

#Black Love and #BlackGirlMagic as Signs: A Semiotic Analysis

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In this paper I will be discussing and analyzing the social media hashtags #BlackLove and #BlackGirlMagic as artifacts through semiotic analysis. I will argue that the Black community uses hashtags like this as symbols of both celebration and protest simultaneously. They serve to create a new media narrative for a new generation of young Black children recovering from the generational trauma caused by historical crimes of racism and hate towards the Black community. However, while these movements were originally intended to be a celebration of blackness, Black people, and their stories, I will argue that they have lost their meaning over time. They have evolved and have been warped into subtle, but pervasive exclusionary messages that are imbedding new, toxic ways of thinking into this new generation of Black youth. In this paper I will propose a new way of using these hashtags on social media in a way that is more representative of all Black bodies, and not just the ones deemed as palatable and socially desirable.

#BlackLove is a popular hashtag that has been increasingly circulating in social media, especially by millennials. It is a hashtag that is usually paired with a cute photo or TikTok video of a Black couple. The couple is usually doing something romantic or funny, and the posts can also be aesthetically pleasing vacation montages of the couple. These cute vacation montages are also referred to as “baecations”. “#BlackGirlMagic is a concept and movement to celebrate the beauty, power, and resilience of all Brown and Black girls. Throughout American history, Brown and Black girls face adversity, hegemonic forms of beauty, marginalization, and systematic racism. However, Black girls still achieve with little supplies or support to become the most educated group in the U.S. and have the highest rate of entrepreneurial growth” (MelPrill).

Semiotic analysis is the study of signs and their meaning relating to the social world and social processes (Curtis and Curtis). With semiotic analysis we peel back the layers of an arbitrary sign, instead of taking it upon face value, and examine the ways in which a sign has been constructed to mean what we know it to mean within culture and society. A sign is made up of the signifier and the signified, where the signifier is an arbitrary term or description we use to identify the thing in question, and the signified is what we associate with the arbitrary term or description.

The hashtag ‘Black love’ originated as a way of “[combating] the very popular belief that Black men and Black women [could not] hold healthy relationships” (Marquaysa B.). The hashtag ‘Black girl magic’ originated as a phrase that was popularized by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 “when she first tweeted the hashtag #BlackGirlsAreMagic to celebrate the everyday ways that Black women thrive despite the boundaries erected to keep us from doing such” (Steele 6). It is no secret that Black women are vilified every day in person and especially online. In *Digital Black Feminism* (2021), Catherine Knight Steele makes reference to Safiya Noble (2018), who “began her inquiry into algorithmic bias with a simple question: What happens when you google search “Black girls”? In *Algorithms of Oppression*, she details how the creation and utilization of algorithms in nearly every aspect of our digital lives perpetuate anti-Black racism and misogynoir” (Steele 4). While we are coerced into believing that data, statistics, and numbers are completely factual and devoid of all human bias, this is simply not the case. Safiya Noble’s sentiments are an example of a concept we covered during this course. As Louise Amoore (2020) wrote, “Algorithms come to act in the world precisely in and through the relations of selves to selves, and to others, as these relations manifest in the clusters and attributes of data” (Amoore 204). Amoore argues that algorithms are not neutral as we are led as a society to believe, and they are in fact laced with the

very same biases that humans experience. Digital algorithms are created by us and for us, so it is evident that the same biases against Black women that exist in real life exist online as well, as argued in *Digital Black Feminism*. Black people and Black women in particular, began pushing against racial stereotypes through these hashtags, but this in turn sparked an online counterargument against these phrases for ‘making everything about race’. Even as Black people continue to use digital spaces as a way to speak up against the injustices of systematic racism, they still suffer from algorithms that are inevitably biased against them. In Rianka Singh’s *Rethinking Platform Power* (2021), she notes that “it is often imagined and argued that users are empowered by digital platforms as they afford users a voice by lowering barriers to participating” (Singh 712). However, she goes on to say that “we need to push back against the notion of platforms as liberatory” (Singh 711). Therefore, it is clear from the way Black people are treated online and discriminated against through algorithms, that platform affordance cannot be equated to liberation.

#BlackLove as a Sign:

#BlackLove exists as a symbol of celebrating and embracing Black culture. Black history and African roots are often erased and forgotten due to decades of whitewashing. In this context, the hashtag reminds Black couples to be proud of their roots and celebrate them.

Unfortunately, many languages are beginning to die out because Black children are growing up without learning their traditional languages, privileging English, and other centralized languages over their own. This will eventually lead to the wiping out of entire peoples and cultures that have existed for centuries. Those that did grow up knowing their own languages often feel embarrassed to speak their languages or speak with their native accents in White dominated spaces for fear of being looked down on. This is known as code-switching, broadly defined as “adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities” (McCluney et al.).

This hashtag, therefore, reminds Black people to revive and embrace their forgotten traditions, languages, and cultures, and hopefully pass them down to their children in generations to come. It demands for them to take up space just the way they are, instead of bending to the perceptions of dominant cultures.

Secondly, #BlackLove is used as a symbol of hope for Black families. As mentioned previously, Black families are stereotypically known to be broken, usually with a single mother and a father who has left his family or has been incarcerated. It has also become a racial slur that is weaponized against young Black children—for example, “your abandonment issues are because you have no father”, or “your daddy is in jail”. Here, the hashtag signifies healthy, loving Black families defying the stereotype, breaking generational curses they experienced in the past, and overcoming other racial stereotypes. It shows that contrary to popular belief, Black couples can maintain healthy relationships both for themselves and their children. In addition to this, the hashtag serves an equal but opposite purpose. It symbolizes the uplifting of Black love and Black families, while simultaneously symbolizing a rejection of white superiority in mainstream media. White couples are often idealized in the media, while interracial couples are fetishized, and Black couples are underrepresented. This shows that mainstream media does not consider Black love as ‘pure’ or

valid enough to be pedestalized the way White couples are. In this context, the hashtag exists to highlight and emphasize the beauty of Black love.



(BDonna_12), Photo Courtesy of @misogynoirs



(6900FLEX), Photo Courtesy of @misogynoirs



(jnochill_et al.), Photo Courtesy of @misogynoirs



(OhTavareys), Photo Courtesy of @misogynoirs

Lastly, #BlackLove is a symbol of appreciation for Black women. “The most disrespected woman in America, is the Black woman. The most un-protected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the Black woman” (Wilson). This quote by Malcom X was heavily circulated in 2020, and clearly this statement reigns true to this day, and not just in America. Black women are hated, discredited, degraded, vilified, dehumanized, objectified and unloved because of their skin color and because of the stereotypical personality traits that are associated with them. Black women are even victimized amongst people of their own race, I would say more often than they are by people of other races.

As shown in the images above, Black women, especially dark-skinned women are seen as less attractive and less desirable, even by dark-skinned Black men themselves in a heterosexual context. Therefore, this hashtag acts as a symbol of protest against conventional beauty standards that praise whiteness and lightness, and highlights the beauty of Black women, especially dark-skinned Black women. It reminds them that they are beautiful and deserved to be loved truly.

#BlackLove and #BlackGirlMagic are similar in this sense, because they both act as a symbol of appreciation for Black women, even though #BlackLove carries multiple other meanings.

#BlackGirlMagic as a Sign:



Christina Swarns @ChristinaSwarns · Apr 7

...

What a long time coming! Congratulations to the brilliant KBJ for shattering the glass ceiling and becoming the first Black woman to sit on the United States Supreme Court. It is a historic day for justice. [#BlackGirlMagic](#)



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(ChristinaSwarns)

As mentioned above, #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackLove are similar in their symbolization of love for Black women, however #BlackGirlMagic's primary focus is on highlighting Black women's capabilities specifically, whereas #BlackLove mainly focuses on the union of Black people in romantic relationships. Despite where they differ, they both act as forms of hashtag feminism. As Conley (2021) writes, "In particular, hashtag activism, hashtag feminism, and digital feminism...have been formalized...to describe the role hashtags play in documenting social and political life, and in theorizing about power. [It] examines modes of activism and feminist practices, namely how Twitter hashtags locate activist campaigns, organize online communities, and amplify social movements" (Conley 2). Hashtag feminism transcends in different ways, and these hashtags, particularly #BlackGirlMagic, are just one of the ways Black women are reclaiming digital and physical spaces by protesting racism, sexism, colorism, homophobia, and misogyny. #BlackGirlMagic is a celebration of the intelligence, beauty, strength, resilience, femininity, and excellence of Black women in the face of multiple forms of discrimination and degradation. In fact, as seen in the images on pages 5 and 6, many heterosexual men of various races claim and strongly assert that they would not date heterosexual dark-skinned Black women, or Black women in general. There has been a long-standing argument about whether this is blatant racism masked as a 'preference'. Regardless of whether it is a preference or internalized racism, it is undeniable that Black women are generally considered undesirable, a racial stereotype that #BlackGirlMagic is working to change.

Furthermore, #BlackGirlMagic is a symbol of the celebration of Black hair, a topic that has caused controversy in schools for no reason other than the fact that Black hair is different from conventional beauty standards. There have been endless stories of Black children whose braids or dreadlocks have been cut off by their peers in school, or even their teachers. Some have been stopped from participating in sports that require uniformity, such as cheerleading, until they 'change' their hairstyles to something more palatable (Asmelash). This is not only prevalent in a North American context. Growing up in Uganda, I witnessed firsthand the discrimination young Ugandan children have faced in schools. As a rule, children are not allowed to keep their hair long during school semesters so before the beginning of each semester, they are required to cut off their hair for the sake of uniformity. If they do not have it cut before they come to school, there have been cases where teachers cut off the children's hair themselves. However, some schools have a double standard for this rule when it comes to foreigners. Foreigners, including Asian children,

White children or mixed-race children with hair that is considered ‘fair’, are not forced to cut off their hair before reporting to school. This shows how deeply embedded racism and colorism are, to the extent that we discriminate against ourselves and privilege foreigners and whiteness even within our own country. Therefore, #BlackGirlMagic acts as a protest against hair discrimination and discrimination of other forms.

Lastly, #BlackGirlMagic is a celebration of Black bodies and afro-features. In the world we live in today, Black women’s curvy bodies are the blueprint and are idealized as the new beauty standard. Many social media influencers pay thousands for the ‘Instagram influencer body’ that so many Black women naturally have, after being popularized by socialites like Kim Kardashian. However, even though the bodies and the culture of Black women have been appropriated, they are still hated and vilified, and are not credited for their creations. This links to the story of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who was exploited and exhibited for her body. According to *Body of Evidence* (2011), her body “which although subaltern, seemed to speak not only for itself, but for women, especially Brown women, everywhere. Saartjie Baartman’s body told the story of how Brown women had for centuries suffered emotional, physical, and epistemic violence at the hands of White men, history, and science” (Ndlovu 18). She was treated like an animal and was forced to live in inhumane conditions for the entertainment and muse of her captors. And while her body’s uniqueness was considered an anomaly to Europeans, her shape was certainly not unique in South Africa, let alone in many other African countries. She had the opposite of an ideal body at the time, but today the bodies of Black women like hers are the new trend. Beauty standards for women have evolved numerous times over the course of history, and while curvy bodies are in-style or on trend now, there will come a time when the standard will change again. When that point comes, will Black women still have the modest significance they do today? #BlackGirlMagic serves to answer this question by showing love and respect to Black bodies, long after they go out of style when the tides turn. Below are examples of how #BlackLove and #BlackGirlMagic are used as symbols of appreciation.

Black Coffee @3rd_heaven7 · Apr 11
Random pictures of beautiful black girls 🍷💕

#BlackGirlMagic #melaninpoppin



(3rd_heaven7)

... blacklovefeed and blackgirlmagicfeed
Los Angeles, California



(blacklovefeed and blackgirlmagicfeed)

While #BlackLove and #BlackGirlMagic have proved to be symbols of celebration and hope for Black people, especially Black women, some argue that they are the Black community’s way of finding every opportunity to make everything about race. People online, particularly White supremacists, have created a counter hashtag “#WhiteGirlsAreMagic”, in retaliation of #BlackGirlMagic because firstly, they feel that using #BlackGirlMagic is unfair since

#WhiteGirlsAreMagic is considered racist and derogatory. Secondly, they feel that if Black people can create a hashtag to celebrate themselves in that manner, then why can't they? It is also worth noting that #WhiteGirlsAreMagic and #WhiteGirlMagic were not created to celebrate the beauty of White women, they were created simply because #BlackGirlsAreMagic and #BlackGirlMagic started trending first (Rankin). While it is fundamentally racist, in and of itself, for White people to lay claim to the digital spaces created by Black people in this manner, it is not what I wish to focus on.

Instead, I would argue that the way these hashtags have evolved is doing harm to the Black community, which is overshadowing the good that they have done over the years. This is because they have slowly and inconspicuously morphed into social media trends that play into the very same tropes that they are protesting against. Firstly, some argue that these hashtags (and similar ones such as #BlackExcellence) create impossible expectations for the Black community to live up to, because people are trying to live up to the perfect social media versions of those who glamorize these hashtags. While I agree, I believe this is an issue we all generally face when it comes to social media, and I think that there are more insidiously detrimental ways in which these hashtags are affecting the Black community.

Firstly, I believe that these hashtags have evolved to become discriminatory, especially #BlackLove. #BlackLove pages on social media, particularly Instagram, privilege heterosexual couples and tend to exclude queer couples. This is because the Black community has traditionally struggled to be accepting and welcoming of members of the LGBTQA+ community, and this has seeped into these hashtags subconsciously by virtually excluding queer couples from these pages and algorithms, reducing the amount of representation Black queer people see online. This fundamentally affects their perception of themselves and only makes them feel more underrepresented within their own communities.

Additionally, these #BlackLove pages idealize the heterosexual couples where either: both the man and the woman are light-skinned, or the woman is light-skinned but the man is slightly or significantly darker than the woman. This is something I noticed while looking through some of these pages, and I realized that most of these pages are very similar because they get content from the same places. There is little to no representation of dark-skinned women on these pages, and those that are included tend to be models with perfect skin and perfect hair. If you opened Instagram this minute, searched up #BlackLove, and clicked on one of the pages, you would notice that it takes a large amount of scrolling before you stumble upon a couple that does not fit the aesthetic that I just described above. Additionally, there is also little to no representation of couples that do not have 'Instagram influencer bodies', a phrase that has come to represent slim but curvy or model-like women and fit, toned, tall men. The couples pictured also tend to be in aesthetically pleasing locations, usually on vacation, denoting a certain level of wealth and status. The same goes for #BlackGirlMagic, because again, most of the women pictured using this hashtag tend to fit the 'Instagram influencer body' blueprint. For these reasons, I believe that these hashtags subliminally privilege some bodies and exclude others. It sends a message to Black girls and women that they are only worthy of Black love if they are light-skinned, heterosexual, able-bodied, or have an 'Instagram influencer body'. Is it really Black love and Black girl magic if the people portrayed only represent a miniscule percentage of the Black population?

Secondly, there has been a long-standing argument in the media within the Black community about the people who 'count' as Black, which creates a double standard. To illustrate,

the hashtag #BlackLove is rarely applicable to couples where at least one of the people in the relationship is of Black descent but looks racially ambiguous, for example Dwayne Johnson or Meghan Markle. Some have gone so far as to say that Meghan Markle is not ‘really Black’. Furthermore, the criteria that allows certain racially ambiguous people to ‘count’ as Black while excluding others is seriously flawed because it denies some people entire parts of their heritage and culture. For example, Drake is Black, but Halsey is not, and yet they both each have one parent of African American descent. Would Halsey be ‘allowed’ to use either of these hashtags? Halsey has notoriously received backlash online for trying to embrace her African American roots simply because she looks whiter than she does black. This not only influences who is ‘allowed’ to use the hashtags and who is not, but it has far-reaching effects on the identities of mixed-race people and almost denies them access to Black digital spaces.

Some argue that Black people who are racially ambiguous or ‘white-passing’ cannot possibly understand the magnitude of racism Black people face throughout their lifetimes, because they have never had to experience it full scale. While it is certainly true that racially ambiguous Black people benefit from light-skin or even white privilege, that should not take away from their experience as racialized people in our society. It should not deny them parts of their own heritage, and they should not be subjected to shame and torment for wanting to embrace their roots, just as these hashtags encourage them to do. Their lived experiences are just as valid, important, and real as everyone else’s experiences. In my opinion, while it is important for light-skinned and racially ambiguous Black people to acknowledge and be aware of their privilege, I believe that the Black community’s focus on cherry-picking who gets to participate in Black culture can at times be self-defeating, because it takes away attention from the larger societal issue at hand: systemic racism. Rather than using such hashtags as ways to create more divisions amongst ourselves, it is more important to find better ways to come together in unity and in solidarity against the oppression and systemic racism we all face as a people.

In conclusion, while I strongly believe in the amount of positive change these hashtags have done for the Black community and Black women in particular, they have unfortunately evolved into mere trends and are now subliminally playing into certain ways of thinking that privilege some groups and exclude others. Because of this, we need to go back to the roots of these hashtags and think about why they were created in the first place. I suggest a total rethinking of the way these hashtags are used online by rejecting what is currently being circulated. One of the main ways to combat what these hashtags have become is by actively flooding the algorithms with content that empowers the groups that have been marginalized both by society in real life and by underrepresentation in the media. This is not to say that there is entirely no representation of Black marginalized groups, because there certainly is—more than ever before, and it is growing at a faster rate. However, representation of these marginalized groups within the Black community is difficult to come across unless your algorithm or feed is specifically constructed to display such content, which should not be the case. It is very important for Black people to be able to go online and see themselves represented in the content that is posted using these hashtags, and not just the curated aesthetically pleasing snapshots of models and influencers that are currently flooding the algorithms. The only way to ensure this is by taking control of the narrative and creating real content to counteract the facade of perfection portrayed by social media under the guise of #BlackLove and #BlackGirlMagic.

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