YouTube Communities and the Promotion
of Natural Hair Acceptance Among Black Women

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

Black women are popularizing a second wave of the natural hair movement, rejecting the European beauty ideal and promoting acceptance of afro-textured hair, which has historically been viewed as unkempt and unprofessional. As part of this movement, many women are turning to social media platforms—particularly YouTube—to gain information, support, and acceptance. Through framing theory, this study analyzed YouTube content to identify the most salient themes. This analysis revealed that content creators are facilitating a positive discourse surrounding natural hair, and that content consumers tend to express gratitude and use the platform to deepen their understanding of hair care.

I. Introduction

Black hair is unique not only in its appearance, but also because of the historical, sociological, and psychological implications that are related to it. The kinky-coily texture that is a characteristic of the hair of the people of the African diaspora has been much more than a simple physical feature. Instead it is another tool used to differentiate this race from others, often to its disadvantage.

Since African slaves were brought to North America, they have been scrutinized by White supremacists, based on differences in culture, language, and especially appearance. Black women's hair was often used as one of the most significant differentiating factors. Throughout the centuries and various phases that African American people have endured, hair has transformed from just a physical attribute to a visual marker of one's identity, political beliefs, and self-perception. When many Black women wear one's hair natural, it signifies not a hairstyle but a lifestyle.

In the age of new media, anyone who has access to the internet is able to contribute ideas that shape the discourse about various topics. Black women no longer have to rely on traditional forms of media to seek their representation. Online influencers around the world are using digital platforms to spread information about caring for natural hair, but ultimately using their tools to shift perceptions of natural hair to a more positive light. This study analyzed the attributes that Black women associate with their experience of wearing natural hair as observed through the content creator-content consumer relationship on the social media platform YouTube.

II. Literature Review

In this literature review, the author looked at the following issues: American history of Black hair, the politicization of Black hair and the first natural hair movement, the second natural hair movement, and YouTube as a platform for discussing social issues.

American History of Black Hair

For Black women, styling one's hair, and particularly chemically straightening one's hair, has had a deep significance for generations (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). This practice has often shaped Black women's self-perception and their attitudes toward natural hair, which among African Americans has carried a negative connotation for most of American history (Patton, 2006). What was considered unkempt, dirty, and nappy was closely related to the hair of a slave (Bellinger, 2007). Women with straight, wavy, or even loosely curled hair were considered to be genetically closer to White, which carried the connotation of goodness and beauty (Bellinger, 2007). This fixation on hair texture not only contributed to a widening separation between Black and White women, but also fragmented the Black community, stirring up animosity between dark skin and light skin, "bad hair" and "good hair."

The act of chemically straightening, or relaxing, one's hair has historically allowed Black women to obtain an appearance that more closely resembled societal ideals of beauty, which emphasize European features (de Sá Dias, Baby, Kaneko, & Robles Velasco, 2007). Relaxing methods progressed throughout the 20th century. What was once a practice that solely used plant and fat-based products as well as heated tools turned into a chemical-based product that was made available in the 1940s. Relaxing formulas continually transformed and became a consumer product accessible by any household. By the 1960s, at-home relaxing kits could be found in most drug stores (de Sá Dias et al., 2007). Relaxing was a widespread practice among Black women that further contributed to the assimilation into American societal standards. Yet at the very same time that relaxers became widely accessible to consumers, Black people across the country began to embrace a different hair aesthetic.

There was a brief reclamation of the natural hair texture during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and Black Power movement in the 1970s. Many more people sported their Afros as a reflection of the "My Black is Beautiful" message (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). For the first time, one's hairstyle was not solely about style preferences but also about making a political statement. Many Black women cared less about taming their hair, and instead grew out large Afros as an effort to "free their minds" and to subtly challenge White supremacy (Bellinger, 2007; Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Not everyone in the Black community embraced this political forwardness, and many were harshly criticized by older, more conservative Blacks. However, the Afro became a symbol to the youth of expression and liberation.

The political natural hair movement turned out to be short-lived. America moved into a more conservative era in the 1980s, and more Black people entered the professional workforce. Afros faded into the background, and many Blacks felt that they had to adopt more uniform appearances (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). As less people proudly sported Afros, this hairstyle became an iconic symbol of past decades.

The Second Wave of the Natural Hair Movement

It was not until recent years that a second wave of the natural hair movement emerged (Antoine, 2013). More liberal and inclusive representations of women, partnered with the sharing power of social media has allowed for a natural hair community to form online. Many Black women recognize online influencers that have had an impact on their perception of natural hair or even on their decision to wear their hair in its natural state (Ellington, 2014). Before the development of social media, an entire generation of Black women had no idea how to properly take care of the hair they naturally grew (Bellinger, 2007). Now that there is a trend moving toward the rejection of chemical straightening as the norm, a large and powerful online community has formed around natural hair care (Antoine, 2013). Prominent online influencers have become like virtual friends or mentors for the followers who are hoping to learn and connect with others. This trend can especially be observed among Black women in college (Antoine, 2013), some of whom are taking care of their hair by themselves for the first time in their lives. These young women are experimenting with different methods than the ones their mothers have taught them, even if they face criticism from older generations for wearing their natural hair (Ellington, 2014).

This modern phenomenon mirrors the youth-driven movement of the 1970s, yet this time, fewer women cite political beliefs as their motivators. Now, many members of the millennial generation of Black women are working to reshape the conceptions that people, both in and out of the Black community, have formed about natural hair (Antoine, 2013). The movement does not have such a strong focus on overthrowing White beauty conventions, but instead focuses on widening the beauty ideal and instilling confidence in Black youths. This second wave of the natural-hair movement has attracted thousands of "naturalistas" from around the world who were dedicated to the uplift of Black women who wear their natural hair (Gill, 2015).

YouTube as a Community-Building Platform

The instant and easily accessible information as well as the formation of virtual communities makes social media a vehicle for change and a comforting space for those who seek support (Ellington, 2014). YouTube has taken a leading role among other social platforms as an online community-building space. YouTube promotes active participation and gives ordinary people the power to become content creators. As more people contribute content to the platform, they continually redefine cultural meaning on a wide range of topics (Burgess & Green, 2009). Agents on platforms, such as YouTube, gain social influence and guide the dissemination of information as well as the direction of commentary that occurs (Susarla, Oh, & Tan, 2012).

YouTube has played a large role in the dissemination of information about natural hair, helping to shape the discourse that currently surrounds this topic. Viewers who seek videos about natural hair partake in a shared, ritualistic experience that reinforces ideas about natural hair and provides information or motivation to take action (Antoine, 2013; Ellington, 2014). YouTube has the unique ability to do this because of its parasocial nature, which is defined as the perceived appearance of "face-to-face interaction" between content creator and audience (Antoine, 2013). This becomes a much more powerful community-building tool as opposed to an audience simply interacting with written word on blogs or still images on other platforms. This is of particular importance for those seeking information about the natural hair movement. The combination of visual aids and in-depth information allows Black women to find a human connection with whom they would like to watch and whatever they seek–information, support, or encouragement.

Framing Theory Applied to Social Media

A popularly referenced communication theory that helps individuals analyze content is Entman's framing theory. It is a method used to identify the most salient information that is being communicated while organizing messages into frames. This allows researchers to analyze these frames and identify overarching themes that are prevalent in various forms of media--newspapers, television, and now even social media (Entman, 1993; Entman, 2004).

By applying framing theory to social media communication, researchers can further analyze the prevalent themes within information disseminated between content creator and audience, as well as from user to user on various platforms. Various facets of YouTube content can contribute to the framing of an issue–the video, the audio, the video title, and the commentary that takes place under the video (Farr, 2011). Tian studied all of these facets by creating a two-tiered frame analysis and applying it to content found in YouTube videos as well as the corresponding comment sections (Tian, 2010).

A framing analysis of YouTube content can be used for a study that can compare the frames that are being disseminated by the content creator with the frames that are found in the comments section. This analysis can provide insight into the impact of these agents as well as how they influence the discourse surrounding certain topics, especially the natural hair movement (Tian, 2010). As a guide for this study, the author asked one research question: What attributes do Black women associate with their experience of wearing natural hair, and how does this present itself through YouTube content?

III. Methods

In the first stage of research, a content analysis was completed by analyzing YouTube videos that disseminated information about natural hair acceptance, or "natural hair journeys," and tips for caring for one's natural hair.

YouTube videos were selected because of the democratic nature of their content and their ability to create social influence. YouTube, as a platform, is structured by organizing content into various categories, such as Music, Comedy, or News. This allows for people to create content about a topic or to form interactive communities to learn more about a topic (Susarla et al., 2012).

YouTube videos have been successful tools of communication for the natural hair community. While blogs, Facebook pages, and other social media platforms are also popular, YouTube offers an advantage to someone who is looking for information or searching for support, not only because of the visual appeal of the content but also because of the open access to the videos, which is not always the case with Facebook pages or other social media platforms. On YouTube, viewers can openly access the content, and they can see the content creators, observe their hairstyles, witness the before-and-after process if they went from treated to natural hair, listen to the person's voice, and leave comments in response to the video's content. All of this allows the viewers to feel as if they are participating in an interpersonal, "face-to-face" relationship with a content creator on YouTube, as opposed to just following an author of written word. Explanatory videos allow viewers to interact with content creators and one another in the comments sections, and these viewers typically express gratitude for the support they receive (Antoine, 2013). YouTube is even a preferred educational tool about natural hair over help from professional stylists, which can be pricey and difficult to find. Videos can go into demonstrative detail and guide women on their "natural hair journey" (Gill, 2015).

The selection of YouTube videos for this study is meant to provide a sample that conveys the democratic, interactive nature of the content that this platform provides. The hope is that YouTube videos that are specifically about Black natural hair will elicit comments from viewers that will show evidence of the social support and sense of community that this content can promote and generate. It is important to not only analyze the content within the videos but also the audience interaction associated with that content. This interaction can be analyzed by looking at the audience's comments because "audience frames can function as a dependent variable, affected by media frames" within the videos (Tian, 2010).

Sample Selection

For the sample selection of YouTube videos, the term "natural hair journey" was used as a search term. A preliminary search revealed that this term is typically associated with YouTube videos in which content creators provide personal anecdotes about natural hair. The term "journey" indicates that the content creators either transitioned from a physical state of having chemically straightened hair or a mental state in which they did not embrace their natural hair to having natural hair or appreciating it. This is not simply a cosmetic change, but it relates to psychological and social changes for the content creator, as they indicated in their video conversations with the audience. The final result in the journey was the creator's choice to decide to wear her fully natural hair or to simply embrace the physical appearance of their natural hair.

It was observed that these videos can elicit a more emotional, meaningful audience response than a video that is simply about how to achieve a certain hairstyle. While styling videos are important content that contributes to the dialogue of the online natural hair community, the current study sought to find content that touches on the emotional aspects of self-image and self-acceptance, the historical aspects of "good hair" and other hair typing practices, and the modern social networking processes that create support and even serve to inspire viewers. After searching videos using "natural hair journey," the author collected Top 10 video results. The search ranking is not necessarily based on "view count" because YouTube altered its search algorithm in March 2015 (D'Onfro, 2015) and considered both view count and average watch-time in calculating popularity ranking. In the past, a video could continue to top the list even though viewers might have only watched it for a few seconds, because it counted only the number of views for ranking (D'Onfro, 2015).

The author planned to select the 25 top comments from each of the Top10 videos, which are decided by votes for popular comments and the recency of comments. YouTube's algorithm displays these comments at the top, with the rest displayed most recent to least recent (Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejdl, & Pedro, 2010) The author tried to select 25 comments from each selected video, but Video 7 had only 16 comments–likely because it was posted recently and did not have time to generate viewers' comments.

Analysis

After the Top 10 videos were selected, the transcripts of the videos and the top comments on these videos were analyzed based on Entman's (1993) framing theory, which identifies frames the content creator used consciously or not "to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendations" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). For this study, only the words from the transcripts were coded since the videos did not provide visual content that furthers the purpose of the study. Applying framing theory to YouTube videos and user comments allows for the identification of prominent themes and the sentiments, problems, and solutions associated with this content.

The coding procedure for this study was adapted from Tian (2010), which studied the framing of organ donation within YouTube video content and comments. Tian looked for meta-frames (or main frames) to identify major themes within the content and divided even videos' tone into positive, negative, or neutral categories.

Analysis of videos showed the following themes: 1) Inspiration, 2) Admiration/Gratitude, 3) Confidence/Identity, 4) Childhood/Family, 5) Societal Standards 6) Conflict, 7) Race/Ethnicity, 8) Hair growth/hair care, and 9) Others. The audience comments were coded using the same themes.

IV. Findings

YouTube Videos

The most prevalent video theme was 8) "Hair growth/hair care" in the code sheet (Refer to Appendix), which was defined as "information about hair growth tips, hair products, hairstyles, or details about one's hair care regimen." This is understandable since many videos about natural hair tend to focus on information about how to grow and maintain healthy hair. While describing their transition to wearing natural hair, video creators offered details about products that they used and the physical growth of their hair. While sharing their hair journeys as cautionary tales, they discussed what worked best for them to achieve a level of hair health or hair length with which they were pleased.

The second most prevalent theme was 4) "Childhood/Family," which was defined as "childhood experiences or familial influences on how one wears their hair" in the code sheet. This theme was closely related to the first focus, since the subjects would often outlined their hair care regimen dating back to childhood. For example, DiamondCandyTV from Video 1 recalled how her hair care regimen had changed:

> "My mom permed me and my little sister's hair, probably when we were in the third grade. She always took care of our hair and it was very healthy, even though it was permed. However, when I started taking care of my own hair in high school, that's when things started to go downhill."

The third most prevalent theme was 3) "Confidence/Identity," which was defined as mention of confidence, or lack thereof, in wearing one's natural hair; or mention of the development of one's identity in relation to their natural hair. After deciding to go natural, women could experience a wide range of emotions, including a boost in confidence, or even a sharp decline. Often their hair formed a part of their identity, and when this aspect changed, these women described undergoing an adjustment period. Jaelah Majette from Video 3 described her emotions after she decided to go natural and shaved her head:

> "You would have thought in that bag, that it was just hair. But to me it was my self-esteem, my confidence, my comfort, my security blanket. And now that all that was gone, I just felt like I wasn't tangible anymore. It's kind of like I lost myself."

It is important to note that this was one low point in Majette's overall positive experience with going natural. It shows that these emotions and confidence levels can fluctuate throughout one's journey.

Most of videos were toned "Positive" or "Neutral." "Negative" tones were the least frequent out of the three. An example of a positive tone is when Finding Kim's video used positive reinforcement to encourage women who are about to embark on a journey that may test their patience and comfort level. One "Negative" tone, also from the same video, was found when she said, "Sometimes I became discouraged because of failed styles or I didn't notice my growth." This comment also touched on the difficulties of going natural, and reveals the frustrations that come along with the process. Yet this let viewers know that it is normal to feel this way, and that they are not experiencing these emotions alone.

YouTube Comments

The most prevalent theme in the comments was 2) "Admiration/Gratitude," which is defined as "compliments or expressions of gratitude." An example of this theme was found in comment 10l from Dawn Michelle: "You are stunning, sister, and have really made some incredible progress with your hair growth! Love!!!" Many other comments of this nature would not only include compliments about the subject's hair, but also about her commitment, her resiliency, or general statements about her contributions to the natural hair community.

The second most prevalent theme was 8)"Hair growth/hair care," the same theme found from videos. Comment 1e by Kimberly Townsend exemplified this theme: "My 4c hair grew to almost the exact length in two years. But I wasn't taking care of it as I should have and I had to cut it all off yesterday. Hopefully I can get it back to that length. Beautiful hair by the way." Several comments under this theme were made in response to information that the content creator provided about their own hair regimens. Commenters often interacted with each other, answering questions about products that they have tried, sharing what styles they preferred, and sharing timelines of how long it took them to achieve a certain length of hair.

The third most prevalent focus within the comments was 9) "Others," which include a wide range of comments, ranging from questions about what music was playing in the background to remarks about how the subject was wearing a cute outfit.

The fourth most prevalent theme was 1) "Inspiration," which included mention of inspiration or motivation to embrace natural hair or continue on a natural hair journey. By providing guidance and sharing their personal experience, content creators were able to inspire viewers to also partake in a natural hair journey and to go against different forces that may inform them to do otherwise (societal pressure, family members, etc.). One example of inspiration was found in comment 3s from Hawa Eve:

> "Wow, this is very inspiring. The front of my hair is very damaged from heat and I feel like my hair isn't at it[']s full potential. So, I've been thinking of cutting it very very short. Seeing your hair grow so nice and healthy makes me less worried about growing my hair. Thank you!"

Although women like Eve may experience difficulties during their natural hair journeys, watching videos with advice and personal anecdotes reminds them to keep going.

The most prevalent tone within the comments was "Neutral," with "Positive" being the second, and "Negative," the third. In the code sheet, questions and general statements without a positive or negative emotion were defined as neutral statements.

V. Analysis

This paper tried to explore how Black women are articulating their perceptions of natural hair and shaping the perceptions of others on YouTube. The analysis of video content and comments revealed how women are using this digital platform to shape the cultural discourse around this topic. First, the content creators set the tone for the discourse surrounding natural hair by emphasizing theme 8) Hair growth/ hair care, which colored their journeys positively. This reflects the intention of many content creators, which is to inform or encourage other women who are having an experience that they can identify with. Sariya Jade, who posted Video 10, reflected on her decision to create a slideshow that shows embarrassing pictures from her past:

> "Let me just tell you guys, these pictures are hideous . . . they're atrocious. I am actually mortified at the fact that I'm showing you guys these, but hey . . . it's going to help you guys hopefully. Even if one of you guys is inspired to go natural or to transform your hair and make it healthy again, I will be happy."

Jade desired to share her progression through her natural hair journey in order to provide a helpful tool for her viewers. This is a sentiment shared by most content creators, which, if not explicitly expressed, is conveyed through their willingness to be vulnerable, as well as their providing detailed descriptions of their journeys. When the content creators used positive language and reinforcement, the comments also set a positive tone. This illustrates the effect of spreading positive beliefs and representations of women with natural hair. The fact that 2) "Admiration/Gratitude" was the most prevalent comment category reflects a positive tone that is consistent throughout this discourse.

In all but one of the videos, the content creators used chronological storytelling to illustrate their progression through various hairstyles, lifestyles, and even levels of acceptance of natural hair. Chronological storytelling is important because it allows viewers to connect with the beginning stages of the content creator's journey and witness the growth that they have experienced. Although most videos had an overall positive tone, the content creators provided viewers with stories about how they started with a negative view of their natural hair, or struggled at first with understanding how to care for their hair. This created a more realistic and relatable journey by revealing the negative aspects, which ultimately led to a positive outcome.

In these stories, content creators either focused on the physical growth of their hair, their emotional growth and confidence, or both to explain their hair journeys. While videos portrayed simply the physical changes, the women on the video provided details about how their hair texture and hair health changed, what products they used, and what hairstyles worked best for them. For example, Chrissy Cousin from Video 5 explained why she decided to cut all of her hair off, despite judgment from her peers:

> "So that's my goal, that's why I'm doing this and I want to show you all on camera how this process is going to go. Hopefully we can have a journey in the future of me showing you the progress and growth of my hair health."

Majette who posted Video 3 used an approach with more of an emotional explanation in sharing her natural hair journey:

> "So, it's been a real life journey for me just to get to my natural hair texture and to see how it reacts to different products. I'm really just learning to be comfortable with the way I was made naturally."

There were a few unexpected findings. First, it was expected that the information provided in the videos would cause an obvious positive impact on viewers, which would generate many comments in 1) the "Inspiration" theme. Instead, "Inspiration" was not a major theme, indicating that viewers were not emotionally connected to the content.

The author originally expected that all of the videos would include personal anecdotes that included emotional stories about how the women may have struggled, succeeded, and come to terms with their identity and level of confidence. Yet, Tatyana Ali in Video 2 used sarcastic and self-deprecating humor to connect with her audience. This lack of emotional appeals is reflected in the comments with the "Neutral" tone and the "Other" theme being most prevalent.

A couple of women posted videos that stuck to the facts of their story by clearly and simply describing how their hair changed appearance and became healthier during their journey. This shows that a content creator does not always have to share a story that touches viewers on a deep, emotional level in order to provide them with information that resonates with them.

Finally, an underlying discussion revealed divisions within Blacks about hair. Hair is still a central topic within Black culture because people of the African diaspora are still coming to terms with their appearance and battling societal standards that do not tend to favor them. This issue of division, although not one of the most prevalent themes, showed more in comments than on videos.

Historically, it has been a cultural belief within the Black community that people with silkier, looser curls had "good hair." Comment 3a from Tee Jay illustrated her frustration with people who hold on to this dated point of view. She wrote: "Waiting for the day as Black people [where] we would stop seeing 'Are you fully Black?' as a compl[e]ment." Comment 2e from biracialgirly even reinforced the misconception that only biracial or women of other races can have long, healthy hair. She commented: "You look Black with short hair and mixed with long hair." This is the type of rhetoric that has often dissuaded Black women from going natural for so many years, because they believed that the societal standard for hair length will not be achievable. Majette was the only content creator who referenced this dynamic among Black women within her video. She shared with her audience how she used to use the misconceptions about hair texture to her advantage:

"People were always curious about what I was mixed with or why or how my hair got to look like that or how I grew it so long . . . And soon enough it became comfortable and normal for me. I actually found gratification in people asking me was I one hundred percent black?"

Although 7) "Race/Ethnicity" theme was not a top theme, it is important to analyze its subtle presence as a reflection of why this movement holds a deeper significance to many women than simply choosing a new hairstyle. The sampled videos rarely promoted many messages that map onto the literature surrounding the promotion of natural hair acceptance. But these efforts to create a positive movement were perfectly illustrated by a comment from Ali in Video 2:

"And my last tip . . . girl you gotta love yourself. If you don't love yourself, then you won't be able to really grow out healthy hair. You're going to start comparing your hair to other people. This journey is about focusing on yourself."

This study has some limitations. Generalization of the findings to an entire population is not possible due to a small sample size of videos and comments. Samples of social media comments can often reveal extreme opinions, thus the attitudes in the videos and comments cannot represent the sentiments of an entire population (Moe & Schweidel, 2014). Typically social media users, when they have extreme opinions, choose to leave comments in response to online media. So, the sample does not represent thousands of viewers who may take something away from the video, but simply do not choose to leave a comment.

VI. Conclusions

The second wave of the natural hair movement was invigorated by the sharing power provided by social media platforms. YouTube, especially, is a platform that allows Black women to disseminate information about natural hair and cause a shift in the cultural understanding of natural hair, which has been overwhelmingly negative in the past. The author's content analysis of 10 YouTube videos and the corresponding comments revealed that content creators are sharing a positive narrative about natural hair. The majority of content creators who are posting videos used personal stories and emotional appeals to connect with viewers. This is reflected in the comments section as discussions surrounding confidence, identity, and appreciation for the content took place. This content also revealed an underlying discussion surrounding race/ethnicity and how hair is still a marker of Black women's lived experience.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix: Code sheet for videos and comments

Variable Name	Value label
Coder name	Name of person coding: 1=Cameron 2=Vanessa 3=Other
Source number	Video identified as one of 10 numbers between 1 and 10. Comment identified as one of alphabets between a and p. A comment on a specific video is identified by a mix of video and comment identification, such as 1a.
Date	Date when each video was published: mm/dd/yy
Length	Time for videos: 00:00- 1:00:00 Word count for comments: 0000-9998
Focused theme	Each video/comment can focus on more than one theme. 1) Inspiration: inspiration or motivation to embrace natural hair or continue on a natural hair journey 2) Admiration/Gratitude: compliments or expressions of gratitude 3) Confidence/Identity: confidence, or lack thereof, in wearing one's natural hair or the development of one's identity in relation to one's natural hair 4) Childhood/Family: childhood experiences or familial influences on how one wears one's hair 5) Societal Standards: societal pressures or beauty ideals 6) Conflict: conflicts that a black woman has experienced when wearing natural hair 7) Race/Ethnicity: natural hair within the Black community/how this issue affects Black women 8) Hair growth/hair care: information about hair growth tips, hair products, hair styles, or details about one's hair care regimen 9) Others: all content that does not fit any of the themes above
Generic frame	The most prevalent or salient frame in the information subsidy. This was not included in the coding process, but referenced in the analysis section to better organize and interpret findings.
Important quote	A quote that explains a specific issue or supports a theme/frame