Resisting the Strong Black Woman Schema through Emotional Expression, Personal Care Prioritization, and Community Building Among U.S. Black Women on Reddit

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Abstract

Introduction: This study examines how U.S. Black women utilize Reddit to resist the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema, a cultural ideal that promotes emotional suppression, constant caregiving, and unwavering self-reliance. While the SBW image has historically symbolized survival and strength, it often places a psychological burden on Black women, contributing to emotional isolation and burnout. This research specifically examines how Black women resist this schema through emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building.

Methods: A qualitative design was employed using reflexive thematic analysis. Data were extracted from publicly accessible Reddit posts and comments where Black women discussed their experiences with strength, vulnerability, and emotional well-being. These discussions occurred in subreddits such as r/BlackLadies, dedicated to Black women, where users either explicitly self-identified or engaged in conversations focused on Black women's experiences. The analysis focused on capturing themes in how these users resist by challenging or redefining the SBW schema in their everyday lives. Ethical considerations included the use of only anonymized, publicly available data.

Results: The analysis revealed three major themes: *Breaking Free from Silence*, *Choosing Myself Without Apology*, and *Healing Through Community*. These themes illustrate how Black women on Reddit resist the SBW schema by expressing emotional vulnerability, setting personal boundaries, and finding validation through collective support. Particularly significant were reflections of burnout, intentional self-care practices, and the healing power of shared experiences within online communities.

Conclusion: This study shows that Black women use Reddit to resist the Strong Black Woman schema by challenging its emotional demands and reshaping what strength means in their everyday lives. The findings emphasize how digital spaces can foster care, connection, and culturally rooted forms of healing.

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Introduction

"Well, I just feel like I'm just drowning in stuff. Like, there's probably somebody sitting on my chest. That's what it feels like. So, when I need to talk to somebody about something, I don't. I blow up all the time cause it's like I hold a lot of stuff inside me and I never, ever let it out, and that leads to this big ball of stress that ends up exploding." (Woods-Giscombé, 2010, p.678). These powerful words come from a participant in Woods-Giscombé's (2010) study on the Superwoman role among Black women. The quote captures the emotional burden many U.S Black women experience, as they feel expected to suppress vulnerability or seek support. This pressure reflects the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema (Castelin & White, 2022), where strength becomes both a cultural ideal and a source of personal burden.

This tension, between cultural expectations and personal well-being, raises important questions about how Black women respond to such demands in everyday life. In response to these pressures, the present study investigates how U.S. Black women are actively reshaping these expectations through digital forms of resistance, focusing specifically on Reddit communities where they engage in emotional expressions, prioritize self-care, and build supportive communities.

The SBW schema is a socially constructed ideal that portrays Black women as consistently resilient, self-sufficient, and emotionally controlled, often prioritizing the needs of others over their own well-being (Abrams et al., 2014; Anyiwo et al., 2021; Castelin & White, 2022; Parks & Hayman, 2024; Thomas et al., 2022; Watson-Singleton, 2017; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). This widely held schema emerged as a survival strategy that has its origins in slavery, when Black women in the U.S. were forced to perform demanding physical labor while also caring for white families. These roles contributed to lasting stereotypes that portrayed Black women as exceptionally strong and emotionally invulnerable (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Stanton et al., 2017). Over time, these expectations were reinforced through systemic mistreatment and racialized gender norms, shaping the ongoing belief that Black women must remain strong regardless of their own well-being (Anyiwo et al., 2021; Stanton et al., 2017).

While the SBW schema has helped many Black women navigate adversity (Anyiwo et al., 2021), it also imposes unrealistic expectations that lead to emotional suppression, discourage seeking support, isolation, and contribute to negative physical and mental health outcomes (Stanton et al., 2017; Parks & Hayman, 2024; Castelin & White, 2022; Watson-Singleton, 2017). Research indicates that internalizing the SBW schema is associated with

increased psychological distress and chronic stress, which in turn elevate the risk for negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and burnout (Watson & Hunter, 2015; Parks & Hayman, 2024). The psychological and chronic stress associated with the SBW schema have also been linked to negative physical health outcomes. These include higher rates of obesity (Parks & Hayman, 2024; Woods-Giscombé, 2010), disordered eating patterns such as binge eating (Harrington et al., 2010), and poor sleep quality (Thomas et al., 2022), which are also closely interrelated and may reinforce each other.

Moreover, Black Americans, particularly Black women, face additional challenges in accessing mental health care due to institutional betrayal in predominantly white spaces. Many mental health services are not designed to meet their specific cultural needs, which further intensifies the difficulties they face in receiving appropriate care (Chikawa, 2024; Thomas et al., 2022). Microaggressions and other forms of racial discrimination within healthcare settings also contribute to heightened stress and mental health challenges. This lack of culturally competent care can foster mistrust and feelings of alienation, making many Black women hesitant to seek professional help and leaving them to navigate their mental health struggles on their own (Gómez, 2013; Thomas et al., 2022).

While these barriers persist, research also highlights the positive impact of culturally affirming care. Black women therapists, for example, may provide an "unspoken level of comfort" for Black women by fostering emotional safety, shared cultural understanding, and affirmation of lived experience (Sacks, 2017). These supportive therapeutic relationships are just one example of a broader cultural shift.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the need to move beyond simply documenting the harms of the SBW schema and instead explore how Black women actively resist or redefine this stereotype in empowering ways (Castelin & White, 2022; Thomas et al., 2022). Castelin and White (2022) suggest that reshaping the SBW schema, including vulnerability, self-care, and openness to support, could help loosen restrictive expectations and reduce psychological strain.

In this study, resistance is understood not only as rejection of the SBW schema but as a deliberate way to heal, redefine, and create space for rest and care. Rather than abandoning the concept of strength altogether, some Black women reshape its meaning to include emotional honesty, interdependence, and self-prioritization (Nelson et al., 2016). A qualitative study by Nelson et al. (2016), based on interviews with 12 Black women, found that participants rarely rejected the SBW label outright. Instead, they redefined it in more liberating ways, emphasizing self-care, expressing vulnerability, and building supportive

social networks. These acts not only offer a way to navigate the schemas' pressure but also affirm Black women's right to be fully human in the face of long-standing cultural expectations. As such, speaking openly about emotional burdens or seeking community support directly challenges the silence and stoicism traditionally imposed by the SBW schema (Nelson et al., 2016; Parks & Hayman, 2024).

While studies like Nelson et al. (2016) have laid important groundwork by showing that some Black women started redefining strength in more liberating and caring ways, there are still only a few empirical studies that explore this shift in depth. As a result, we still know relatively little about how resistance to the SBW schema is practiced in everyday life. To address this gap, it is important to examine spaces where Black women can express themselves openly, reflect on vulnerability and care, and share their experiences without fear of judgment.

One key space where these acts of resistance are taking place is social media. In response to limited access to culturally affirming care, many Black women seek alternative spaces for support and connection. These platforms offer opportunities not only for emotional expression and visibility but also for fostering community, sharing coping strategies, and challenging dominant cultural narratives, often in ways that traditional support systems might not accommodate. Social media platforms like TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram have emerged as meaningful sites to find support and community (Chikawa, 2024; Smith et al., 2024; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). Black American women are among the most active social media users in the United States, frequently engaging with multiple platforms for communication, identity expression, and community connection (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). In recent years, they have created spaces on these platforms to discuss Black womanhood and challenge structural gendered racism. Black American women utilize social media not only to interact and entertain themselves, but also as a means of building community, engaging in collective resistance, and fostering care-based networks, tools that help them navigate and counteract institutional oppression (Gray & Stein, 2021; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2022). Due to its multifaceted nature, social media can hold emotional significance and become an integral part of a person's daily life (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). Some TikTok users, for example, view the platform as a supportive complement to professional treatment, offering a space to reflect and share experiences, while also providing emotional support for those facing mental health challenges (Chikawa, 2024).

While platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram have become valuable spaces for Black women to engage in discussions about mental health challenges in culturally resonant

ways (Smith et al., 2024; Chikawa, 2024), their fast-paced, surface-level character frequently limits greater involvement and complete support (Proferes et al., 2021). The short-form content can limit in-depth discussions and make it difficult to explore the complex experiences, such as the emotional burden of the SBW schema, in meaningful depth (Proferes et al., 2021). Furthermore, users may be discouraged from sharing experiences that are stigmatized or vulnerable due to the voluntary and public nature of these platforms. Discussions about gender, racism, or emotional difficulties may therefore be filtered or completely ignored. This limited visibility has the potential to distort how Black women's mental health experiences are portrayed online and restrict the breadth of knowledge that communities and researchers may access (Mantell et al., 2025). This limitation highlights the need for a space that allows for longer, more reflective discussions.

In contrast, Reddit, as a social media platform that stands out for its threaded discussions, topic-specific subreddits, and anonymous participation, features that foster ongoing dialogue and support rich, qualitative exploration (Mantell et al., 2025). While platforms like Black Twitter have received significant scholarly attention, Reddit has been largely overlooked in Black digital culture research. This is partly because Reddit is often perceived as a white, male-dominated space and lacks visible identity markers, which makes it more difficult for researchers to trace and analyze Black users' experiences (Smith et al., 2024; Matsuzaka et al., 2023). As a result, the ways in which Black women engage with mental health and resist cultural pressures, such as the SBW schema, on Reddit remain underexplored.

Reddit's structure supports long-form discussions that allow Black women to to express nuanced experiences, including emotional challenges, coping strategies, and questioning of dominant societal norms (Zapcic et al., 2023). The platform's community-based design and relative anonymity encourage openness, making it an effective space for resisting the pressures of the SBW schema (Proferes et al., 2021; Mantell et al., 2025). Subreddits like r/BlackPeopleTwitter further highlight Reddit's potential to amplify Black voices and promote meaningful cultural exchange. Such subreddits are centered around identity or experiences and create a more intentional space for support and disclosure than the broader audience on Twitter (Smith et al., 2024).

This study explores how U.S. Black women resist the SBW schema in the digital space of Reddit. Through qualitative analysis of Reddit posts, it examines how users engage in emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building as everyday forms of resistance. These everyday acts challenge the pressure to remain emotionally

invulnerable and help redefine strength in ways that center care, vulnerability, and connection. By focusing on a specific online platform, this research offers a focused contribution to conversations in mental health, digital culture, and culturally responsive care. It adds to the growing body of work that recognizes the importance of lived experience and social context in shaping how Black women navigate and push back against harmful cultural expectations. Thus, this study is guided by the following research question: *What forms of resistance do U.S. Black women on Reddit demonstrate against the Strong Black Woman schema through emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building?*

Methods

Study Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore how U.S. Black women resist the SBW schema on Reddit. Reddit is well-suited for such research due to its anonymity, which encourages emotionally open reflection and personal disclosure. Platform features like throwaway accounts promote dissociative anonymity, allowing users to feel less constrained by societal norms and share sensitive experiences more freely and vulnerably (De Choudhury & De, 2014; Guo & Caine, 2025). This openness offers access to unfiltered emotional experiences and internal reflections that are often difficult to capture in more visible or socially regulated environments (Chew et al., 2021; Pilkington & Rominov, 2017). Unlike other qualitative data sources, Reddit reduces social desirability bias and the pressure of audience management, making it especially valuable for studying identity-related and mental health topics in depth (Chan et al., 2025).

The research by De Choudhury & De (2014) also shows that social support within these Reddit communities is diverse and covers emotional, informational, and practical aspects. This variety of support enhances the depth of interactions, which fosters a strong sense of community and provides researchers with rich, meaningful data for qualitative analysis. Additionally, Reddit's varied user base and public accessibility make it a practical and inclusive setting for research, offering access to multiple perspectives (Zapcic et al., 2023).

To analyse these discussions, the study applies Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which allows for an in-depth examination of subjective meaning-making. Unlike other forms of thematic analysis, RTA prioritizes researcher reflexivity over inter-coder reliability, emphasizing the interpretative role of the researcher in identifying patterns within digital discourse (Bager-Charleson & McBeath, 2023). Ethical approval for

this study was granted by the BMS Ethics Committee at the University of Twente under approval number 250595.

Materials

The data for this study were extracted from the social media platform Reddit. Relevant posts and comments were collected manually, and a personal Reddit account was created to access and navigate publicly available threads. A Word document was used to store, organize, and clean the textual data. ATLAS.ti software was then used to support the coding process and theme development during the reflexive thematic analysis.

Selection and Preparation of Data

Reddit is structured into specialized communities called subreddits, each dedicated to a specific topic or interest. These subreddits allow users to engage in discussions, share experiences, and interact with other users around shared themes (Zapcic et al., 2023).

The data collection process consisted of three main steps: (1) the selection of relevant subreddits, (2) the identification of relevant discussion threads, and (3) the selection and review of both posts and their associated comments for inclusion in the final dataset (Rocha-Silva et al., 2023; Ziegert, 2023). This process was conducted manually using Reddit's built-in search bar and sidebar suggestions, which direct users to related communities. The selection of subreddits, posts, and comments was guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria, which are presented later in this section.

Subreddits were selected based on themes relevant to Black womanhood, mental health, and resistance to the SBW schema. The search process was guided by the study's core concepts and informed by existing literature on the SBW schema and Black women's psychological well-being (Thomas et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2016; Castelin & White, 2022). Based on these sources, keywords such as *"Strong Black Woman schema," "Black Women's mental health," "Black Women and therapy," "Black Women and self-care,"* and *"Black Women and emotional support"* were developed and used to identify subreddit communities aligned with the study's focus.

The following descriptions of each subreddit are based on the researcher's interpretation of the subreddit's content and thematic focus, as observed during the data collection process. The subreddits selected for later analysis were as follows:

1. **r/BlackLadies** - A subreddit designed for Black women to engage in conversations about mental health, relationships, and societal expectations (15 posts, 80 comments)

2. **r/blackgirls** - A subreddit created for Black women to share their experiences, seek advice, and discuss issues related to identity, culture, and emotional well-being (3 posts, 25 comments).

3. **r/lonely** - A general support-focused subreddit where users reflect on feelings of isolation, emotional struggle, and the desire for connection, often offering insight into internal vulnerability and coping (2 posts, 9 comments).

4. **r/BlackMentalHealth** - A crucial subreddit where Black individuals discuss mental health, coping mechanisms, therapy experiences, and emotional well-being (2 posts, 6 comments).

5. **r/BlackPeopleTwitter** - While broader in scope, this subreddit frequently includes cultural and social discourse relevant to Black communities, including issues related to Black women (1 post, 4 comments).

6. **r/TrueUnpopularOpinion -** A subreddit where users post controversial or socially unconventional opinions, some of which reflect personal experiences with identity, social expectations, and emotional resistance (2 posts, 3 comments).

Once the relevant subreddits had been selected, discussion threads aligned with the study's core themes were searched and reviewed. The selection of search terms was guided by existing literature on the SBW schema and Black women's psychological well-being (Thomas et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2016; Castelin & White, 2022; Parks & Hayman, 2024), as well as commonly used language observed within subreddit communities. Based on these sources, a set of keywords was developed, including "Strong Black Woman," "Strong Black Women schema," "mental health," "emotions," "community support," "strength," "vulnerability," and "self-care." These terms were entered into each subreddit's search bar to identify posts relevant to the study's conceptual focus.

To enhance the accuracy and depth of the dataset, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the selection and review of individual posts and comments. The inclusion criteria for this study will focus on posts and comments that explicitly or implicitly discuss at least one of the following core themes: the Strong Black Woman schema, Black womanhood, mental health, self-care, emotional expression, or resistance to societal expectations. Posts were considered to address these topics implicitly when they described related experiences, aligned with the study's operational definition of the SBW schema. While the dataset primarily drew from subreddits specifically dedicated to Black women, some broader communities (e.g., r/TrueUnpopularOpinion or r/lonely) were also included when comments clearly reflected the perspective of a Black woman. In these cases, inclusion

depended on explicit self-identification within the comment (e.g., "as a Black woman…" or "Black women here…") or through context indicating that the speaker belonged to this demographic. Additionally, only publicly available content that adheres to Reddit's community guidelines and ethical research standards will be included in the dataset.

Posts and comments were excluded if they did not meaningfully engage with themes of Black womanhood, emotional labor, or resistance to the SBW schema. This included comments that only discussed general mental health or social concerns without connecting them to gender, race, or cultural identity; surface-level responses such as memes, jokes, or brief affirmations that lacked depth in analysis; or repetitive content without contributing to new insights and ideas. Posts that could not be reasonably identified as reflecting the voice of a Black woman, particularly in subreddits not centered on this group, were also excluded. Throughout the data selection process, a reflexive lens was applied by asking, "Why am I drawn to this post?" to ensure each entry had relevance to the research question and contributed to a deeper understanding of how Black women resist the SBW schema.

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 25 posts and 127 comments were securely stored in a Word document, cleaned, and formatted for analysis. The dataset was then imported into ATLAS.ti and organized for coding using RTA, ensuring it was well-structured for in-depth qualitative work.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

As a researcher, it is important to acknowledge my positionality concerning this study. I am not a regular user of Reddit and do not identify as a "Redditor," which means I approached this platform as an outsider. My unfamiliarity with Reddit required me to take intentional steps to understand its structure, norms, and communication styles before engaging in data collection. Hence, to familiarize myself with the platform, I first explored Reddit's general functionality, which included how subreddits operate as independent communities with their own rules and moderation systems. I reviewed Reddit's Help Center and various guides to understand key platform features, such as upvotes, downvotes, and moderation policies. Additionally, I engaged deeply with the selected subreddits: r/blackladies, r/blackgirls, r/lonely, r/BlackMentalHealth, r/BlackPeopleTwitter, r/TrueUnpopularOpinion, by browsing discussions, observing user interactions, and analyzing highly interactive posts to identify common themes and patterns.

Beyond being an outsider to Reddit, I also recognized that I was a non-Black researcher studying Black womanhood. This meant I was engaging with experiences that I had not lived myself, which required careful reflection to ensure that my interpretations were

accurate, ethical, and respectful. To approach this responsibly, I based my analysis on Black feminist scholarship, meaning research and theories developed by Black women that focused on their unique experiences, struggles, and perspectives (Settles et al., 2008; Kadeba, 2017; Williams & Lewis, 2021). This helped me understand the topic from the standpoint of those who had lived it. Additionally, I centered Black women's voices in my analysis to ensure that their perspectives remained the focus rather than imposing outside interpretations. I understood that my background and experiences shaped how I viewed the data, so I actively reflected on any potential biases. To help with this, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, where I recorded my thoughts, potential biases, and decisions made during analysis. By engaging with work by Black scholars, prioritizing the words of those sharing their experiences, and remaining mindful of my position, I aimed to approach this research with awareness and sensitivity.

However, this outsider perspective also offered certain advantages, as it allowed me to approach the material with a level of analytical distance that could help me identify broader patterns and thematic structures. As Hellawell (2006) notes, such distance enhances objectivity and enables the researcher to question taken-for-granted assumptions within a community. Moreover, outsider researchers are less influenced by pre-existing relationships, which could reduce bias and social pressure in the research setting. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) further emphasize that outsiders bring a fresh lens to the data, allowing them to notice dynamics that might be overlooked by those embedded in the community. They also argue that the outsider position fosters increased reflexivity, which encourages the researcher to engage more critically with their own positionality and interpretive processes.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, RTA was chosen as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Exploring how Black women resist the SBW schema requires a flexible approach that captures complex experiences and highlights the importance of reflexivity in shaping themes.

This approach is well-suited for this study because it supports a flexible, interpretive approach to understanding meaning. It allows themes to emerge from participants' own words and is especially appropriate for analyzing personal, culturally shaped experiences shared in online spaces. By using RTA, this study ensures that Black women's voices and experiences with the SBW schema are analyzed with care and depth, rather than just being categorized (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Familiarization

To engage meaningfully with the data, I read posts and comments across selected subreddits and took reflective notes, paying close attention to tone, language, and recurring themes. This helped me understand how conversations around mental health, self-care, and the SBW schema take shape on Reddit. As an outsider to both Reddit and the lived experiences of many users, I approached the data with care and a commitment to centering Black women's voices throughout the analysis.

Generating Initial Codes

After familiarizing myself with the data, I began generating initial codes using a hybrid inductive–deductive approach. Three initial codes, *Emotional Expression, Personal Care Prioritization, and Community Building*, were developed in advance, as they reflected the key concepts outlined in my research question. These deductively informed codes served as an initial framework to guide the early stages of analysis. At the same time, I remained open to new insights, allowing more specific subcodes to emerge inductively from the Reddit posts and comments. As I engaged with the material, I identified text segments reflecting patterns tied to the SBW schema, emotional experiences, mental health, and resistance. These inductively developed subcodes were grounded in users' own language and captured the nuanced ways in which Black women on Reddit expressed and challenged social expectations. They later served as the foundation for themes and subthemes during theme development.

For instance, when a Reddit user explicitly rejected the expectations tied to the SBW stereotype, such as challenging the belief that Black women must always appear strong, emotionless, or self-reliant, their comment was coded using subcodes like *Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Schema* or *The Right to Be Vulnerable/Soft*. Other comments were coded under the subcode *Dehumanization through the SBW Schema* when users described feeling emotionally overlooked or reduced to the stereotype. These comments often shared experiences where their emotional needs were dismissed by others, such as medical professionals, partners, or peers, because of the assumption that they could endure more pain or responsibility than others.

In RTA, a single text segment can carry multiple codes to capture layered meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For example, I applied both *Dehumanization through the SBW Schema* and *Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Schema* to comments that described emotional neglect and challenged the stereotype. I continuously refined codes by grouping similar ones and breaking broader codes into more specific subcodes as needed.

Generating and Reviewing Themes

After coding the data, I moved to generating and reviewing themes, which is a key stage in RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). At this stage, I developed subthemes to reflect shared meanings within the data. Most subthemes were grounded in the patterns identified through subcoding. In many cases, the label of a subcode was retained for the subtheme because it already captured the core meaning well. In a few instances, labels were slightly adapted to better represent the shared ideas across data segments. These subthemes then served as the foundation for developing broader themes, which reflected higher-level patterns across the dataset. This process was shaped through ongoing, reflexive engagement with the data and guided by the research question.

For example, within the initial code *Emotional Expression*, subcodes like *Tired of Being Strong, The Right to Be Vulnerable/Soft,* and *Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Schema* reflected emotional resistance to constant strength. These formed the theme **Breaking Free from Silence**, where participants reclaimed the right to be vulnerable, human, and emotionally cared for.

An example of how subcodes were slightly refined into subthemes includes *Tired of Being Strong*, which became *Burnout from Always Being Strong* (see Table 1), and *The Right to Be Vulnerable/Soft*, which was adjusted to *The Right to Be Vulnerable and* Human (see Table 1). These refinements helped better reflect the depth and emotional nuance present in users' narratives.

Under the initial code *Personal Care Prioritization*, subcodes like *Letting Go of the Caretaker Role*, *Setting Clear Boundaries*, and *Therapy as Resistance* all showed how Black women were actively choosing themselves, often for the first time, in response to social expectations. The labels of these subcodes were retained as subthemes, as they already clearly reflected the core meanings. Together, they formed the basis of the theme **Choosing Myself Without Apology** which emphasizes self-prioritization as a form of resistance.

Moreover, subcodes from *Community Building*, such as *Offering Emotional Support and Practical Advice*, *Seeking Safety Among Black Women*, and *Appreciation for Shared Vulnerability*, were also retained as subthemes with their original labels and highlighted how users found affirmation and solidarity in each other. These subthemes contributed to the development of the theme **Healing Through Community**, showing how shared understanding and care function as sources of empowerment and emotional survival.

To better understand and illustrate how certain subthemes co-occurred within or across themes, I created two Sankey diagrams (Schmidt, 2008), Figure 1(Intra-Theme Co-Occurrences) and Figure 2 (Cross-Theme Co-Occurrences), included at the end of the results

section. These visual tools helped me identify meaningful overlaps between patterns of meaning that might otherwise remain obscured in the presented data. One diagram highlights intra-theme co-occurrences, while the other captures connections across different themes. This process supported a more nuanced interpretation of the data and helped ensure transparency in how subthemes were related and grouped.

Lastly, to support cultural sensitivity in my analysis, I asked a Black woman colleague to review about 10% of my coded data. Her perspective helped me reflect more deeply on the themes, especially around resistance and vulnerability. In particular, she reviewed the initial coding and development of the theme *Emotional Expression*, where she emphasized the importance of framing vulnerability not only as emotional resistance but also as a reclaiming of humanity. This led me to slightly refine the wording of related subthemes to better capture this nuance. Rather than aiming for agreement, her input added valuable context that helped strengthen the depth and cultural relevance of my interpretations.

Writing the Report

Once themes were finalized, I wrote the report by presenting each theme with the related subthemes, illustrated through paraphrased Reddit excerpts to reflect Black women's perspectives. Hence, I selected excerpts that best represented the core meaning of each theme, while also including illustrative variation to reflect the range of perspectives and experiences present in the data. The report also includes my reflexive engagement, which acknowledges how my outsider position shaped the interpretation of the findings. All excerpts were carefully edited for clarity and anonymized, with brief contextual additions where needed.

Results

The following themes emerged from a qualitative, RTA of Reddit discussions, illustrating how U.S. Black women resist and redefine the expectations tied to the SBW schema. Three overarching themes were identified, each supported by subthemes that reflect Black women's lived experiences, particularly around emotional expression, self-care prioritization, and community building.

An overview is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes of Resistance to the Strong Black Woman Schema on Reddit

Themes	Subthemes
Breaking Free from Silence	Dehumanization Through the SBW Schema
	Burnout from Always Being Strong

	Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Label
	The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human
Choosing Myself Without Apology	Creating Everyday Healing Practices
	Therapy as Resistance
	Setting Clear Boundaries
	Letting Go of the Caretaker Role
	Medical Advocacy and System Mistrust
	Building Personal Support Systems
Healing Through Community	Seeking Safety Among Black Women
	Offering Emotional Support and Practical Advice
	Appreciation for Shared Vulnerability
	Affirming Black Identity and Resilience

While analyzing the Reddit discussions, it became clear that many users' experiences did not fit neatly into only one category. Often, several codes or themes appeared together within the same comment, reflecting the complex and interconnected nature of Black women's resistance to the SBW schema.

Theme 1: Breaking Free from Silence

This theme shows how Black women on Reddit resist the pressure to always appear strong and emotionally unaffected. Many users shared that they often feel expected to hide their pain or stay quiet about their struggles. Speaking freely about their emotions, particularly feelings such as anger, sadness, tiredness, or vulnerability, was characterized as a form of resistance. The expression of how they really feel is a way to take back control and reject harmful ideas about what it means to be a strong Black woman. By being emotionally honest, these Black women challenged the idea that they must always be strong and instead gave themselves space to feel and heal.

Subtheme 1.1: Dehumanization Through the SBW Schema

This subtheme describes how the Strong Black Woman schema is externally imposed by healthcare providers, employers, peers, and family, resulting in emotional neglect and invisibility. Black women are often seen as naturally resilient and less affected by pain, leading to expectations that they handle emotional burdens alone. As a result, their struggles are frequently dismissed, and their emotional needs are invalidated, making basic feelings like pain, sadness, or fatigue seem unacceptable. Many described this as a profoundly dehumanizing experience.

One user shared that, despite being in pain from a fractured leg, she was repeatedly overlooked and inadequately treated in a medical setting because other patients were prioritized over her, which she linked to being a strong Black woman. She expressed anger at being ignored and stated that it is unacceptable to be forgotten simply because she is not white.

This example shows how the SBW schema leads to dehumanization in healthcare settings. Because Black women are often seen as naturally strong or able to tolerate more pain, their suffering is frequently downplayed or ignored by medical professionals. The user's anger and decision to speak out reflect not just frustration, but a growing mistrust of healthcare institutions. This subtheme's strong connection with *Medical Advocacy and System Mistrust* (see Figure 2) underscores how acts of being ignored or mistreated became key motivators for Black women to reclaim power and advocate for better care.

Consequently, many Black women were left emotionally exhausted, laying the groundwork for the deep burnout, which can be explored in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 1.2: Burnout from Always Being Strong

This subtheme shows the emotional and physical exhaustion that many Black women experience from constantly being expected to stay strong, collected, and self-reliant. Unlike other subthemes that focus on rejecting the label or reclaiming vulnerability, this one focuses on the felt burden of always having to endure. Users described being overwhelmed by responsibilities, emotionally drained, and unable to show weakness without judgment. Their words reflect not only frustration, but also a deep, personal fatigue which is the result of carrying emotional weight for too long without relief.

One Black woman shared that over the past few years, her deep involvement in political and social causes had left her feeling miserable and angry, eventually forcing her to step back for the sake of her mental health. She described feeling completely burned out. When someone recently called her "strong," she became angry and lashed out, saying she was tired of being seen that way and questioning what strength had actually done for her.

It shows how emotionally draining it can be to be called "strong" all the time. What is often meant as a compliment felt like a rejection of her suffering to this user. She described feeling burned out after years of staying active, constantly giving her time and energy to others, and carrying the weight of everything happening around her. This subtheme frequently co-occurred with *Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Label* (see Figure 1), as emotional burnout often led women to question the value of being seen as "strong." Her decision to step back from activism could also be read as a form of boundary-setting (see Figure 2), reflecting the need to protect her mental health.

Subtheme 1.3: Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Label

This subtheme describes how participants actively rejected the "Strong Black Woman" label and the pressure it carries. Although the stereotype is often intended as a compliment, many Black women on Reddit explained that it felt more like a burden, a role they were expected to perform rather than an identity they had chosen. Black women shared that being called "strong" trapped them in a box where they were not allowed to show emotion, ask for help, or appear vulnerable. The label made them feel obligated to live up to an ideal they never agreed to and one that demanded constant resilience and self-sacrifice.

One Black woman shared that she felt both exhausted and offended by being called "strong." She explained that she did not see it as a compliment or something to be proud of. Instead, she expressed a strong desire to stop living in survival mode, no longer taking on everything by herself or relying on what she described as masculine energy to cope.

Her statement highlights how the SBW schema, rather than empowering, often traps Black women in cycles of isolation and burnout. Her resistance to this narrative is a powerful act of self-advocacy and a call for recognition of Black women's right to vulnerability, softness, and genuine support. Hence, this excerpt also co-occurs with the subtheme *Burnout from Always Being Strong*, as she describes deep exhaustion from constantly managing everything alone. Additionally, her desire to let go of "masculine energy" and live beyond survival mode reflects the subtheme *The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human,* which highlights a shift toward emotional openness and self-compassion.

As Black women distanced themselves from the label, they reclaimed their right to feel and express emotional vulnerability.

Subtheme 1.4: The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human

While subtheme 1.1 centers on the dehumanizing effects of external expectations, this subtheme focuses on Black women's internal resistance. Many women described feeling trapped by the expectation that they must always be tough and self-reliant. Instead, they

expressed a deep desire to live in their softness, to rest, to cry, and to receive support without being judged. For Black women, allowing themselves to be vulnerable was not a weakness but an important act of reclaiming their full humanity. They rejected the idea that strength should come at the cost of tenderness and emotional openness.

One user stated that Black women have every right to be vulnerable and to express that vulnerability, without needing to live up to the idea of having superpowers. She emphasized that they are human, like everyone else.

The user is pushing back against the idea that Black women must always be strong or unbreakable. By asserting that they are "human like everyone else," she directly challenges the expectation of superhuman strength. In doing so, she addresses one of the core dehumanizing aspects of the SBW schema (see Figure 1), which denies Black women the right to be seen and treated as fully human with emotional needs, pain, and the right to be vulnerable.

Theme 2: Choosing Myself Without Apology

While the first theme centers on emotional expression as a form of resistance, this theme focuses on the practical, behavioral shifts that follow. It highlights how Black women intentionally prioritize their own well-being to push back against the societal expectation of caring for others while neglecting their own needs. Black women described setting boundaries, seeking support, and adopting practices that promote emotional and physical health. These actions reflect a conscious move away from survival mode toward self-protection and healing, on their own terms and without apology.

Subtheme 2.1 Medical Advocacy and System Mistrust

This subtheme highlights how many Black women expressed mistrust toward the healthcare system, which often originated from experiences of being ignored, dismissed, or disrespected in medical settings, as described in subtheme 1.1, where dehumanization and the overlooking of their pain were common. In response, they emphasized the importance of advocating for themselves, switching doctors, speaking up when their pain was minimized, and warning others to do the same. These acts were emotional responses to years of systemic neglect. The comments reflect a refusal to accept poor treatment and a demand for dignity, support, and accountability from health professionals.

One user shared that after facing negative experiences in hospitals and clinics, she now carefully chooses her doctors. If she feels unheard, she leaves. She noted that reaching this point of self-advocacy took a long time.

Her story highlights how being dismissed in medical settings prompted her to advocate for herself and seek care from doctors who respect her. This type of self-advocacy frequently

co-occurred with setting clear boundaries (see Figure 1), a practice many women described in response to emotional and relational strain beyond the healthcare system.

Subtheme 2.2 Setting Clear Boundaries

This subtheme highlights how Black women resist the daily pressure to go beyond their limits by making intentional decisions to protect their time, energy, and peace. Boundary-setting here refers to present, situation-based actions, such as saying no to emotional labor, stepping away from draining conversations, or refusing to justify the need for rest. These are not large, identity-shifting changes, but more purposeful and ongoing moments of self-protection in everyday life. By upholding their own boundaries, users reject the idea that they must be endlessly strong, helpful, or available to others at all times.

One user shared that when she feels overwhelmed by negativity, she reminds herself that she needs a shift in perspective. She noted that many people fear the power and fierceness of Black women, even when Black women themselves are not fully aware of it, which leads others to mistreat, provoke, or test them. In response, she had to reinvent herself multiple times by removing herself from certain spaces, ghosting people, stepping away from social media, and limiting others' access to her.

This user's reflection highlights how setting boundaries can be a protective and empowering act. Faced with constant negativity and mistreatment, she chooses to reclaim control by withdrawing from harmful environments and relationships. Distancing herself from people, social media, and spaces that drain her reflects a conscious effort to protect her mental and emotional well-being.

While boundary-setting often addressed immediate pressures, some women described a deeper transformation, a conscious decision to step away from caregiving roles that had long defined their identities.

Subtheme 2.3 Letting go of the Caretaker Role

This subtheme reflects a deeper personal shift in which Black women actively move away from long-standing roles that require them to care for others, such as family members, partners, or friends, often at the cost of their own well-being. While setting boundaries often involves moment-to-moment decisions, letting go of the caretaker role is about stepping out of an identity rooted in always being the helper, the problem-solver, or the emotional anchor. Black women described feeling drained from constantly prioritizing others and remaining in relationships where their worth was defined by how much they gave. Letting go was often painful but was seen as necessary for healing.

One user described always being the one who held everything together like "duct tape" and solved everyone's problems. Over time, this constant pressure left her physically and emotionally exhausted, as she realized that no one was checking on her while she was breaking down, trying to keep things afloat. She shared that those around her were shocked when she finally stepped away from her caretaker role. They had never expected her to leave or stop supporting them. She chose to cut ties completely, stating that their toxicity was theirs to deal with, not hers.

This reflection makes clear how the emotional burden of being constantly relied upon led to deep exhaustion. The user recognized that while she was holding everything together for others, her own needs were ignored. This realization connects directly to the subtheme *Burnout from Always Being Strong* (see Figure 2) and marks a turning point, as stepping away from the caretaker role became a necessary act of resistance to protect her mental and emotional health.

Hence, stepping away from roles of constant giving allowed many Black women to focus on their own healing, with therapy seen not just as self-care, but as an act of radical self-advocacy.

Subtheme 2.4: Therapy as Resistance

While everyday self-care routines help create moments of healing and calm, choosing to go to psychotherapy often marked a deeper, more intentional break from the emotional expectations placed on Black women. Therapy became both a healing practice and a form of resistance. For many, it meant rejecting the pressure to carry everything alone or appear constantly strong. It also challenged the cultural stigma around mental health and directly pushed back against the SBW schema. Going to therapy was described as a turning point: choosing oneself, seeking help, and refusing to suffer in silence.

One user shared that she explicitly rejected the SBW schema, saying it was exactly this stereotype that pushed her to take different actions. She explained that she now allows herself to cry when needed, continues psychotherapy for as long as it feels necessary, and takes sick leave without guilt. She added that she no longer worries about what others think.

This illustrates how seeking therapy becomes a conscious form of resistance and a personal as well as political act that challenges the societal pressure to appear invulnerable. This excerpt also co-occurs with *Rejecting the Strong Black Women Label* and *The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human* (see Figure 2), as the user challenges the stereotype directly and embraces emotional openness as part of her healing.

Alongside professional care, many users emphasized the importance of building informal, affirming support networks where they could feel emotionally safe and understood.

Subtheme 2.5 Building Personal Support Systems

This subtheme highlights how Black women resist the pressure of constant self-reliance by building supportive and affirming communities. Rather than carrying emotional burdens alone, they created networks, composed of friends, family, or chosen community, where they could be vulnerable and receive care without judgment. These relationships allowed them to move beyond survival mode and have their emotional needs recognized.

One user shared that what keeps her going and brings her happiness is her friends' group. She emphasized how important it is for Black women to be around others who truly see and care for them as whole individuals. She explained that she intentionally surrounds herself with people she trusts to be kind, fair, and nonjudgmental, and friends who are genuinely committed to treating her with the same care and respect that she offers them.

This highlights how vital mutual care and emotional reciprocity are to resist the pressures of being "strong." By building spaces of emotional safety and recognition, these women redefined strength as connection and care in community.

Rather than relying solely on others, Black women also integrated personal healing practices into their routines to nurture long-term emotional resilience.

Subtheme 2.6: Creating Everyday Healing Practices

This subtheme highlights how Black women on Reddit create small, intentional routines to support their emotional well-being and ease daily pressures. Through simple self-care practices, like journaling, colouring, reading, walking, or setting screen-free days, they resist the expectation to always put others first. These moments of rest and reflection allow them to care for themselves with kindness and slowly let go of the internalized pressure to always be "strong."

One user shared that she often journals to process her emotions and does other activities that help her relax and stay focused. She also mentioned doing her hair frequently, like setting it in rollers, because it helps her feel good about herself.

This phrase shows how self-care can be part of everyday life. Journaling helps the user sort through their emotions and feel more in control, while doing their hair is a way to feel good about themselves and boost confidence. Both practices offer comfort and support in their daily routine.

Theme 3: Healing Through Community

This theme centers on the ways Black women turn to one another for emotional support, understanding, and healing. In response to a world that often isolates or misunderstands them, participants described how connecting with other Black women, whether in real life or online, gave them a sense of safety, relief, and validation. These Black women's communities became a place where they could be vulnerable without judgment, share their experiences honestly, and receive care without having to perform strength. The support of like-minded women allowed them to process pain, reject harmful stereotypes, and feel truly seen and understood.

Subtheme 3.1: Seeking Safety Among Black Women

This subtheme reflects how a lot of Black women seek emotional safety and recognition, specifically among other Black women who share similar lived experiences. While subtheme 2.5 focuses on actively forming supportive relationships, *Seeking Safety* highlights the sense of relief and emotional protection that comes from entering already existing Black female spaces. These may include friendships, group chats, subreddits, or cultural communities where Black women feel seen, understood, and safe. Users shared that only with other Black women could they truly relax, speak honestly about harming stereotypes, and show their softer side without worrying about being judged or misunderstood. These spaces were described as rare but important because they offer deep validation and emotional safety in a world that often feels hostile or exhausting.

One user expressed that being a Black woman is difficult, especially because it means having to be cautious about when and with whom to show vulnerability. However, she shared that the most comforting part is being able to be soft around other Black women who truly understand her experiences and struggles.

The user reflects on how being vulnerable as a Black woman often feels unsafe, as it depends on who is around. However, she emphasizes that being in the presence of other Black women who understand the shared struggles creates a space where softness is not only possible but also healing. This comment illustrates a clear co-occurrence with *The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human* (see Figure 2), as it highlights how culturally safe spaces not only offer protection but also allow Black women to reclaim vulnerability as a valid and healing emotional expression.

As a result of feeling safe, many women began to express vulnerability, which was met with appreciation rather than judgment.

Subtheme 3.2: Appreciation for Shared Vulnerability

This subtheme captures the gratitude and emotional connection that emerged when Black women saw others speak honestly about their struggles. In spaces where strength is

often expected and emotional expression discouraged, it was powerful to witness other women share feelings of sadness, exhaustion, or self-doubt. Black women expressed how much it meant to see someone else be real. This mutual openness fostered a sense of trust and belonging. For many, it was healing simply to know that others were feeling the same way and were brave enough to say it out loud.

One user expressed appreciation for another's openness, saying it was refreshing to see such honesty. She shared that Black women often are not given the space to be vulnerable, so the post was meaningful to her. She wanted the user to know that many other Black women around the world feel the same way.

This highlights how much it means for Black women to experience others openly expressing their emotions. In communities where strength is often expected, the act of sharing one's struggles is not just brave but deeply appreciated. This appreciation reflects how mutual emotional openness helps Black women feel seen, validated, and less alone, which reinforces that healing can come simply from being heard and understood. This subtheme co-occurs with *Seeking Safety Among Black Women* and *The Right to Be Vulnerable* (see Figures 1&2), as the user acknowledges the emotional significance of honest expression in spaces where Black women feel seen and safe.

This culture of shared appreciation was often accompanied by intentional acts of care and advice-giving.

Subcode 3.3 Offering Emotional Support and Practical Advice

This subtheme captures how Black women seek comfort in community and also actively support one another through kind words, shared experiences, and helpful guidance. In these spaces, emotional support and practical advice often go together. Black women respond with empathy while also offering solutions, encouragement, or reminders to rest and care for themselves. These interactions reflect a deep sense of mutual care, where users are not just sharing struggles but lifting each other up in concrete ways. Whether it is affirming someone's feelings, recommending therapy, leaving philosophical quotes as inspiration, suggesting helpful books, or simply saying "you're not alone," these acts show how Black women care for one another with heart and clarity.

One user offered comfort and support to another who had shared a difficult experience with a therapist. She acknowledged that while she did not have specific advice, she wanted to validate the user's feelings and send a virtual hug. She expressed sympathy for what the other person was going through and criticized how the therapist handled the situation, especially the

fact that the therapist continued to call her "strong" even after she had clearly said she disliked the label. The user acknowledged this as inappropriate and upsetting behavior.

This shows how emotional support within Black women's communities is delivered with care and attentiveness. The user does not try to "fix" the situation but affirms the other woman's emotional reality, is in the present moment, and offers comfort and validation in response to her pain. Moreover, this comment aligns with *Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Label* (see Figure 2), as the initial contributor explicitly resists being labelled strong in a therapeutic setting. The responding user affirms this stance by criticizing the therapist's disregard, highlighting how the SBW schema can persist even in spaces meant for healing.

As women cared for one another, they often reminded each other of their strength, worth, and the deeper power of shared heritage.

Subtheme 3.4: Affirming Black Identity and Resilience

This subtheme highlights how Black women affirmed their identity and celebrated their strength in the face of systemic oppression. These expressions were reactions of cultural pride and self-definition. Black women used their voices to uplift one another, remind themselves of their heritage, and reinforce the value and beauty of being a Black woman, even in a world that often devalues them. Many comments showed that users did not accept the negative messages society puts on them. Instead, they focused on loving themselves, feeling proud of being Black women, and honoring their heritage.

One user encouraged another by acknowledging how difficult things can be but told her that she is already strong enough to keep going. She shared that what helps her personally is focusing on the beauty, creativity, and resilience of Black women, especially in the hardest times. She reminded the user that the challenge feels heavy because the burden keeps growing, but that with each step, she is becoming even stronger.

Although the responder uses the word "strength," she gives it a different meaning. Rather than reinforcing the isolating, stoic version of strength linked to the SBW schema, she reframes it as a shared, cultural kind of resilience, one rooted in beauty, creativity, and support from other Black women. Here, strength is redefined as something chosen and rooted in cultural pride and support from others, rather than something based on enduring hardship alone. This subtheme also co-occurs with *Offering Emotional Support and Practical Advice* (see Figure 1), as the responder provides encouragement and care. Moreover, by redefining strength as communal and culturally rooted, it indirectly aligns with *Rejecting the SBW Label* (see Figure 2).

The following Sankey diagrams visually summarize the relationships and patterns identified across themes and subthemes.

Figure 1

Intra-Theme Co-Occurrences Among Subthemes
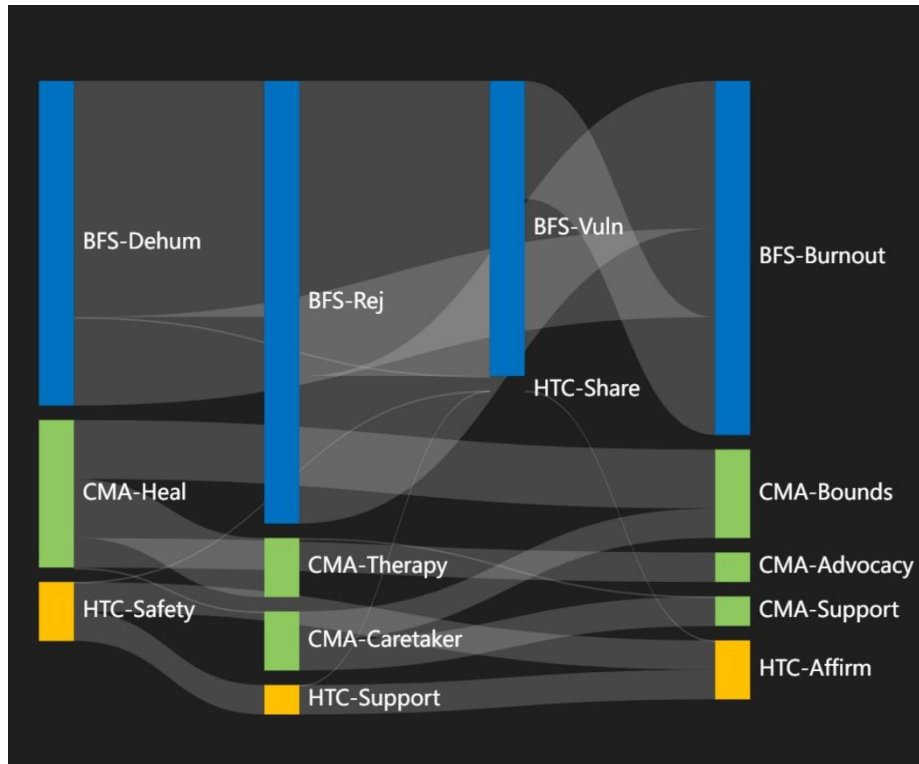
Note. This Sankey diagram illustrates intra-theme co-occurrences among subthemes. The flows represent how often particular subthemes, such as Dehumanization Through SBW (BFS-Dehum), Healing Practices (CMA-Heal), and Seeking Safety (HTC-Safety), appear together within the overarching themes of Breaking Free from Silence (BFS), Choosing Myself Without Apology (CMA), and Healing Through Community (HTC).

Within the Breaking Free from Silence theme, BFS-Burnout frequently co-occurred with BFS-Dehum, BFS-Rej, and BFS-Vuln, indicating a deep emotional overlap among exhaustion, rejection of imposed strength, and the need for emotional expression. Within Choosing Myself Without Apology, CMA-Heal was often paired with CMA-Bounds and CMA-Therapy, suggesting that these are part of a broader healing process. In Healing Through Community, HTC-Safety, HTC-Support, and HTC-Affirm showed strong co-occurrence, which emphasizes how emotional safety, support, and affirmation are closely intertwined in communal care practices.

Figure 2

Cross-Theme Co-Occurrences Among Subthemes
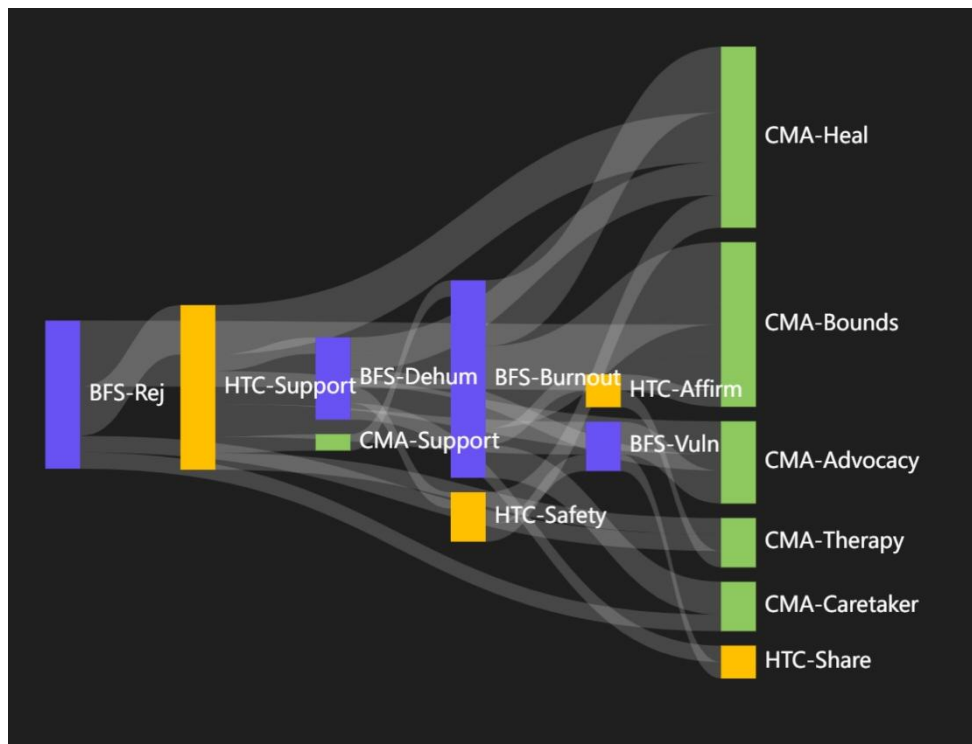
Note. This figure visualizes cross-theme co-occurrences between different overarching themes (BFS, HTC, CMA) using a Sankey diagram. The flows illustrate how subthemes from one overarching theme (e.g., BFS-Rej) are linked to subsequent subthemes (e.g., HTC-Support, CMA-Heal).

In Figure 2, CMA-Heal most frequently co-occurred with BFS-Burnout and HTC-Support, suggesting that healing routines are often used in response to emotional exhaustion and are supported by community-based encouragement. BFS-Burnout also showed strong links with CMA-Bounds and CMA-Caretaker, indicating that burnout frequently motivates Black women to protect their energy and redefine their caregiving roles. Similarly, HTC-Support was closely associated with BFS-Vuln and CMA-Heal, reflecting the central role of community support in facilitating both vulnerability and self-care.

Discussion

This study examined how U.S. Black women utilize Reddit to resist the SBW schema through emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building. Through RTA of Reddit discussions, three major themes were identified: Breaking Free from Silence, Choosing Myself Without Apology, and Healing Through Community. Each of these themes illustrates the nuanced ways in which Black women resist, redefine strength, and reclaim emotional space in a cultural context that often demands their silence and sacrifice.

Breaking Free from Silence

The theme Breaking Free from Silence shows how resisting the SBW schema allows users to express their emotions and confront the emotional isolation caused by the constant

expectations of resilience and self-sacrifice. The most prominent intra-theme co-occurrence in this theme was the strong connection between *Burnout from Always Being Strong* and several other subthemes: *Dehumanization Through the SBW Schema, Rejecting the Strong Black Woman Label, and The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human*. This pattern suggests that burnout is not just one emotional experience among others, but a core response that connects and triggers many of the others. Users described burnout not simply as feeling tired or stressed, but as the result of constantly hiding their emotions, being ignored by society, and always having to seem strong no matter what. The emotional and physical exhaustion detailed by these Black women often marked a breaking point, after which many began to express and articulate a need for change.

These insights align with the study by Al Issa and Chen (2025), who show that the endorsement of the Superwoman Schema (used simultaneously with the SBW schema) pressures Black women to suppress emotions and manage multiple roles without visible struggle. Over time, this leads to chronic stress and burnout. Similarly, Kim et al. (2024) found that mothers of color, including U.S black women, often internalize traditional caregiving expectations, which increase their emotional and domestic workload, leading to burnout. This dynamic shows how the SBW schema places pressure on Black women to care for others, hide their emotions, and put themselves last, not because they choose to, but because it is expected of them.

Many users linked their emotional exhaustion to a deeper feeling of being unseen or undervalued, which is a form of dehumanization rooted in the SBW schema. As described in the subtheme *Dehumanization Through the SBW Schema*, users reported being ignored in healthcare settings or expected to suppress pain in order to meet others' expectations.

Users' voices of being dismissed, especially in healthcare settings, are consistent with Gómez's (2013) concept of institutional microaggressions. Gómez argues that seemingly small acts, such as minimizing symptoms or assuming Black women do not feel pain in the same way as others, build up over time and form a type of institutional betrayal. These patterns diminish trust in healthcare systems and contribute to emotional distress. McCleary-Gaddy and James (2022) further show that such dehumanizing experiences, especially when internalized through the SBW schema, can lead Black women to see themselves as less emotionally complex or less deserving of care. This self-dehumanization, also called infrahumanization, makes women less likely to seek professional mental health support, which can deepen isolation, mistrust, and emotional exhaustion.

This buildup of exhaustion and invisibility often led users to distance themselves from the SBW label. Rejecting the label became a form of resistance, a way to reclaim agency over how they express emotion and receive care. Closely tied to this was the desire to embrace vulnerability, not as weakness, but as a necessary and healing act. Many users shared how allowing themselves to cry, speak openly about pain, or admit when they were struggling felt liberating after years of emotional suppression.

This rejection of the SBW label and embrace of vulnerability reflects what Davis (2018) describes as communicative resistance, the ways Black women use voice, language, and emotional expression to push back against narratives that silence or limit them. In online spaces like Reddit, users challenged the SBW role by naming their exhaustion, setting boundaries, and redefining what strength means on their own terms. Nelson et al. (2016) similarly argue that the SBW schema acts as a controlling image by encouraging emotional restraint and rewarding self-sacrifice. However, their findings also show that many Black women push back against this role by speaking honestly about their struggles, setting emotional boundaries, and allowing themselves to receive support. These acts of resistance represent a shift away from merely surviving toward caring for themselves more intentionally.

Ultimately, breaking free from silence was not only about speaking, but about finally being heard, felt, and reclaiming one's full humanity.

Choosing Myself Without Apology

The second theme highlights how Black women intentionally prioritized rest, emotional balance, and self-protection, often in response to the exhaustion described in the previous theme. Burnout frequently co-occurred with both *Creating Everyday Healing Practices* and *Setting Clear Boundaries*, suggesting that these were not isolated acts, but meaningful responses to managing the emotional burden of constant strength.

Adkins-Jackson et al. (2019) describe self-care as a daily, therapeutic process rooted in self-awareness (the ability to recognize one's emotional limits) and self-regulation (the capacity to act intentionally to support emotional well-being). Reddit users showed self-awareness when they acknowledged their emotional exhaustion, often triggered by overwhelming social demands and ongoing self-sacrifice. One user, for example, described journaling as a way to process emotions and regain focus, which demonstrated self-awareness and regulation. Others mentioned practicing meditation to calm their minds, taking quiet time, or stepping back from social interaction as self-regulatory strategies for restoring emotional balance. As Adkins-Jackson et al. (2019) state, these internal processes are vital for Black women who face emotional demands, to make everyday healing practices calming and

empowering forms of resistance. These insights are reinforced by Woods-Giscombé & Black (2010), who show that mind-body practices like meditation, deep breathing, and mindfulness can help Black women reduce stress tied to the SBW role. These culturally grounded techniques support emotional release and self-compassion, offering tools to interrupt cycles of self-neglect and overextension.

The importance of boundary-setting also emerged as a key form of self-care. As described by Adkins-Jackson et al. (2022), Black women understand self-care as the intentional act of creating space between themselves and harmful or draining demands. This includes setting clear boundaries with others, limiting emotional labor, and stepping back from energy-draining relationships. These behaviors closely reflect the actions described by Reddit users in this study. Notably, *Setting Clear Boundaries* often co-occurred with *Creating Everyday Healing Practices*, suggesting that both are interconnected tools for restoring balance and resisting the ongoing expectation to always be strong and available.

Healing Through Community

Another central finding of this study was the power of emotional connection and shared understanding among Black women. These spaces allowed them to release the pressure to be strong, share their experiences honestly, and heal through giving and witnessing vulnerability, without judgment. This dynamic reflects the subtheme *Offering Emotional Support and Advice*, where mutual exchanges of empathy, storytelling, and encouragement serve as meaningful forms of emotional care and connection. Users shared that reading about others' struggles helped them feel validated and less alone, while offering support in return also felt meaningful and therapeutic. These moments frequently co-occurred with *The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human*, suggesting that healing was not only personal but deeply relational.

This kind of connection aligns with Davis (2014), who has found that this dynamic closely mirrors the Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC), which theorizes that Black women heal through collective communication practices that let them "take off the mask" of expected strength. Within SBWC spaces, the focus shifts from individual self-reliance to collective strength built through affirmation, validation, and emotional reciprocity. Community interactions thus become acts of resistance to the isolating effects of the SBW schema.

A final key aspect of this theme was the *Appreciation for Shared Vulnerability*, where many users expressed how powerful it was to witness other Black women speaking honestly about their pain. Being simply in a space where others were open about similar emotional struggles helped them feel seen, validated, and less alone.

This resonates with the study by Liao et al. (2019), who found that collective coping, such as seeking support from other Black women, family members, and communities, reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness among women endorsing the SBW schema. In this study, *Appreciation for Shared Vulnerability* relates to the idea that witnessing shared emotional truths, without needing to speak oneself, can still offer relief and protection. Together, these findings underscore how emotional openness within Black women's communities serves as a powerful and protective form of collective healing.

Reflection After the Analysis

My academic background in psychology and personal values, particularly around feminism, anti-racism, and mental health, shaped how I related to certain themes during the analysis. While I aimed to give each theme equal attention, I found myself especially attuned to expressions of emotional exhaustion, vulnerability, and collective support. This may have, to some extent, influenced how I framed and interpreted themes such as *The Right to Be Vulnerable and Human* and *Healing Through Community*, which I found especially meaningful in the context of resistance to the SBW schema.

At times, my personal values, especially around emotional openness and mutual care, helped me connect with what participants shared. Still, I was aware that, as a white, non-U.S. researcher, I might not fully grasp the cultural depth of some experiences. To stay grounded in the participants' perspectives, I returned often to their exact words, questioned my assumptions, and tried to let their context guide how I understood and presented the findings.

Ultimately, the analysis reminded me that researcher subjectivity is not something to eliminate, but something to remain in dialogue with, especially when working with lived experiences outside one's own.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this study is its focus on the emotional realities of Black women, particularly in relation to mental health, vulnerability, and community care. These dimensions are often overlooked in psychological research (Spates, 2012). By centering how Black women articulate their own emotional needs and forms of resistance, the study contributes to more culturally responsive understandings of well-being and challenges dominant frameworks that tend to erase or minimize their lived experiences (Castelin & White, 2022).

Another strength lies in the use of Reddit as a data source. The platform's anonymity and peer-to-peer format enabled users to express themselves with honesty and vulnerability, especially on sensitive topics such as burnout and dehumanization (Proferes et al., 2021; Mantell et al., 2025). Reddit provided a unique space for Black women to exchange

reflections, support one another, and process emotional experiences outside the constraints of traditional research settings.

The inclusion of multiple subreddit communities (such as r/BlackLadies, r/BlackGirls, and r/BlackMentalHealth) allowed for a broader range of voices and emotional experiences to emerge (Rocha-Silva et al., 2023). Reddit remains underutilized in research centering Black women (Smith et al., 2024; Matsuzaka et al., 2023), so its application in this study offers a meaningful contribution to the growing body of research on mental health and identity. Because the posts were unprompted and naturally occurring, the data reflected unfiltered and honest expressions of emotional vulnerability, self-care, and collective support (Boettcher, 2021).

Lastly, the use of reflective thematic analysis allowed for a flexible and nuanced interpretation of the data. This method acknowledged the researcher's influence on meaning while facilitating close engagement with users' voices (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The approach enabled the development of emotionally resonant themes, such as *Burnout from Always Being Strong* and *Healing Through Community*, that captured the complexity of resisting the SBW schema in everyday life. The analysis also revealed meaningful patterns of co-occurrence, showing how emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building were not isolated themes but closely intertwined forms of resistance.

One limitation of this study is the inability to verify the geographic location of Reddit users. While the research was framed around U.S. Black women and supported by U.S.-based literature, Reddit's anonymity made it impossible to confirm this focus (Rocha-Silva et al., 2023). As a result, interpretations tied to U.S. cultural and healthcare contexts may not fully reflect the actual demographics of participants.

Another limitation involves the lack of detailed identity markers beyond race and gender. While users self-identified as Black women, other relevant aspects, such as age, class, or sexual orientation, were hardly ever revealed (Kumar et al., 2022; Rocha-Silva et al., 2023). This made it difficult to perform a more thorough, intersectional study of how various identities may perceive the SBW schema in different ways.

Additionally, the study relied on manual post and comment selection rather than automated scraping or systematic sampling. While this allowed for deeper engagement with the content and ensured thematic relevance, it also introduced the possibility of selection bias (Zhang et al., 2018). As a result, some perspectives or experiences may have been overrepresented or overlooked, limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Moreover, the study was limited to publicly accessible subreddits. While this ensured ethical transparency, it excluded private or membership-restricted communities where even more open, in-depth conversations might take place (Proferes et al., 2021). As a result, the findings likely reflect only part of the broader discourse around the SBW schema within Black women's online spaces.

Finally, as a non-Black, non-U.S. researcher, my outsider position may have introduced interpretive distance. While I used reflexive journaling and engaged with Black feminist literature to reduce bias, full cultural understanding cannot be assumed.

Implications for the Future

This study provides important insights into how Black women use online platforms like Reddit to resist the SBW schema and articulate emotional needs. However, several directions for future research can build upon and deepen this work.

First, researchers should consider designs that allow for the inclusion of more detailed identity markers. Expanding the lens to account for intersecting factors such as age, sexuality, and socioeconomic background could support a more holistic and intersectional understanding of how the SBW schema manifests across different lived experiences. For example, younger Black women may engage more actively in rejecting the schema or finding alternative narratives through digital spaces, while older generations might feel more strongly bound to traditional expectations of emotional restraint and caregiving, shaped by different historical and cultural contexts. Drawing on Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), which emphasizes the importance of centering Black women's diverse lived experiences and acknowledging the interlocking systems of oppression they face, future research would benefit from exploring how these intersecting identities shape different expressions of strength, resistance, and vulnerability.

Building on this broader intersectional lens, future research could also move beyond the SBW schema to examine how other intersecting stereotypes, such as the Mammy, Jezebel, or Angry Black Woman, shape Black women's emotional lives and practices of resistance (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005). Investigating how these controlling images interact may offer a more holistic understanding of the layered emotional burdens Black women navigate, and the diverse ways they reclaim identity. Building on this study's focus on emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building, future work could explore how other stereotypes suppress or reshape these modes of resistance in both online and offline contexts.

In addition, future research could compare how Black women express emotional resistance on different digital platforms, like TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit, since each platform's design changes how vulnerability, emotional expression, personal care prioritization, and community building are shown (Ham et al., 2018). For example, TikTok's visual and performative nature might highlight emotional expression differently than Reddit's anonymous text discussions, and Twitter's public visibility could influence community building in unique ways. Understanding these platform-specific shifts would build on this study by showing how digital environments shape different styles of resistance and care.

Finally, given the limitations of relying on publicly available Reddit posts and being led by a researcher outside the community, it lacked opportunities for deeper dialogue or clarification. This can create distance and limit how deeply their stories are understood. Future research could use Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), a method where researchers and community members work together throughout the whole process. This approach helps ensure the research is respectful, relevant, and truly reflects the voices of those involved. CBPR also fits well with Black feminist ideas, as it centers lived experience and encourages shared knowledge that benefits both researchers and communities (Breland-Noble et al., 2024). Future studies using CBPR could explore how Black women define and practice emotional resistance in offline community settings or examine generational differences in responses to the SBW schema through group discussions and collaborative workshops.

Conclusion

This thesis examined how U.S. Black women use Reddit to resist the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema through emotional expression, self-care, and community building. Through reflexive thematic analysis, three themes emerged: Breaking Free from Silence, Choosing Myself Without Apology, and Healing Through Community with each revealing how Black women challenge the emotional suppression tied to the SBW ideal. Particularly significant were findings around the deep emotional exhaustion many users experienced, the creation of intentional healing practices like journaling and boundary-setting, and the power of online communities to foster mutual care and vulnerability. These forms of resistance often overlapped, highlighting the interconnected and layered nature of Black women's efforts to care for themselves and challenge social expectations. Such insights highlight the emotional burden associated with constantly being viewed as "strong," while also showing how Black women actively redefine strength rooted in rest, care, and connection with others. This study emphasizes the importance of bringing up Black women's voices in psychological dialogue

and research and advances more culturally sensitive understandings of Black women's mental health.

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Appendices

Appendix A

During the preparation of this work, the author (Victoria Pohl) used ChatGPT in order to brainstorm, check for grammar and spelling (with minor revisions for conciseness), and to receive feedback on the structure and flow of the text. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.