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"I am now being who I am and I'm proud of it": Hair related personal and social identity and subjective wellbeing of older Black women in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Hair is an important personal attribute defined by the person's natural hair shape, form and colour as well as by age and health. The hair of Black women has a specific curly texture that has been commonly manipulated to resemble straighter European hair, following centuries of oppressive beauty norms. The biological hair aging also presents challenges to some women due to the traditional social constructs of beauty and the persistent pressure on women to maintain their appearance. This interdisciplinary study explores the evolution of hair management practices of Black women from age-related biological, personal, social and well-being perspectives. A mixed methods approach was adopted, based on an online survey (n = 46) followed by in depth semi-structured interviews (n = 10). A statistically significant shift towards less frequent use of complex hair styles and visits to the hairdressers over a 30-year period was found, but frequency of hair colouring was not impacted. Three main qualitative themes were identified: 1) managing hair greying represented an important age-related negotiation of personal and social identity; 2) curly hair texture remained a strong personal and cultural identity symbol in light of historical dominance of Eurocentric hair beauty standards and hair-based discrimination; and 3) subjective well-being was strengthened by increased confidence in one's personal hair aesthetics and better-informed choices about hair management. Overall, age did not diminish the desire to maintain good hair. Increasing the visibility of older Black women's hair will further support their capacity to negotiate their presence and participation in social and professional contexts and to enhance their subjective well-being.

KEYWORDS

Black women; hair aging; hair and identity; textured hair; wellbeing

Introduction

Hair is an important personal attribute. Hair appearance is defined by the person's natural hair shape, form and colour as well as by age and health, but is often altered under the influence of cultural identity and fashion trends. Whilst the role of hair in personal well-being is not well understood, excessive and pathology-related hair loss has been reported to cause a psychological

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burden of negative self-perception which in turn impacts social interactions and quality of life (Schielein et al., 2020; Russo et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2001). Healthy hair is also subject to biological aging, commonly manifesting itself in greying and thinning, the management of which is partially addressed by a mix of medicinal and cosmetic treatments (Monselise et al., 2015). An added layer of complexity for women is the role hair plays within the traditional social and power gender-based norms in society assigning a high value to female beauty. Furthermore, hair colour and length-related stereotypes have resulted in women feeling compelled to manipulate their hair for personal gains in social or professional contexts (Ward & Holland, 2011; McMurtrie, 2010; Weitz, 2001; Synnott, 1987). The combined psychological impact of biological hair aging and these social norms, especially as experienced by Black women, has not been studied extensively.

The role of hair in Black aesthetics and popular culture as well as its symbolism in the resistance of Black people to White hegemony is well researched (Chaves & Bacharach, 2021; Canella, 2020; Dash, 2006; Jarab, 1985). It is also documented artistically, for example: the famous song by the American songwriter Solange Knowles "Don't touch my hair [When it's the feelings I wear]" has captivated and inspired others to portray the historical struggles of Black women against Eurocentric beauty standards (Knowles, 2016). The acclaimed book bearing the same title by the Irish author Emma Dabiri offers a personal and philosophical account of the meaning and role of hair for people of African descent from pre-colonial to modern societies, skilfully intertwining her personal experience as a mixed-race woman living in the United States (US) and Ireland (Dabiri, 2019). An informative and humour-infused documentary by the American comedian Chris Rock has also served to educate broad audiences about the daily realities of Black hair styling, talk and culture amongst African American women (Stilson, 2009). In the context of these expressions of cultural and social Black identity related explicitly to hair, the impact of hair aging and related visible aspects of it such as greying, have so far been neglected.

This study

This interdisciplinary study foregrounds the experiences of older Black women, and the evolution of their hair management practices from age-related biological, personal, and social perspectives. It also seeks to explore whether and how aging hair impacts the subjective well-being of women. It is informed by an extensive literature review in the fields of body image changes in relation to aging; the science of biological hair aging; studies of well-being and hair, and studies on Black women's hair and identity. The data collection and analysis focus on Black women living in the UK who are 59 years old and over as biological changes to hair become more prominent after menopause. The study contributes to raising the visibility of a group of women who appear underrepresented in gerontological academic research as well as in the media.

Literature review

Body image and aging

Face and hair are difficult to separate from one's overall body image. Large cohort studies from the US report that face and body image dissatisfaction decrease with age and are also mediated by race with Black women being more satisfied than White or Asian women (Frederick et al., 2022, Frederick et al., 2022). However, small-scale studies on specific aspects of body aging report more nuanced outcomes, reflecting the variable methods and age of the studied populations. Where positive associations between aging and body image have been identified, a shifting focus towards health and professional status with age is also present (Lee & Damhorst, 2022; Lee & Lee, 2022; Bennett et al., 2017; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013). Other studies refer to body image vulnerability and negativity associated with aging (Kilpela et al., 2021; Reel et al., 2008).

Regardless of the motivations, all studies report active adaptations of lifestyle choices such as eating, fitness, fashion and cosmetics usage with age. Moreover, maintaining a sense of personal agency is commonly sought via the selective use of beautifying routines and products, not so much to resist the biological process, but to assert one's identity whereas women might have felt invisible in the past (Searing & Zeilig, 2022; Cameron et al., 2019; Bennett et al., 2017; Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Clarke & Korotchenko, 2010; Ward & Holland, 2011). Hair greying is a visible manifestation of aging which women specifically address in various ways as they negotiate gendered agism (Cecil et al., 2022; Heinrichsmeier, 2019; Barak-Brandes & Amit, 2018; Ward & Holland, 2011). Grey hair, however, is not universally undesirable, as some women choose to display it to maintain personal authenticity whilst combining it with some compensatory actions (e.g. haircut, makeup) (Cecil et al., 2022). It could also be specifically used to signify experience and authoritative status (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017). Hence, attitudes towards hair aging and how it is managed co-exist on a very wide spectrum and address varied personal objectives, which are likely to evolve with time, as well as under external influences.

Scientific understanding of Black women's hair and hair aging

Differences in the geometric, mechanical and sensory properties of different hair types lead to different hair management and styling practices (Daniels et al., 2023; Khumalo et al., 2000). Culture, fashion trends and age also influence these practices as well as the hair aesthetic norms which women uphold. The curliest human hair is associated with people of African descent (Loussouarn et al., 2007). Such hair has been reported to have more knotting and broken hairs and is linked to perceptions of, and concerns with, hair breakage (Lewallen et al., 2015; Quaresma et al., 2015 Bryant et al., 2012; Roseborough and McMichael, 2009). Specific challenges to hair management emerge with age, notably due to hair greying (Maymone et al., 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Duvel et al., 2019; Panhard et al., 2012) but also due to the biological aging of the hair follicles, resulting in hair thinning and loss (Williams et al., 2021; Cloete et al., 2019 Ali & Wojnarowska, 2011).

Hairstyling practices amongst Black women and their impact on hair and general health

In addition to the hair's natural fragility, styling practices such as relaxing and braiding can cause structural damage to Black women's hair (Molamodi et al., 2021; Bloch et al., 2019; Dadzie & Salam, 2015; Khumalo et al., 2005) and possibly dermatosis and hair loss (Mayo & Callender, 2021; Dadzie & Salam, 2016; Tanus et al., 2015; Kyei et al., 2011). Due to the enduring dominance of Eurocentric beauty standards, which also include the appearance of straight hair, hair relaxing (straightening) has been popular for decades amongst Black women globally. However, the procedure is associated with scalp irritation, excessive hair breakage (Dadzie & Salam, 2015; Rucker et al., 2011; Olasode, 2009) and, more recently, with breast cancer (Eberle et al., 2020; Stiel et al., 2016). Whilst further research into possible cancer risks is needed, such reports and social media coverage may have accelerated the recent decline of hair relaxer usage (Rominey n.d.) and the increasing popularity of "natural" styles, meaning non-relaxed hair (Dadzie & Salam, 2015, 206).

The politics of Black women's hair

The dominance of Eurocentric hair beauty norms resulting in negative hair valuations has contributed to the internalisation of white supremacy in Black women and, consequently, the politicisation of Black hair (Greensword, 2022; Robinson, 2011). The impact of hair appearance and texture on an individual's well-being begins from a young age and girls with textured hair in the

US, as young as 10-15 years, are reported to have experienced some form of teasing or bullying related to their hair (Henning et al., 2022; Mbilishaka et al., 2020) whilst school appearance policies preventing children from wearing their natural hair at school have been successfully challenged in court in the UK (Equality & Human Rights Commission, 2023). Within this complex social context, older women in the family, like mothers and grandmothers, have a strong influence over younger persons' hair choices due to their frequent involvement in combing and grooming rituals. Their influence has been reported to vary from reinforcing "neat" Eurocentric hairstyles to spending a lot of time creating Afrocentric hairstyles (Mbilishaka et al., 2020). Hair relaxing through college years and adulthood to prevent possible discrimination and to focus attention on professional achievements is still common for Black women in the US (Williams et al., 2022). The adaptation of hair styles to Eurocentric standards has been reported to be particularly common for lawyers, followed by finance professionals and physicians and least common in technology-related occupations. This suggests that the overall degree of formality in the professional field magnifies the pressure on the already underrepresented Black women to conform by adopting Eurocentric hair styles (Karl et al., 2022). Hair bias in recruitment contexts has also been reported, whereby Black women with natural hair styles were judged to be less professional and competent than Black women with straightened hair and White women regardless their hair type and style (Koval & Rosette, 2021). Thus, due to the potential risk of discrimination and marginalisation, Black women are more inclined to resort to identity adaptations (hair-related adaptations), which could cause stress and impact negatively on wellbeing (Dawson & Karl, 2018; Dawson et al., 2019; Berkemeyer, 2019; Nkimbeng et al., 2023). In response to these concerns, discrimination based on natural and protective hairstyles tied to national origin or race was first banned in two US states in 2019 (Donahoo & Smith, 2022; Donahoo, 2021). Since then, another 21 US states have enacted the legislation also known as **C**reating a **R**espectful and **O**pen **W**orld for **N**atural Hair (Crown) (Congress.Gov, 2022). Nevertheless, some employment practices may still diminish Black women's perceived opportunities to access and succeed in specific jobs (Donahoo, 2023). Thus, continuous engagement and education of organisational stakeholders is needed to overcome explicit and implicit racial biases in the workplace (Trusty et al., 2023). In response to these lived experiences of oppressive beauty and professional hair norms Black women have resorted to various subtle or more overt forms of resistance. For example, some would wear Afrocentric hairstyles purposefully as a visual manifestation of their rejection of the Eurocentric beauty norms and as an assertation of their personal and cultural identity. Opting for such hairstyles is also a means of cultivating "self-love" and a base to share discursive language (Rowe, 2019; Norwood, 2018). For many Black women, transitioning from relaxed to natural hair symbolises a process of identity negotiation including, amongst others, learning new hair practices and routines (Goins, 2021, Ndichu & Upadhyaya, 2019). Online blogs and hair tutorials play an important role, as their interactive nature fosters supportive communities based around shared experiences and celebrating Black beauty and culture (Yusuf & Schioppa, 2022; Canella, 2020). Several film scenes have also featured protagonists in intimate moments of unstyled Black hair, thus offering the audience glimpses into Black women's complex relationship with their hair (Rowe, 2019).

The market research specialist Mintel reports that 60% of US consumers with textured hair feel pressure within their community to maintain their hair (Rominiyi, 2023) and 53% of UK consumers indicate that they are willing to spend more than their current spending to achieve their hair goals (Stratford, 2024). Other trend spotters have highlighted that whilst black female consumers make up 2% of the England and Wales adult population, their hair related spending accounts for 10% of the UK haircare and services market size (Tressure Tress n.d.). This data points to high financial commitment from Black female consumers, likely to be at least partially driven by the historic pressure to conform with Eurocentric hair presentation standards. In the current context however, this might signify a willingness to prioritise outward manifestation of

cultural heritage and self-expression using Afrocentric styles. Age-specific market data is lacking, which is the case for all types of hair, but it is reasonable to assume that the lack of specialised products for textured hair in the past did not reduce the motivation to manage hair.

Hair and subjective well-being

Scalp conditions and hair loss incurred as a result of hair relaxation have been associated with low self-esteem in Black women with improved confidence and well-being following the switch from relaxed to natural hair (Jacobs & Kelemi, 2020). A change from relaxed to natural hair is likely to require some personal learning and is often situated within a social context. Black hair grooming routines present social bonding and positive affirmation opportunities within families as well as in hairdressing salons (Mbilishaka, 2018a;) which may influence the decision to switch. Furthermore, hair salon visits are seen by many as a means to heal and improve well-being as they offer the opportunity for social interactions and storytelling (Mbilishaka, 2018b). Hairdressing salons and natural hair blogs/vlogs have also been suggested as possible contexts within which culturally sensitive interventions for improving mental health and well-being in Afro-Americans can be delivered (Mbilishaka, 2018a; Ashley & Brown, 2015). Quantitative studies examining the associations between hair and different aspects of psychological well-being are sparse. In a group of Black students and employees at a university in the US ($n = 69$), natural hair was correlated with positive self-esteem and engagement with physical activities (Blackshear & Kilmon, 2021). A study of African American women ($n = 282$) identified no significant correlation between hairstyle and self-esteem but a positive correlation between high internal locus of control and wearing natural hair (Ellis-Hervey et al., 2016). Meanwhile similar studies in the UK are lacking, but recently some critical qualitative studies have been published. The marginalisation of the Black beauty and hair industry in the UK has been noted specifically (Lukate, 2022) whilst in another publication, the authors describe Afro-Caribbean women's experiences with their hair as a source of racism which is pervasive and contrary to the media portrayals (Griffiths & Haughton, 2021). On the other hand, similarly to US studies, the materiality of the textured hair-care routines across generations and the aspirational and spiritual nature of caring for textured hair was reported (Rajan-Rankin, 2021).

To conclude, hair's specific texture and styling practices seem to have an impact on the personal and social identity and well-being of women. The hair practices that Black women engage with appear to range from transformations aimed at preventing discrimination or enhancing one's economic prospects to choosing hair styles according to cultural identity and, for some, political values. However, hair style choices may also have pragmatic, convenience-based and cost drivers which, in turn, exert different pressures on women at different stages of their lives. In addition, changes in the hair due to biological aging such as hair greying and thinning are likely to add another layer to the already complex motivations and procedures (for example colouring hair) as well as to one's hair-related well-being. It is notable that the majority of the literature reviewed is based on studies that have taken place in the US. There is a dearth of knowledge about the experiences of older Black women from the UK and their hair practices. The following study redresses this imbalance and aims to explore how these hair-related and inter-related factors are experienced by a group of UK based women.

Methods

This study was based on a mixed methods approach. Ethical approval was granted by London College of Fashion (University of the Arts London) ethics subcommittee (12/02/2021). At each stage of data collection (quantitative and qualitative), the participants were presented with an information sheet and informed consent was obtained. Following their research participation,

they were also sent a short debrief form. The quantitative stage was conducted first to identify themes and questions which were then explored further in the qualitative stage. All personal details were treated as confidential, and all responses have been fully anonymised. Due to the cultural sensitivity of the topic of the study and to ensure the most accurate usage of hair styling terms, an advisory panel was convened, comprising two professional women of African and Afro-Caribbean descent respectively, to help guide the study. The advisory panel advised on the overall design of the study and the terminology used.

Study participants

Different groups of participants took part at each stage. The participant inclusion criteria for both stages were the same: i) females; ii) self-identify as of African, Afro-Caribbean, Black British or mixed-race background which includes Black origin; iii) age over 59; iv) natural hair curl type corresponding to groups 3B, 4 A and 4B, according to a professional hair type classification system (Gittens, 2015: 25-26).

For simplicity, this study refers to all participants as Black women, as they commonly referred to themselves in such a way, and to their hair as Black hair or textured hair.

Quantitative methods

An online survey was conducted using Qualtrics software (Qualtrics XM, USA). The questions were grouped into the following categories: demographic (age, ethnicity, employment status); hair descriptives (currently hair style, natural hair curl type, greyness. For the latter two, visual scales were presented to enable the participants to select according to their hair status); current and past hair management and styling practices (six questions with guidance to report current practice and to think back 30 years); self-observed age-related hair changes (six questions); current hair satisfaction questions (six questions), open-ended questions asking the participants to describe their hair; and an adaptation of the Quality of Life (QoL) questionnaire comprising thirty questions (Bowling & Stenner, 2011; Bowling, 2009). The rationale for comparing hair over a period of 30 years was based on the aim to reflect the significance of the menopause on the biological hair aging. During and post menopause, a reduction in hair growth rate and density along with intensified hair greying occurs, which, alongside lifestyle factors, may cause changes in hair styling practices. The sampling technique was convenience sampling. With this sampling technique contact is made with a small group of people who are relevant to the study. They then publicise the study and bring it to the attention of other relevant potential participants. The survey was conducted from July 2021 to October 2021. Statistical analyses (correlations and *t*-tests, as appropriate) were conducted using SPSS (version 28.0.0.0) (IBM, USA). Statistical significance was defined as achieving *p*-value equal or lower than 0.05.

Qualitative methods

All the interviews took place remotely via the platform of the interviewee's choice (Zoom, Skype or Microsoft Teams). It has been noted previously that it is possible to generate a sense of trust and cooperation with participants during remote interviews (Searing & Zeilig, 2022) which may more easily be arranged at the convenience of the participants and take place in private spaces. The interviews were semi-structured in format and comprised open-ended questions. The interview schedule included about 20 open questions structured into the following subthemes: discussing the participant's current hairstyle preferences, management and styling techniques and the motivation for these; discussing their hair in the past, elaborating on hair aging perceptions, and talking about the role of the hair for their well-being, identity, and other possible impacts on life.

Some questions were aimed at exploring further and enabling the interpretations of quantitative data analysis. Other questions, for example, those related to hairdressing, family and social influences, were guided by the literature review (see Supplement 1 for the full list of questions). The questions and question order were reviewed after two pilot interviews and small changes were made to the order of questions to aid the flow of the subsequent interviews. However, the interviewers kept the interview schedule flexible to enable the participants to share anything they considered relevant. All interviews took place between February 2022 to June 2022. All interviews were both video and audio recorded and then transcribed.

The qualitative data analysis followed the method of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involves a six-phase process including familiarisation with the data, coding, thematic search, naming and defining themes and writing up. The research team met first and a randomly selected transcript was read by the researchers collectively to create the initial code book. Forty-six primary codes were identified. The remaining interview transcripts were then read and coded by different researchers, to reduce bias. A small number of additional codes were created in this process. The researchers met to discuss their respective coded interviews and to engage in reflective practice. Following this iterative process, the initial codes were condensed into twelve secondary codes, which were then aggregated into three major themes with four subthemes each. The consensus of all researchers was sought and reached at each stage to ensure the credibility of the process and outcomes (Nowell et al., 2017). The NVivo qualitative data analysis software version 12 (QRS International, USA) was used throughout.

Results

Quantitative results: descriptive data

A total of 46 valid responses from female participants aged 60-80 were collected: twenty-nine participants (63%) of age 60-64, eleven participants (24%) age 65-69 and six participants (13%) of age over 70 years. Thirty-five participants self-identified as being from African, Caribbean or Black British ethnicity, and nine as of mixed-race background. Forty-two participants (91%) did not have relaxed or otherwise texture-altered hair, broadly comprising two groups: thirteen participants (28%) had styles which were not Eurocentric (braids, afro twists, dreadlocks, sister bumps, plaits, wigs, extensions) and twenty-nine participants (63%) considered their hair natural with variable hair length. Thirty-one participants (67%) reported low intensity and fifteen (33%) reported high intensity of grey hair (Table 1).

Quantitative results: hair management and satisfaction data

The frequency of common hairstyle choices at the present time and in the past (defined as about 30 years ago) were compared using Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test (Table 2). The frequency of each styling choice was recorded on a three-point scale: 1 = very frequently (at least every 1-2 months), 2 = not frequently (over 2 months), 3 = never. The frequency of hair relaxing, braiding, weaving and extensions in the past (30 years ago) was significantly higher than in the current day. This signifies that not only the chemical hair alterations but also styles applying high tension on the hair had become less common with age. The participants also reported going to the hairdresser less frequently now than when they were younger, which may be reflective of the current style preferences, slowing hair growth rate and other lifestyle factors. However, the frequency of hair colouring was not significantly different between the past and the current day suggesting that hair colouring habits are independent from other styling practices and not reliant on professional hair dressing. The ease of hair management in the past and currently was compared via an Independent-Sample *t*-test. Currently, hair was more difficult to manage than in the past

Table 1. Demographic and hair-related descriptive data of the survey participants.

Demographic data								
Participants age n = 46	60-64 years		65-69 years		70-74 years		75-80 years	80+ years
Frequency	29		11		4		2	0
Percent	63		24		9		4	0
Ethnic background (self-report) n = 45 (1 = prefer not to say)	African		Caribbean		Black British		Mixed (other)	Other
Frequency	8		12		15		7	2
Percent	17		26		32		15	9
Other = South American mixed, Black American								
Employment status n = 45 (1 = prefer not to say)	Employed Full Time	Employed Part Time	Self Employed	Fully retired	Retired + self-employed.	Retired + volunteer	Other	
Frequency	11	4	7	14	4	1	4	
Percent	24	9	15	30	9	2	9	
Other = retired but studying								
			Hair type data					
Hair curl type n = 46		III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	
Frequency			2	9	15	10	10	
Percent			4%	20%	33%	22%	22%	
Hair greying intensity n = 46	No grey	Low grey			High grey			Completely grey
Frequency	1	15	12	3	1	4	9	1
Percent	2%	33%	26%	7%	2%	9%	20%	2%
Current hair style n = 46	Chemically treated hair				Natural style with high tension		Natural hair (not specified)	
	Relaxed, texturised, permed				Pleats, braids, extensions etc		Various hair length	
Frequency	4				13		29	
Percent	9%				28%		63%	

($t(45)=2.99$, $p=.002$). This finding may be reflecting the chosen hairstyles, the less frequent use of hairdressers or other changes to hair over time, hence it could be explored further in the qualitative stage. A range of satisfaction correlates between hair characteristics and attitudes toward hair was explored using Pearson Correlation. Strong positive correlations were identified between feeling satisfied with current hair length, texture and overall appearance of hair with the following: feeling positive about the natural hair; personal attractiveness based on current hairstyle and confidence in social situations based on hair. Satisfaction with current hair colour had a weaker correlation with positivity and attractiveness and no correlation with confidence. All correlation coefficients are displayed in Table 3.

Further correlates of overall hair satisfaction were found for those who liked to wear their hair naturally ($r=0.31$, $p=.037$ and $N=46$) and liked to wear styles that are easy to achieve at home ($r=0.47$, $p=.001$ and $N=46$).

Grouping the women into a 'still-working' ($n=22$) and 'partially or fully retired' samples ($n=19$), three questions related to self-assessment of hair were analysed using an Independent-Sample t-test. There was no statistically significant difference between the sample groups for either of the following questions: positivity about current hair, attractiveness based on current hairstyle confidence in social situations based on hair and overall satisfaction with current hair inferring that working status did not affect the way the women felt about their hair. At the time of the survey, the participants stated that their hair was a mark of femininity ($n=20$), racial ($n=22$) and social identity ($n=22$). As their hairstyles were mostly not Eurocentric, these choices would benefit from further qualitative exploration.

Table 2. Hairstyling frequency questions.

Questions	Frequency score	SDev	p-value	N-Score
How often do you relax your hair? (currently)	2.85	0.69	<.001	−4.966
How often did you relax your hair? (30 years ago)	1.91	0.69		
How often do you colour your hair? (currently)	2.22	0.84	1	0
How often did you colour your hair? (30 years ago)	2.46	0.72		
How often do you braid or weave your hair? (currently)	2.61	0.65	.006	−2.734
How often did you braid or weave your hair? (30 years ago)	2.17	0.77		
How often do you use hair extensions? (currently)	2.65	0.71	.008	−2.642
How often did you use hair extensions? (30 years ago)	2.35	0.79		
How often do you use a hairdresser for any of the above? (currently)	2.41	0.78	<0.001	−3.785
How often did you use a hairdresser for any of the above? (30 years ago)	1.85	0.73		

Notes: Hair styling activity frequency was measured via a three-point response scale: 1 = very frequently (at least every 1-2 months), 2 = not frequently (over 2 months), 3 = never. The data was analysed using Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, $^{*}p<.01$

Table 3. Correlates of satisfaction with current hair colour, length, texture and overall appearance and feeling positive, attractive and confident (Pearson correlation test $^{**}p\leq.01$, $^{***}p\leq.001$, **N = 46**)

	How satisfied are you with your current hair colour?	How satisfied are you with your current hair length?	How satisfied are you with your current hair texture?	How satisfied are you with your current hair appearance overall?
I feel positive about natural hair most of the time***				
Pearson correlation, r	0.326*	0.602**	0.618**	0.612**
I feel attractive based on current hair style***				
Pearson correlation, r	0.385*	0.643**	0.713**	0.788**
I feel confident in social situations based on current hair style ***				
Pearson correlation, r	0.261	0.624**	0.665**	0.808**

The QoL data was grouped into seven question subgroups (Life Overall [$\alpha = .75$], Health [$\alpha = .76$], Social Relationships and Participation [$\alpha = .36$], Independence [$\alpha = .25$], Psychological and Emotional Well-being [$\alpha = .75$], Financial Circumstances [$\alpha = .78$], and Religion/Culture [$\alpha = .57$]), and a QoL value for each subgroup as well as an aggregate QoL value ($\alpha = .82$) was calculated. It should be noted that while some of the QoL subscales did not reach alpha levels of .70 (the conceived minimum threshold of internal reliability), it has been argued elsewhere (e.g., Hur et al., 2023) that the validity of measurement should be prioritised over reliability. Given that the present survey was adopted from a standardised questionnaire, it was decided to retain the original structure of the questionnaire. The QoL sub and overall values for those with natural hair style vs those with other hairstyles were compared using an Independent-Sample *t*-test. The participants with natural hair had lower religion/culture QoL satisfaction than those with non-natural hair ($t = 2.58$ (44), $p = .01$). All other results did not yield statistically significant differences between groups, meaning that wearing hair naturally or not did not impact the QoL.

Qualitative results: descriptive data

A total of ten Black women of African or Afro-Caribbean heritage, ranging in age from 59 to 67 years and residing in the UK took part in the study. All survey participants were invited via the debrief information to express interest in participation in the interviews. As none of them did, a fresh group of participants meeting the same inclusion criteria were recruited. All participants identified as having high curl types 3B, 4 A and 4B (Gittens 2015: 25-26) lived in the UK and were of age >59 years (Table 4). The summary of the codes, patterns and themes and the number of references found in the transcripts are reported in Figure 1.

Table 4. Demographic information of the participants in the interviews

Participant	Age (years)	Self-reported background	Marital status	Employment	Location
A	61	Black British	Married	Employed F/T	London
B	60	Black African	Single	Unemployed	Buckinghamshire
C	61	Caribbean, British	Single/divorced	Employed F/T	Greater London
D	59	Afro-Caribbean	Divorced	Retired	Greater London
E	62	Black, Caribbean	Married	Employed F/T	Essex
F	62	Caribbean	Divorced	Employed F/T	Greater London
G	60	Caribbean	Separated	Unemployed	Coventry
H	67	Caribbean	Divorced	Self-employed F/T	Leicestershire
I	59	Caribbean	Not married	Employed	London
J	59	Caribbean	Married	Employed F/T	United Kingdom

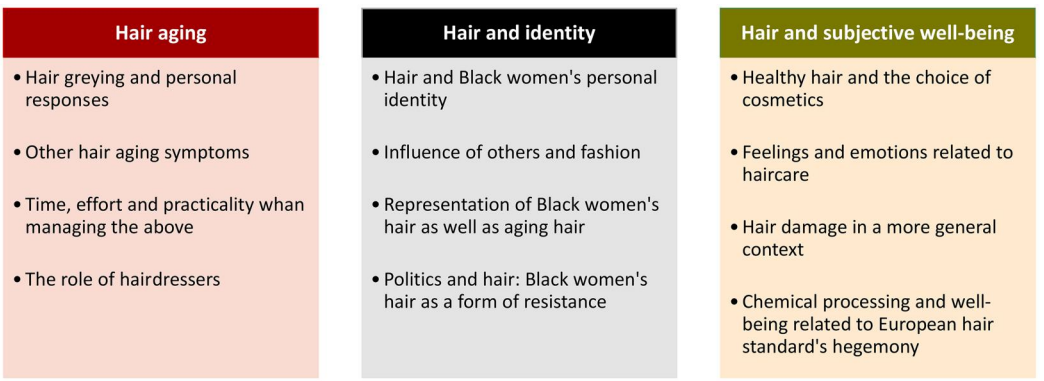

Figure 1. Major themes emerging from the analysis of the qualitative data.

Theme 1: Hair aging and its management. Subordinate themes: hair greying, other hair ageing manifestations, time and effort, the role of hairdressers

The most common hair aging sign discussed in the interviews was hair greying but the feelings and responses to it varied. For some participants accepting their grey hair signified a renegotiation of their identity but from a position of control which is different from passive acceptance or a denial of biological aging.

> "I don't feel old and neither do my friends who are the same age as me. We might be in our 60s, but we're not in the 60s that my parents were when they were definitely older and still colouring their hair … if you can accept your hair has changed, then it doesn't mean to say you're not young anymore because you're young in your mind. It's just that your hair, like the rest of your body, is changing and evolving and that's the next phase." (Participant C).

Others assigned low aesthetic value to grey hair which, they feared, could also lead to other negative judgements: for example, grey hair, and by extension the admission of age, could allude to inferior competence or capacity for self-care. Gendered ageism was specifically referred to.

> "When men get old and grey, they call them distinguished, don't they? For women - she's an old bag or she's this and that and I just think it's wrong." (Participant G).

The challenge of negotiating one's social identity in the context of visible hair greying was exacerbated by the perceived lack of positive representation of women with grey hair. It also brought forward the importance of when and how one will make the important decision to allow grey hair to show, as this could be a pivotal personal and social identity negotiation point.

> "It's just getting through that first time when you actually go out there and suddenly people see you and think, oh, your head is not great, it's not black anymore … " (Participant C).

For most participants, hair thinning and slowing hair growth were also notable signs of hair aging, but they were less stigmatised than greying which might be due to their less visible nature. Managing these manifestations of hair aging was not universally equated with switching to natural hair texture. It was more of a gentle shift towards subjective practicality and comfort and feel-good haircare without compromising on personal aesthetic standards: "I do not like styles that I cannot sleep in", "long hair in the summer – it is uncomfortable" (Participant C); "I do wear wigs sometimes if I run out of time", "I am not spending a lot of money and time on it" (Participant D).

The experiences with hairdressers varied a lot. Some women considered their hairdressers good at addressing their needs and offering a pampering experience. For others, the experience was mired by discomfort caused by some styles, the high cost, the lack of confidence in the hairdressers' ability, and a sense of powerlessness.

> "And then you come out being fed up because you've allowed someone to take control over your hair and you don't feel good." (Participant F).

Hence, the shift towards subjective practicality of hair management, often meaning doing less, could also be a manifestation of the desire to take control of one's choices.

In summary, this theme identifies how important hair colour management over time is for many Black women. Awareness of agism and stereotyping of grey hair clearly influenced the individuals' decisions as women strove to demonstrate their ability to maintain fulfilling personal and professional lives. Regardless of whether they embraced greying or chose to colour their grey hair, keeping a presentable hair appearance whilst allowing for a degree of subjectively defined ease and comfort appeared to be common. The choices made were not strongly influenced by a particular group of people or media, although mothers and daughters were referred to in some cases.

Theme 2: Hair and identity. Subordinate themes: personal identity, influence of others, representation and hair politics

Hair was referred to as a defining feature of Black women's identity: "Well, being from an African background, we usually say that our hair is our Crown!" (Participant B).

The emphasis on hair aesthetics, the time spent on looking after and styling hair, the desire to change styles frequently and the importance of peer validation from other Black women were among the most common signifiers of how important hair was for women. For most participants, the importance of hair on a personal level remained almost undiminished with time. For some, taking care of one's hair was a means for building confidence:

> "I always want to make the effort, it makes me feel really confident." (Participant C); "it gives you confidence when you do your hair and you go out, some are calling, oh … your hair looks nice." (Participant F).

Another motivator was resisting ageist stereotypes as looking well-groomed was believed to facilitate positive social valuations:

> "if your hair is not right, it can affect whether you look actually older, other people looking at you will think, well, she's not very well groomed and taking care of herself" (Participant F).

A subtheme of the politics of resistance and representation was identified too. It stemmed from lived past experiences when women were made to feel that their hair texture and style needed to emulate European hair to be accepted:

> "We were all going for a specific look, because at a younger age, you were taught that the white Caucasian-looking straight hair was the right hair to have. And we didn't appreciate our own hair, we didn't appreciate our own textures because it wasn't really acceptable. (Participant E).

In this context, the symbolism of hair also cut deeper into racial inequality as having the "right" hair could impact the professional, economic and well-being prospects of these women. However, equally importantly, most participants felt that at this stage of their lives, they had the agency to wear their hair as they wished, and to assert their cultural identity publicly. For some, hair could also be used to make a personal political statement:

> "What got me back to going natural (hair) was when George Floyd died, and I was really angry about it. I was very angry. I cut off all my hair, because for me, when I had my red (relaxed) hair, it was like saying I wanted to be white, and I didn't." (Participant H).

This statement echoes the Black hair symbolism in the 1960s and highlights that hair is a strong conduit for personal expression (Kelley, 1997). References to the influence of other Black women and families were made thus strengthening the link between hair and cultural identity. Current social media and fashion were acknowledged for starting to promote the beauty of naturally textured hair (similarly to promoting grey hair aesthetics): "It's only just recently that you see adverts with Black women with their natural hair or with grey hair" (Participant E). Although still in its early days, a more prominent representation of Black women's hair had the potential to facilitate social acceptance of different hair looks and the celebration of one's identity in the contexts of age and culture.

Theme 3: Hair and well-being. Subordinate themes: healthy hair, feelings and emotions, hair chemical processing, hair damage

This theme offered insights into how, on a personal level, the participants were negotiating their evolving identities in relation to their hair.

Strongly interrelated subthemes of care for one's hair and a sense of empowerment were identified. The styling practices of the younger years were characterised by a lot of variety, but also

by poor awareness of product safety and a lack of control. In contrast with the past, current hair care choices were manifestations of personal strengths: "I follow styles that suit me … you become more confident" (Participant C); it (the way hair is) gives you confidence, makes you feel almost empowered" (Participant E). The current hair positivity also stemmed from the opportunities to education and making informed choices: " … doing lots of research in the sense of what I can do to thicken my hair." (Participant I). However, for some participants, the emotional burden linked to the internalised negative hair self-image was still present.

> "Sometimes I choose to wear wigs – it's easier. It kind of helps me mentally as well because I've still got a bit of a stigma about my hair and it's like putting on makeup". (Participant E).

Self-awareness appeared to be one way of overcoming this challenge but also highlighted the need for understanding how hair impacted one's personality and well-being from a younger age. Feelings prompting and resulting from hair choices were not only closely linked to one's personal identity, but also impacted on one's well-being: "(hair) … affects the emotional well-being, because I'm now being who I am and I'm proud of it. I feel a lot better about it. I feel a lot better about my hair." (Participant H). The agency to choose hair colour and styles based on preferences, ease, and knowledge rather than under social pressure alone seems to be an earned and appreciated right.

Discussion

This study highlights that hair has a prominent place in UK Black women's negotiation of aging on both personal and social levels. All interviewed and 87% of the surveyed participants reported low-intensity grey hair, in line with the low incidence and intensity of grey hair in populations with the same hair type and texture (in comparison to hair of European descent) published previously in a global study of greying hair (Panhard et al., 2012). In light of this relatively low intensity of grey hair in our participants, their concern with it could be attributed to their awareness of gendered ageism linked to hair greying. The survey also reported hair colouring as a stable pattern over the last thirty years, which suggests that hair colouring habits may be independent of grey hair incidence and intensity, i.e., those who coloured their hair when younger continued to do so past the age it started to go grey. Hair colour is a recognised contributor to women's body image and social identity and is influenced by internalised social and beauty norms and the motivation for self-acceptance (Cameron et al., 2019). Our interview findings resonate with this point and confirm that hair colour is a habit that was originally fashion led and remains linked to personal aesthetics. Furthermore, decisions to colour (or not) the hair with the specific aim to mask grey reflect an evolving balance between wishing to be authentic and managing the learnt stereotypes about grey hair signalling diminishing professional competence in women (Cecil et al., 2022). For Black women specifically, our study suggests prevalent concerns with greying stereotypes and less so with authenticity, as hair texture defines their identity over and above colour.

Negotiating the conflict between hair texture appreciation and the Eurocentric hairstyle hegemony was the other prominent finding, emerging mostly from the qualitative data, with participants describing how, in their youth, hair had to be manipulated to make it look like "the right" hair. This key finding resonates with other studies, originating mostly in the US, exposing the evolution of hair practices and attitudes in Black women as a form of coping and resistance to the unattainable Eurocentric hair standards promoted in the media and at the workplace (Chanella, 2020; Norwood, 2018; Opie & Phillips, 2015; Robinson, 2011). Moreover, having the right hair is particularly important for Black women seeking to assimilate into certain professions - particularly those traditionally dominated by white men. More recently, the growing social acceptance of Afrocentric hairstyles has enabled free choices and motivated participants to use

their hair as a symbol of personal strength and empowerment. Our survey resonated with this trend as participants reported a reduced frequency of hair relaxing and described their hair as "beautiful", "curly", "natural" and "short", with correlations between positivity and satisfaction of current styles (mostly non-relaxed). A sense of enhanced subjective well-being after styles were switched to "natural" hair was reported, thus "natural" texture and styles appeared to signify a break away from the past and improved well-being. Striving for uniqueness is associated with positive body image (Gillen & Dunaev, 2017: 141) which is also something that several participants in this study touched on, suggesting that with age they had moved their hair choices away from compliance and towards being authentic to their culture and personality. Thus, the unique texture of Black hair was turned by some into an asset which could support equitable and active social and professional engagement in the later stages of life. The study also highlights an increased preference for simplification and practicality enabled by learning to accept one's hair and its changes over time. Overall, with age, hair management practices shifted towards less frequent styling (survey and interview data), whilst high satisfaction with current hair length, texture and style was correlated with positivity about hair, its impact on personal attractiveness and confidence in social situations. The qualitative data also suggested hair-related subjective well-being which originated from self-awareness, researching, and making informed decisions. However, the lingering impact of past and current racism and ageism on personal aesthetics, confidence and subjective well-being was still evident in some reflections and comparisons the women made, thus highlighting the intersectionality of hair-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination Black women have faced (Crenshaw, 2010). As the survey did not find a significant statistical correlation between the state of the hair (natural vs chemically processed) and QoL, it is possible that, at this stage of their lives, women's hairstyle choices were less driven by externally defined norms. Instead, they reflected confidence in one's choices, with practicality and comfort being as important as aesthetics and belongingness.

The significance of good looks as a source of social and economic resource has been recognised and the term "aesthetic capital" is used to signify the notion of it being something to grow and leverage (Anderson et al., 2010: 5). This study demonstrates that Black women wish to maintain their aesthetic capital past the age of 60. We propose that there are generational differences in Black women's practices and priorities related to accruing "aesthetic capital" and thus breaking the compound effects of race and age-related social pressure. This is a novel concept, and it could also be relevant to holistic body image and well-being management in the context of biological aging. Specifically, as body dissatisfaction of Black women is reported to diminish with age (Frederick et al., 2022) it is of interest to explore further in the future if this is due to the decreasing relative importance of appearance (including hair) or resulting from new aesthetics.

A question has also been raised if a continuous expansion of beauty standards over the span of life in the endeavour to leverage economic and social gains is a positive trend (Kuipers, 2022). The survey data does not show a difference in hair positivity between women in employment and those who were not, which might be reflective of the overall sense of agency that women seek with age taking precedence over the perceived pressure from the work environment. However, high spending on haircare products and services amongst Black women as a whole suggests that hair holds specific significance for many, and it will continue to do so under the influence of legal, social and consumer-driven changes. As the participants' reported influence by social media was quite moderate, their subjective well-being related to hair was most likely acquired via their personal hair experiences and reflections. Thus, this paper points towards a generation of Black women whose capacity to define their own personal and authentic hair aesthetics seemed to have grown with age. This is, so far, a positive trend; however, it is important to be aware of the rapidly growing impact of digital social media and consumerist culture and how these will shape the personal and social identities as well as the intergenerational learning related to hair amongst Black women.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the hair-related well-being of Black women post-menopause remains explicitly connected with their experiences of living with and negotiating the Eurocentric hair beauty and work-context hair standards prevalent in their youth and to the lingering stigmatisation of hair greying for women. However, they are also willing and able to take control over the aesthetic, practical and emotional aspects of their hair management practice, but it will take some time until new generations are completely free from negative lived experiences. To achieve this, more prominent representations of older Black hair in the media and work environment are needed and, in parallel with that, better awareness and appreciation of Black women's culturally influenced haircare practices.

Strengths and limitations of this study

This study's main strength lies in its mixed-method approach addressing a sensitive topic related to a group of aging women who are underrepresented in the related research fields of dermatology and gerontology. Another strength is the richness of the obtained data, particularly the data from the interviews. In terms of limitations, the survey sample was small, which may have influenced some of the statistical outcomes, e.g., limited statistical power. All participants were recruited via a random self-selection and snowballing technique, resulting in samples reflecting individuals who are more self-aware and more interested in their hair. Larger samples may have offered further nuances in the scope and depth of the main findings. Finally, this study was situated in the UK, whilst the majority of published research that informed its preparation had been conducted in the US. The authors considered all cited literature highly relevant however, the social and personal significance of the UK environment on the participants is contextualised to very limited number of sources. It is also important to note that the hair-aging aspect of this study is also very important and under researched, hence our exploratory study makes a distinct contribution to Black hair studies in the field.

Positionality statement

This study was conducted by a team of six researchers who, at the time of the data collection and analysis, were all working for University of the Arts, London (UK). One researcher engaged in the quantitative research data collection exclusively. The researchers interacting with the interview participants and the qualitative data were of diverse backgrounds, one was of an Afro-Caribbean descent, one of Asian and three of White European origin, and also represented diverse scientific perspectives on hair and aging: psychological, gerontological and biological. From the beginning of the project, the research team aimed to maintain self-awareness and to engage in reflexivity. To begin with, the Principal Investigator integrated an advisory panel to guide the study, this comprised two Black women involved in the cosmetic and hairdressing fields of relevance to Black hair practices. In the preparation for the qualitative stage, the team discussed the challenges with the positionality of the interviewers. Hence, care was taken to ensure that the different lived experiences of the researchers and participants were acknowledged at the start of the interviews. The iterative process of the thematic analysis also included considerations of the positionality of the researchers. This was supported by the researchers' independent coding of an initial interview, which was then discussed as a group to create the main codebook. Thus, each researcher shared their own perspectives about the data – which was then mediated by the team as a whole. The different backgrounds and perspectives of the researchers represented a collaboration aimed at reaching the right balance between subjectivity needed to understand participants' lived

experiences, and objectivity for a holistic understanding of this topic, as well as for adopting a pluralistic research methodology.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interests. The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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