Black feminism arose in the 1970s as a result of the various forms of oppression faced by Black women, including racism, sexism, and in some cases weightism, or prejudice against full-figured people (1). The significance of Black feminism lies in its ability to unite Black women for the goal of activism (2). In the present study, Black feminism is a lens used to examine objectification of Black female cover models on *Essence* magazine. In addition to objectification, the study will examine the occurrence of body size and shape diversity, hair texture diversity, and weightism on *Essence* magazine covers.

Objectification is the construction of a body that views it as an object that belongs to consumers and not the owner of the body (3). Frederickson and Robert’s objectification theory has viewed this issue as whether a body portrays action and function or is used as an accessory (4, 5). Body positioning of cover models have been studied to determine which poses indicate objectification of female bodies. While most literature on objectification uses White subjects as the focus, there is evidence of objectification of Black cover models as well (6).

One subset of objectification faced by Black women is the lack of body size and shape diversity, which is outlined by the thin ideal and the curvaceous ideal. Black women are more likely to be held to the curvaceous ideal, which is an appreciation for more shapely bodies and not overly thin bodies (7). The curvaceous ideal can still be harmful to the body images of Black women because it does not include full-figured women. Also, the desire for curvaceous bodies is male-oriented, and therefore still objectifies women (8). This exclusion of bigger cover models is what describes weightism. Justification for weightism includes health issues and a perceived lack of morality in bigger individuals. As Black women tend to be bigger than women of other races, they face this discrimination more often (9).
Another subset of objectification of Black women is the lack of hair texture diversity in media. Standards for what is attractive with Black women’s hair is also male-oriented, and tends to follow White standards of beauty (10). Appreciation for the natural hair of Black women has been mixed, even within Black media. In some instances, natural hair textures are praised. On the other hand, there are some Black magazines that prefer straight-haired models over models with naturally curly hair.

The present study tests three hypotheses: 1) the images of cover models on *Essence* magazine will portray features that are less consistent with the objectification of Black women; 2) the curvaceous ideal will be more frequently presented on *Essence* covers than the thin ideal, with the least inclusion of overweight/full figured models; and 3) shorter hair lengths, natural hair textures and Afrocentric styles will be present on *Essence* covers, but less frequently than long, straight/relaxed hairstyles. A content analysis of *Essence* magazine covers between the years of 1981-2013 will be used to determine the frequency of codes associated with the previously mentioned areas of objectification.
References


