Facebook and communicate mainly with other Black friends, creating their own community. Evidence also

suggests that hashtags (#) are an important feature of the Twitter platform that enables personal and collective identity development and maintenance. Hashtags allow users to annotate tweets with metadata specifying the topic or intended audience of a communication, and Black youth use them to identify and catalog messages following themes that help them create a cultural community (Brock, 2012). This virtual community has been referred to as Black Twitter, and it provides a user-generated source of culturally relevant online content (Brock, 2012). Social media sites like Twitter and Tumblr are especially appealing to Black women because they foster positive identity development, collective community, and strengthen social networks amongst Black women (Bradford, 2017). These channels allow them to speak to each other across borders and boundaries, provide visibility to their perspectives, and offer them a voice, all while using verbal formats and word play that may draw on culturally specific oral traditions, experiences, and expertise (Crandall & Cunningham, 2016; Mann, 2014; Maxwell, 2016). Jetten and colleagues (2009) explain how identity and belonging to social groups and networks positively affect health. Thus, the affirming virtual connections created through social media may facilitate Black women's self-identification and, in-turn, improve their well-being.

To examine how Black women may be cultivating these online networks, we sought to investigate Black women's engagement with the following three hashtags: #CarefreeBlackGirl, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock. Hashtags such as these were designed to celebrate Black womanhood and girlhood, promote digital self-care through countering negative stereotypes, and facilitate Black women's empowerment (Bradford, 2017; Wheeler, 2016). These hashtags represent positive affirmations and radical statements asserting that Black women are more than tropes and tragic stories. They have also evolved into powerful hashtag movements on Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram. We have chosen to focus here on these three hashtags (#CarefreeBlackGirl, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock) because, since their creation,

Black women have blogged about their powerful potential to create virtual healing spaces promoting Black women's well-being (e.g., Sharp, 2014).

In addition to looking at hashtags, researchers also have examined how blogs serve as virtual spaces that help in the formation of a collective Black digital community and even foster social activism (Keller, 2012; Maxwell, 2016). Specifically, many Black users visit and participate in Black-oriented blogs, collectively known as the "Blackosphere," a community of Black bloggers raising awareness of racial injustice, empowering each other, and mobilizing communal action (Holland, 2007; Payton & Kvasny, 2012). We chose three Black-oriented blogs (*Crunk Feminist Collective*, *For Harriet*, and *The Root*) that feature content related to Black women's identity formation, empowerment, social activism, and Black-oriented media. These blogs do not offer a single voice or experience; however, they do provide a range of perspectives that may be constructive and meaningful to Black women. Moreover, these blogs often serve as an online forum for discussing, defining, and dissecting the hashtags we have included in our study (#CarefreeBlackGirl, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock). We therefore investigated Black women's use of these three hashtags and three Black-oriented blogs to better comprehend Black women's use of Black-oriented social media in their negotiations of Black womanhood.

### **Psychological Consequences of Social Media Use**

What is the effect of using social media to share and embrace broader constructions of Black womanhood? Currently, there is no published evidence testing this question. Much of the existing work on psychological effects of social media use has focused on general use (i.e., number of hours) and has sampled general populations of U.S. adults or college students. Findings from these analyses are somewhat mixed, and many studies indicate that general social media use is linked to diminished well-being. For example, whereas Gonzales and Hancock (2011) reported that social media use is linked to higher self-esteem, others have linked usage to

lower self-esteem (e.g., Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014) and greater social anxiety (e.g., Murphy & Tasker, 2011). In addition, studies have reported that higher Facebook use is associated with more depressive symptoms (Feinstein et al., 2013; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014) and psychological distress (Wenhong & Kye-Hyoung, 2013). Assuming these effects extend to Black women, we would assume that general social media use, such as hours spent on Facebook, might also be linked to diminished well-being.

However, even though general social media use may have negative consequences for mental health, it is possible that identity-related social media use, such as consumption of Black-oriented blogs or participation in hashtag movements, could have positive outcomes. Although there is no published work on the psychological consequences of using the specific Black-oriented hashtags, there is work indicating that use of similar hashtags can foster activism and social justice movements, known as hashtag activism. Many hashtag movements have emerged from specific social events, including several incidents of police brutality, e.g., #ICantBreathe (Eric Garner) and #HandsUpDontShoot (Michael Brown; Hoyt, 2016). One prominent example is #BlackLivesMatter, which evolved from a supportive hashtag into a social justice movement. Activists have used this hashtag to critique institutional practices and to organize acts of resistance such as marches, protests, and die-ins (Langford & Speight, 2015). One subset of social media use, devoted to the empowerment of women, is known as hashtag feminism. Analyses indicate that movements such as use of #WhyIStayed (which focuses on domestic violence), #Women2Drive (which focuses on women's rights in Saudi Arabia), #BringBackOurGirls (which focuses on girls kidnapped in Nigeria), or #SayHerName (which focuses on violence against Black women) helped call attention to social problems, influence public conversation and mainstream media agendas, mobilize communities, spur political action, and facilitate social change both online and offline (Chaudhry, 2014; Clark, 2016; Olson, 2016;

Williams, 2015; 2016). Because activism is a form of collective action that enhances well-being (Drury, Cocking, Beale, Hanson, & Rapley, 2005; Drury & Reicher, 2005), Black women's engagement and participation could positively affect their mental health. Given the demonstrated benefits of hashtag activism, we anticipated that the use of positive identity hashtags, such as #CarefreeBlackGirl, could prove beneficial to the psychological well-being of Black women and might act as a buffer against the negative effects of SBW endorsement on mental health.

### **The Present Study**

The SBW ideal is a cultural expectation for Black women to be self-reliant, resilient, and self-sacrificing. Although this ideal is often viewed as aiding Black women's coping and survival, it also may be detrimental to their health, and has been linked to increases in depressive symptoms and higher anxiety (e.g., Watson & Hunter, 2015). Although social media use has been linked to diminished well-being among predominantly White samples (e.g., Feinstein et al., 2013), few studies have examined contributions of Black women's social media use to their mental health or SBW endorsement. Accordingly, the present study sought to examine if and how Black women are using social media to cultivate cultural narratives, self-empower, and create positive media portrayals. Given recent work highlighting the adverse health effects of SBW endorsement on Black college-aged women (West et al., 2016), and data that social media use is highest in young adults (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), we chose to sample young adults. We drew upon Black feminist theory and theories in social and media psychology to help formulate the following research questions and hypotheses: We hypothesized that greater use of Black-oriented blogs and hashtags would be associated with lower levels of SBW endorsement (H1). We expected that higher levels of SBW endorsement would predict adverse mental health and lower self-esteem (H2). We also asked: Which social media variables would contribute most to Black women's adverse mental health outcomes and lower self-esteem, once demographic

factors are controlled (RQ1)? We hypothesized that higher use of Black-oriented blogs and hashtags would predict more positive mental health and higher self-esteem (H3). Finally, we expected that Black-oriented blog and hashtag use would moderate the relations between SBW endorsement and Black women's mental health and self-esteem such that these relations would be weaker for women who engaged in heavier use of Black-oriented blogs and hashtags (H4).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 412 self-identified Black or African-American women aged 18-30 ( $M = 24.25$ ;  $Mdn = 24.00$ ;  $SD = 3.84$ ). We recruited 224 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing site, and the remaining 176 participants were undergraduate and graduate students attending a large Midwestern university. Of the 412 women, 3.6% ( $n = 15$ ) identified as both Black and as one other racial or ethnic group. The median household income was \$45,000 to \$54,000. Researchers often conduct studies on MTurk due to (1) its low cost and (2) the ability to obtain more demographically diverse and representative samples in comparison to convenience samples (for reviews, see Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Chandler & Shapiro, 2016; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Thus, given the difficulty of recruiting a large sample of young Black women at a predominantly White institution (PWI), we used MTurk to obtain a sizable, more representative sample.

### Measures

**Social media use.** Two sets of measures were used to assess participants' social media use. One set of measures assessed their use of mainstream social media sites. Participants were asked to indicate how often they use four social media sites (Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram), via a 6-point scale anchored by *never or almost never* and *several times a day*.

The second set of measures assessed how often participants viewed or read seven popular

blogs (*MadameNoire*, *Buzzfeed*, *Jezebel*, *Refinery29*, *The Root*, *For Harriet*, and *Crunk Feminist Collective*), three of which represented progressive, Black-oriented blogs/websites: *The Root*, *For Harriet*, and *Crunk Feminist Collective*. Informal polling of students representing our target demographic identified these three blogs as especially relevant sources of positive race-related web content. Additionally, a web analytics and traffic measurement search using Amazon Alexa and Quantcast indicated that these websites were largely frequented by Black college educated women (nearly 7 million unique monthly views for *The Root*, 50 to 100 thousand monthly views for *For Harriet*, and between 50 to 80 thousand unique monthly views for *Crunk Feminist Collective*). Responses were provided on a 5-point scale that included the following options: 1 = *never*, 2 = *once a month or less*, 3 = *few times a month*, 4 = *once a week*, 5 = *daily*. A mean score was computed across the three items ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Although, to our knowledge, this method has not been previously used to measure blog consumption, it has been used to measure the consumption of other social media (e.g., Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2016).

Next, participants were asked whether or not they had ever used the following hashtags: #CarefreeBlackGirl, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock. Informal polling of students and research assistants identified #CarefreeBlackGirl, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock as prominent positive race-related hashtags used by young Black women across various social media platforms. Using the Sysomos Media Management Platform (<https://sysomos.com>), we found that between March 2016 and March 2017, #BlackGirlMagic was used most frequently (1.1 million mentions on Twitter, 123.9 thousand mentions on Instagram, and nearly 852 thousand mentions on Tumblr), followed by #BlackGirlsRock (453.5 thousand mentions on Twitter, 483.8 thousand mentions on Instagram, and 241 thousand mentions on Tumblr), and #CarefreeBlackGirl (46.5 thousand mentions on Twitter, 5,150 mentions on Instagram, and 19.2 thousand mentions on Tumblr). Further, women frequently used all three of the hashtags together

when posting content on social media (43.6 thousand simultaneous mentions on Twitter and 118.6 thousand simultaneous mentions on Tumblr). If participants had used any of these three hashtags, they received a score of “1” (versus a score of “0”).

**SBW ideal endorsement.** Strong Black Woman ideal endorsement was measured with the 9-item embodiment subscale of K. Thomas’ (2006) Strong Black Woman Scale. This subscale assesses the extent to which Black women endorse SBW principles, such as sacrificing their own needs for family and loved ones and withstanding hardships without complaint. A sample item includes: “I view making mistakes as a sign of my own personal failure.” Responses were made on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A mean score was computed across the items ( $\alpha = .85$ ), such that higher scores indicate greater personal endorsement of the notion of the Strong Black Woman. The scale was originally normed on a sample of Black college women at a predominately White institution and an historically Black university. All nine items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .40 to .73 (K. Thomas, 2006), and the Cronbach alpha test showed moderate reliability ( $\alpha = .77$ ). A modified version of the scale (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, in press) also showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Validity of the scores were supported by its positive correlation with growing up in predominately Black neighborhoods and negative association and stronger acceptance of individualism as a cultural value (K. Thomas, 2006).

**Well-being.** Three measures were used to assess participants’ mental well-being. One measure, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), assessed participants’ general feelings about themselves and their self-worth (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”). Participants responded to the 10 items using a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*). A mean score was computed ( $\alpha = .91$ ), such that a higher score indicates higher self-esteem. In a sample of 98 African American single mothers, the RSE demonstrated good internal

consistency ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and was negatively correlated with depressive symptoms and negative thinking (Hatcher & Hall, 2009).

The second measure focused on participants' self-reported symptoms of depression. Using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies' Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), participants were asked to indicate how they felt or behaved during the past week. They responded to all 20 items via response options that ranged from "Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)" to "All of the time (5-7 days)." Sample items include: "I felt depressed" and "I thought my life had been a failure." A mean score was computed across the items ( $\alpha = .94$ ), which were scored from 0-4, such that higher scores indicate more depressive symptoms. Within a sample of 40,403 African American women in the Black Women's Health Study (BWHS), the CES-D demonstrated good internal consistency and psychometric stability (Williams et al., 2007).

The final measure assessed mental health symptoms using three subscales from the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). The three subscales selected included a 6-item index of anxiety, a 5-item index of hostility, and a 4-item index of interpersonal sensitivity. Participants responded to how distressed or bothered they felt by each symptom during the past seven days. Response options (scored 0-4) ranged from *not at all* to *extremely*. Mean scores were computed for each subscale such that higher scores indicate greater symptoms of anxiety ( $\alpha = .91$ ; e.g., "How much were you distressed by nervousness or shakiness inside?"); hostility ( $\alpha = .84$ ; e.g., "How much were you distressed by feeling easily annoyed or irritated?"); or hypersensitivity ( $\alpha = .90$ ; e.g., "How much were you distressed by your feelings being easily hurt?"). In a sample of 609 Black college women from a predominately White institution and a historically Black university, the reported internal consistency for three subscales of the BSI ranged from .85 to .91 (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, in press). The validity of the measure was

supported by its positive correlations with other measures of mental health, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Boulet & Boss, 1991) and the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (Kay, Fiszbein, & Opler, 1987).

**Demographic Variables.** Previous research has indicated that certain aspects of women's backgrounds are associated with their social media usage patterns, such as age, religiosity, and socioeconomic status (Pew Research Center, 2010, 2014, 2015, 2017); young adults, aged 18-29, with higher-income households were the most frequent users of social media. Given these potential group differences, we included age and socioeconomic status (SES) as covariates in our analyses. Participants' SES was assessed using a subjective measure (Adler et al., 2000), which asked them to indicate where they would place themselves in comparison to other people in the U.S. Participants viewed an image of a ladder and were asked to indicate their numerical position using a 10-point scale anchored by 1 (*worst off*) and 10 (*best off*).

Several empirical studies have also identified religious involvement as a consistent predictor of positive mental health and well-being among African Americans (Brown, Ndubuisi, & Gary, 1990; Ellison, Boardman, Williams, & Jackson, 2001); we included religiosity as a covariate in our analyses. Participant religiosity was assessed via the following three questions: (1) "How religious are you?"; (2) "How often do you attend religious services?"; and (3) "How often do you pray?" Participants used a 5-point scale anchored by *not at all* at 1 and *very* at 5 to indicate their perceptions of their level of religiosity. In response to the second and third questions, participants used a 5-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very regularly, usually once a week*). As in previous studies (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2015; Trinh, 2016), a mean score was computed across the items ( $\alpha = .90$ ), such that higher scores indicated greater religiosity.

### **Procedure**

Data were collected over a 2.5-month period from mid-October 2015 through mid-

January 2016. With permission of the Institutional Review Board, two recruitment strategies were used: (1) Amazon Mechanical Turk and (2) the University's Office of Registrar. Using MTurk, the approximately 30-minute survey was administered electronically, through Qualtrics. Inclusion criteria for the study were that participants had to be a self-identified Black/African American woman between the ages of 18-30. All participants who completed the survey received \$2. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine Black women's media use.

For the second recruitment strategy, registered undergraduate and graduate students who had identified as Black or African American received an email from the registrar inviting them to participate in a survey being conducted by a university research team. The email described the study as a survey assessing Black women's media use, and provided a link to the online, self-administered survey. Participants who completed the survey received a chance to win one of four \$100 Visa gift cards.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics for the social media use, SBW, and well-being variables are provided in Table 1. Participants reported moderate levels of endorsement of the SBW ideal. They used Facebook and Instagram the most, on average, and Tumblr the least. Concerning the hashtags, 10.2% ( $n = 42$ ) of participants had ever used any of the three. Specifically, 3.6% ( $n = 15$ ) of participants had used #CarefreeBlackGirl, 5.3% ( $n = 22$ ) had used #BlackGirlMagic, and 8.5% ( $n = 35$ ) had used #BlackGirlsRock. Concerning Black-oriented blog use, 8.8% ( $n = 36$ ) had ever viewed and/or read *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 14.5% ( $n = 60$ ) had ever viewed and/or read *For Harriet*, and 19.4% ( $n = 80$ ) had ever viewed and/or read *The Root*. Analysis of the patterns of missing data revealed that less than 15.8% of all items for all cases were missing, and

84.2% of the items were not missing data for any case. Considering individual cases, 65.1% ( $n = 268$ ) of participants had no missing data. Finally, no item had 20.1% or more of missing values.

We tested whether the two samples differed on the social media use, SBW endorsement, and well-being variables. We conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs comparing scores of the MTurk participants to those of the university participants. Sub-sample means and statistics are provided in the final columns of Table 1. The university sample engaged in higher levels of Black-oriented blog use and hashtag use, and the university sample expressed greater endorsement of the SBW ideal. The university sample reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity, whereas the MTurk sample reported higher levels of self-esteem. Due to sub-sample differences, we controlled for sample (0 = MTurk; 1 = University) in subsequent analyses.

We next investigated whether participant demographics and background factors contributed to their scores on the following well-being outcome variables: self-esteem, depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity. A series of zero-order correlations was run between the five well-being variables and the following demographic variables: religiosity, sample, age, and subjective SES. Results are provided in Table 2. Being in the university sub-sample was associated with more mental health symptoms and lower self-esteem. In contrast, being older and reporting a higher subjective SES was each associated with fewer mental health symptoms and higher self-esteem. Based on these findings, we chose to use age, sample, and SES as covariates in subsequent analyses.

### **Main Hypotheses and Research Questions**

To test Hypothesis 1, concerning associations between Black women's SBW endorsement and their general social media use and Black-oriented social media use, we ran bivariate correlations between SBW ideal endorsement and the six social media variables. Results are

provided in Table 3. Contrary to our predictions, Black-oriented blog and hashtag use was associated with more SBW endorsement. More frequent use of Tumblr was also associated with greater endorsement of the SBW ideal.

We next examined whether SBW endorsement (H2) and social media use (H3) are significant correlates of Black women's well-being, and whether Black-oriented social media use moderated the relations between SBW endorsement and well-being (H4). To test these questions, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses with the five well-being variables serving as dependent variables, the significant demographic correlates (sample, age, religiosity, and subjective SES) entered as controls on the first step, SBW endorsement entered on the second step, and the six social media variables entered on the third step. The two-way interaction terms used to test moderation were entered on the fourth and final step. Results are provided in Table 4.

In the first step, being older was associated with fewer symptoms of depression and hostility as well as higher self-esteem. The full set of demographic variables explained from 1.6% to 6.0% of the variance in Black women's well-being. On the second step, the regression analyses yielded a significant effect of SBW endorsement; women who personally endorsed the SBW ideal reported more symptoms of depression, anxiety, hostility, and sensitivity, as well as lower self-esteem. Adding this variable explained an additional 20.0% to 34.1% of the variance in Black women's well-being. At the third step, we added the four mainstream and two Black-oriented social media use variables. We were interested in the unique contributions of each of these variables given the lack of previous research examining them; therefore, we did not collapse the four mainstream social media variables into one combined social media variable. Tumblr use was associated with more symptoms of depression, hostility, and sensitivity, and with lower self-esteem. Black-oriented blog use was associated with more symptoms of depression,

anxiety, and hostility. Together, the inclusion of the social media use variables explained an additional 3.2% to 5.0% of the variance in Black women's well-being.

To test the final hypothesis, concerning whether hashtag use or Black-oriented blog use buffered the influence of SBW endorsement on well-being, we used Hayes' (2012) SPSS PROCESS macro (Model 2) to test for moderation. Predictors were mean centered (Aiken & West, 1991). The two-way interaction terms between SBW endorsement and hashtag use and between SBW endorsement and Black-oriented blog use were entered in the final step of the regression. These two interaction terms did not significantly predict mental health or self-esteem. Thus, we conclude that Black-oriented social media use does not buffer Black women from the negative effects of SBW endorsement on well-being.

### **Discussion**

Black women often feel as if their survival and self-worth are connected to endorsing the strong Black woman ideal, a culturally rooted ideal that emphasizes strength and resilience. Although the literature notes positive coping benefits to SBW endorsement (e.g., Baker et al., 2015), it also highlights adverse mental health outcomes associated with the expectations Black women face when they are constantly expected to live up to this ideal (e.g., Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). The connections between SBW endorsement and mental health have been outlined; however, we were interested in examining SBW endorsement in relation to Black women's use of social media spaces. Specifically, we explored whether hashtag use (i.e., #CarefreeBlackGirl, #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock) and Black-oriented blog use might serve as protective factors against the association between SBW endorsement and negative well-being. The current study represents one of the first within the field of psychology to empirically examine contributions of both general and race-related social media to Black women's well-being.

### **Review of Main Findings**

Contrary to our first hypothesis, Black-oriented blog and hashtag use were related to greater, not less, SBW endorsement. Although we were not able to directly assess potential explanations in the current study, we speculate a few interpretations of this finding: (1) some Black women may aim to build an online community by seeking content that reinforces positions supporting the SBW ideal; and (2) some women who endorse the SBW ideal may use these media as outlets to articulate a range of feelings that they feel unable to express in their daily lives. Although Black-oriented blogs may provide the contexts for giving voice to topics that are meaningful to many Black women, these blogs do not offer a singular voice. Both visitors and contributors to these sites may express a range of perspectives about the SBW ideal (Black & Peacock, 2011). Future studies should assess how young Black women use Black-oriented blogs—further examining the content they may solicit from these sites.

Regression analyses addressed our main hypotheses and research question. Consistent with our second hypothesis, SBW endorsement was associated with more adverse mental health and lower self-esteem. This result reflects the potential danger of personally endorsing the SBW ideal and also echoes past research that found that Black women who were more accepting of the SBW ideal were at a greater risk for depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Donovan & West, 2015; Watson & Hunter, 2015). In addition, our study is the first to examine how SBW endorsement relates to mental health indicators other than depression, anxiety, and self-esteem; also demonstrating its association with increased hostility and sensitivity. The relation between SBW endorsement and negative mental health symptoms and lower self-esteem persisted when the demographic variables and social media variables were included in the analyses, highlighting its powerful connection to the mental health of young Black women.

Our research question explored which social media variables contribute most to Black

women's adverse mental health and well-being. Tumblr use was associated with more negative mental health (more symptoms of depression, hostility, and sensitivity) and lower self-esteem. In addition, Instagram use was linked with more symptoms of sensitivity. However, Facebook and Twitter use were not significantly associated with any of the well-being outcomes. Because Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are more widely used among young adults than Tumblr (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), we were surprised that Tumblr use emerged as the most consistent social media correlate of mental health. Based on past research, we expected Twitter to be the most salient social medium for Black women due to its popularity and affirming "Black Twitter" spaces (Brock, 2012). However, Twitter was not a significant correlate of any well-being outcomes. Often, Tumblr is a platform that fosters a sense of virtual collectiveness and solidarity among marginalized communities (Hart, 2015). However, whereas Tumblr promotes a unified space for users to seek support and visibility (Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2014), it can also facilitate conversations rooted in the expression of pain that may diminish users' mental health and well-being. Thus, if some Black women are utilizing Tumblr to discuss painful and private experiences with other users, they may be experiencing more adverse mental health. Further, social networking sites are comprised of content and users that present a range of attitudes and opinions that may not be uniformly positive or constructive. It is possible that individuals choose to selectively engage with certain topics or users that share similar viewpoints. Thus, some Black women who use these sites expecting to find a uniformly affirming community may instead encounter users that espouse opinions in support of the SBW ideal or other racial stereotypes. Future studies should thus explore how different segments of Black women are using Tumblr.

We expected that higher levels of Black-oriented blog and hashtag use would be associated with more positive well-being; this hypothesis (H3) was not supported. Instead, Black-oriented blog use was associated with more adverse mental health (increased symptoms of

depression, anxiety, and hostility). These results may be due to a selection effect; that is, women who already feel poorly and distressed may use the race-related blogs more in efforts to seek out like-minded individuals or to confirm their negative affect. It is also possible that we did not include blogs that would contribute positively to well-being, and that the blogs we did include contributed negatively. We did not ask participants to explain their Black-oriented blog use, but instead inquired about how often they visit the following three sites: (1) *The Root*, (2) *For Harriet*, and (3) *Crunk Feminist Collective*. Thus, it is difficult to discern how participants filtered information from these sites and if users were introduced to certain views that influence well-being negatively. Future research should further examine the content on these blogs and their subsequent relation to mental health and well-being. Hashtag use was not significantly associated with any of the well-being outcomes. Therefore, despite the demonstrated social activism and community-building functions of these positive social media (e.g., Olson, 2016), these benefits were not found to extend to young Black women's personal mental well-being.

It is also helpful to draw upon the literatures on feminist identity and critical consciousness development to help explain these conflicting findings regarding Black-oriented social media use. Indeed, Black women's exposure to Black-oriented blogs or hashtags may trigger an affective response similar to that of the revelation stage of feminist identity. In this stage, women often experience psychological distress, depression, and anxiety as they become more informed about social injustices of which they were previously unaware (Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008). For instance, when students first take Introduction to Women's Studies, they often begin to grapple with and explore an emerging feminist identity, seeking out information pertaining to their new identity. This experience, while illuminating, can also be overwhelming and traumatizing, and students may experience adverse mental health symptoms as a result. Further, Stroebe, Barreto, and Ellemers (2010) found that the more women search out

information about sexism, the more they experience increased feelings of despair and, overall, more negative well-being. Learning about other forms of oppression may show similar outcomes. Accordingly, engaging in hashtag activism and reading progressive, Black-oriented blogs that expose readers to race and gender oppression that they may not have been previously conscious of may heighten mental distress and diminish well-being. Thus, although using hashtags and Black-oriented blogs can be empowering and provide some Black women with a new lens through which to view themselves and the world, it is also important to critically consider the ways in which this engagement may also be negatively related to their well-being.

Finally, we expected Black-oriented social media use to moderate the relation between SBW endorsement and well-being, such that Black women who endorsed the SBW ideal, but used more race-related hashtags and/or read more Black-oriented blogs, would show more favorable well-being outcomes. This expectation was not confirmed; there were no moderating effects. Because Black women are likely socialized to endorse the SBW ideal through multiple contexts including, but not limited to, the media, social media use may not be powerful enough to buffer the influence of SBW. Women are socialized by familial and societal expectations (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014) and, thus, examining family, peer, community and/or other factors might be more helpful in understanding how to mitigate the negative influences of SBW on well-being. It is also possible that engaging with race-related social media may be too passive a form of empowerment to counteract the powerful effects of the SBW ideal. Indeed, social media have been critiqued for promoting short-sighted, low-risk, low-cost, and passive forms of activism. Sometimes referred to as “slacktivism” or “clicktivism,” this type of social media activism may prevent users from engaging in action-oriented change in their communities and even in their own lives (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Thus, social media use, while influential, may not be strong enough to overcome the influence of SBW endorsement.

### **Practice Implications**

Our central aim was to understand the role that social media play in young Black women's identity constructions and whether engagement with Black-oriented social media counters negative associations between SBW endorsement and well-being. Our findings may have many practical implications for clinicians, media activists, and instructors. First, therapists and counselors should be mindful of our finding that, consistent with past studies, personally endorsing the SBW ideal is associated with negative mental health symptoms among young Black women (e.g., Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Though many Black women clients may consider SBW endorsement to be a beneficial coping strategy in response to oppression and adversity, it is essential that practitioners underscore the relation this ideology may have with Black women's well-being. In addition, because the SBW ideal stresses self-reliance, practitioners should also be cognizant of how SBW endorsement may dissuade some Black women from seeking needed mental health services in the first place and may also hinder their degree of participation once in treatment.

A second implication stems from the link between social media use and young Black women's mental health. There is a dearth of psychological literature regarding both Black women's social media use and its relation to their well-being. Our study extends past evidence of a negative association between social media use and mental health from samples of mostly White college students (e.g., Feinstein et al., 2013; Vogel et al., 2014) to a sample of young Black women. Further, our findings show that use of social media — even positive, race-related social media — is also negatively associated with mental health and does not buffer against the negative contributions of endorsing the SBW ideal. Given the high use of social media among this population (Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Pew, 2014), practitioners should be conscious of how even culturally specific forms of social media engagement, intended to be empowering, can

undermine mental health. Media activists and bloggers may also consider the development of alternative social media platforms that are more beneficial for Black women's well-being.

Third, we speculate that our findings that personally endorsing the SBW ideal is associated with greater race-related blog use and hashtag use may suggest that these same social networking sites allow Black women to express a more expansive range of emotions than they may feel able to in their everyday lives. Practitioners and online activists should be mindful of how young Black women's engagement with social media— particularly hashtags or blogs that increase their consciousness about racial and gender discrimination— can be both detrimental to their well-being and potentially liberating.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations of this study that future researchers will want to address. First, our sample consisted of mostly college-aged women. Considering that cultural narratives of the SBW ideal tend to focus on Black women who have children and/or are caretakers, it might have been more apt to include older women who have children in our sample. Watson and Hunter (2016) noted that women with children often described themselves as having fully obtained the SBW ideal, whereas women without children (who were primarily college students) viewed themselves as being "SBWs in training" (Watson & Hunter, 2016, p. 9-10). Often, students described their experiences of SBW endorsement in the context of school, as a response to academic stressors. In contrast, women with children viewed their SBW endorsement as existing within the context of financial and caretaking stressors (Watson & Hunter, 2016). Future studies should measure participants who have children and/or are caretakers in order to examine whether the meaning of SBW ideal endorsement changes based on this developmental factor. In addition, the generalizability of our findings is confined to the specific cohort of women that we sampled. Indeed, both the particular social media we examined and our sample's engagement

with the social media are likely specific to this moment in time. Future research should be attentive to how social media use is influenced by sampling and cohort effects.

Second, many participants were either unfamiliar with the hashtags or did not report using them often. As indicated earlier, only 10.2% of participants had ever used any of the three hashtags. Considering that many participants reported relatively high SBW endorsement ( $M = 2.99$ ), but few had used any of the hashtags, hashtag use would not seem to be strong enough to protect against adverse mental health outcomes. We may not have tapped the most frequently used hashtags, which could have affected how much influence our hashtag variable had in our analyses. Subsequent research could present an expanded list of hashtags for participants to report on or allow open-ended responses. Future studies could also benefit from utilizing more targeted sampling. Recruiting from specific social media sites, such as Tumblr, might be a way to reach participants who use the hashtags more often or are more familiar with them.

Third, as with all cross-sectional studies, we were unable to draw causal conclusions about the directionality of the associations examined. For instance, it is possible that women with poorer well-being endorse the SBW ideal as a coping strategy. Likewise, these same women may engage with hashtags or Black-oriented blogs to find community and improve their mental health. Future research should examine these questions using experimental or longitudinal methods to more accurately probe the directionality of these relations.

A fourth limitation is our measurement of hashtag use. We asked participants to indicate whether they had ever used each of the hashtags of interest, assuming that a hashtag's influence was cumulative and would remain stable over time. It is likely, however, that using hashtags produces a state-like, temporary boost or decline in well-being that our correlational data did not allow us to capture. Thus, we may have observed null results for hashtag use as a correlate of well-being because we were not accurately measuring it. Experimentally manipulating hashtag

use in future studies would help determine if its effect is more state- than trait-like and establish whether hashtag use can influence mental health or self-esteem in the moment; longitudinal methods would elucidate whether this effect is long-lasting.

### **Conclusions**

The current study expands our knowledge of how young Black women's endorsement of SBW ideals is associated with mental health symptoms and low self-esteem. It also demonstrates that social media use can also be associated with poorer mental health and well-being among young Black women. It is critical for researchers to further examine Black women's engagement in diverse forms of social media and to illuminate the complex roles of social media use in Black women's mental health and well-being. Researchers, clinicians, bloggers, and social media activists should continue to interrogate Black women's nuanced, digital self-presentations.

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Table 1

*Descriptives of Social Media Use, Strong Black Woman, and Well-Being Variables.*

	Full Sample	MTurk	University	F	<i>d</i>
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>		
<b>Media Use</b>					
Facebook	4.47(1.59)	4.50(1.55)	4.41(1.67)	.24	.06
Instagram	3.33(1.86)	3.19(1.81)	3.57(1.93)	3.10	.20
Tumblr	1.85(1.32)	1.86(1.28)	1.83(1.38)	.03	.02
Twitter	2.72(1.73)	2.71(1.67)	2.74(1.84)	.03	.02
Blog Use	1.51(.63)	1.46(.66)	1.60(.58)	<b>4.08*</b>	.23
Hashtag Use	.10(.30)	.04(.20)	.18(.38)	<b>21.42***</b>	.46
<b>SBW</b>					
SBW endorsement	2.99(.92)	2.88(.96)	3.17(.83)	<b>7.98**</b>	.32
<b>Well-Being</b>					
Self Esteem	3.24(.66)	3.32(.67)	3.13(.61)	<b>7.49**</b>	.30
Depression	1.75(.63)	1.65(.65)	1.91(.58)	<b>14.03***</b>	.42
Anxiety	.68(.85)	.58(.80)	.83(.89)	<b>6.94**</b>	.30
Hostility	.60(.73)	.56(.77)	.67(.67)	1.98	.15
Sensitivity	.92(1.05)	.72(.92)	1.25(1.16)	<b>21.86***</b>	.51

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . SBW = Strong Black Woman.

Table 2

*Significant Demographic Correlates of Well-Being Variables.*

	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Sensitivity	Self-Esteem
Religiosity	.00	.03	.02	.02	.08
Sample	<b>.20**</b>	<b>.14**</b>	.08	<b>.25**</b>	<b>-.14**</b>
Age	<b>-.19**</b>	-.08	<b>-.14*</b>	<b>-.19**</b>	<b>.17**</b>
Subjective SES	<b>-.11*</b>	<b>-.13*</b>	-.08	-.09	<b>.14**</b>

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Sample is coded 0/1. SES = Socioeconomic Status.

Table 3

*Bivariate Correlations among Strong Black Woman Ideal, Mainstream, and Black-oriented Social Media Variables.*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. SBW Endorsement	—						
2. Facebook	-.01	—					
3. Instagram	-.00	<b>.26**</b>	—				
4. Tumblr	<b>.15**</b>	<b>.14*</b>	<b>.18**</b>	—			
5. Twitter	.04	.11	<b>.44**</b>	<b>.25**</b>	—		
6. Blog Use	<b>.18**</b>	<b>.19**</b>	<b>.17**</b>	<b>.31**</b>	<b>.15**</b>	—	
7. Hashtag Use	<b>.16**</b>	.00	<b>.11*</b>	-.01	<b>.13*</b>	<b>.26**</b>	—

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . SBW = Strong Black Woman.

Table 4

*Regression Analyses Testing Which Media Variables Best Predict Well-Being.*

	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Sensitivity	Self-Esteem
<b>Step 1. Demographics</b>					
Age	<b>-.15**</b>	-.02	<b>-.18**</b>	-.11	<b>.14*</b>
Sample	.01	.05	-.11	.07	-.01
Subjective SES	-.04	-.07	.01	-.05	.06
<i>Step One Adj. R2</i>	.046	.033	.016	.060	.030
<b>Step 2. SBW</b>					
SBW Endorsement	<b>.60***</b>	<b>.49***</b>	<b>.47***</b>	<b>.52***</b>	<b>-.46***</b>
<i>Step Two Adjusted R2</i>	.387	.263	.222	.320	.230
<i>Change in Adj. R2</i>	<b>+.341***</b>	<b>+.230***</b>	<b>+.206***</b>	<b>+.260***</b>	<b>+.200***</b>
<b>Step 3. Social Media Use</b>					
SBW Endorsement	<b>.56***</b>	<b>.45***</b>	<b>.42***</b>	<b>.48***</b>	<b>-.43***</b>
Facebook	.00	-.02	.01	.06	-.04
Instagram	-.06	-.04	-.06	<b>-.12*</b>	.05
Tumblr	<b>.11*</b>	.08	<b>.15**</b>	<b>.15**</b>	<b>-.15**</b>
Twitter	-.01	.02	.04	-.03	.05
Blog Use	<b>.12*</b>	<b>.13*</b>	<b>.13*</b>	.09	-.05
Hashtag Use	-.02	.07	-.02	.05	.06
<i>Step Three Adjusted R2</i>	.408	.285	.258	.356	.252

<i>Change in Adj. R2</i>	+0.032**	+0.035*	+0.050**	+0.047**	+0.036*
<hr/>					
<b>Step 4. Interaction Terms</b>					
SBW x Hashtag Use	.01	.07	-.01	.07	.00
SBW x Blog Use	-.01	.05	.08	.05	.01
<i>Step Four Adjusted R2</i>	.448	.339	.311	.395	.292
<i>Change in Adj. R2</i>	+0.025	-.039	+0.038	+0.037	+0.032
<i>Final Equation F</i>	17.425***	8.291***	9.451***	11.085***	8.245***

Note. Betas from each unique step reported. \*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001. Bolded betas indicate that the variable made a significant, individual contribution. SBW = Strong Black Woman. SES = Socioeconomic Status.