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Dating_MissRepresentation.Com: Black Women's Lived Love-Hate Relationship With Online Dating

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DATING_MISSREPRESENTATION.COM:
BLACK WOMEN'S LIVED LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH ONLINE DATING

by

James H. Johnson

M.A Ed., California State University Long Beach, 2010
B.S., California State University Long Beach, 2005

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2017

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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

DATING_MISSREPRESENTATION.COM:
BLACK WOMEN'S LIVED LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH ONLINE DATING

By

James H. Johnson

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctorate of Philosophy
in the field of Mass Communication and Media Arts

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March 28, 2017

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

JAMES H. JOHNSON, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in MASS COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA ARTS, presented on March 28, 2017, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: DATING_MISSREPRESENTATION.COM: BLACK WOMEN'S LIVED LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH ONLINE DATING

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Novotny Lawrence and Dr. Aaron Veenstra

The increased use of online dating sites has further encouraged corporations' attempts to capitalize on these mate-seeking trends. Match.com, eHarmony, and OkCupid are primary competitors in a growing market of individuals seeking out potential romantic partners. They offer several mainstream dating options as well as niche-dating sites. Similar to society at large where dating still occurs offline, scholars have revealed that racial hierarchies exist within various online platforms. As such, the roles of gender and ethnicity in online dating environments merit study. Specifically, the experiences of Black women who use Internet dating sites, a virtually unexplored demographic, form the basis of this dissertation. This study consisted of 16 interviews and a demographic survey, which were used to examine Black women's online dating experiences from *their* perspectives to determine whether or not online dating sites are productive, love-seeking spaces. Data analysis was conducted utilizing a Google Form survey to collect demographic data and NVivo 11 qualitative software to help generate themes that guided analysis. Themes that emerged included: negative and positive perceptions from men; physical and non-physical attributes participants possessed that men found attractive; whether or not men's perceptions impacted interview participants' success or failure in online dating, and whether or not participants viewed their online dating experiences to be in line with those of other Black women. Participants discussed how perceptions from men online influenced their racially-gendered online dating experience.

DEDICATION

I would like to extend a special dedication to Lillie Marie Gilliam. My mother was raised on a pecan orchard in rural Redwood, Mississippi in the 50's. She moved to California where she worked in the basement of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, and years later worked through nursing school while raising three children. As a child of a single parent, I saw my mother work multiple jobs to put three children through private Christian schools, then college and still unconditionally support her children and now her grandchildren. Witnessing her overcome various adversities has fueled and motivated my sisters and me. For that I dedicate my dissertation to my mother.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CHAPTER 1	1
INTRODUCTION	1
The Problem.....	1
Background of the Problem	5
The Controlling Image.....	7
The Mammy.....	9
The Matriarch.....	11
The Jezebel.....	13
Sapphire	14
The Strong Black Woman (SBW)	15
Research Questions.....	21
Summary.....	23
Organization of the Dissertation	23
CHAPTER 2	25
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	25
Overview.....	25
A Brief History of Dating through Media	25
Online Dating and The Burden of Perception: Why Now?	28
The Socio-Technological Continuum.....	32
Online Dating Research	40
Self-Presentation, Impression Management, and Self-Disclosure.....	45
Online Dating Studies: Racially Gendered Hierarchies	53
Summary.....	66
CHAPTER 3	69
METHODOLOGY	69
The Problem.....	69
Qualitative Methodology Rationale.....	72

Rationale for the Study	73
Archetypes and Theoretical Framework	74
Research Design	75
Sampling Techniques	75
Participants	77
Data Collection Process	79
Protocol and Instruments	79
Interviews	81
Data Analysis	82
Coding Strategy: An Iterative Process	82
Node Titles Created from the Interview Protocol	84
Reflexivity and the Researcher	86
Trustworthiness	88
Summary	89
CHAPTER 4	90
THE UNCERTAINTY OF CHOOSING A PLATFORM (SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL SPACE)	90
.....	90
Overview	90
Category: Mobile Applications	92
Theme: Tinder	92
Theme: Other Online Dating Applications	94
Category: Website-Based Dating Options	98
Theme: Match.com (Match)	98
Theme: eHarmony	100
Theme: Plenty of Fish (POF)	104
Summary	108
CHAPTER 5	110
LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP: SELF-PRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION BY	
POTENTIAL MATES	110
Overview	110
Category: Self- Presentation-Nonphysical Attributes	112
Theme: Independence	114
Theme: Honesty and Transparency	117
Category: Self-Presentation- Physical Appearance	121
Theme: Body Type	121
Theme: Images	127
Category: Stereotypes	132
Category: Negative Perceptions by Potential Mates	137
Theme: Negative Perceptions In A General Sense	138

Category: Negative Non-Physical	140
Theme: Spirituality	140
Theme: Race (Colorism).....	144
Summary.....	146
CHAPTER 6:	148
OPERATING WITHIN CROOKED SPACES OF INTIMACY	148
Overview.....	148
Failures, Success, and Lessons Learned	149
Sub-Category: Failures	149
Sub-Category: Success.....	154
Sub- Category: Lessons Learned	156
Category: Experiences with Other Mates	161
Theme: Black Men Part I (View of Black Women Online)	163
Theme: Black Men Part II (Transformations in Dating Markets.)	166
Theme: Interactions with Non-Black Men	173
Theme: Regional.....	176
Category: Indicative of Dating Climate.....	179
Theme: Advice to Black women from Black Women.....	189
Summary.....	196
CHAPTER 7	199
SUMMARY OF THE STUDY.....	199
Overview.....	199
Conclusions.....	202
Contribution to Current Research	205
Implications.....	205
Limitations	213
Future Research	214
Positionality Statement	217
REFERENCES	221
APPENDICES	1
Appendix A: Introduction to Study/Informed Consent (Google Form)	222
Appendix B: Interview Protocol	226
Appendix C: Code Book.....	228
Appendix D: Reflexive Journaling	229
Appendix E: Audit Log.....	232
Appendix F: Recruitment.....	235

VITA..... 237

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Each year new online dating sites and mobile dating applications, such as Grindr and Tinder, are introduced to American singles. One in every ten American adults were reported to have used an online dating site or a mobile dating application (Smith & Duggan, 2013) over the 2012-2013 year. Among American singles, 11% of Internet users overall (roughly 9% of all adults) personally used an online dating service (Smith & Duggan, 2013), a figure that demonstrates that Internet users are increasingly using online dating services to meet potential partners.

The increased use of online dating sites has further encouraged corporations' attempts to capitalize on these mate-seeking trends. Match.com, eHarmony, and OkCupid are primary competitors in a growing market of individuals seeking out potential romantic partners. These companies offer several mainstream dating options as well as niche-dating sites. In doing so, the corporations target specific demographics by pushing subscribers' personal preferences to the forefront. Examples of these ever-increasing niche sites include BlackPeopleMeet.com (Black singles), FarmersOnly.com (Caucasian farmers), TrumpSingles.com (Making Dating Great Again), EliteSingles.com (dating for busy professionals), Meet-an-Inmate.com (prison inmates), AshleyMadison.com (spouses interested in extra-marital affairs), PositiveSingles.com (singles with sexually-transmitted diseases, or STDs), and AnastasiaDate.com (connecting single men from North America with single women from Eastern Europe).

With the increased commercialization of the online dating experience and the growing number of online dating platforms, there is a pressing need to examine the demographics of the

medium's users to determine their position within the virtual hierarchy of dating platforms.

Similar to dating offline, scholars have revealed that racial hierarchies exist within various online platforms (Boyd, 2011; Rudder, 2014a, 2014b). As such, the roles of sex and ethnicity in online dating environments merit study. Specifically, the experiences of Black women who use Internet dating sites, a virtually unexplored demographic, form the basis for this study. The goal of this dissertation is to examine Black women's online dating experiences from *their* perspectives to determine whether or not online dating sites are productive, love-seeking spaces for Black women.

Prior research regarding race and online dating has focused mainly on racial preference (Fiore & Donath, 2005; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; McClintock, 2010). Other scholars have examined gender (Fulllick, 2013; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Günter J Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010; Kreager, Cavanagh, Yen, & Yu, 2014; Skopek, Schmitz, & Blossfeld, 2011) and self-presentation strategies in online dating spaces (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006a; Hall, Park, Hayeon, & Michael, 2010; Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010; Madill, 2010). While there is not a vast amount of literature examining online dating experiences, Christian Rudder (2009), founder of OkCupid, completed one of the few studies addressing an apparent racial bias in online dating. The article "How Your Race Affects the Messages You Get," stated that interactional data, defined as data generated from online daters' messaging behaviors, indicated that mate selection was heavily influenced by racial preference. Based on an analysis of the 2009 study wherein he examined dating site subscribers' interactions according to race, Rudder's most disturbing finding was that Black women are considered the least desirable group in the online dating marketplace (Rudder, 2014a). He came to this conclusion by examining user-generated data that showed how men of all races interacted with women of all races. Rudder's data revealed that

Black women were the least sought after by men of all races, a finding that held true across the portfolio of dating platforms owned by or affiliated with OkCupid (Rudder, 2014a). Further, Rudder's work indicated that racial bias and racial hierarchy intensified from 2009 to 2014 (Rudder, 2014a, 2014b). Coincidentally, this phenomenon occurred within the same time frame America celebrated its first Black president.

Rudder's research (2009, 2014a, 2014b) demonstrated that issues surrounding gender, race, and class permeate the socio-technological realm of digital courtship. This study extends Rudder's work, examining how Black women view their experiences when seeking online relationships. Specifically, my study analyzed the influence of self-presentation strategies used by Black women participating in online dating. As such, it provides a platform from which the voices and lived experiences of these women, dubbed by Rudder as "least desirable" in the online dating marketplace, may be heard.

Online dating is a relatively new courtship practice in which people of any ethnicity or socioeconomic background might participate. As a result of the general lack of knowledge about Black women in digital courtship, this dissertation centers on their perspectives and on their failures and successes in the online dating world. According to Rudder (2009, 2014a), Black women in these virtual dating communities are either viewed as the least desirable women or overlooked altogether by daters across racial lines. In 2009 Rudder published statistical data gathered from user-generated data directly from OkCupid's databases; he posted his findings on OkTrends (Rudder, 2009), a blog and subdomain of OkCupid, which purported that race and attraction influenced online daters' interactions. Overall, Black women were consistently the most undesirable group of women among non-Black men, while Black men showed little racial preference towards Black women. In general, women of all races preferred men of their own

race, but Asian and Black men also were among the least desired. Since the 2009 study, racial bias appears to have decreased in the responses to questions asked in the online profiles, but racial bias actually intensified among online daters when asked who they actually would consider dating (Rudder, 2014a, 2014b). According to Rudder (2014a):

While OkCupid is large enough that its demographics reflect the general Internet-using public, DateHookup is a niche site particularly popular with Latinos and Blacks (those groups comprise 13% and 20% of the site, respectively.) Other sites in our portfolio, with still different demographics and business models, show the same attraction patterns.

Rudder (2014b) acknowledged that the data collected directly from subscriber's pages speaks to a larger cultural narrative that correlates Whiteness and beauty. He pointed to scientific studies that show how beautiful people obtain privileges similar to White privilege. For example, he explained that the larger narrative of beauty is that it influences different facets of everyday life ranging from first dates to job interviews and overall outcomes in work and school; beauty is a social construction that is privileged. The standards for first impressions are constructed by the dominant culture (read White), and tends to prefer customs and behaviors that align with its hegemonic values. Rudder (2014b) extended this argument by highlighting OkCupid's interface, which allows online daters to choose more than one race when setting up their own dating profile. The data showed that adding "Whiteness" to one's racial description alleviates a good amount of racial bias against them in the online dating marketplace. For example, Rudder (2014a) demonstrated that Whiteness increased a subscriber's potential to find a date. The data Rudder used compared two groups of subscribers: those who self-identified with only one particular race—Asian, for example—alongside subscribers who checked both "Asian" and "White." The data revealed that by adding Whiteness to one's profile, it improved

one's dating chances across the board: Asian daters by 13%, Black daters by 14%, and Latino daters by 6%. Overall, women proved to be "racially loyal" by showing a clear preference towards men of their own race, but women across the board expressed a secondary preference for White men. Once OkCupid opened its user database to facilitate Rudder's work, other studies, using the same data, emerged. Still, studies comparable to those completed by Rudder are scarce (see Chapter 2 for in-depth discussion of those that do exist), but such data strongly suggests a need to understand the experiences of people of color in the online dating venue, especially the online dating experience from Black women's perspectives in an effort to understand how Black women navigate the dialectical relationship existing between themselves and the online dating spaces that they occupy. A study of Black women's experiences in online dating in the United States is an important place to begin.

Background of the Problem

In order to discuss and study the nature of Black women's experiences in online dating, it is important to understand how African-American women are burdened by the perceptions of others. With that in mind, this section provides a brief introduction to this study's usage and connection of two points. First, the role of misrepresentation in today's mediascape and how it influences the perception of dating subscribers which in turn makes digital courtship a "crooked space" where African American women struggle to stand upright with confidence (Harris-Perry, 2011). Second, this section positions digital courtship as a socio-technological realm where Black women employ strategies to construct an online and an offline self in order to form a co-present identity in today's information age. This study refers to *mediascapes* as the overall landscape of media including books, magazines, cinema, radio, television, advertising, websites, and overall visual culture that informs "the images of the world created by these media"

(Appadurai, 1990). Consumers are cornered in today's mediated society by the images produced by media conglomerates.

Media firms' diverse portfolios allow them access to various mass audiences, enabling them to be pervasive while subtly influencing audience perceptions of popular discourses concerning race, class, and gender. An example of a major media firm in the online dating market is InterActiveCorp (IAC). IAC is the parent company of many online dating sites that cater to U.S. markets. A North American Internet company headquartered in New York City, IAC manages over 50 brands across 40 countries. Hence, IAC has multiple ways of engaging with consumers around the world ranging from search engines, entertainment, dating, and home repair. According to IAC's webpage, it is the parent company for Chemistry.com, Match.com, Meetic, OkCupid, PeopleMedia, and Twoo. The primary focus of PeopleMedia, owned by Match.com, is to provide online personals for participants looking for potential mates through specialized communities. According to the PeopleMedia site:

Respectful of true love in all its multiplicity of forms, PeopleMedia has embraced the opportunity to support singles who prefer a personalized dating experience. Our online communities include OurTime.com, a super-site used by more than 1 million singles over the age of 50; BlackPeopleMeet.com, one of the biggest urban brands on the Internet; and SingleParentMeet.com, also No. 1 in its category.

As this information from PeopleMedia demonstrates, dating firms have capitalized on human intimacy by creating online spaces catered to specific audiences.

Dating firms and media companies' use of both conventional and niche sites segment spaces of intimacy on the Internet. The strategy behind niche marketing is to target consumers with advertising images characterizing and defining dating spaces. From their earliest

incarnation, matrimonial ads have been a niche market fueled by the interests of singles, but today, online dating extends the reach of matching agencies to singles with particular interests. Niche dating sites commodify site subscribers' potential involvement in intimate partnerships by creating an online space that prioritizes common interests such as ethnicity, location, lifestyle, and sex. The involvement of contemporary media companies in various markets makes them major participants in American media culture by frequently reducing heterogeneous groups into monolithic audiences described by stereotypes. These formulaic mass-mediated portrayals of African American women have now become narrow archetypal depictions that reinforce social hierarchies in virtual spaces.

In order to understand and view today's media landscape as a crooked room that is in constant conflict with Black femininity, this dissertation study uses Harris Perry's (2011) political science framework on the crooked room. The construct of the crooked room enables an understanding of the origins and impact of anti-Black misrepresentations of African-American women, as well as how those same misrepresentations permeate online dating spaces. Popular stereotypes used to caricature Black women are the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2008, ; Harris-Perry, 2011), which represent a theme taken up in this dissertation. Such stereotypes have described full-figured, dark-skinned Black women as asexual Mammies, sexually active Black women as lascivious and seductive Jezebels, and expressive, opinionated Black women as emasculating Sapphires. These pejorative stereotypes are extant controlling images dating from the antebellum era, and they continue to define Black female identity in American popular culture (M. C. King, 1982).

The Controlling Image

The objectification of Black female bodies continues to serve a dual purpose of both entertainment and labor. The racist and sexist ideals of antebellum slavery produced and reproduced anti-racist stereotypes against Black women. The proliferation of the stereotypes occurred for 250 years, allowing anti-Black stereotypes to become hegemonic ideals that would eventually inform media depictions of Black women in a negative light. Dominant culture's collective understanding of the Black lived experience through a lens of negative stereotypes combined with and Euro American's control over media production to create anti-Black stereotypes that evolved into anti-Black mass mediated archetypes. Anti-Black stereotypes and mass mediated archetypes eventually came to circumscribe Black women's femininity. Mass mediated archetypes solidified racist and sexist beliefs against Black women. The culmination of racism, sexism, classism, and media depictions aided in the marginalization of Black women's lived dating experience.

Collins (2008) posited three dimensions where the dominant culture in America has marginalized Black women. First, Black women are economically exploited with low wages and subservient jobs. Second, they are oppressed politically by being denied the same rights and privileges extended to White male citizens. Third, and perhaps most telling, they are oppressed by controlling images, enduring extensions of racist ideology formulated during the era of slavery that permeate contemporary social structures. The constant battle against the ways that dominant discourses characterize Black women affects individuals differently. Similar to trying to find equilibrium in a crooked room, today's mediascape forces African-American women to question their self-definition and femininity. Controlling images reproduce a constant tension between society's constraining perceptions of Black womanhood and the diverse self-definitions Black women use to create their individual identities (Harris-Perry, 2011, 2012, 2015).

To examine the root of such a dichotomy, Harris-Perry (2011) conducted focus groups comprised of 43 African-American women from metropolitan areas (Chicago, New York, and Oakland). These groups consisted of women from various cities, different generations, as well as diverse economic and familial circumstances. Participants were asked to list the stereotypes and myths, used by other people, to characterize them and other African-American women. They were also asked to write down the “facts” about Black women as they saw them. Within the focus groups the women deliberated amongst each other about the myths and the facts. Despite the participants varying backgrounds, they independently arrived at a clear understanding of three common and painful stereotypes that many researchers of African-American women’s lived experience identified as the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire.

The Mammy, Jezebel, and the Sapphire, in addition to the Matriarch and Strong Black woman (SBW), stereotypes are extant controlling images that continue to define Black female identity (King, 1982). These images reproduce a constant tension between society’s constraining perceptions of Black womanhood and the diverse self-definitions Black women use toward their individual identity. Contemporary images invoking these archetypes are undergirded with the racist and sexist colonial infrastructure that has both sexually exploited and subjugated Black women. Further, the proliferation of these archetypes of Black women speaks to a deeper narrative in which Black women are characterized and personified in online dating spaces.

The Mammy

The most prevalent stereotype of Black women in American popular culture is the Mammy, which is characterized as the “antithesis of the American conception of womanhood” (Jewell, 1993, p. 39). An overarching characteristic of the Mammy archetype is her asexual nature and overwhelming concern with serving her White, surrogate family (Bogle, 2001; Jewell,

1993; Lawrence, 2008). Bogle (2001) asserted that the Mammy caricature is also identifiable by her very dark skin, oversized dresses, and the signature handkerchief that she wears on her head.

Historically, Black females served as nannies and domestic workers in the homes of their White slave owners during the antebellum era. Slave owners and their wives became increasingly dependent on African-American females carrying out domestic duties, so much so, that the lived experiences of Black female slaves were mythologized into the Mammy figure. Nurturing qualities such as mother, wife and daughter derived from White culture's depiction of the Mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotypes where Black women were shown willingly taking care of other White families (Weitz & Gordon, 1993). The Mammy caricature was prominent throughout slavery as well as the Jim Crow eras. It served a political, social, and economic purpose for mainstream White America, depicting Black women as happy slaves (Pilgrim, 2000); however historians have argued that there were actually very few mammies during the antebellum era. Still, the archetype endures and in popular discourses she is the most prevalent representation of Black feminine identity.

Aunt Chloe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was one of the earliest Mammy figures depicting Black women's social station fettered to hearths of White families. Memoirs dating from the 1890s-1920s consistently mentioned mammies while simultaneously downplaying Black women's relationships with their own families (Turner, 1994). Thurber (1992) stated that descriptions of the Mammy peaked in memoirs between 1906 and 1912. The mythical construction of the Mammy image remained prevalent in post-bellum cultural artifacts such as magazines and advertisements.

References to Mammy in the *Confederate Veteran* magazine, American popular songs, memoirs, and fiction confirm that more was written about Mammy at the turn of the century than

during the antebellum period, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, the New South movement, and the later phases of the Confederate Lost Cause movement (Thurber, 1992, p. 95). Similar to their dark skin, big boned and cantankerous predecessors, the modern Mammy is just as present today as she was in the past. Contemporary Mammy caricatures include Eddie Murphy's interpretations of Black women in both *The Nutty Professor* (1996) and *Norbit* (2007), Martin Lawrence in the *Big Momma's House* (2000) and Tyler Perry's *Madea* (1999) franchise, and also Viola Davis and Octavia Spencer in their roles in *The Help* (2011).

The Matriarch

The matriarch is often perpetuated as non-feminine, domineering, and the most powerful person in their family. According to Ladner (1971), the term matriarch has become symbolic and the label is often invalid, because many Black women play highly functional, and sometimes autonomous roles within their families (Jackson, 2011). From hooks' perspective, many Black women embrace the matriarch label as it allows them to regard themselves as somewhat privileged because being a matriarch is better than being categorized by the other derogatory terms (hooks, 1994). Hence, according to Burton and Bengston (1985), many Black female heads-of-households have embraced the image of the matriarch.

Collins (1990) discussed the matriarch, as representing one of the normative yardsticks used to evaluate Black women's behavior (p.71). The matriarch is typically described as someone who has multiple children and is either the head of her household or wields equal power with her male partner. She also likely works outside of the home. Thus, she is perceived as a strong, hard-working mother and employee. She is also personified in the Black female character colloquially referred to as the "welfare queen" (Baker, 2005). The welfare queen is an

offshoot of the matriarch archetype, often portrayed as the mother figure that does not want to work parasitically spending taxpayers' money.

The matriarch image is deeply entrenched in many commonly held beliefs regarding the constructs of the Black family. This is primarily because many grandmothers and older females are the dominant and the most influential members of the family—even when males (fathers, husbands, sons and brothers) are present in the home. The matriarch is a character that often emasculates Black males, yet in Black culture is praised as a strong mother figure. An example of this image would be when an African-American male praises and describes his mother as strong, courageous, and concerned while at the same time, views his wife, who possesses the same qualities, as being different, difficult, controlling, and unpleasant. The overuse and misuse of the matriarch has led popular culture to identify any woman with a family, who lives in a household where no male resides, as a matriarch (hooks, 1981). The term perpetuates images of African-American women as masculine, domineering, and powerful.

Thea Vidale and Angela Bassett have both played the contemporary matriarch figure. Vidale starred in the short-lived sitcom, *Thea* (1993). Vidale's character Thea, was a dark skinned, thick statured widow who worked two jobs and had financial difficulties. Her character as the matriarch is solidified through the show's overarching narrative of financial struggle, Thea's funny and assertive personality, and her constant interaction with her children and their display of deference towards her. Similar to Vidale, Angela Bassett has also played single, matriarchal characters experiencing financial struggles as they work to raise their children. These performances include her roles in *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) and *Meet The Browns* (2008).

The Jezebel

The Jezebel portrays Black women as having voracious sexual appetites resulting in promiscuous behavior that invites the male gaze across racial lines (Pilgrim, 2002; Tompkins, 2012). The slave era Jezebel was depicted as having an uncontrollable sexual appetite. Slavers rationalized their sexual exploitation of Black women by characterizing them as hot-natured and too much for Black men, therefore making the act of raping their slave women acceptable (Pilgrim, 2002; White, 1999). A slave who refused her owner's sexual advances risked being sold, beaten, raped, or having her "husband" or children sold. The concession to sexual relations with Whites, thereby reinforced the belief that Black women were lustful and seen as little more than breeders, encouraged to reproduce as often as possible.

The caricature materialized in popular culture via commodities. In particular, cinema, "ashtrays, postcards, sheet music, fishing lures, drinking glasses, and so forth—depicted naked or scantily dressed Black women, lacking modesty and sexual restraint" (Pilgrim, 2002). Significantly, White women were upheld as examples of self-respect, modesty, and sexual purity (Pilgrim, 2002); however Black women were depicted as innately promiscuous, seductive, and lewd. Pilgrim (2002) noted that American society objectified Black women of all shades, portraying them as hypersexual "bad-Black-girls."

The contemporary depiction of the Jezebel is similar to her traditional image as she continues to be constructed as having an extremely ravenous sexual appetite. Today, this image is personified by Black women who believe that sexuality is all she has to offer in intimate relationships. For example, the American drama series, *Being Mary Jane* (2014-present), features Gabrielle Union as a single Black woman in search of companionship. Though the character is married, she ventures into the world of online dating and engages in an extramarital

affair. She is professional, yet still somewhat promiscuous, and although she is much like her White counterparts appearing in a show like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), the Jezebel archetype creates a dichotomy in which Black women who engage in multiple sexual relationships are considered loose, while Caucasian women who do so emerge as sexually liberated.

Sapphire

The Sapphire caricature initially appeared on the *Amos and Andy* radio show (1928-1960). *Amos and Andy* was a radio program where two White actors played Amos (Freeman Gosden) and Andy (Charles Correll) speaking in Black voice while mocking Black life and Black speech. The show, in its sexist and racist ideology, introduced a minstrel caricature, Sapphire Stevens, played by Ernestine Wade (Ely, 1991). *Amos and Andy*'s depiction of Sapphire Stevens typified Black women as being aggressive and threatening.

While researchers have often cited the evolving structure of Black families and the roles of Black men and women within the familial arrangement as a rationale for the development of the varying Black female archetypes, the emergence of the Sapphire can be attributed to the proliferation of the characterization in the entertainment industry. Also known as the “angry Black woman,” this caricature characterizes Black women as rude, loud, and overbearing. It is important to note that the Sapphire is dependent on a Black male counterpart. As Jewell argued, “It is the African-American male that represents the point of contention, in an ongoing verbal duel between Sapphire and the African-American male...[His] lack of integrity and use of cunning and trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him through her use of verbal put downs” (1993, p. 45).

Based on the success of *Amos and Andy* radio show, CBS created a televised version debuting network television's first all-Black cast from 1951-1953. *Amos and Andy* further

popularized racial stereotypes of Black men and women (Pilgrim, 2008). Black actors were largely represented in situation comedies prompting audiences to laugh at the Sapphire's ability to dominate and belittle Black men. Sapphires that followed Stevens were *Sanford and Son's* Aunt Esther (Esther Anderson) and *Martin's* (1992) Pamela James (Tichina Arnold). More recently, modern day Sapphire characters have been visible in films, such as the *Barbershop* (2002) franchise's character, Terri (Eve) and Angela (Tasha Smith) in the *Why Did I Get Married* (2007) franchise. The contemporary Sapphire is relatively consistent with historic constructions of the degrading caricature. She is depicted as a headstrong, self-reliant woman who emasculates men. Moreover, she may be an aggressive character who is animated in her expression of anger, outrage, dissatisfaction with Black men, and perceived discriminatory treatment (Baker, 2005). Contrarily, Thomas et al. (2004) suggested that 21st century manifestations of the Sapphire may include trouble expressing anger as well as other emotions and ideas.

The Strong Black Woman (SBW)

Myers (1980) argued that the matriarch label might be insulting to some, but not necessarily to African-American females who truly consider themselves strong Black women (SBWs). Moynihan (1965), in his treatise on the Black family—*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*—identified the SBW as a source of major problems in Black communities. In the section of the report entitled, “The Tangle of Pathology,” he contended that the SBW is the head of the familial structures found in Black communities; however his description of the SBW contradicted the majority of American narratives depicting male figures as the head of community structures. Moynihan concluded that the SBW was a detriment to her community. Her strong persona did not allow room for a strong Black male counterpart. The “anomaly”

Moynihan highlighted in the Black community eventually became the focus point for legislation and talking points for presidential incumbents, leading to a greater disadvantage because the minority group was operating on one standard while the majority was operating on another. After Moynihan released his finding, scholars such as Billingsley (1988), argued against the idea that the SBW negatively impacted the Black community. According to Billingsley (1988), the matriarchal structure was an adaptation to a racially divided America, where African Americans consistently confront socioeconomic difficulties. In other words, the SBW was a structural response and not pathology.

According to Collins (1990), a segment of the Black population's acceptance of the SBW concept or syndrome is also a controlling image. It is a persona that has been defined by the African-American male, accepted and propagated by the Black woman, and widely-accepted by general society. By defining themselves as SBW, many Black women believe that being strong and resilient (a survivor) is the only characteristic that makes them unique. Thus, they wear the label as a suit of armor (Romero, 2000, p. 225) that primarily functions as a coping mechanism rather than a shield protecting them from life's many adversities. As a result, many Black women who identify as SBW feel that they have the ability to manage and overcome life's difficulties.

Popular culture in the 21st century, utilizing user-generated content on websites and the media, depict SBW in numerous ways. Internet content often shows SBW as castrating or brawling "hood rats" on World Star Hip Hop (WSHH), while media portrayals show working class Black women as callous, overeducated, and prioritizing work and career first. This can be viewed in Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married Too* (2010), when Patricia (Janet Jackson) uses

her work as a distraction only to unravel by resorting to destroying windows instead of communicating with her husband.

The aforementioned archetypes are damaging for members of marginalized groups, because the messages that they convey, if left unchecked, perniciously degrade significant aspects of their identities (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005). Moreover, the stereotypes discussed here originated in the dominant culture's efforts to subordinate Blacks. Though racism is subtler than 150 years ago, Black women continue to be bombarded with updated depictions of people who look like them in Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, matriarch and SBW roles (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

Collins (2008) posited three dimensions where the dominant culture in America has marginalized Black women. First, Black women are economically exploited with low wages and subservient jobs. Second, they are oppressed politically by being denied the same rights and privileges extended to White male citizens. Third, and perhaps most telling, they are oppressed by controlling images, enduring extensions of racist ideology formulated during the era of slavery that permeate contemporary social structures. The constant battle against the ways that dominant discourses characterize Black women affects individuals differently. Similar to trying to find equilibrium in a crooked room, today's mediascape forces African American women to question their self-definition and femininity. Controlling images reproduce a constant tension between society's constraining perceptions of Black womanhood and the diverse self-definitions Black women use to create their individual identities (Harris-Perry, 2011, 2012, 2015). Stereotypes shed their formal names as Mammy, Jezebel, Strong Black Women, and Sapphire, and the media reproduces identifiable and conflated Black women characters with dark skin that

are devoid of depicting sexual agency, embracing their sexual agency as licentious, and vocal Black women as emasculating bitches.

It is important to note that a clear distinction exists between stereotypes and archetypes. Stereotypes refer to the racist and sexist ideals used to oversimplify and marginalize Black women, while archetypes are the constant mass-mediated portrayals prototyping, or caricaturizing, Black women throughout America's media culture. These hegemonic racist and sexist beliefs, which may even be ideals, are reproduced when anti-Black characters mock the Black-lived experience, which has consistently been portrayed in cinema, radio, television, and now, on the Internet. Black women in America are burdened by the perceptions of both popular and hegemonic culture (Kellner, 2003), and they are confronted with the need to constantly negotiate their authentic self against the mass-mediated perceptions of their identities and culture. Further, the proliferation of these mass-mediated archetypes of Black women informs a deeper narrative in which Black women are characterized and personified in online dating spaces. There is a critical need to understand the online dating experience from Black women's perspectives in order to more fully comprehend how Black women navigate the dialectical relationship between themselves and the online dating spaces that they occupy.

Harris-Perry (2011) argued that the identity negotiations that African-American women are forced to make sometimes resist these inaccurate depictions, but these women also give in to the negative myths. Black women are inundated with images that do not accurately depict them and consistently reinforce ideals that disenfranchise them in social structures. Describing African-American women's resistance to popular culture's perceptions of them, Harris-Perry (2011) equates such work with trying to find equilibrium in a crooked room. She wrote:

Sometimes Black women can conquer negative myths, sometimes they are defeated, and sometimes they choose not to fight. Whatever the outcome, we can better understand sisters, as citizens when we appreciate the crooked room in which they struggle to stand upright. (Kindle Locations 512-513)

The crooked room that Harris-Perry discusses forces Black women to constantly negotiate and renegotiate their lives, deciding when to resist and when to accept or given in to popular culture's racist and sexist caricatures; such choice is a common topic of the feminist framework. She illustrated the difficulty of such an endeavor by comparing the activity to trying to find equilibrium in a crooked room, a place where balance is offset and people either cannot stand up straight at all or cannot do so without feeling uncomfortable or unnatural. She wrote:

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. It may be surprising that some gyrate half-naked in degrading hip-hop videos that reinforce the image of Black women's lewdness. It may be shocking that some Black women actors seem willing to embody the historically degrading image of Mammy by accepting movie roles where they are cast as the nurturing caretakers of White women and children. It may seem inexplicable that a respected Black woman educator would stamp her foot, jab her finger in a Black man's face, and scream while trying to make a point on national television, thereby reconfirming the notion that Black women are irrationally angry. To understand why Black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to

appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room. (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. Location 472-473)

The stereotypes of the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the Sapphire, and their companions, the Matriarch and SBW, provide the very angles of the crooked room. Mass-mediated archetypes have encouraged a collective consciousness that understands Black women as naturally seductive and lewd, which in turn promotes a fetishizing of Black women as sexual objects and not as humans that require love and respect. Instead of examining Black women's disenfranchisement as citizens, this study uses both the archetypes of Black women and Harris-Perry's framework of the crooked room to interrogate the experiences of Black women within the online dating context. Primary interests include understanding why Black women form the least desired dating block and the nature of the burden of perception and negotiation placed on Black women in the intimate spaces of the Internet.

This study examined the racial hierarchy illuminated by Rudder (2014a) and argues that online dating platforms are crooked spaces undergirded by America's socio-historical baggage where Black women are viewed stereotypically (even if unconsciously done). Digital courtship is an extension of America's offline society, so when Black women participate in the former, they must do so within the confines of the latter. In contemporary mediated society, one's offline self becomes intertwined with the online self. This study posits online dating platforms as socio-technological spaces (Fuchs, 2003a). *Socio-technological* refers to the infrastructure of dating sites constructed of hardware (servers, computers, smartphones) and software (algorithms, dating sites and mobile application); within the technological infrastructure, human agency is filtered and used to match subscribers looking for potential suitors. Positioning online dating sites as socio-technological spaces allows the emergence of racial hierarchies to be more salient

and offers opportunities to examine this social medium within an American cultural context. In order to understand the nature of Black women's experiences in these socio-technological crooked spaces, it is important to understand online dating as a continuum of America's media landscape, as well as an extension of the crooked room. This dissertation study adds to such an understanding.

Research Questions

The intersection between the racially gendered archetypes of Black women and their impact on the lived experiences of women dating digitally has not been critically analyzed; therefore, the rationale behind Black women's racially-gendered experience within online dating platforms remains to be examined. The study explored how race and gender intersect to shape Black women's online dating experiences, how they navigate online dating sites, how they manage the realities of their experiences in terms of successes and failures, and how their lived experiences impact their viewpoints as Black women in online dating.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Black women perceive their online dating experiences in the United States?
2. How do Black women perceive the impact of their race and gender on their experiences in online dating, as they present themselves to the "market" of online dating?
3. What are the significant issues that these women experience as they negotiate the potential failures and/or possible successes delineated within the realities of their experiences of online dating?

The first research question considered African American women's perspective about their online dating experiences by gathering information on reasons that influenced them to join, how they selected a site or an app, and their overall attitude and approach engaging the different

platforms. To understand the perspective of African American women about online dating I conducted phone and online interviews with 21 Black women who met the study's criteria, ultimately using 16 of those interviews in my dataset. This data allows me to understand how this cohort of African American women viewed the current dating market and the reasons that motivated them to join online dating platforms.

The second research question addresses how interview participants perceived the impact of their own race and gender and how those two social markers shaped their online dating experiences. Answering this requires a discussion of how participants viewed themselves and how participants understood how potential daters from the opposite sex viewed them as well. Understanding Black women's perceptions on the ways that their race and gender affect their self-presentation strategies is vital to the discussion of impression management because it allows me to discuss the various dichotomous relationships at play: authentic self vs. the ideal self, co-present identities (online and offline), male and female, Black female and males, and those identifying as multiracial versus monoracial.

Research question three considers the implications of race and gender in the online dating marketplace. Guided by Harris-Perry's concept of the "crooked room" and the pervasive anti-Black archetypes, I analyze the ways that perceptions of race and gender affect experience.

The final research question examines definitions of success and failure in online dating. Such definitions inform my discussion of African American women's dating goals and expectations going into online dating scenarios, which allow me to understand how African American women engage men, present themselves to counter dominant stereotypes impacting African American women, and lastly how men themselves accept or reject the dating goals and strategies of the interview participants.

Summary

My study aims to understand the obstacles African American women face while participating in online dating. This is important because this bloc of women share similar experiences across different technological platforms operating under various cultural contexts and netiquette that is platform specific. Black feminist conceptual framework is used to center the voices of participants, as an effort to understand the online dating phenomenon from an understudied perspective. To compliment the Black feminist epistemological framework the research design is phenomenological, which allows the study to look at the variation of experiences within a purposive sample.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into 7 chapters, including the introduction to the project. Chapter 2 presents the literature that supports the research questions for the study. The literature review discusses relevant research studies, reviews major issues central to the study, and provides an overview of the theoretical foundation of this study, which include Black feminist epistemology and phenomenology. By demonstrating the gaps in the literature relative to the experiences of Black women online daters, the literature review provides an explanation of the purpose and the research questions of this study.

Chapter 3 presents and describes the methodology employed in this study. It describes the Black feminist epistemological framework, phenomenological research design, coding strategy, and data analysis.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the results of the study. They pay particular attention to the interviewees' words in order to answer the research questions. Chapter 4 answers RQ1 as

participants map out their love-hate relationship within the socio-technological terrain of online dating markets.

Chapter 5 answers RQ2. In it, participants address the delicate balance that promotes love and compassion while simultaneously contesting hegemonic perceptual frames that confine Black female identity. The love-hate relationship participants describe in this chapter refers to Black women's ability to "double-Dutch" both racism and sexism.

Chapter 6 answers RQ3. Participants illuminated specific angles in the crooked space of online dating. Data in Chapter 6 also builds on the discussion in chapter 5 to highlight the importance of self-definition, self-awareness, and the necessity for Black women to have a firm grasp on their authentic self in order to succeed in online dating.

Chapter 7 summarizes my conclusions, argues for this study's significance, and presents potential avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

The review of the literature begins with a brief history of personal ads, starting with classifieds and progressing through the widespread use of the Internet in dating. Scholars have shown that personal ads operate as an extension of social norms governing participants' behaviors from outside of social media. This discussion also includes common themes regarding race, equality, and respectability. In 2016, subscribers may present themselves as racially tolerant, while simultaneously exhibiting behavior that suggests racial bias. Since the majority of online dating scholarship focuses on self-presentation strategies and misrepresentation, self-presentation is foundational to the field of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) as it relates to media studies, and thus this dissertation. Consequently, and in the hopes of teasing out such tension, the next section addresses such strategies. The third section addresses research that pertains to Black women and dating. The fourth section looks at racial preference in online dating spaces. Finally the literature review concludes with a brief discussion of the ways this study extends CMC and online dating scholarship by addressing what as yet has not been explored in the scholarly literature.

A Brief History of Dating through Media

Fifty years after the invention of the newspaper, matrimonial agencies began using print media (specifically, newspapers) to highlight the pursuits of matchmaking and marriage. Cocks (2009) contended that the agony column in the *Athenian Mercury* in 1692 offered one of the first print ads devoted to locating appropriate potential mates. Another source (Ferrell & Hartline, 2012) argued that the oldest personal ad was published in the *Collection for Improvement of*

Husbandry Trade in 1695. The ad read: “A gentleman about 30 years of age, that says he has a very good estate, would willingly match himself to some young gentlewoman that has a fortune of 3,000, or thereabouts” (p. 561). Although men frequented personal ads looking for wives, women on the other hand were not extended those same social rights. In 1727, Helen Morrison, described as a lonely English spinster, placed a personal advertisement in the *Manchester Weekly Journal*. Morrison’s personal advertisement resulted in her commitment to an insane asylum for four weeks (Ferrell & Hartline, 2012, p. 561).

In the 18th century, the business of matrimonial advertisements grew simultaneously with the popularity of the newspaper. While matrimony was a primary focus of these print advertisements, such columns were not limited to marriage pursuits. In fact, 18th century print advertisements also were used to form friendships and meet lovers (Cocks, 2009). Print advertising evolved as the needs of its target audience changed. Searching for companionship took the burden away from the idea of matrimony, opening up a modern approach where both sexes pursued potential partners. The process of courtship moved away from connecting individuals seeking marriage to targeting those who were seeking companionship in a general sense. According to Cocks (2009):

(Personal ads) also sheltered those on the edges of law and morality, such as gay men and women, lurking lotharios and adventurous single girls. There were a number people that belonged to correspondence clubs, companionship columns, lonely-hearts clubs, matrimonial bureaus, and, by the 1960s, wife-swapping societies, who met through the personals. This was all hidden in plain sight between the thin lines of type at the backs of newspapers and magazines. (Location 101)

Thus, newspaper-based personal ads eventually attracted critics who were concerned that they would lead to the decay of conventional morality.

Personal advertisements also allowed individuals to connect with others interested in intimate behavior that was considered nontraditional or taboo. Advertisers, lonely hearts, pornographers, single women, and swingers all formed communities via personal ads. Furthermore, classifieds allowed gay men and women to form communities during a time when homosexuality was illegal. Another demographic that used ads of this nature were single servicemen, aka “lonely soldiers,” during World War I. Unlike the print ads that preceded them, the varied postings in this category sought to connect friends and pen pals (Cocks, 2009). As Cocks (2009) asserted:

These advertisements catered to those slightly at odds with traditional forms of courtship and morality, sometimes women just beyond the customary age of marriage or those distanced from the usual connections of family through the death of parents or by virtue of their own financial independence. (Location 76)

These uses of ads demonstrated that many people of different backgrounds sought connections whether society considered such needs to be typical or unusual.

The dating market has undergone a number of structural transformations in recent decades, with the advent of the Internet being the most marked enhancement. The Internet originated from a United States Defense Department initiative in the 1970s that they dubbed ARPANET (Castells, 2011); since that time, it has been rapidly evolving to meet the needs of users on both a professional (business) as well as personal level. The Internet resulted in the introduction of dial-up modems and Bulletin Board Systems, which was one of the first platforms allowing users to communicate amongst each other (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Brainz,

2010). In the 1980s, mainframe computing led to business services like CompuServe, which allowed users to access news, events, and eventually email. CompuServe later offered forums that became popular and led to member created communities on sites such as American Online. The early 1990's, saw the birth of social networking sites like Classmate.com and Sixdegrees.com. Eventually, these communities' added features like user profiles to describe the context of one's life and personal photos or other images. Sites eventually became further segmented by targeting more demographic markets: AsianAvenue.com in 1997, BlackPlanet.com in 1999, and Migente.com in 2000. The features of social networking sites were later used to find love. In 1994 and 1995, Match.com and Kiss.com were the first major online dating firms. By 1996, Yahoo had 16 registered dating sites. Today, the online dating market has become subjected to cyber-balkanization (Putnam, 2001). Currently, the market has become tremendously segmented into small niche audiences, which rather than globalizing the search for love tends to restrict it to one's more narrow and boundaried preferences. In this highly mediated information age, while there are a variety of viewpoints and cultures represented in cyberspace, the Internet allows users to seek out networks or dating markets that mimic their own political and cultural sentiments. Therefore, digital courtship has emerged out of the Internet and its ability to assimilate modern culture and society.

Online Dating and The Burden of Perception: Why Now?

Recently, American popular culture has taken interest in the discourse surrounding the Black women's level of desirability in the 21st century dating market. Al Jazeera reported that professional single Black women are struggling to marry and discussed the consequences it has on the Black middle class (Why African-American Women Struggle To Marry, 2015). Adding to this discussion, experts on the television show *Married At First Sight Black* (2015) asserted

that when matchmaking on the show, Black men are not interested in dating Black women, while Black women prefer to date their own race. Another media narrative centered on Black women dating is FYI's latest reality show *Black Love* (2015) following five Black women as they navigate New York City's tough dating market. Media firms have begun to capitalize on the racially gendered narrative questioning Black women's ability to find love, and through commercialization of media text, this narrative is becoming increasingly popular. Black feminist epistemologies describe the constant battle between Black women's authentic self and American popular culture's misconceptions oversimplifying this social group's lived experiences as burdensome. Hurston's (1937, reprinted 2009) "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is often referenced, in which she described Black women as mules of the world. Hurston explored the effects of race and gender on the development of Black women's identity, and in this book, she cross-examined the Black woman's lived experience through her character Janie. Janie exhibited agency by ignoring other people's opinions until she hit a brick wall that subjected her to the limitations of her social station of being a Black woman. As Janie's experience demonstrated, historically, there remains a disjuncture between Black women's personal identity and the perceived identity of Black women understood by society, which often results in a difficult journey to understand oneself. Hurston used Janie as a dual symbol. Similar to a beast of burden, Janie symbolized Black women who are often saddled with societal expectations that impede the development of her independence and womanhood. The metaphor depicting Black women as mules is symbolic of the ways that the dominant society in American burdens Black women with the expectation that they will—they *must*—accept their societal roles. Such roles are constructed within the intersecting oppressions of racial prejudice and gender inequality. The burden of perception remains an issue in the 21st century media landscape.

The current mediascape serves as a form of the crooked room where various types of media constrain the identities of African American women by their constant narrow depictions of Black femininity. As a result, the Internet has become an integral part in today's media ecology, influencing the landscape of cultural narratives characterizing Black lived experiences. Before the Internet, MTV heavily influenced millennial dating culture via their production of such dating shows as *Singled Out* (1995-1998), *The Blame Game* (1998-2001), *DisMissed* (2001), *Taildaters* (2002), *Room Raiders* (2003-2009), *Date My Mom* (2004-2006), *Next* (2005-2008), *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* (2007-2008), and *Catfish* (2012-present). VH1's, *Flavor of Love* (2006) was also a hit with audiences. *Flavor of Love* competed with ABC's dating show *The Bachelor*. Both shows employed similar formats, but instead of a clean-cut White male, VH1 centered the show on the rap group Public Enemy's Flavor Flav. The show ran for a total of three seasons and served as a launch pad for the series, *I Love New York* (2007), *For the Love of Ray J* (2009), and later, *She Got Game* (2015). These shows shifted away from the clean-cut representations of White heterosexual relationships and began incorporating singles of color and singles from diverse sexual backgrounds, which is unfortunate because the series continue to portray Black women as hypersexual, angry, and often times, violent. More recent shows like MTV's *Catfish* and Bravo's docu-series *Online Dating Rituals of the American Male* (2014) spotlight digital courtship and the various identities operating within this modern realm of dating. Match making reality shows that focus more on online relationships often highlight dating strategies that use strategic deception tactics to gain a potential mate. Dating reality shows, regardless of show format, often portray Black women as disposable types who are equal parts hypersexual and violent.

This study examines the ways in which Black women are burdened by perception in the online dating context. For instance, increasingly common narratives in popular culture suggest that Black women should think like men and act like women. The popularity of this concept led to multimedia approaches yielding a book deal, a movie franchise *Think Like a Man* (2012) and *Think Like a Man Too* (2014), and also solidified *The Steve Harvey Talk Show* (2015) as a burgeoning platform where women seek advice on obtaining heterosexual, long-term relationships. Steve Harvey's concepts of "thinking like a man" and "acting like a woman" have filled studio audiences and inspired televised forums helping women understand *What Men Really Think* (2015).

Before Steve Harvey began teaching women how to *Think Like a Man*, Greg Behrendt's book *He's Just Not That Into You* (2009) claimed to reveal the signposts in failing dating situations that marked levels and behaviors centering on male interests in women; his book was also turned into a movie. Behrendt and Harvey are two men looking to remedy women's dating issues through the minds of men. Both created texts and TV forums that inspired comedic movies about women ardently working towards finding the right man with whom to spend their life. Unfortunately, these American cultural texts ignore the intersection of race and gender despite being fully about gender and dating. These texts endorse conventional wisdom using a one-size fits all message that has not worked for women of color who must traverse a racially-gendered dating market. Such popularized notions and narratives have influenced the Internet realm as well, an assertion that can be seen in Rudder's (2009, 2014a, 2014b) studies, for instance. After years of partnering with the Steve Harvey Morning Show setting up singles on blind dates, the same dating firm that owns Match.com and BlackPeopleMeet.com created an

Internet-based dating site for Steve Harvey called Delightful.com, which serves people of all races.

This study contributes to online dating literature pertaining to mate selection and racial preference in several ways. First, compared to CMC literature in media studies, works specifically interrogating online dating sites as a racially-gendered space are minimal, and they tend to discuss the Black dating experience via the unwillingness to date across racial lines from the perspectives of non-Blacks. This dissertation study attempts to advance the research by examining how the very unwillingness discussed in other studies may or may not influence Black women's online dating experience. Second, data collection in the current published literature tends to rely either on stated preference data accessed directly from personal ads or interactional data using datasets comprised of daters' communications across racial lines. This study moves beyond such data captured through the Internet software's databases by instead using in-depth interviews of Black female online daters to allow their voices and narratives to describe their own experiences. Unlike other research studies, the goal of this study was to provide a space to understand the lived experiences of women that extant research has referred to as digital dating's least desirable dating bloc. Third, by focusing on the voices of Black women, this study allows for a better understanding of a diverse group often conflated by hegemonic notions of the so-called "one-drop rule." Highlighting these experiences allows me to interrogate factors such as homophily (in race, class, and education), that potentially impact Black women's digital courtship experiences.

The Socio-Technological Continuum

In developing a research dialogue relative to ethnicity and online dating, it is necessary to provide an in-depth analysis of race and ethnicity in online dating, with a specific focus on

defining spaces of online courtship by media companies. Online dating sites, especially demographically targeted dating sites, are cultural products constructed and maintained by media and Internet companies. Highlighting media structures' involvement in online dating sites reveals corporations' involvement with cultural products and how media corporations articulate their products and brands on multiple cultural and economic axes, such as race and gender, throughout the web. Media and Internet companies managing multiple brands also mean that these same companies are managing brands in various socio-cultural spheres. American society's adoption of the Internet has allowed for online activities to influence offline social practices (Boyd, 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Internet use also has expanded across various technology and mobile devices (i.e., computers, tablets, cellular phones), thus adding to the Internet's reputation of being ubiquitous. Certainly, the permeation of the Internet has led to its heavy influence on the intimate areas of American social and cultural practices.

This section positions online dating sites, both general and niche dating sites, as a part of the continuum of the contemporary media landscape. In doing so, I draw from the conceptual frameworks of Oscar Gandy and Anthony Giddens. Gandy's (2000a) study on minority audiences offers insight on how media companies influence popular culture and participate in audience segmentation. Giddens' (1986) conceptual framework is mobilized in media scholarship to explain the ways in which race, class, gender, and hegemony shape the lived experiences of media consumers. Both scholars offered conceptual lenses that are helpful in understanding how Black women experience conventional dating sites catered towards general users as well as their experiences dealing with specialty dating sites that cater to special interests such as race, religion, politics, and lifestyle.

The media uses race as a social construct. As such, this study mobilizes Gandy's (2000a, 2000b) work on audience segmentation, which showed that minorities, especially African Americans, were an undervalued and underserved segmented audience. Gandy's conceptual framework examined categorization to highlight the media industry's influence on the public sphere. Gandy viewed audiences as publics (rather than consumers) and victims (rather than autonomous agents with power). His construction of publics emphasized how media interacts with the democratic process. Ang (1991) also described audience segmentation as a social technology and not a social science. The motive behind this social technology was the media industry's need to accumulate systemic "strategic knowledge" (p. 52). Media producers' reliance on the knowledge of audience behavior, audience size, and audience composition heavily impacts financial decisions and also has led to the practices of audience targeting, niche marketing, and audience segmentation. On a similar plane, Giddens (2013) argued that,

Advertisers orient themselves to sociological classifications of consumer categories and at the same time foster specific consumption "packages." To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life. (p. 198)

Giddens' notion of the inherent "artificiality" of advertisers' creations extends to the world of online dating and the experiences of users because it helps media corporations divide heterogeneous populations into manageable segments whose lifestyle preferences can then be identified and catered to (Dyer, 2008; Hardy, 2014). Online dating firms may not create the stereotypes used in segmenting audiences, but their blatant use of stereotypes reproduces racialized boundaries in online spaces. By promoting online dating spaces as urban, Asian, and interracial, among other categories, online dating firms reproduce racial boundaries that maintain

social distances amongst racial groups and ignore the historical color stratification within racial groups. The emergence of segmented dating sites predicated on stereotypes invites scholars to ask whether these implicitly or explicitly *raced* sites are safe spaces for Black females wanting to find love online. This strategic knowledge, described by Ang (1991), is aimed to convert heterogeneous information about audiences into a manageable data set that allows the media industry to map audiences as homogenous groups. The television industry maps audiences with ratings; the film industry uses box office sales; and in the age of new media, audiences are constructed from user-generated content, loosely referred to as data.

Political economists have highlighted media industries' practice of categorization as a means of commodifying the audience. Dallas Smythe (as cited in Fuchs, 2014) argued that media industries' commodification of audiences was a "blind spot." The debate over this blind spot among western Marxists addressed the popular understanding of media industries' production and reproduction of texts (film, magazines, television, and now websites). Smythe argued that audiences were a *Janus-like product* where media industries package and sell audiences to advertisers, and the actual content was a free lunch, because the same audience purchased by advertisers also pays for the content (Caraway, 2011; Fuchs & Mosco, 2012). This strategy is similar to online dating platforms' "freemium" services, where users create profiles for free but are charged subscription fees if they want to access all of the features on the dating site. Thus, users pay to participate in a marketplace, or a dating market, where each user depends on other paying users. In such a dating market, users expect to meet other fully paid users, but in actuality, the dating pool consists of both fully paid users and users utilizing free features. In other words, dating sites rely on users to pay a fee but everyone participates with varying levels of access; such varied access must be understood in the context of adding a layer of complexity

to the already existing societal norms influencing racial hierarchies within the dating platform. Other scholars like Gandy (2000a, 2000b) and Meehan (2002) argued that audiences are not valued equally in the capitalist gaze of media production.

According to Gandy (2000a), segmentation splinters the public sphere by either targeting or ignoring consumers of a particular socially constructed group. He also posited, through Baker's (1998) argument of corrupt segmentation, that authentic groups and group interests can be distinctively different from groups that have been constructed for marketing goods and services. Both Baker (1998) and Gandy (2000b) have argued that the by-product of corporate constructions of a "commercial ethnicity" is the essentialist production of ethnic and racially homogenous audiences that corrupts diversity. Baker (1998) described corruption, in this manner, as unreal and inauthentic interest or identities. Gandy (2000b) offered another type of segmented corruption when he argued that constructing audiences segmented by race and ethnicity causes a level of cultural pollution that produces a by-product of reproduced and reinforced stereotypes about the very audience it aims to attract. Gandy referred to America Rodriguez's 1997 case study, which analyzed pan-Hispanic identity in the constructions of "commercialized ethnicity" used to create an imaginary community amongst Cubans and Mexicans an effort to target a linguistic market (Rodriguez, 1997). Gandy wrote: "The construction of the audience as a market grants some autonomy to individuals as rational actors who select those goods and services that have the greatest potential for meeting their needs within the limits of their budgets" (p. 3). Dating firms have blatantly segmented audiences with such demographically targeted dating sites as AsianPeopleMeet.com, BlackBabyBoomerMeet.com, BlackChristianPeoplemeet.com, BlackPeopleMeet.com, ChinesePeopleMeet.com, IndiaMatch.com, InterracialPeopleMeet.com, and JPeopleMeet.com.

Granted, individuals can choose to participate in such segmented and targeted dating sites if they feel like such sites will better meet their needs. However, corrupt segmentation or commercialized ethnicity, both explicitly and implicitly, promoting essentialized representations of race in online dating commercials also may contribute to the online dating experiences of such groups as Black women. Black women's online dating experience may or may not be marginalized, depending on the number of users in the dating network that subscribe to the essentialist advertisements characterizing these sites.

Bringing the concept of constructing audiences full circle, Meehan (2002) examined the U.S. system of national broadcasting as a case study. Her findings illuminated the ways in which media corporations produce gendered audiences. First, media industries' commodification of audiences is an effort to target valued customers with expendable income and buying power. Second, popular discourses surrounding gender informed the media companies on how to structure their segmented audience. The rating system developed by the media monopolist valued and targeted upscale, White males between the ages of 18 and 34 as they were seen as breadwinners with expendable income. The case study showed that patriarchal assumptions undergirded the commodity ratings system, which, in turn, gendered the market, further illuminating the varying degrees in which audiences were treated in light of competing capitalist interests. Extending Meehan's (2002) analysis to the realm of digital courtship offers a political economy lens that exposes the economics and cultural influences of media firms. Such a lens highlights media firms' participation in shaping online dating consumer markets by segmenting online dating spaces according to attributes such as race, religion, and political beliefs. Constructing spaces in an effort to commodify audiences offers another entry point through

which an understanding of the racially gendered experiences of Black women using general and/or specialty online dating sites and applications may be reached.

In examining these issues relative to race and ethnicity in advertising, it is clear that the overarching issue concerning structuration—the process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very “medium” of that constitution (Giddens, 1984, 1986)—and race is that media and advertising companies construct consumers’ choices within markets. This process serves as corporations’ media-guided effort to influence consumer behavior by articulating identification within racial groups and reinforcing socio-economic ties.

One way to understand how online dating sites have permeated our social lives is by examining the similarities and differences between conventional dating spaces geared towards wide audiences and demographically targeted sites. For instance, essential attributes, such as skin color, sex, and age used to socially categorize groups of people can also become a part of the group’s self-identity (Davis & Gandy, 1999). “Social self-identity” has been described by Babad, Birnbaum, and Benne (1983) as “a complex integration of personality attributes, unique experiences, personal choices, and the individual sense of ‘self’ on one hand, and ‘socio-identities,’ which are the products of various group memberships, on the other hand” (p. 37). Media companies play an active role in shaping racial identities. The structural hierarchies of society, which limit human agency along the lines of race, gender, and class inform the advertised articulations of these dating spaces. Mosco (2009) pointed out that power structures (corporations) are central to the structuration process. Mosco highlighted the exploitative relationships between genders, races, and classes as entry points into the structuration process. As such, online daters, depending on their station in society, experience the socio-technological system of digital dating differently. As an example of this theory in action, OkCupid released a

study providing context to the racial hierarchy of inbox responses within its own online dating platform, which detailed the racial preferences amongst daters utilizing the dating sites owned by OkCupid (Rudder, 2009, 2014a).

Using examples such as OkCupid's foray into racial preference data collection practices, this dissertation's proposed contribution to this conversation of media-related CMC and its research goal is to highlight how corporations define the boundaries of digital intimacy within America. The underlying danger of the corporatization of media-related CMC is that it completely subverts civil rights progressions through both subtle and overt audience segmentation. Not only does this practice demarcate the boundaries in which individuals negotiate their social identities, it also informs our cultural norms. Commercial advertisements of online dating sites are artifacts of corporate efforts to monetize human activity via a technological structure.

Fuchs (2003a) argued that the Internet consists of both a technological infrastructure and communicating human actors. Fuchs challenged early scholarship that defined the Internet as purely technological, arguing that such definitions overlooked the fact that knowledgeable human activities generate content for, communicate through, and reproduce the Internet. Fuchs developed his concept of the Internet as a socio-technological system by describing it as a "social self-organization [that] is a self-referential, mutual process where structural media and human actions produce each other" (Fuchs, 2003b). The Internet is a technological structure used globally by humans to create and recreate content on the web. This social self-reorganization approach to media-related CMC within the online dating context highlights the medium. Online dating is both the medium and the outcome of the practices it organizes and constrains (Fuchs, 2003c).

Online Dating Research

Personal advertisements soliciting courtship and companionship have evolved into the 21st century online dating profile. As a natural evolution of classified ads into the Internet age, online dating presents an opportunity for individuals to engage in communication with one another in cyberspace regardless of geography, spatial, and societal differences. One in every ten American adult has used an online dating site or a mobile dating application (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Dating sites have continued to gain momentum since 2005. Prior to that time, American adults had little to no experience with online dating. Initially, a large segment of the population had mixed feelings regarding digital dating because of the stigma that surrounded this new courtship strategy. Today, online dating has lost much of that negative perception, and American singles increasingly regard it as a viable option to meet potential partners. Among regular online daters, Match, eHarmony, and OkCupid are the most popular sites for seeking potential partners (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

Digital courtship is a mixed-mode relationship that often begins in the online realm but includes an expectation of an eventual face-to-face encounter (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Mixed-mode relationships were preceded by the days where singles met up in chat rooms and often remained in long-distance relationships that did not move beyond cyberspace (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Millennials of the 21st century are touted as being both diverse and progressive and have adopted modern love-seeking tools such as online dating sites and dating applications. Unfortunately, in today's dating climate, Black millennials, as well as Blacks in other age cohorts, still experience the negative side of race-based preferences, racist stereotypes, and historical baggage that frames ethnic minorities as negative or unworthy. Black Twitter for example, as well as other market trends, shows young African Americans as

enthusiastic early adopters of mobile technology. Paul Carrick Brunson, matchmaker and dating coach, projects that African Americans will be the dominant ethnic group using mobile dating applications by 2017 (Robertson, 2014). With that said, there is a need for research to examine the user experience of Black women to interrogate whether or not online dating does more harm than good.

Rudder's (2014a, 2014b) studies can be viewed as seminal findings in computer-mediated courtship scholarship, in part because he used data regarding users that had never before been released by a dating firm. The most popular findings concerned race, more specifically the intensified racial preferences that still exist among online daters. OkCupid's unveiling of its users' racialized preferences stirred conversation regarding racial preferences. In "The Black Damsel in Dating Distress," Coates (2015) highlighted how popular discourse blindly accepted the statistics of Rudder (2014a, 2014b). Coates' treatise asked for a more critical eye when considering the struggles of Black women using online dating sites. He further argued that the findings were not fair due to OkCupid's predominantly White user base. The statistics, according to Coates, demonstrated White users' unwillingness to date interracial. Brinkhurst-Cuff (2015) discussed her experiences of being objectified on Tinder as a Black woman of mixed heritage. Her experience echoed extant research detailing the objectification of mixed-race Black women in society. Kolawole (2015) recounted her online dating experiences, characterizing them as discriminatory, in "Black Women Face Prejudice Every day and I Don't Need It in Online Dating, Too." Her unsatisfying user experience is paralleled with a podcast highlighting the dating site Dating Ring's attempt to fix racial issues amongst their users. Comparing her own online dating experiences with those on Dating Ring, Kolawole's illumination of Black women's user experience across dating platforms served as plea for help

from the dating firms. The plea was followed up with a social media fast resulting in Kolawole abandoning online dating until dating sites improved the user experience for Black women. Thus, it is not surprising that online dating research purports that Black women are the least desirable in the field of candidates pursuing mates digitally (Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010; Rudder, 2014a; Yancey, 2009). It is evident that a clear and dialectical relationship between Black women, their identity, and society, which is often a battle between their true self and society's perception (in essence, a constrained Black female identity), negatively impacts the lived experiences of Black female bodies in America, which can be seen in the world of online dating.

Although researchers (Gunter, 2013; Rudder, 2014a) tend to define Internet dating sites as a form of social networking, and both niche and traditional dating sites focus on providing a database of potential suitors typically geared towards potential partners who are geographically desirable, it seems important to broaden this definition to include social networking sites and mobile dating applications. The introduction and popular use of mobile applications have increased the ubiquity of both social networks and dating services. Expanding the definition of Internet dating sites to include social networks and mobile applications offers an avenue for untraditional strategies used to pursue mates through other sites and applications where matchmaking romantic partners is not the focus. Doing so provides two benefits. First, it helps to account for the increasing popularity of online dating. Second, a broader definition can be more inclusive, providing greater access and more spaces for otherwise overlooked user populations or those populations that are under-represented in more traditional online dating marketplaces.

There are at least four reasons why digital courtship has grown in popularity among singles: (1) Internet access has become more widespread, (2) computer and mobile app literacy has increased, (3) real-time chat platforms have expanded features, and (4) digital cameras have become more widely available. According to Center (2015), as of January 2014, 87% of American adults were estimated to use the Internet. Internet use among men was 87% and 86% among women. Identified by race and ethnicity, 85% of White adults, 81% African American adults, and 83% Hispanic adults used the Internet. The two age ranges that most often used the Internet were 18 to 29 year olds at 97% and 30 to 49 year olds at 93%. However, these data suggest that singles between the ages of 45 to 54 are just as active online as singles between the ages of 18 to 24. When highlighting educational level, adults with some college education made up 91% of adults using the Internet and college-educated adults made up 97% of Internet users.

According to Smith and Duggan (2013), dating online is very popular among single people ranging in age from their mid-20s to their mid-40s. Middle-aged singles are confronted with a “thin dating market” with respect to the limited availability of partners within their immediate social networks. Researchers have found that online dating is a useful alternative for adult singles who are confronted with thin dating markets (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Importantly, two thirds of online daters, fully 66%, actually make it to a face-to-face encounter. This means that one third of online daters have not actually gone out on a date with someone that they initially found on an online dating site.

Marriage in the digital age is still dependent upon traditional ways of meeting partners. According to Smith and Duggan (2013), only 5% of Americans who are either married or in a committed relationship say they met their partner online. In 2005, American adults had little-to-no experience with online dating and viewed online dating as an ineffective way to meet

potential partners. One in five online daters enlisted their friends as digital wingman in an effort to make or create their online dating profile. Friends enlisted to help create and review online dating profiles comprised 22% of online dating profiles. Women, at 30%, were more likely to enlist a friend in comparison to men at 16%. Over time, digital courtship has continued to grow rapidly in the realms of clientele, business returns, and its overall presence in media and popular culture. Online dating habits, as well as overall attitudes towards online dating, have changed since 2005. For example, among American singles, Match.com, eHarmony, and OkCupid are popular sites for seeking out potential partners; 11% of Internet users, which is roughly 9% of all adults, said that they personally use one of the services. When looking at mobile dating applications, 7% of cell phone apps users, which is 3% of all adults, said they have used dating applications on their cell phone. In 2013, 11% of American adults used an online dating site or mobile dating application (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

Technology also is changing how singles court potential dates. Today's singles are utilizing social media platforms to communicate with their dates. According to Match.com (2015), in its fourth annual report, 50% of singles consider grabbing coffee a first date; 51% research new dates on Facebook; and 30% of singles use FaceTime or Skype to communicate with their dates. Single men make up 46% of online daters who have sent explicit messages to a date while 35% of single women have done the same. Both single men and women make up 36% of the population who have sent a sexy photo to their date.

With the Internet came new cultural norms substituting etiquette with netiquette. Illouz (2013) argued that we live in a popular culture that has embraced a more therapeutic narrative that plays into today's social media. Social media has allowed Internet users to become more open in their online or public persona. The dating realm continues to evolve along with the

cultural norms that undergird the phenomena. Digital courtship taboos include posting emotional drama, excessive numbers of selfies, and asking your date to unfriend their exes. With smartphones came texts and selfies, which both play a part in online courtship. Approximately 60% of online daters spent at least one hour a day on social media and 39% of singles' conversations occur digitally because being single *and* connected is more important than ever.

The uptick in dating television shows is evidence that corporations are getting involved in demarcating boundaries of courtship. Television shows, commercials, and social media centered on dating seem to have become cultural products of corporate narratives on dating. The majority of media portrayals on dating are centered on White, patriarchal, heterosexual narratives of courtship and marriage. This study positions digital courtship in the media continuum where Internet users are marginalized along the lines of race, gender, and class. At the center of these matrices are Black women.

Self-Presentation, Impression Management, and Self-Disclosure

Before discussing the racial and gendered user experiences of Black women in online dating, this section provides a discussion on impression management scholarship and its prevalence in media-related CMC studies. Self-presentation, impression management, and self-disclosure are defined through Goffman's (1959) framework of a dramaturgical analysis. Goffman introduced the concept of self-presentation to describe how people use expressions to control other peoples' impression of them in face-to-face encounters. The dramaturgical framework views the world as a stage performance and humans as the actors within it while the physical environment provides acting props. Everyone's performance has a backstage for preparation that helps presents his or her front stage identity (Goffman, 1959). Backstage performances refer more to preparation, typically located in one's home or another area where

the individual can be free of other people's judgment. Front stage includes personal exteriors like gender, age, race, hairstyle, makeup, and overall fashion. In order for impressions to be successful, they need to be managed within a context or particular setting.

The concept of the situation exists at the center of impression management (Goffman, 1959). The situation, also called a social situation, is the actual interaction between two or more people. During the situation, each person performs in order to persuade the other of his or her definition of the situation. The situation relies on the setting and how identities are established in that particular situation. For example, buying a car situates the identities of a car salesman and a customer; the situation is surrounded by a potential transaction as the performances take place while negotiating the transaction. Goffman (1959) looked at both language and body as *sign vehicles*. Sign vehicles create impressions through expression and Goffman's dramaturgical approach categorized two types of expressions. The first group of expressions included those that people purposefully give, such as facial expressions, intentional poses, and controlled body language. The second type included those expressions that people give off through interpretation and non-verbal cues, where people have less control, sometimes giving their performance away during social interactions.

Goffman's dramaturgical framework has been extended from face-to-face interaction to the online realm. The situation in the online dating platform serves as the situation where participants can perform their situated identities. CMC as a medium allows participants to have more control over their self-presentation. The context of the *situation* influences the salience of the presentation. In other words, CMC-influenced relationships are determined by the online environment or platform that participants choose to use. Asynchronous tools allow online daters to rely on verbal and linguistic cues, not risking embarrassment through less controllable

nonverbal communication cues (Walther, 1996). The technological features of online dating allow participants to control their self-presentation through “given” expressions opposed to expressions “given off” uncontrollably (Goffman, 1959).

Walther and Parks (2002) proposed the concept of “warranting,” a conceptual framework used to understand how users validate online identity cues. Warrant theory states that in the presence of anonymity people misrepresent information about themselves. Warrants serve as a connection between a person’s online identity and off-line identity. Warranting cues are not weighted equally and thus possess warranting value unequally. Each warrant has a value determined by the target (person of focus); the target determines whether or not the cue was altered. High value warrants are cues that are difficult to manipulate, while low warrant cues are easier to manipulate making them more questionable in terms of accuracy. Online participants search for certain clues to measure against someone else’s online identity claims (Donath, Karahalios, & Viégas, 1999).

Various online environments, such as online role-playing games, allow participants to freely explore self-presentation without anchoring any warrants of their off-line identity (Turkle, 1999, 2014). Online dating is different from online role-playing games, because online dating participants look forward to intimate encounters off-line. Previous qualitative research found that the deception is the main perceived disadvantage of online dating (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006b; Gibbs et al., 2006). Referring to Goffman’s idea of situated identities in online dating platforms where lying appears to be a perceived norm, it may cause reciprocal deception amongst online daters using a particular platform (Fiore, 2008).

Self-presentation is viewed differently depending on the online environment. For example, self-presentations in the online dating arena differ from the self-presentation strategies

exercised on popular social media networks, such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Individuals share aspects of themselves through plaintext reporting of personal information, status updates, and sharing on other friends' profile pages. Individual users are not the only source of information about themselves. Friends post digital content to each other's profile pages (Rui & Stefanone, 2013a, 2013b). Aside from the expectation of online dating's mixed-mode relationships combining both online and offline communication, social networking sites allow friends to post on other individuals' profiles for everyone within the profile owner's network to see. The online dating arena enables profile owners to exercise complete power over the information presented only in their own profiles. Other-provided information (OPI) on sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter can be problematic because the information is inconsistent with the idealized self-presentation strategies of the profile owner (Walther & Ramirez Jr., 2009). Compared with information provided by the profile owner (self-provided information or SPI), OPI is less likely to be manipulated, is likely to have greater credibility, and can be seen as a reliable source in the perception of the profile owner (Walther & Ramirez Jr., 2009; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008).

The depth, breadth, and level of intimacy of impression management are regulated by self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is a technique used in relationship maintenance (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011), which means that the greater the network, the greater the need to maintain those relationships. Self-disclosure becomes difficult in romantic relationships due to the tension between authenticity and impression management. Individuals struggle with the appropriate time to self-disclose to their partners, vacillating between autonomy and openness (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987). Research shows that online dating is different

from regular CMC relationships due to the expectation of possible off-line interaction; therefore self-disclosures are more authentic. Due to the goal of achieving an intimate relationship, online dating participants may be more motivated to disclose authentic aspects of themselves in their online advertisements (Gibbs et al., 2006). In recent history, it has become more commonplace for young adults to use communication technology as a means of developing and maintaining their sexual and romantic relationships. Young adults use communication technology for meeting, screening, getting to know new partners, maintaining existing relationships, and ending relationships (Bergdall, 2012). Technological features of communication technology shape both the process and context of relationship partnering.

With the emergence of online dating, individuals have altered their approach to meeting new romantic partners. Online daters' disclosure choices are shaped by the norms and expectations governing each site, and a desire to "present themselves as unique individuals within the constraints of a technical system that encourage[s] homogeneity, negotiating a desire to stand out with the need to blend in" (Ellison et al., 2006b). As a result, online dating participants are expected to reveal personal information in order to conform to social norms as well as their desire to develop genuine romantic relationships. These individuals also must consider the risks of sharing personal information with strangers without confirmation that others are being honest in their disclosures. Deception is a common risk in online dating that could result in emotional or physical distress.

Ellison et al. (2006b), an often-cited resource, examined subscribers' self-presentation strategies in online dating spaces. The study interrogated the ways in which online presentation of the self is used to find a romantic partner. The researchers collected data from telephone interviews that they conducted with 34 active online dating subscribers. The findings revealed

that presentation strategies employed by participants by-passed the constraints presented by the platform itself, such as the lack of nonverbal cues. Although this study does not focus on race, the fact that online daters knowingly circumvent the technological limitations of dating platforms, offers insight into online daters willingness to present an ideal self. This includes Internet daters self-presenting as racially tolerant when their behavior exhibits preferences that are either racialized, gendered, or both. The dichotomy among the self-presented racially tolerant individuals, and his/her racialized and gendered behavior preferences can manifest in Black women being viewed as less desirable than other women.

Self-presentation and self-disclosure in the online dating contexts is about believable profiles and their marketability. Past research reported that some online daters participated in deceptive self-presentation (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Ellison et al., 2006b; Günter J. Hitsch, Ali Hortaçsu, & Dan Ariely, 2010; Catalina L. Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). Self-presentation deception tends to increase with the pressure to engage in self-presentation. For instance, individuals communicating with members of the opposite sex they find attractive or threatening to a person's self-image or both accounts for the motivations behind individual self-presentation (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998; Tyler & Feldman, 2005). Research reported that the majority of men are more likely to be deceptive in their self-presentations than women. Other research reported that men and women engage in deceptive self-presentation, but enhanced different personal traits (Hitsch et al., 2009; Schmitt, 2002). Men enhanced attributes focused on status such as salary and profession, while women focused on enhancing their physical attractiveness.

Bapna, Ramaprasad, Shmueli, and Umyarov (2013) examined weak signals in online dating. Weak signals were described as the ability to view a potential mate's profile and leave an observable trail without actually messaging the individual. According to Bapna et al. (2013); weak signaling is the ability to visit, or "check out," a potential mate's profile such that the potential mate knows the focal user visited her. It is akin to making a move without actually making a move, and yet, critically, the counter-party becomes explicitly aware that a move was made. (p. 3)

This is both an important and understudied concept because society has become more sophisticated when it comes to utilizing social media and platform features in ways that they were not initially intended to be used. For example, weak signaling is an adaptive behavior among subscribers in the online dating context where users increase their matching outcomes by leaving an electronic footprint that potential suitors can follow. This strategy can also be seen in more untraditional online dating contexts such as Facebook. An example of weak signaling on Facebook would be someone perusing Facebook pages within their network and frequently liking pictures of someone within their friend network giving a weak signal of interest.

The study by Bapna et al. (2013) offered insight into the ways online daters have adapted to the platform with a social medium of online dating. The results showed that weak signaling was a strategy often used by women overcoming dating norms that discouraged them from making the first move. According to the study, social frictions greatly influenced search frictions, which led to a significant drop in matches. The sample included longitudinal data of 100,000 American users from monCherie.com. The researchers collected profiles in agreement with the administrators of monCherie.com. Bapna et al. (2013) used big data to illuminate the offline dating frictions and inefficiencies made apparent in the online dating context. The study

posited that extant online dating research limited itself to search frictions. They further argued that instead of search frictions, long-standing social norms created social frictions that inhibited women from making the first move in dating markets. When weak signaling was removed from the sample, matching outcomes declined, showing that the ability to send a weak signal improves matching outcomes. Bapna et al.'s study is important because it used big data to look at the sub processes of online dating norms on a micro level. The overall argument posited that the final dating outcome is preceded by the sub processes of viewing and messaging. The digitization of social processes allows researchers to examine micro-level data

The increasing popularity of digital courtship has gained attention from both popular culture and contemporary media-related CMC scholarship. The majority of media-related CMC scholarship investigating online dating focuses on deceptive behavior and self-presentation strategies carried out within personal advertisements, better known as online dating profiles. Looking at a cultural phenomenon such as online dating within an American context allows researchers to gauge contemporary attitudes towards race and gender, which are two areas that usually undergird individual agency in American social structures (Hardy, 2014; Mosco, 2009). Few studies, however, have attempted to examine the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender within the online dating culture. The combination of gender and race has become a growing taboo in the online dating marketplace. Rudder (2009) showed that race and gender are important factors in the online dating marketplace. Dating profiles are not valued equally. According to Rudder (2009), the dating market is stratified according to race and gender, with White males enjoying the status of most sought after, or responded to, while Black females are viewed as the least valued in conventional online dating spaces. The same study highlighted gendered attitudes towards racial homophily, as women were more likely to respond to suitors of

the opposite sex who were from the same race. Rudder (2014) asserted that his earlier research (Rudder, 2009) still holds true and in some cases the biases have intensified.

As previously mentioned, the majority of scholarship on CMC within an online dating context focuses on various levels of deception and online personal ads. Race and gender identity, along with the ways in which people of color present themselves in the online dating realm, remains under-theorized. In an effort to extend research in media-related CMC pertaining to race and gender, this study investigates the correlations between online daters' impression management strategies and their racial and gendered identities

Online Dating Studies: Racially Gendered Hierarchies

Online dating is not a force for social change. Online dating research consistently shows that regardless of the self-presentation and self-disclosure strategies, Black women remain the least sought after group. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) contended that "Race and ethnicity are clearly the biggest divide in social networks today in the United States" (p. 420). Dating firms use algorithms to capitalize on the biases of subscribers via both *conventional* and specialty sites, also referred to as demographically targeted or niche-dating sites. Unfortunately, general and specialty dating sites offer a technological avenue that sustains social distances among users. The commercialized efforts to segment online dating audiences have sustained romantic distances between racial groups, and have done very little to resolve the fact that Black women are the least desirable dating bloc on the Internet. The majority of studies examining the gendered and racial discrimination in online dating rely either on interactional data or content analysis of dating profiles.

Digital courtship can be identified as a racially gendered space. Men disproportionately place an importance on women's physical attractiveness in dating contexts (Feingold, 1990;

Montoya, 2008). Skin color serves as a symbolic tool for potential suitors to evaluate race and ethnicity, influencing their perceptions of minority women's physical attractiveness (Hill, 2002c; Hunter, 2013; Rudder, 2014a). Stating racial preferences publicly on dating platforms has become increasingly unpopular among subscribers, yet racial homophily among online daters has intensified in recent years (Glasser, Robnett, & Feliciano, 2009; Rudder, 2014a). Based on these findings, it is clear that gendered racial preferences would shape the online dating experience for Black women. In a number of CMC studies interrogating online dating spaces the critical race work is saved for and suggested in the future research section (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2011; Leon, Rotunda, Sutton, & Schlossman, 2003; Skopek et al., 2011; Toma & Hancock, 2010). This study expands media-related CMC studies in the online dating context via a critical race lens to examine the Black female experience. The following studies illuminate both the romantic distance between racial groups and an underlying theme where Black women are often considered undesirable.

Each online dating profile serves as an electronic dossier offering a wealth of demographic information for researchers to analyze. Wilson, McIntosh, and Insana (2007) examined Black Americans' dating preferences by accessing 100 men and 100 women's Match.com dating profiles. Fourteen demographic variables were measured to determine daters' willingness to date Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians. This study found that being male, young, either definitely wanting or possibly wanting children, being attractive, being a smoker and not exercising all related to Black daters' willingness to date people of other racial groups. In regards to age, younger participants were more willing to date outside of their race than older participants. Gender was another determinate regarding willingness to date across race. Black men were significantly more willing to date outside of their race (Whites,

Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians). Black participants who expressed a desire for children were more willing to date Whites and Asians than those who stated that they did not want kids. Black participants who were identified as attractive were more willing to date Whites and Hispanics than Black participants labeled less attractive. Participants who smoked were more willing to date Whites and Hispanics than Blacks who did not smoke. Blacks who did not exercise were more willing to date at least one other race, than Black daters who exercise. The electronic dossier known as the online dating personal ad is usually the first impression. The importance of this study illustrated the importance of the personal ad. Online daters skim and swipe often times based on the first impression of a dating profile. Unfortunately, studies such as this one where researchers have *accessed* user-generated data often reveal more about users' idealistic self, which leads to the importance of interactional data where participants are examined by their electronic footprint unveiling their communication with other daters across racial and gender lines. Very seldom do these studies explicitly focus on the experience for the least desired group.

The previous study examined Black online daters' self-reported racial preferences based off of their dating profile. Further examining racial preference, Tsunokai, Kposowa, and Adams (2009) compared the racial preferences of online daters across different age cohorts (generations). The researchers did this by interrogating the ways in which historical events and today's sociocultural racial climate impacted the racial dating preferences across birth cohorts. These cohorts consisted of the silent generation (individuals born in 1942 or before), the baby boomers (born between 1943 in 1960), generation X (born between 1961 and 1981), and the millennium generation (those born after 1981). Data were collected directly from Match.com dating profiles. The dating profiles in this study were viewed as *electronic dossiers* that

highlighted the daters' background, physical features, personality traits, interests, values, social economic status, and the characteristics and qualities that the individual was seeking in his/her dating partners. Another question box that daters completed pertained to the racial or ethnic group they preferred to date. The findings confirmed the researchers' hypothesis. For instance, the silent generation, which is the oldest generation, was the least likely to date outside of its race, except in instances where Whites were the response variable. This study supported their hypothesis and findings by drawing from Mannheim's (1952) argument that individuals tend to be sensitive to critical events that occur in their formative years. In other words, the racial climates during this generation's formative years may have shaped their racial preferences. Growing up, older generations were more susceptible to structural inequality and systemic racial oppression that instilled a sense of group identity along racial fault lines.

The hypothesis that race was a signpost for significant disparities in dating preferences was also confirmed. Overall, Whites and Asians were least likely to date African Americans, while African Americans were resistant to dating Whites. Asians showed a preference toward Whites, and African Americans were supportive of dating Hispanics. Multiracial daters were open to dating any race, except for Whites. When examining dating preferences by region, daters who lived in the South were least likely to date outside of their race. The study also referred to Mannheim (1952) to support the argument that racial preference was not just age-specific, but also regional when it came to generational identity formation. Researchers in this study pointed to the acute chain of events that was a result of the long history of the Jim Crow South. Further analysis revealed that women were consistently less willing than men to date outside of their race. Suggestions for this were the potential pressures from parents and friends to date within their racial group, as well as the racialized norms of being stigmatized and

marginalized for not sticking with your own kind. Despite previous studies which stated that the level of education positively impacts racial tolerance and intermarriage rates, this study did not show a relationship between education and the willingness to date across racial lines. Political orientation showed daters that identified themselves as liberal or middle-of-the-road were more willing to date outside of their race. This was consistent across all racial groups. When it came to gender and race, racial homophily was strongest among women, and a consistent theme was the degree of unwillingness to date African American suitors exhibited by non-Black racial groups. A racially gendered hierarchy was definitely emerging within the literature.

Sweeney and Borden (2009) examined “a general dating site” in an effort to examine mainstream daters and their preferences. The usefulness of general dating sites was interrogated to understand general partner preferences. By avoiding specialty sites, or niche dating sites, the aim of this study was to examine general daters in an effort to look at a sample that mimicked the real world or the general population. The sample consisted of men and women between the ages of 21 and 30 years seeking heterosexual partnerships. Eighty three Black women, 74 Black men, 82 White women, and 91 White men, made up a total sample of 330. This study posited two prominent arguments explaining the continued low rates of interracial relationships: (1) contact or structure and (2) the role of dominant culture’s common ideas about race or racial ideology. Researchers in this study described contact as the physical boundaries and limitations that determined who the pool of potential suitors dated and eventually married. Issues concerning contact referred to racial residential segregation, occupational segregation, and same race networks that limited men and women from meeting potential suitors. Racial ideology pertained to the role dominant conceptions about race played in relationships and the influence they had on one’s inner circle also influencing intimate partnerships. For race, people tended to partner with

individuals of the same race, social class, and educational level. Dominant culture and social norms shaped both the willingness and ability of daters to reach across racial lines. Racial ideology was also involved in forming dating norms. Dominant ideas about race, pressure from family and friends, social norms, legislation, and the social historical power differentials between racial groups, all influenced decisions on who to date and marry. Subscription structure could also be a potential contact consideration impacting Black women and their lived experiences on online dating platforms. Dating sites' membership fees and cost of different features could limit Black women to particular sites.

The research of Glasser et al. (2009) highlighted the ways that race/ethnicity and gender indeed influenced body type preferences. Researchers collected data directly from 5,810 heterosexual participants' dating profiles. The findings revealed that African Americans and Latinos were more accepting of larger body types than Whites. Men, in general, and Whites were least likely to deviate from their desired body preference, opposed to women and non-Whites. Findings also suggested that White men were more susceptible to the influence of dominant media images, which had a great influence on their body type preference. African-American and Latino men were significantly more likely to prefer what Glasser referred to as thick or heavy body typed woman. In comparison to White women, this study implied that African American and Latino women show a stronger resistance to mainstream media's depiction of ideal beauty. In contrast, other research implied that African-American women are constrained in other ways by cultural standards of beauty. Glasser et al. (2009) supported their findings that also aligns with Childs' (2005) and Poran's (2006) offline dating research. Poran (2006) conducted focus groups with 15 African American women who were negatively impacted by media images promoting thinness as beautiful. This positioned African-American women in a no-win

situation, where despite the men in their own culture finding them attractive, dominant culture was consistently telling them that they do not meet modern beauty standards. As a result, Childs (2005) argued that college-educated Black women were reluctant to date Caucasian men because they felt that Whites perceived them as unattractive or stereotypically hypersexual and promiscuous. This study sheds light on general dating sites as potential crooked online dating space where the dating pool is predominantly White or non-Black, exercising dating preferences that overlook Black women as potential mates.

Yancey (2009) conducted a content analysis on personal ads downloaded from Yahoo! personals, arguing that African Americans are less likely to date interracial with European Americans. Stratified sampling technique was used to choose personal ads by region and city size. General Social Survey (GSS) was used to create categories representing nine regions (Pacific, Mountain, West South Central, West North Central, East South Central, East North Central, New England, South Atlantic, and Middle Atlantic). A total of 1,076 heterosexuals were chosen for the study, including African American, Hispanic American and Asian Americans. This study found that, by accessing online dating profiles, researchers could access data that gave a more authentic picture of daters' racial preferences. This research posited that there was a high level of acceptance when it came to interracial dating. The findings indicated that African-Americans were less willing to engage in interracial dating with European Americans than Hispanic and Asian Americans. In accordance with previous studies, researchers found that Eurocentric biases used to evaluate physical beauty often alienate African American women deeming them unattractive. Researchers in this study also suggested that the Eurocentric biases alienating Black daters influenced Black daters' low levels of trust when considering European Americans as romantic partners.

As a whole, African Americans did not condemn interracial relationships. Researchers implied that condemning interracial relationships might indirectly promote racist ideologies that would feed into the alienation of the Afro-American experience. This study posited that African Americans comparatively are least likely to date interracially than non-Blacks. However, it does not contradict research indicating that African Americans are supportive of interracial dating, which also includes their family and friends. This study provided insight in the patterns of the willingness to date interracially and expanded the discussion on the alienation of African Americans in American dating culture. Researchers in the study suggested that further research explore specialized dating websites catering to niche markets such as farmers (farmersonly.com), Christians (Christianmingle.com), and pet lovers (PetLoversMeet.com). The examination of specialty dating websites would offer insight on African American alienation within the various subcultures in which dating firms cater. Focusing particularly on African-American women, this dissertation study will offer additional insight regarding potential alienation caused by daters' unwillingness to date across racial lines on general dating sights. Alienation is another entry point into the examination of African American women's comfort level with certain dating applications and dating sites, as well as an interrogation of whether Black women prefer general dating services (Match.com, OkCupid.com and Tinder) or the more niche dating sites and applications (BlackPeopleMeet.com or Soul Swipe).

Hitsch et al. (2010) examined mate preferences based on the attribute information users placed on their online dating profiles. The study set out to answer three questions stemming from extent literature. First, whether daters prefer potential suitors who are similar to them (described as horizontal attributes) or whether there is an agreement among people regarding the desirability of mates (described as vertical attributes). Second, researchers sought out existing

same race preferences. Third, they examined the gender differences in mate preferences. The data in this study consisted of 6,485 users of an online dating service from two United States metropolitan areas. The strength of this study is its correlation of stated preference data and revealed preference data. Findings in this study showed that there was a strong preference for similarity in the areas of a partner's age, education, race, and height. According to the study, education was an important horizontal attribute because it provided information on potential daters' earning potential. Preference for similarity was also important concerning religion, political views, and habits such as smoking behavior. Both men and women exhibited a preference towards same race coupling, but women's preference for dating within their own race was more pronounced than in men. There was a gender difference between the stated preferences and the revealed preferences. When looking at how men and women's stated preferences for a partner of a different race, the results were gendered. Eighty percent of men and 54% of women stated that the ethnic background of their partner did not matter. On the other hand, 17% of men and 41% of women stated that they preferred a partner whose ethnicity is "the same as mine." Results revealed that men's stated preferences towards partners of a different race coincided with the data illuminating the revealed preferences. Women, however, revealed preferences that did not coincide with stated preferences. Although this study did not reveal which dating site it used, it offered insight on the strategic behaviors exhibited in personal ads. More importantly, it made an argument for methodological approaches that interrogate the "revealed data" to unveil the ways in which online dating subscribers strategically "shade" their true preferences.

Robnett and Feliciano (2011) also argued that race and gender influenced dating choices on the Internet. Their study showed that African Americans were less likely to date European

Americans due to social and historical aspects of American culture. A common theme that surfaced in this study was that Black women were the least sought after group amongst online daters, with no insights as to why. Previous research highlighted the impact of stereotypes on Black women and self-presentation strategies in personal ads, but it has not combined these two in an effort to understand the lived experience of Black female online daters.

Feliciano, Lee, and Robnett (2011) studied 4,000 Internet daters from Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Atlanta to examine Latinos' stated racial preferences for dates. The study results showed that few Latinos preferred to only date Latinos. Latinos exhibited a preference to date Whites over Blacks, suggesting that the boundary between Latino and White was less rigid than the one between Latino and Black or Black and White. When it came to showing a preference towards Blacks, Latinos showed a higher preference than Blacks and Whites. When analyzing the racial preference among Latinos by metropolitan area, education level, language, and religion revealed that greater proximity to Blacks in New York and Atlanta promoted a greater chance of acceptance. Overall, the study argued that the diversity within the Latino community accepted racial hierarchies, privileged Whites, and showed evidence that many were assimilating to the dominant group. Due to the diversity in the Latino population assimilation patterns varied.

R. King (2013) conducted a study on the Facebook dating application "Are You Interested" (AYI). AYI is a platform where singles interested in dating relationships or sexual trysts peruse dating profiles by clicking "yes" on dating profiles they like and "skip" on profiles they want to bypass. When subscribers click "yes," the other subscriber is notified. King examined the percentage of AYI users that responded to a "yes," based on ethnicity and gender. Results revealed that the majority of "yes" clicks went unanswered, but there was a pattern that

emerged in the unanswered “yes’s” revealing a social hierarchy along the fault lines of race and gender. With respect to gender, men throughout the study responded to women three times as often as women responded to men. Regarding race, the results showed that Asian women responded to the “yesses” of White men 7.8% of the time, which was more often than they responded to any other race. White men on the other hand responded to Black women 8.5% of the time, which translated to less often than they responded to White, Latino, or Asian women. In sum, all of the men, except for Asians, in the study showed a preference towards Asian women, while all women, except for Black women, preferred White men. Both Black men and women remained at the bottom of their gender category. Overall, men in all racial categories preferred women outside of their race.

Lin and Lundquist (2013) examined how reciprocation patterns of heterosexual daters were shaped by race, gender, and education. Findings in this study revealed that racial homophily heavily influenced the mate selection behavior of both men and women. Women showed a preference towards men of similar or more dominant racial status, while non-Black men responded to all, except Black women. Both White men and women with college degrees were more likely to respond to a White person without a college degree, before they would respond to Black daters with a college degree. The dataset consisted of approximately 9 million registered users worldwide and 200 million messages. Asian women were most likely to send initial messages to Asian men, followed by White men, and were least likely to send messages to Hispanic and Black men. Black women in this study showed the highest level of racial homophily. Messaging patterns showed that Black women rarely messaged White, Asian, or Hispanic men. Although Hispanic women also showed a preference towards their coethnics, it was not as strong as Black female daters. White men came in second place regarding Hispanic

women's dating preferences, while Hispanic women rarely initiated contact with Black and Asian men. From the male perspective, White men have the best dating odds. This is a result of Asian, Hispanic, and White women showing a high level of preference toward White men. Asian and Black men received the majority of their messages from their coethnics. Although weaker than the women, men also showed a tendency towards homophily. Asian men primarily initiated contact between Asian women; White and Hispanic women came in second, and were unlikely to message Black women. Black men exhibited a primary preference towards Black women, but also sent messages to Asian and Hispanic women, with messages to White women slightly less often. Hispanic men showed a preference towards Hispanic women first, then Asian and White women. Black women were least likely to be contacted by Hispanic men. White men showed a preference towards White women the most, and contacted Hispanic and Asian women second most often. Similar to Asian men, White men completely avoided contact with Black women. Overall, Black women received the most messages from Black men and a small portion from Latinos, while White women received messages from men inside and outside of their ethnic group. In general, women tended to exhibit racial homophily, more so than men. The men showed a level of willingness to cross-racial boundaries, but often drew a line when it came to engaging with Black women. Analyzing response behaviors, White women were more likely to respond if the sender was college-educated. However, education did not change the racial preference. White women without a college education showed the highest level of preference towards Whiteness, as they were more likely to respond to White men's messages regardless of education. White, Hispanic, and Asian women were equally contacted by White men, both educated and uneducated, while Black women remained the least likely to receive any response. However, college educated White men exhibited a preference towards college educated Black

women over Black women who do not have a degree. Overall racial preference superseded educational attainment in the online dating market.

Curington, Lin, and Lundquist (2015) used interactional data from one of the largest dating sites in the United States to interrogate how race, gender, and multiraciality shape users' online dating experiences. This study extended both mixed race and online dating scholarship by exploring racial hierarchies in the online dating context via the experiences of multiracial daters. Users had a choice of 10 "ethnicity" boxes they could check when filling out their personal profiles. The options were Asian, Middle Eastern, Black, Native American, Indian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, White, Other, and Undeclared. Data collection focused on how monoracial daters responded to initial messages sent by multiracial daters with various White/nonWhite racial and ethnic makeups. The sample consisted of 200 million messages from 9 million users who self-identified as heterosexual men and women from seven groups: Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, Asian-White, Black-White, and Hispanic-White. This study positioned online daters' message or inbox responses to other daters as a rejection-free interaction which speaks to respondents' true preference. This study did not focus on initial contact, arguing that levels in comfort dominate whether or not online daters initiate contact, such as homophily and lowering the risk of rejection.

The reciprocation patterns in the study indeed unveiled a dating hierarchy. When examining the racial divide between Hispanic-White, Black-White, and Asian-White three related themes emerged. First, multiracial daters participation was a qualitatively different dating experience than monoracial daters, and should not be assumed that these multiracial experiences were comparable to monoracial minority experiences as daters who are multiracial do indeed experience online dating differently from their minority counterparts. Second, the

findings in this study revealed that multiracial men and women were highly sought after, and expanded popular scholarship on “controlling images” depicting multiracial women as exotic and hypersexualized. Data in this study showed that Asian and Hispanic women most preferred multiracial men, while Black women showed a higher preference towards multiracial Black men than Black daters. Third, Asian-White and Hispanic-White daters’ ability to easily assimilate afforded them more privileges than Black-White daters. Overall, multiracial men and women were preferred across all racial groups, including Whites.

Summary

That society and culture influence communication technology is unsurprising and examples of it are obvious across the various forms of social media. Boyd (2011) unveiled how networked publics experience a digital ghettoization of online space. In *White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook*, Boyd exposed a migration of White users from MySpace to Facebook in an effort to get away from interacting with non-White users. The migrators viewed Facebook as an intellectual space and MySpace became less appealing as people of color increased their presence. Boyd’s work helped map out the racialized boundaries of early social networks. Rudder’s (2014) *Datasclysm* illuminated the persistence of racialized mate-selection during an era described as being colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This dissertation study positions America’s media landscape as a crooked room where Black women continue to struggle to stand upright. The online dating market is an extension of the American media landscape, and an extension of the crooked room. The aforementioned studies reveal that Black female online daters sit at the bottom of the dating pool. Despite studies showing that multiracial individuals are often fetishized on online dating sites, they also reveal that Black multiracials share a low

status in the online dating pool. Overall, racial preference has proven to be the strongest sorting mechanism amongst online daters.

The online dating lexicon used in American popular culture, comprised of journalists, dating professionals and researchers, refers to digital courtship as an online dating market comprised of self-commodifying personal advertisements aimed to exchange emotional currency within a network of Internet subscribers functioning in an economy of desirability. Previous studies have discussed the racial hierarchies within online dating, where dominant American culture has led to the undervaluing of Black women as potential mates. My interests in race and gender within online dating stem from a curiosity to understand how racially gendered hierarchies construct online spaces that govern Black female subscribers dating experiences. This research interest denotes an application of commodification of human interaction within the construct of social media, specifically within the context of online dating. Using the twin lenses of race and gender to interrogate the world of online dating provides the foundation of this dissertation's contribution to the field of media-related CMC. In doing so, this research study differs from the majority of present research exploring the phenomenon of online dating, which focuses on impression management, deception, and attractiveness, while placing little emphasis on race and mate selection. My research further distinguishes itself from previous work because it uses in-depth interviews to interrogate the commodification of race and gender. Thus not only is its method innovative, but it is designed to create a platform for the most under-represented users—Black female daters—to voice to their personal online dating experiences. Such a platform enables unique contributions to the literature, filling in the gaps left by those researchers who have ignored or left unasked questions of agency and the lived experience (see Chapter 5). Such questions speak plainly to the historical antecedents Black woman online

daters have to negotiate during their participation. Chapter 3 presents the methods used to conduct the study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The Problem

The purpose of this study was to raise awareness about Black women's struggles to find love online and to explicate their online dating experiences in a hierarchal dating market heavily influenced by both race and gender. Consequently, a qualitative methodology was well suited for this investigation. More specifically, this study attempted to investigate how historical and contemporary stereotypes have affected Black women's sense of self and their experiences within the online dating marketplace. Further, this study aimed to reveal the ways in which Black women who participate in online dating negotiate their co-present, offline and online, identities and the conflict between their authentic self and American popular culture's depictions of race and gender, which enables and constrains their lived online dating experiences as Black women. This qualitative study was phenomenological by design, positioning the voices of a marginalized group with diverse experiences with the phenomenon at the center of the analysis. As such, in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions were the primary mode of data collection (Creswell, 2013).

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative studies are selected when variables are not as easily defined or identified, and concepts are not always easily explained or available to describe, in order to understand the behavior of study participants. In exploring the phenomenon of Black women's lived experiences in online dating, a qualitative study afforded the documentation of these individuals and collective insights.

As a complement to Creswell's rationale for the use of qualitative research, Rudder (2009) developed an understanding for the manner in which men, both Black and non-Black,

interacted with Black females in online dating, and provided evidence and advocacy for the use of both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, in conjunction with in-depth interviews. In Rudder's view, this method allowed for deeper insight into Black women's self-presentation as it related to digital courtship.

Furthermore, according to Patton (1990), qualitative designs are used for exploratory research in areas where very little is known. Based on their historical experiences, the struggles to project the voices of Black women have often failed (Stoller & Gibson, 1999). In order to shape and inform their experiences, it was concluded that qualitative research methods accurately captured the diverse and complex topics and subtopics, themes and subthemes, as well as emerging concepts and their relationships surrounding the phenomena.

Qualitative research is interpretive, grounded in the lived experiences of its participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and relies on the collection of primarily non-numerical data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Qualitative research designs entail the procedures of the study and introduce the methods of data collection through which analyses will occur (Creswell, 2009). Researchers who execute qualitative studies generally identify a phenomenon in an open-ended way and "develop hypotheses and theoretical explanations that are based on their interpretations of what they observe" (p. 388). Researchers often reflect on their roles within the research processes and are sensitive to how their individual biases potentially shape their work (Rallis & Rossman, 1998). Broadly, qualitative research is an approach to the study of social phenomena and may draw upon multiple methods of inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Phenomenology served as the methodological framework of this study. The origins of phenomenology can be traced to 20th century German scholars Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger. The philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method were

developed further in France by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. This method was guided by a philosophy that valued human communication as it described the experience of an individual. Phenomenology “concerns itself with the nature and function of consciousness” (Lanigan, 1988), particularly for the individual. The phenomenological method “was not founded: it grew. Its fountainhead was Edmund Husserl” (Spiegelberg, 1975, p. 3). According to Husserl (1964), phenomenology was “the general doctrine of essences, within which the science of essence of cognition finds its place” (p. 1). In other words, Husserl referred to the human experience as an “essence of cognition,” which implied that individuals exist through the act of communicating their understanding of society and sharing the knowledge gained. Thus, personal experiences operate as meaningful sources of knowledge. French scholar Merleau-Ponty (1962) further elaborated on the notion of essence by explaining that phenomenology “does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man [or woman] and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’” (p. vii). That is to say, the essence of being is focused on the facts or “facticity” communicated based on individual perception, and the idea of perception becomes important in deriving meaning from personal experience. Merleau-Ponty argued that “we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world” (p. 5). This consciousness of the world begins with a perception of the self. According to Sokolowski (2000), the self represents an “agent of truth, the one responsible for judgments and verifications, the perceptual and cognitive ‘owner’ of the world” (p. 112). Thus, meaning is extracted from perceptions of the self in an effort to identify a truth in lived experiences. The work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and others inform the contemporary approach to the method of phenomenology. Moreover, for phenomenological studies, “in-depth interviews are a valuable tool for collecting descriptions of lived experiences

of co-researchers [interviewees] because they allow them to tell their stories in their own words” (Orbe, 1998, p. 40). Scholar Mark Orbe described the phenomenological study as a three-step process: first, phenomenological description—collecting descriptions of firsthand, lived experiences; second, phenomenological reduction involving themes and imaginative free variation or reviewing the descriptions in order to disclose essential themes; and, third, phenomenological interpretation, that is, interpreting and analyzing the themes (1998). This step-by-step process aimed to reveal findings that capture the core of co-researchers’ experiences. Closely related to the goals of the present study, communication scholars have used the phenomenological method to investigate human experiences with certain health disorders and education practices. For the purposes of communications research, the traditional phenomenological method was applied in the analysis.

Qualitative Methodology Rationale

I employed a qualitative methodology in this study because it allowed me to foreground the individual and her voice within the context of online dating. My dissertation highlights the variance in lived experiences for women who are often referred to as a homogenous group. In-depth interviews with semi-structured questions, the study’s primary mode of data collection, gave voice to the myriad ways Black women experience online dating thereby exposing the inherently heterogeneous nature of Black women online daters.

In an effort to give voice to Black women in the online dating arena, a phenomenological approach was used in the study to gather the firsthand accounts of Black women’s lived experiences in online dating and digital courtship. Additionally, a constructivist approach was selected with the purpose of understanding the phenomena through the experiences, narratives and ideas of the participants themselves (Hays & Wood, 2011). By utilizing a constructivist

perspective, additional attention was placed on putting forth the participants' perspectives and ensuring contextual relevance (Hays & Wood, 2011). The constructivist perspective emphasized data, or epistemologies, generated directly from participants' interactions with both their experiences and ideas, which aligned with the proposed studies Black feminist epistemological framework and phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research captures people's lived experiences (Levers et al., 2008). Moreover, phenomenological researchers study the essence of a phenomenon and explore how individuals situate themselves in the world based on how they make meaning of their experiences (Levers et al., 2008). As such, utilizing a phenomenological approach in this study allowed documentation of the realities of Black women in online dating scenarios.

Rationale for the Study

Archetypes of Black women present as an often-researched area of cultural and communication studies; however, much of this research often fails to highlight the voices and realities of the women themselves (Collins, 1990; McNair, 1992; Romero, 2000); therefore, the information about Black women that is provided by these studies often lead to false conclusions about the challenges and quality of their lives. Furthermore, because opinions about Black woman are often distorted by the influence of mass-mediated archetypes and historically-based stereotypical labels, it is imperative to listen to what Black women have to say about their lives and their lived experiences. West (1995) contended that exploring Black women's cultural reality by inquiring about their unique experiences can produce both self-disclosure and respect for their backgrounds. Within the often-misunderstood motives of participants in the online dating marketplace, efforts to study and understand the lived experiences of Black women engaging in these activities is even more critical.

The results of the study are significant to both media-related CMC scholarship as well as Black feminist thought research in highlighting the lived experiences of Black women within an online context. Further, the results of the study serve a dual purpose by offering rich insight for media-related CMC scholars interested in the intersection of race, gender, and the Internet. The results also add to the growing literature surrounding Black female identity within the context of the online dating marketplace. Furthermore, the results of this study are dictated by the voices and experiences of its subjects—Black women who have participated in online dating. Their perspectives are often unheard, yet are rife with unacknowledged racial bias as Rudder and other CMC scholars revealed.

Archetypes and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework in this study offers a theoretical lens through which to interrogate the connection between Black women's self-definition and America's collective understanding of Black women via media portrayals; more specifically, this study's conceptual framework examines how this dialectal relationship shapes their experiences in finding love online. Archetypes in the study refer to the consistent production of mass-mediated depictions of Black women, which stem from anti-Black stereotypes created during the antebellum era while stereotypes marginalize by oversimplifying or typifying a person, group, or situation (Bogle, 2001; Pilgrim, 2000). Stereotypes in this study undergird archetypes, where archetypes are typified mass-mediated reproductions that consistently and inaccurately portray Black women in American media culture. Marginalizing archetypes oversimplifying Black women are referred to as controlling images (Collins 2008). Though dating back to slavery, controlling images continue to undergird perceptions of Black women in the online dating marketplace.

The Mammy, Jezebel, Matriarch, Strong Black Woman (SBW), and Sapphire archetypes are extant controlling images that continue to define Black female identity (King, 1982). These images reproduce a constant tension between society's constraining perceptions of Black womanhood and the diverse self-definitions Black women use toward their individual identity. Contemporary images invoking these archetypes are undergirded with the racist and sexist colonial infrastructure that has both sexually exploited and subjugated Black women. Further, the proliferation of these archetypes of Black women speaks to a deeper narrative in which Black women are characterized and personified in online dating spaces. There is a critical need to understand the online dating experience from Black women's perspectives in an effort to understand how Black women navigate the dialectical relationship existing between themselves and the online dating spaces that they occupy.

Research Design

Sampling Techniques

In an effort to obtain a wide variety of perspectives and responses, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used. Purposive sampling techniques are primarily used in qualitative studies and may be defined as selecting units (i.e. individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions. Maxwell (1997) further defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which, "particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 87).

Purposive sampling is often employed and designed to enhance understandings of selected individuals or group experiences or for developing theories and concepts. Researchers seek to accomplish this goal by selecting "information rich" cases, that is individuals, groups,

organizations, or behaviors that provide the greatest insight into the research question. Miles & Huberman (1994, p. 34) and others note that three types of cases have the greatest payoff in purposive samples: typical cases (i.e., those who are “normal” or “average” for those being studied); “deviant” or extreme cases (i.e. those who represent unusual manifestations of the phenomenon of interest); and “negative” or disconfirming cases (i.e., those who are “exceptions to the rule”). Many other purposive sampling strategies can be used in qualitative research, and the strategies can be revised throughout the research process as more knowledge of the setting and subjects are obtained. Also, additional cases can be added to test emerging hypotheses or rival explanations.

Snowball sampling is a method typically used with populations either unknown or not easily accessible to the researcher. Members of these populations have not all been previously identified and are more difficult to locate or contact than known populations (Coleman, 1958; Goodman, 1961; Spreen, 1992). When discussing the intimate details of dating, snowball sampling offers an opportunity for women to identify other women who have candidly shared their experiences with online dating. Obtaining a sample from such a population typically does not allow for the use of traditional random sampling methodologies that require the entire population be known (i.e., the population of students at a university). Instead, methodologies such as snowball sampling employ the presumed social networks that exist between members of a target population to build a sample. Snowball sampling is more directed and purposeful than many other non-random sampling techniques, such as convenience sampling, which focuses only on the most easily identified and reachable members of a population. When carefully conducted, snowball sampling can provide comprehensive (though not generalizable) characterizations of unknown populations.

The primary advantage of snowball sampling is its success in identifying individuals from unknown and potentially very large populations beyond any known segments of a given population. Another advantage is that a sample can be produced quickly and cost-effectively. Conversely, there are several challenges inherent in snowball sampling, the foremost being that snowball sampling does not yield a random sample. Therefore, the results from a study using a snowball sample are not generalizable to the population under study. However, when a population is unknown and there is little information available about it, snowball sampling can provide a better understanding and more complete characterization of a population.

Participants

Researchers (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996) have found that Black women are more likely to explore their racial identity than their gendered identity because racial issues are more salient than issues concerning gender. Thus in-depth interviews can be productive spaces to examine race in online dating spaces.

Participants for the semi-structured interviews were comprised of women who had participated in online dating and self-identified as Black (or African American). Further, they met the following criteria:

1. Heterosexual women between the ages of 28 and 55.
2. Have used online dating services (i.e. Match, OkCupid, eHarmony, Tinder) between January 2014 and January 2016
3. Have participated in online dating services for at least one month.

The parameters for recruitment were applied to individual interviews after receiving approval of the research study from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Southern Illinois University (SIU).

I recruited participants online only by utilizing a Google form as it allowed me to contact women from diverse digital environments. The Google form was also an efficient way for keeping records and could be easily exported into spreadsheets and later incorporated into datasets. My primary strategy to disperse information about the study utilized email, social media networks, and word-of-mouth to recruit women for this study. I developed a research study announcement that was then formatted into an email, later forwarded to individuals who had expressed interest in the study, and who had satisfied preliminary assumption of approval according to the stated criteria for participants. The announcement was also formatted into a social media post (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Google +, etc.) and shared online. Interested parties were directed to send an email request for more information. Upon receipt of the request, I sent an email from a designated email account that contained the study description and consent to participate form (Appendix A). The study description and consent form was a Google form where participants checked boxes on qualifying criteria, which also served as a sorting tool used to qualify participants for this study. Women had one week to respond before I followed up in an effort to confirm a date.

Women were recruited for the semi-structured interviews, and recruitment continued until 21 women had both met the stated criteria for inclusion in the study and provided their written consent for participation. I conducted a total of 21 interviews. Six of those interviews were omitted for different reasons. Two interviews were omitted due to the participants' inability to answer the interview questions. One interview was omitted because I did not feel that the responses were genuine, and interviewer and interviewee rapport may have been skewed. Despite signing and adhering to the study criteria, another interview was removed because the participant's online dating use was outside of the stated time frame for inclusion. I reopened the

interviews for a particular interview because she fit the dating criteria and offered a great deal of insight, but she was omitted because I was too far along in the coding process to incorporate her experiences. The last participant signed up and simply did not respond or participate in the study. She was essentially a no show. The final sample exceeded the initial goal of 12 interviews, which allowed for variance and ample information to recognize patterns (Bertaux, 1981, p. 37).

Data Collection Process

I generated the first dataset using a Google Forms electronic document that served as both a consent form and demographic data survey. The second data collection method was in-depth interviews designed to investigate the participants' online dating world. Once the data collection was finished, I correlated the demographic information from the Google Forms document with the in-depth interviews using NVivo 11 software. I assigned each participant a pseudonym then matched the name with his or her demographic information. Due to the large number of interviews and the large number of themes coded, major themes were highlighted and/or supported by interview excerpts.

Interviews were formatted and imported into NVivo 11 software. By using NVivo 11 to analyze multiple datasets, spreadsheets, and interviews, I was able to connect the demographic data with the interview data. Attributes and the demographic information connect to the language provided by the participants.

Protocol and Instruments

The interview protocol (Appendix B) was designed to examine the various ways in which Black women experience the online dating phenomenon. Instead of lumping Black women into monolithic or binary categories focused primarily on race, the application of a demographic

survey and interview protocol, in conjunction with textual analysis of user profiles, aided in illuminating the variance in experiences among these women. Researchers, discussed in the review of literature, have asserted that Black women's online dating experience is racially-gendered across dating platforms. I employed a demographic survey that mimicked the questionnaires used to populate profiles on online dating sites which had a dual purpose. First, it was a useful tool in the sampling process ensuring a wide range of participants. Second, the inclusion of demographic information offered an entry point into the users' experience by exploring other factors impacting their dating experiences in various areas such as racial identity (colorism and proximity to Whiteness) and homophily (along the lines of education, economic, race, and class) as well as how these areas influenced the process of sorting potential mates and dating behavior.

Questions in the protocol were piloted. Responses to the pilot study indicated that participants were eager to discuss their experiences with digital courtship. The pilot interview protocol did not require any changes, and the same questions were utilized in the final interview protocol. Consequently, while this study presents 16 interviews, the enthusiasm of African-American women online daters allowed me to exceed expectations and 21 interviews were conducted; approximately another six women were turned away from participating in this study. Lastly, for the self-presentation portion of the data collection, participants currently dating online were asked to share their profiles. This request was entirely voluntary and not a study requirement. Six women volunteered or allowed me to view their dating profiles. Profiles were examined to see whether or not their self-definitions aligned with their self-presentation strategies of their ideal-self depicted in profile pictures, self-reported body-type and displayed dating preferences. Incorporating interviews, dating profiles and demographic information

allowed for greater opportunity and space for more granular themes to emerge, which allowed me to paint a richer, more complex picture of the African-American female online dating experience.

Interviews

This study utilized Google Voice to record in-depth interviews that were transcribed by Rev.com for data collection. Interviews were scheduled utilizing a Google form (Appendix A). The Google form included a research study announcement, qualifying criteria to participate in the study, as well as a website to schedule a time and date for the interview. Participants were contacted with a confirmed date and time. For respondents who did not respond within one week, I sent a reminder email. The interviews took place via telephone. Participation in this study took approximately 30 to 40 minutes, the time it took to listen and respond to the given interview questions.

In-depth interviews allowed me to understand the online dating phenomenon directly from the expressed experiences of African-American women who have used dating sites and applications to seek love. Semi-structured questions were implemented, which allowed participants to describe their online dating reality as they saw it. The majority of the studies in the literature review lumped African-American women into a homogenous group, not taking into account African-American women's individual experiences. In-depth interviews with semi-structured questions allowed me to examine the different ways interview participants from various backgrounds interacted with dating services. Creating an interview protocol was an iterative process. The development of the protocol involved both a pilot study (Appendix B) and a member checking process that strengthened the interview questions. Ten women were chosen for the pilot study, aided in refining and revealing questions and themes not considered when

initially creating the interview protocol. Member checking was also used, allowing an outside researcher to check for missed themes, potential follow up questions, as well as check for bias on behalf of the researcher. The interview protocol required participants to discuss the following: (a) how they navigated online dating sites; (b) how they managed the realities of their experiences in terms of successes and failures; and (c) how their lived experiences impacted their viewpoints as African-American women in online dating.

Bott and Myers (1999) highlighted the importance of recognizing and controlling for potential sources of bias that may likely arise when one researcher conducts interviews and analyzes data. If not countered, bias could compromise the integrity of the current study via selection of participants and analysis of data (Bott & Myers, 1999). In order to control for potential bias in participant selection, I selected participants based on the criteria for interviewee participation. In an effort to minimize participant bias, interviews were compared to the qualifying criteria that participants filled out on the electronic consent form as well as having a prepared strong interview protocol.

Data Analysis

Coding Strategy: An Iterative Process

The coding process was an iterative process. The initial phase of coding was considered "open coding", which is a line-by-line coding method that gathers data by developing descriptive themes and organizing those themes within categories. The first phase of the coding process also included "in vivo" coding, which is the selection of specific words and/or phrases from the interview content utilized for titling categories. Axial coding was the second phase, which examined patterns and emerging themes. The second phase was also a refining phase merging, retitling, and eliminating categories.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim using Rev.com, correlated with interview audio for accuracy, and uploaded into NVivo 11, qualitative analytical software, which enabled me to organize large amounts of data and record emerging themes from both the interview documents and demographic surveys. Queries were then run through the qualitative software. Interview statements were organized according to the descriptive code list (Appendix C) created from the stereotypes Black feminist epistemologies refer to as controlling images: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire as well as their extensions, the Matriarch and the Strong Black Woman (SBW). The code list consisted of words and ideas that spoke to the spirit of these archetypes. These included, but were not limited to:

1. Jezebel: Lascivious by nature, seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd promiscuous, predatory.
2. Mammy: Big, overweight, cantankerous, asexual dark skin, amiable, loyal, maternal, non-threatening, obedient, and submissive, deference to White authority, old.
3. Matriarch: Both mother and father to her children, dark, fat, and ugly, as acting and looking much like a man, “Welfare Queen.”
4. Sapphire: Rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing, This is the Angry Black Woman (ABW): emasculating, hand on a hip , rocking her head, mocking African American men for offenses ranging from being unemployed to sexually pursuing White women; shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation, mean-spirited and abusive. Although African American men are her primary targets, perpetual complainer, but she does not criticize to improve things; rather, she criticizes because she is unendingly bitter and wishes that

unhappiness on others.

5. Strong Black Woman (SBW): masculinize, domineering, attitudinal, bossy

Individual interviews were used to examine the themes and concepts that could or could not have emerged from participants' understanding of the phenomena.

Node Titles Created from the Interview Protocol

After the original coding list derived from the common Anti-Black archetypes, I then turned to compare that code list with the interview responses. To do so, I utilized NVivo 11 qualitative software to code ten interview questions as parent nodes in an effort to contextualize responses by interview question. Nodes in this study refer to themes, categories and subcategories in NVivo 11 software. The questions in the interview protocol were used as parent, or general themes, followed by sub themes that were coded underneath the particular question/theme.

Q01_History online dating

Q02_Self-perception attractive qualities

Q03_General perceptions by potential mate

Q04_Negative perceptions by potential mate

Q05_Positive perceptions by potential mate

Q06_Why were you perceived this way

Q07_Affected outcomes - successes failures

Q08_Fit with how you see yourself

Q09_Perceptions still a part of you

Q10_How relates to BW online dating experiences

The coding process involved fifteen interview files transcribed into Microsoft Word

documents, which were imported into NVivo 11 qualitative software. Each line of the 16 interviews was read and coded to the parent nodes, according to the interview protocol, which are shown above. I added an 11th question that served as a “wrapping up” question during the interview process, which also yielded rich data. The node “Q11_Anything else” was added to capture those responses. Multiple subcategories were created within each of the 11 nodes. Content was coded and refined within sub themes. There are 11 parent themes with 182 sub-themes represented.

The following sections were organized by research questions and the interview questions that pertain to them.

- RQ1. How do Black women perceive their dating experiences in the United States?
 - Q01_History online dating
 - Q02_Self-perception attractive qualities
 - Data analysis revealed the most compelling area was the women’s description of their “Appearance-smile.” This was coded under non-physical as it related to the women’s ability to be perceived as “welcoming” to the opposite sex. It did not relate to having a nice smile.
- RQ2. How do Black women perceive the impact of their race and gender on their experiences in online dating, and as they present themselves to the "market" of online dating?
 - Q03_General perceptions by potential mate
 - Pertained to how men viewed the interview participant in a general

sense.

- Q04_Negative perceptions by potential mate
- Q05_Positive perceptions by potential mate
- RQ3. What are the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate the potential failures, and/or possible successes delineated within the realities of their experiences of online dating?
 - Q06_Why were you perceived this way
 - Whether men perceived them in a positive light or in a negative light, interview participants were required to explore why.
 - Q07_Affected outcomes - successes failures
 - Interview participant responses unveiled whether or not the perceptions of men impacted their successes and failures in online dating.
 - Q08_Fit with how you see yourself
 - Interview participants discussed how those perceptions aligned with how they saw themselves.
 - Q09_Perceptions still a part of you
 - Q10_How relates to BW online dating experiences
 - How did interview participants view their online dating experiences in relation to other African-American women?

Reflexivity and the Researcher

As a heterosexual African American man studying the experiences of heterosexual African American women, reflexivity provided the space for me to question and confirm my

logic, thought processes and interactions with participants, while attempting to construct a model grounded in the data. It was important for me, as the researcher, “to explore [my] own experience with the phenomena, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of the personal prejudices, viewpoints and assumptions” (Merriam, 2002, p. 94). The practice of identifying personal prejudice or biased viewpoints and assumptions is called bracketing (Creswell, 2013). By acknowledging personal biases and experiences that may impact the actual phenomena being studied, the researcher may possibly be able to bracket or temporarily set aside presumptions to effectively examine the phenomenon itself.

Furthermore, ideological positions and frames of reference change over time and shift depending on situations and environments to which they are exposed. Butler-Kisber (2010) argued the individual perspectives brought to the research study need to be accounted for and addressed throughout the research process. In the case of this study, my need to construct knowledge and meaning was crucial, and therefore, I was constantly reflecting on my position, beliefs, and biases. Dowling (2008) advocated a form of reflexivity through which researchers were required to reflect epistemologically on their methodological decision-making and were challenged to critically analyze their decisions within a particular research study. With that in mind, I attempted to minimize bias by seeking to thoroughly explaining the relationship among data sources, interpretations, coding, and synthesis (Wolf, 2003) as it was important that I remained in a state of reflection and critical analysis of individual perspectives. Johnson-Bailey (1999) concluded from interactions with African-American female participants in her study, that “there were silent understandings, culture-bound phrases that did not need interpretation, and non-verbalized answers conveyed with culture-specific hand gestures and facial expressions

laced throughout the dialogue” (p. 669). Thus, reflexivity forced me to acknowledge and monitor any and all contextual dimensions that may have impacted the inquiry process.

Ponterotto (2005) noted that from a constructivist paradigm, the researcher’s values and personal experiences should be explicated but not eliminated throughout the processes of participant selection, data collection and analysis. With that in mind, I maintained a journal of observations preceding and following each interview, that included brief reflections on my own emotional reactions to the interview process and related content (Appendix D).

Trustworthiness

Using multiple data sources (i.e. verbatim transcriptions and reflexive journal) helped support my research findings. Trustworthiness was indicative of the quality and rigor of qualitative studies. “Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability are the standards for evaluating rigor in qualitative studies” (Ulin et al., 2005, p. 27), and ones I strove to meet throughout the study. I ensured dependability by maintaining accurate and up-to-date documentation with respect to research approval by the Human Subjects Committee, the recruitment criteria and process, schedule of interviews, copies of signed informed consent, revised questions to the interviews, verbatim transcripts of each interview and an audit log. To ensure confirmability, I bracketed my thoughts and opinions by using a reflexive journal. The reflexive journal allowed me to record my biases and assumptions prior to engaging in each interview. Participants were also able to confirm the accuracy of their responses by reviewing the interview transcripts through email. Doing so, not only ensured accuracy, but also created an opportunity to for participants to voice concerns, qualms and/or problems that I may have overlooked given my position as both researcher and an African-American male.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women describe the impact of their race and gender on their experiences in online dating, and how they present themselves in the cyber-matchmaking arena. Through qualitative methodology and a phenomenological framework, the study provides heterosexual single Black women with the opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions, and online dating experiences. Chapter 3 described how the study was conducted. The methods and procedures served to answer my research questions. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the steps I took to build credibility into my methods and data collection procedures and the ways I maintained trustworthiness as I analyzed the data. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are organized by research question and presents the findings of my study.

CHAPTER 4
THE UNCERTAINTY OF CHOOSING A PLATFORM
(SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL SPACE)

Overview

This chapter presents the findings collected from Research Question 1, which examined how Black women perceived their dating experiences in the United States. Participant responses split the dating market into online and off-line spaces, but simultaneously emphasized the ways in which off-line cultural dating experiences and expectations influence online dating norms. Such dating norms included expectations surrounding education and income levels and racial homophily, which was the most common in this study echoing the work by others such as Rudder (2009, 2014a, 2014b), Fiore and Donath (2005), and Lin and Lundquist (2013). Each participant's lived experience of online dating is a combination of factors based on perceptions of the dating service and quality of potential mates who utilized these dating services. The analysis in this section lends itself to a White cultural frame of courtship (Cocks, 2004, 2009; D'emilio & Freedman, 1988), as participants never mentioned deviating from the dominant dating norms or the norms promoted on the site, thereby participating in Harris-Perry's crooked room.

In this study, I examined online dating sites as one of many racialized spaces on the Internet. Dating digitally is a socio-technological extension of the crooked room; it is a social medium that blends cultural norms and human agency with the technological infrastructure of the Internet (Boyd, 2011; Nakamura, 2008, 2014; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). The first research question (RQ1), "How do Black women perceive their dating experiences in the United States?" examines the online dating market through the eyes and experiences of African-

American women. I set out to learn why the women in this study chose online dating and what their perceptions were of the platforms to which they entrusted their dating lives. The first question coded Q01 pertains to participants' history with online dating. Sixteen participants and their responses were broken down into frequencies categorized by theme and sub theme, which are further filtered by dating platform (mobile application and/or website). Each participant had experiences with online dating platforms and all 16 participants discussed their dating criteria and experiences. Analyzing the data on a deeper level allowed other sub themes to emerge, such as the women's use of dating websites and mobile dating applications. All 16 participants had utilized dating websites in the past, and 11 out of 16 utilized mobile dating applications. Eight out of 11 participants used Tinder, which is a mobile dating application.

During the coding process the categories "visual sites in general," "Smash.com," and the "Steve Harvey" site are metonyms used by participants to describe the well-known sites, Match.com and InterActiveCorp's (IAC) Steve Harvey sponsored online dating site, Delightful.com. One participant's response was coded in the "visual sites in general" theme because she discussed sites and applications such as Tinder and SoulSwipe where technological features and overall user interface places a heavy premium on profile pictures and less on the written sections of a dating profile such as the "about me" summary or bio.

This chapter is divided into two sections, which align with the categories that emerged from the coding process. The first section, Mobile Applications, explores participants' perceptions of certain applications and how this group of Black women viewed conventional dating applications versus niche applications. With the data collected from participant interviews, I used the research findings to explore the relationship between mobile dating applications and the factors that influenced the women in this study to utilize certain dating

applications instead of others. This section devotes careful attention to the distinctions participants drew between a site's reputation and personal experience as well as those differences that participants perceived to exist between paid and free sites.

The second section, Web-based Dating Options, examines participants' perceptions of dating sites and how they viewed their time spent on those sites to explain the experiences participants had when using conventional online dating sites versus those had when using niche sites. To do so, this section describes the competing advertising claims made by sites such as Match.com, eHarmony, and BlackPeopleMeet.com to explore how the women in this study navigated their own experiences in relation to the expectations such advertising created.

Both sections discuss different aspects of Harris-Perry's crooked room that Black women who participated in online dating must navigate. In doing so, this chapter maps the socio-technological space that is shaped by commercials and other forms of advertising as well as films and other types of mass-media while emphasizing the phenomenological aspect of this study to underscore the lived experiences of participants.

Category: Mobile Applications

Theme: Tinder

Tinder was the most commonly used mobile dating application among participants. In the online dating community as a whole (online and offline), Tinder is viewed as a mobile application utilized by people interested in hook-ups (encounters centered on casual sex) (Deutsch, 2014; King, 2013; Nick Watt, 2014; Roberts, 2013; Ryan, 2013; Stafford, 2014). While Tinder was the most commonly utilized mobile dating application, participants who used it experienced various outcomes, much like they had when using other dating applications. Some women like Ella (30, never married) agreed that Tinder was better suited for superficial

encounters: “I tried Tinder but um, I don’t know it’s, it’s very very surface” (Interview Participant, 4/6/2016). Despite Tinder’s hook-up reputation, “Tinder is all the buzz” according to Lailah (36, widow). Other women in this study have overcome their own hesitancy with “hook-up apps” including Tanya (32, never married), who recently relocated from Los Angeles to Texas, and liked Tinder. She looked past its hook-up reputation, explaining:

I didn’t get that vibe from a lot of the people there were like just trying to have sex. It was more or less just like hey, this just seems like another platform. I may be able to hang out and meet some new people. (Participant Interview, 4/18/2016)

Tanya’s recent relocation played a part in how she approached the “hook-up” app because she utilized Tinder as a tool to learn about her new city. Tinder, in Tanya’s case, was just another avenue to meet people—a networking tool more than a dating tool.

User experience varied, and to some participants the reputation of Tinder held true while others saw the app as just another dating tool among many. Sydney (32, never married) described how “hook-up” applications can be hit or miss:

I’ve heard of like Plenty of Fish and Tinder being like the hookup apps where people will just want to find people to have sex with um, but then again I’ve heard of people being in like 2, 3 year relationships with somebody they met from Tinder, or Plenty of Fish so I, it’s weird, it’s like a hit or miss kinda thing. (Participant Interview, 4/8/2016)

Sydney, like Tanya, was aware of Tinder’s reputation and therefore approached it and other hookup apps with a cautious but open mind that allowed her to utilize the application without getting bogged down in its reputation. Moreover, Sydney viewed Tinder as an online dating application where users had the same potential of finding serious relationships as those applications without Tinder’s negative reputation.

By discussing their histories with dating apps, the women created a narrative comprised of diverse experiences. Often Black women are treated as a homogenous group, especially during marketing campaigns (see Chapter 2). However, the responses these women gave to RQ1 showed that regardless of the reputation of the application, this heterogeneous group of Black women experienced the dating platform differently from each other. Ella's dating experience revealed that Tinder was indeed an unsatisfying experience due to the number of very surface level encounters. Lailah, on the other hand, echoed the sentiments of today's dating community showing that Tinder's popularity has permeated both the social circles and dating arenas of Black women, while also emphasizing that Black women in this study were open to utilizing applications that are not niche dating applications. Tanya and Sydney offered reasons that explained why a hookup site should not be overlooked. Sydney offered examples that ran counter to the reputation of hook up applications while Tanya's relaxed approach of looking to meet new people was sufficient for a single, Black woman who had just relocated to a new to a city.

Theme: Other Online Dating Applications

When signing up for this study, the majority of women revealed that they preferred conventional mobile dating applications over niche dating applications. Conventional dating applications included: Tinder (7), Bumble (3), Tagged (1), and Coffee Meets Bagel (1); niche dating applications included: SoulSwipe (3), Meld (1), and BAE (1). The participants' dating experiences varied across the different mobile dating applications. Their interview responses reflected the Google Forms survey responses. The three demographically targeted mobile dating applications that placed race at the forefront emerged as the most popular niche dating applications: BAE (2), Meld (2), and SoulSwipe (2). Despite the fact that niche applications

were consistent between the demographic survey and the interviews, the demographically-targeted websites and free websites and applications were the least favored dating tools for this group of women for a number reasons.

In the online dating community, there is a general consensus that paid sites and applications are better than free sites and applications. Users believe that the price of a subscription wards off people who are not seriously looking for love. Meld, both a freemium and niche-dating application, showed the most promise among the niche applications. Meld pulls members from the social media platform LinkedIn, which has become increasingly popular with businesses, corporations, and financial institutions as they utilize LinkedIn to verify work history. Thus, while people can use Meld for free, the site's connection with LinkedIn helps to mitigate any concerns about a dating pool drawn from non-paying users. Meld is viewed as a dating application for Black professionals because it populates profiles or its dating pool by connecting LinkedIn users, essentially making it an online space where Black professionals with a LinkedIn profile can meet. In the following excerpts participants used the term site, often referring to both sites and applications.

Maya (33, never married) spoke positively of Meld but negatively of free sites overall, saying:

Okay, so, with, like, the free sites, although Meld is free, but outside of Meld, um, with the free site it tends to have more extreme blue collar, extreme, like ... Rough around the edges will be on that site. Like, if, it wouldn't be, odd. If those are the people that, like, that had baby mamas and live in the basement. I don't know how to describe it. Like, they tend to be on all those, like, more so than the paying sites. (Interview Participants, 4/5/2016)

Maya also stated that paid platforms generate dating pools consisting of professionals and/or other types of people who are financially stable, which is paradoxical because she utilized the free features of Meld, the same free features she previously said attracted the wrong type of mate. Maya identifies as a college-educated (her degree is in mathematics) professional with a salary between \$50,000-75,000; she was attracted to Meld because of its promotion of Black professionals. Like the other women in the study, Maya would like someone to help her grow both emotionally and financially. She is not interested in men who may not have been formally educated or those who earn a modest living, the “extreme blue-collar” (Interview Participant, 4/5/2016). Maya, and women like her, are important to this study because they reveal some of the nuances that derive from the matrices of race, gender, and class that essentially shape relationships both on and off-line.

Echoing Maya’s sentiments, Sydney questioned the quality of BAE, another free demographically-targeted application. She said: “I don’t wanna say lower quality but it feels more of like, just like people are playing around on there, just for fun kinda thing not like anyone looking for something serious” (Interview Participants, 4/8/2016).

According to Khloe (33, never married), niche sites like SoulSwipe seem to be an extension of social media and had more to do with promoting one’s pseudo socialite status and social visibility than with romantic pursuits. She explained:

Then when you use the cheap sites like Plenty of Fish or the free sites, or even, um, one I’m using now, SoulSwipe, I find a lot of people just, especially SoulSwipe, where it seems like people are just wanting to be seen. (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

The majority of women explained that their lack of activity on demographically targeted sites, also referred to in the dating community as “Black apps,” stemmed from either the

oversaturation of unprofessional men or continual encounters with non-monogamous men. The overall sentiment regarding niche dating apps that targeted Blacks was that for the most part the people using those apps were not serious dating candidates. That the sites were free only exacerbated the perceived problems. These platforms were just extensions of social media where singles and the not-so-single perused profiles.

Each dating platform, whether mobile or website, takes on its own personality and cultural norms specific to that platform. This was evident among research participants. Tinder was the most popular mobile application among research participants. Despite Tinder's reputation as a hook-up application, the participants had varying experiences using the site. There have been a number of news and magazine articles that described Tinder as a superficial application focused primarily on subscribers' appearances in images; conversely, there have been subscribers who have found love on Tinder. This dichotomy was also true for the women in the study: some women saw the superficiality in Tinder while others had friends who found love on Tinder, or utilized Tinder themselves and had fruitful dating experiences.

Niche and free dating applications were the least favored among research participants. Women in the study described these dating apps as an extension of social networks, but not in a positive light. Daters who used these niche and free apps did not appear to be seriously looking for long-term love. In some instances, niche dating sites seemed to consistently produce unappealing matches. Participants classified a match as unappealing due to a lack of decorum in messages, appearance in images, and overall attitude towards dating exclusively. Free sites and apps were also negatively viewed by this group of women. Research participants' idea of free sites coincided with the general dating community's, which holds the common assumption that paid sites are better because subscribers have to invest more than just their time thereby

exhibiting a level of seriousness when engaging potential mates online. Meld was the only free and niche dating application that defied the negative stigma. This more positive perception relied on the platform's ability to pull LinkedIn profiles to populate dating options for Meld subscribers. Similar to the way participants correlated free sites with levels of seriousness, the image of Meld was based on a perceived correlation between LinkedIn's professional community and the quality potential suitors.

Category: Website-Based Dating Options

Similar to the conventional applications, the conventional dating websites were more popular than the niche websites. Conventional websites were Match (12), OkCupid (8), eHarmony (5), and Plenty of Fish (5). BlackPeopleMeet (BPM) (7) was the only niche website mentioned by participants. Facebook (2), which is neither a conventional dating website nor niche website, was another dating platform represented in the Google Forms document. When analyzing dating experiences regarding websites, all 16 of the participants engaged potential mates via an online dating website. The top sites that emerged from the participant responses were: BlackPeopleMeet.com (7), eHarmony.com (9), Match.com (13), and Plenty of Fish (10).

Theme: Match.com (Match)

Thirteen of the participants used Match.com, making it the most popular dating website among the sample group. Match.com was a site that most of these women were introduced to whether they were entering the dating market out of curiosity or seriously looking for a mate.

Nina (34, met husband on Match.com) explained her use of the site, saying:

And, you know, the-the idea around that was, um, because it was the most popular based on my research ... and I wanted to find a platform where people paid for it, just because I

felt like it would filter out some of those that weren't as serious. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016).

When the participants in this study mentioned having a better online dating experience on paid sites they were often referring to Match.com, and in a few instances, eHarmony. Rose (34, never married) said, "So I, when I joined Match, um, I was like, 'Okay, you know, this is the real deal right here'" (Interview Participant, 4/21/2016).

Despite the pay structure, Match.com, like other dating sites, is often frequented by serial daters and dishonest men. Angela (48, never married) discussed a negative interaction that she had on the site:

Um, with Match I felt like everybody was really ... I don't know. They were very forward and very direct. It was very much about a lot of sexual innuendo. And one guy I actually befriended and he was the one that told me, 'Yeah. You do realize this is Smash.com.' (laughs) (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Angela's experience was unique because it focused on a specific encounter, while many of the other participants who utilized Match, complained that the site did not have the type of Black men that they were looking for.

Nina had to adapt to the many types of people in Match.com's dating platform. One type of person was the chronic dater who seemed to have been using dating sites for long periods of time. Nina had used the website previously; however, she altered the way she communicated during her second attempt using Match.com. She approached it seriously and worked harder to establish meaningful connections rather than being too lackadaisical to avoid feeling as if she was wasting her time on the dating platform. She said,

I mean ... the guys ranged from, you know, those that were kinda chronic daters, you can tell. They were like, on Match, and ... they'd been on it for years ... and they've gone out on, you know, 20 ... 50 dates, and you know, I would always ask that question ... just to kinda get an idea of, you know, what type of person they were, and then you'll get, you know, the answers of, you know, 'I just never found that right person.' Um, which kinda you can tell that they were using it more as a hook-up than truly having a vested interest in finding a life partner. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Nina further explained her altered approach: "So that's when I signed on again ... um, and I tried it for a three-month period, I did a three-month trial. And within that three-month trial is where I found my now husband" (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016). Because she gave herself a three-month window to find a suitable mate, Nina's altered approach emphasized discerning which men were serious candidates looking for long-term relationships.

The women in this study, like many other online daters, felt that paid sites did a better job of weeding out dishonest men. Like everything else in society, different types of people have expendable income, which also determines whether or not subscribers are willing to participate in one site over another. This information continues to build on RQ1 and shows that Black women are a heterogeneous group with various needs in today's dating market.

Theme: eHarmony

Following Match, eHarmony was the next most popular site among participants (9). The findings revealed that when it came to paid sites, the women chose Match.com over eHarmony. One apparent reason for choosing Match.com over eHarmony was the types of men the women encountered on eHarmony. According to Desirée (31, divorced), "Uh, there was more cornballs

so to speak on like eHarmony” (Interview Participant, 4/12/2016). Tanya described her eHarmony experience:

Uh, I think eHarmony had a sense of, like, desperation in the people that they matched me with. It was like, we’re only in our late ... early 20s and people are, like, ‘I’m just looking for love and marriage and this does seem to be right’ and it’s like, well, where does all this desperation come from? (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Both Desirée, a 31-year-old divorcée, and Tanya, a single 32-year-old relocating to a new city, were looking to enjoy the courtship process without the added pressure of marriage. Their responses are indicative of eHarmony’s marketing campaign as the site stresses lifelong love in its commercials, making it no surprise that potential suitors on eHarmony lead with their intensions of matrimony. In a 2013 ad campaign titled, “National eHarmony Commercial—Bridesmaid” (2013), a bridesmaid complains to the founder of eHarmony about being in numerous weddings while also being a member of 14 different dating sites. The founder asked if one of those sites was eHarmony? The bridesmaid responded, “I don't have time for all the eHarmony questions.” The founder then replied, “Well do you want fast or forever?” This advertisement is indicative of eHarmony’s entire marketing campaign and clearly demonstrates that the dating site not only implies but aggressively markets long-term relationships and marriage on their platform.

In this instance, the dichotomy discussed by the participants like Tanya and Desirée also touched on the boundaries and constraints of online dating sites as crooked spaces. Human agency is both enabled and constrained by ideologies of race, class, and gender (Mosco, 2009). Online dating is a socio-technological space susceptible to the agency and structuration process

(Fuchs, 2002, 2003; Giddens, 1986, 1995, 2003); culture and society impacts an individual's agency, while an individual's agency simultaneously affects culture and society.

The socio-technological space of digital dating impacts human agency via the dating sites' advertisements, which utilize predominantly White couples to promote the space, as in the examples of conventional sites like eHarmony and Match. eHarmony uses predominantly White actors to emphasize marriage, and Match uses White couples to emphasize first dates.

Advertisements promote the dating space to a predominantly White audience, and emphasize marriage while doing so. In combination with the design of the sites (electronic flirting, picture rating systems, rating matches, attribute filtering, message responses, etc.) the technological space impacts social interactions, especially if the user is a minority because the advertisements implicitly equate marriage with Whiteness.

Advertisements attract users by making them feel included, but the women in this study described an expectation imbalance that at times left them uncomfortable. In some cases, participants described feeling pressured by Black suitors who they encountered because these men heavily emphasized marriage. There are a number of potential reasons why participants in this study felt pressure when using conventional sites like Match.com and eHarmony that emphasized marriage, including the low success rate for Blacks in a predominantly White dating space and personal preferences for more casual relationships, at least at first. The participants in this study described a fight for balance.

Conventional sites appear to have fewer Black people on them with active profiles than White people; moreover, the participants in this study who did use conventional sites were not interested in dating White men. This presents a simple numbers problem. Users who are willing to date White people have higher numbers to choose from, which decreases the pressure to

immediately settle into a long-term relationship bound for marriage because suitors can quickly move onto the next potential mate if their expectations are not met. Black women in this study, however, often did not feel like they had such a luxury.

The love-hate relationship these women developed when using conventional dating sites like Match.com and eHarmony was two-fold: they needed to accept that eHarmony and Match.com could be inclusive, productive spaces, but were consistently disappointed that the men rushed to marriage. Participants described eHarmony as being populated with desperate cornballs, which made finding equilibrium in the crooked room of conventional dating sites difficult.

When considering these women's dating experiences, and others like them, there is an apparent clash between their life needs in that moment and the culture of the dating site. The discontent is obvious with Desirée and Tanya, as both women were willing to take the dating process slow on a site such as eHarmony, but potential suitors more than likely had bought into the site's marketing of long-term relationships and marriage.

eHarmony commercials have also referenced and poked fun at their matching process and the large number of questions they ask their subscribers to answer during their screening process, which is a deterrent for some people. Gwynn (39, never married) shared her opinion about the inconvenience of having to answer so many questions before being able to engage with other subscribers:

Because like I said you don't want to have too many questions. I think, I can't remember what site I used one time. It might've been eHarmony. But they had a whole series of questions that, you know ... Just the process to get to a, you know, see who your matches were, you know, took like a day and a half. (Interview Participant, 4/11/2016)

A big part of online dating is the process of filling out profile information, which typically includes uploading photos and answering a questionnaire of some sort that populates an online dating profile, as opposed to mobile dating applications that often pull from social media sites like Facebook or LinkedIn to populate the profiles. For dating sites such as Match.com, questionnaires are the common tool used to populate dating profiles. eHarmony prides itself on its questionnaire of 430+ questions, and OkCupid has over 1000 questions on its questionnaire. The difference between eHarmony and OkCupid is that on eHarmony a subscriber cannot proceed to use the platform without answering all of the questions, whereas on OkCupid, a subscriber can answer as they go. eHarmony clearly takes its questionnaire and dating platform seriously, but for some daters the number of mandatory questions proves to be a deterrent. Looking at the overall experiences of these women, it became apparent that each site has its own cultural norms and in some cases deterrents, that influence site traffic and type of subscribers joining the sites.

Theme: Plenty of Fish (POF)

Perceptions of Plenty of Fish (POF) also varied among the participants. Although some of the women, such as Desirée, appreciated the options presented on Plenty of Fish, explaining, “OkCupid and Plenty of Fish are my favorite because I felt like the diversity was the biggest on those two sites,” a number of women completely disregarded the dating platform (Interview Participant, 4/12/2016). Women with past experience using other dating sites and applications utilized sites like POF in their downtime. For Maya, POF was simply a last resort as she had no intention of dating anyone from the platform. She explained::

In a different website, too, so. [laughs] Like there's some sites, like, if I'm feeling down, I know I can go on like POF and have an instant, instant confidence boost. So, that's all I

use POF for. I know that sounds terrible to say out loud but...That's all POF is for, a confidence boost. I'm never, probably ever, going to take anybody seriously off of there.

(Interview Participant, 4/5/2016)

Similar to BPM, the majority of the women utilize POF's free features, but participants saw the dating pool as low class and did not take it seriously. Of all the sites, POF seemed to be used strictly for window-shopping and receiving compliments.

Further, participants seemed to have a love/hate relationship with POF. Despite not taking the site seriously, they either kept their pages up and/or continued to have the application on their phones. Rose offered insight into this dichotomy, explaining, "I guess I kept going back to Plenty of Fish because it's free. And that's why it's just been allowed to kind of linger in the background, uh, for a long time" (Interview Participant, 4/21/2016). Hence, based on the participants' responses, that POF was free seemed to save the platform from complete dismissal.

The most popular demographically-targeted dating website was BlackPeopleMeet.com. Participants utilized it hoping that it would provide a higher concentration of Black male candidates to choose from; however, their responses reflected a level of indifference and discouragement. The responses of these women yielded two major issues concerning BlackPeopleMeet and why they do not take the platform seriously. The first issue, as discussed by Angela (48, never married), was the lack of quality matches, including those that did not fit the women's age preferences. She explained: "With the BlackPeopleMeet, it just felt much younger to me" (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016). The second issue, due to the fact that Black singles are actively searching for online dating markets that include viable candidates, was that subscribers were bumping into the same Black people across different dating platforms. Such a

realization prompted Laura (37, never married, with children) to stick with Tagged instead. She said:

Nine times out of ten, at least say, if I have a friends list, a friends list of a hundred, I'll say 75 people are on my BlackPeopleMeet and the same 75 people are on my Tagged list. You know what I mean? So, there's only like a 25% difference and if that's the case, that's not enough for me to be trying to bounce around to different websites so, stick with one, I stick with one and I'm comfortable with that. You know? (Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

Commercials and promotional material are vital for attracting singles to online platforms. The commercials put forth for the conventional and more popular sites such as Match and eHarmony, promoted first dates and matching with the right person. BlackPeopleMeet commercials originally promoted more sexualized imagery and seductive clips to define the site, and as a result, it was not taken seriously despite its popularity. More recently, the commercials for BlackPeopleMeet have focused on couples grappling with the fleeting stigma of falling in love with someone who they met on an online dating site. Marketing reflects the changes in popular culture; as the Zeitgeist of the dating culture begins to change, marketing towards singles also shifts, but what remains is a clear distinction between the marketing of conventional and niche dating sites. Unfortunately, unlike Tinder's hook-up reputation, BlackPeopleMeet has not been able to escape its bad reputation, at least for the Black women in this study. As previously discussed, Angela felt like BlackPeopleMeet's dating pool was too young and Laura did not feel BlackPeopleMeet's offerings made it worthy of leaving Tagged.

Match.com was the most popular conventional dating website among participants; while BlackPeopleMeet (BPM) was the most popular niche dating site. BPM was the most popular

niche dating site due to the lack of options for Black singles looking for other Black singles. The women in the study participated on BlackPeopleMeet.com but did not take the platform seriously because the quality of men that they encountered and the duplication of the same prospects from different dating platforms discouraged them from engaging the dating site as a serious option. PlentyOfFish (POF) was another negatively reviewed site. Interviews revealed that the women viewed men on POF as blue collar, low class, and less educated. Participants did, however, use POF when they wanted a confidence boost. Women left PlentyOfFish on their devices because it was free, and the women in this study had access to all of the features that they needed on the free version. Match.com was the most popular conventional dating site among this group of women, partly because they were able to take advantage of promotions and free trials. Despite Match.com's large dating market, it was too diverse for some of the participants. Diversity in this instance provided a large number of other races but not enough datable Black men for this group of women. All of the participants were single, with the exception of Nina, who had recently married after meeting her husband on Match.com.

This study consisted of professional Black women. Black professional communities are small, and individuals in Black professional networks often bump into familiar faces across dating platforms. Responses to RQ1 identified that part of the discontent women expressed stemmed from seeing the same faces on different platforms. At that point, online dating becomes an extension of social media where people begin to simply window shop and familiarize themselves with people who they have no intention of dating. Boredom and other reasons for discontent caused subscribers to passively engage dating sites and applications; as a result, subscribers' excitement about seeking a potential mate via digital courtship decreased,

becoming a past time. Further, online dating services were repurposed tools to casually observe other singles who were online dating and nothing more.

Exploring how Black women perceived their dating experiences in the United States gradually revealed the various ways race and class has become a sorting mechanism for these women engaging in different online dating platforms. There is almost a tiered experience that is influenced by subscribers' expectations, the way dating firms define their dating platforms, and the *quality* of members participating on these separate sites or apps. Each site operates differently and provides its own multiplex of filtered preferences centered on race, gendered interactions, and perceptions of subscribers' class level. Regardless of participants' demographic background, their experiences varied across platforms. Niche and free dating platforms were viewed least favorably by the majority of the women in this study; however, a small number of women enjoyed them. The idea of free implied two related but distinct things: (1) how this group of women viewed free sites/apps as a platform, and (2) how the dating community as a whole interpreted these sites/apps as a dating space. Pay structure or platform subscription was another variable that impacted whether or not women chose to participate; the women sampled for this study correlated price and the dating sites' target audience—often derived from marketing campaigns—directly with the type of men they thought they could meet online.

Summary

Despite the various reasons why these women joined dating sites and used mobile applications, a consensus emerged: dating digitally has not been and may never be a beneficial alternative to traditional, off-line dating for this demographic. Participants discussed dating sites and apps with a casualness that implied a level of boredom and diminished interest. What initially seemed fun and intriguing changed once participants experienced trouble finding men

who met their criteria, which included education, income, and other markers of class such as the ability to travel and own a home. Participants joined conventional sites and dating applications hoping to embark on the kinds of new dating adventures promised in promotional materials. However, this sample of professional Black women's responses illuminate many of the issues such women face in today's dating market. Racial homophily is a prevalent sorting mechanism for female online daters across racial lines, but Black women cannot escape the challenges of a constantly changing dating landscape and reorganization of the Black middle class family.

Recent reports indicate that Black women are the most educated group in America (Fletcher, 2012), which should make Black women a sought-after demographic. Yet, participants expressed frustration over their inability to find high-quality men, sentiments that echo other reports explaining that Black men are systemically fettered by violence and America's prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2012). Understanding such a disparity requires further research to explain the achievement gap (Snyder & Dillow, 2013) between Black men and Black women and its impact on the dating experiences of professional Black women in the 21st century. To be clear, Black men are available on online dating sites, but participants complained about the low numbers and lack of variety from which to choose. This finding is not to disparage or to continue the myth of Black men either not wanting or being incapable of monogamous love, but serves to explain one of the many possibilities why the women in this study struggled to find men with whom they wanted to build a future.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of Research Question 2. The chapter explores the love-hate relationship participants experienced while dating online and introduces another angle of Harris-Perry's crooked room: mass-mediated archetypes.

CHAPTER 5

LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP: SELF-PRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION BY POTENTIAL MATES

Overview

Online dating sites and mobile applications are socio-technological mediums that hinge on intimacy and attractiveness (see Chapter 4). Thus, the socio-technological space of online dating is, itself, an angle of the crooked room. Digital courtship is an extension of today's media landscape where subscribers' dating practices utilize race as a sorting mechanism, which illuminates the ways in which societal ills and perceptions permeate technological spaces. This chapter presents another major component of the crooked room by discussing the impact of the mass mediated archetypes that have become hegemonic perceptual frames of Black women. Research Question 2 asked "How do Black women perceive the impact of their race and gender on their experiences in online dating, and as they present themselves to the 'market' of online dating?" The analysis presented in this chapter illustrates the ways that perceptual frames constrain Black women's authentic self by exploring how today's media landscape functions as a crooked room.

Online dating heavily relies on first impressions and existing perceptual frames that require a strong sense of self and a level of maturity so users do not succumb to the barrage of inaccurate perceptions. The persistence of angles in the crooked room or the unceasing reproduction of warped reflections challenging the authenticity of Black womanhood permeates the online dating space. Research Question 2 builds on Black feminist epistemologies that articulate the wide experiences of Black womanhood, various self-definitions and contextual understandings of self-value, and the constant struggle to preserve their authentic selves.

This chapter is divided into four sections drawn from the coding process. The first section, Self-Presentation: Non-Physical Attributes, explores participants' perceptions on the qualities they felt made them attractive to men online, which offered insight into the motivations behind certain dating strategies participants exercised. .

Section two, Self-Presentation: Physical Appearance, examines perception in relation to this group of women's physical bodies. Physical attributes are one of the main sorting mechanisms in online dating platforms, and in this section, women discuss not fitting neatly into the default attributes provided in the various platforms. The responses given by this group of women articulated the love-hate relationship they had with online dating by touching on their efforts to sustain their own levels of self-definition and authenticity in the face of the mass-mediated archetypes and how they influence the behaviors and expectations of the women themselves and their partners.

The third section, Stereotypes, introduces inter-racial and intra-racial issues to discuss how Black women are subjected to perceptual frames from both inside and outside of the Black community. Perceptual frames, essentialism, and mass mediated archetypes create dating climates that are frustrating and exhausting. Instead of focusing on common stereotypes, this section highlights the ways in which hegemonic perceptions of Black women have permeated the online dating space, which in turn creates a negative dating experience.

Negative Perceptions by Potential Mates, the fourth section, describes some of the unique perception-based anxieties that negatively impact online dating, such as reentering the dating market as a young widowed mother of three, the appropriate timing to bring up spirituality and the complexities of embracing one's own multiracial identity while seeking men who culturally

identify as Black. This section offers insight on intra-racial issues that still exist and impact Black women trying to find love online.

This chapter explores the different issues that complicate online dating for Black women. Participants were aware of their positions in society and only one participant explicitly noted anti-Black archetypes; however, the matrices of social constraints—race, class, education, and religion—while a part of the archetypes, ultimately exceeded them. In doing so, participants' responses illuminated other complexities of dating online as Black women, which indicated a high level of reflexivity and self-awareness of both their own personal attributes and the way others may perceive them.

Category: Self- Presentation-Nonphysical Attributes

Research question two interrogated the ways in which Black women perceived the impact of their race and gender on their experiences in online dating as they presented themselves in the online dating market. Participants were asked how men perceived them online. The themes that emerged were a byproduct of the women in the study understanding themselves and how the men they interacted with online perceived them. Further, the categories and themes I discuss below illustrate how these women negotiated both their authentic selves and men's perception of them. A number of nonphysical attributes contributed to participants' view of themselves as attractive to other mates. When considering why men found them attractive the women shared that they possessed qualities such as being adventurous, down to earth, independent, and stable. While a total of 15 themes emerged, independence and stability as well as honesty and transparency were the most prominent.

The women in this study were not shy about what they felt made them attractive to the opposite sex. Although attractiveness usually pertains to physical appearance, attractiveness and

appearance is coded under non-physical because it pertains to the women's attitudes towards projecting a positive personality. The women sampled explained that when men viewed their profiles they saw congenial women. In reference to their appearances, the respondents chose to highlight their smiles, which operated as physical markers of their outgoing personalities, instead of emphasizing their lips or mouths as sexual tools to allure men. Such behavior runs counter to the Jezebel archetype that paints Black women as seductive and naturally lascivious. For the majority of the respondents, the sentiment I coded as "attractiveness" included—foremost—congenial and welcoming profiles; the physical was second and played a bigger role when discussing body type.

Ella (30, never married) described the type of self-promotion that is required in online dating arenas saying, "I think the most qualities, the biggest quality you'd want to show was that you were attractive" (Interview Participant, 4/6/2016). Many other women shared similar responses. Desirée stated, "I think I'm fairly good-looking" (Interview Participant, 4/12/2016). Attractiveness—looking, feeling, and expressing it—was a key theme because these women felt like they were physically appealing to the opposite sex, so the expectation of attractiveness was anticipated and accommodated for. Sydney said:

I think I'm pretty attractive so (laughs) um, I know that like the number one thing for men when they're online dating is looking at your pictures um, so I always thought, I've always felt like, 'Oh, I have decent lookin pictures,' so and that's pretty much it.

(Interview Participant, 4/8/2016)

Similar to offline impression management strategies, online dating self-presentation strategies rely on verbal and non-verbal cues (Walther, 2005, 2007). These women were well aware of the asynchronous nature of digital courtship, the features and tools of each platform,

along with their limitations. Participants were comfortable with the way they looked and utilized images to their advantage. The women in this study were educated, tech savvy professionals. Therefore, curating an image was not an issue. Although the women appeared to be genuine in their efforts, they also acknowledged that the motivation behind their efforts was to present an ideal self that would be attractive to the opposite sex. Curated profiles that emphasized the women's personalities and feminine attributes were emphasized over tropes characterizing Black women as unattractive Mammies or supportive and willing domestic workers. The women in this study also worked hard to promote a sense of self that was not hypersexualized, which could indicate a level of awareness of how their self-presentation strategy would be received. All of these women participated in self-advertising that commodified certain attributes or aspects of themselves, according to what they believed was most attractive. The majority of participants did not portray themselves as flirty or overly sexual, thereby curating dating profiles to target a specific audience in ways that are reminiscent of how a marketing company utilizes stereotypes to make products more appealing to different target groups (Dyer, 2008). For participants, employing impression management strategies was like walking a tightrope. These women wanted to accentuate their femininity and did so by creating profiles that were stereotypically feminine and approachable; however, participants needed to downplay their sexuality and minimize images or statements that could be misconstrued as hypersexual in the attempt to avoid attracting unwanted attention.

Theme: Independence

Scholars who describe the lived experiences of Black women often discuss the complicated balance they have to strike between being independent and being traditionally feminine. Such scholars argue that the balance emerged as a result of competition, first during

the Antebellum era alongside men as slaves and more recently in professional settings for the sake of their families (Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Consequently, Black women have developed a unique definition of sexual independence that exploring online courtship allows us to confront. Women's participation in online dating sites includes a long history contesting dominant notions of women "seeking" romance (Alev, Tao, & James, 2015; Cocks, 2009; D'emilio & Freedman, 1988). Black women's independence continues to be a point of contestation, where both gender and race construct a unique lived experience that persists in the 21st century phenomena of online dating.

During the interviews, the participants exuded a level of confidence that indicated that they were comfortable with their independence. For the respondents, independence was defined by their resilience in American society, in the professional world, and in life in general. Sydney described herself as independent saying, "You know independent in a sense that I kinda had my own place, my own you know, car, a decent job" (Participant Interview, 4/8/2016).

Independence was a shared sentiment amongst most of the women in the study, a confirmation of their accomplishments and a testament to overcoming various types of adversity while maintaining the identity of successful Black women in America; however, being independent did not mean that they did not want to be in an intimate relationship with a Black man. Rose explained the dichotomy thusly:

I do put on, on my page on my profile about, you know, like they can respect my independence, but, you know, not saying not waving the flag like, 'Yeah I don't need a man,' because that's definitely not what I'm trying to portray. Um, but, you know, that I can hold my own. (Participant Interview, 4/21/2016)

There is a consistent juxtaposition centered on promoting independence and perceived independence. Promoting their capabilities is necessary and a marketable quality among this group of professional women. However, promoting autonomy as a marketable trait while not conveying so much independence that men feel like they are not needed is a delicate self-presentation balancing act.

Socio-economic structural change continues to challenge traditional gender roles, especially in the Black community, where the achievement gap complicates the traditionally male role of provider and breadwinner. The U.S. Department of Education reported that Black women are now the most educated group in the U.S., a statistic reflected in the study participants (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). One of the consistent underlying themes among interview participants, which also influenced other themes, was these women's conscious portrayals of their levels of stability and the way men perceived such presentations of stability and independence. By minimizing or reframing their accomplishments and capabilities, participants confronted American society's cultural perception of Black women as attitudinal and emasculating—a Sapphire. Participants promoted themselves as individuals willing and capable of being intimate with the opposite sex, and disinterested in being confrontational or combative with men. Despite the variations in their online dating experiences, the majority of Black women in the study alluded to some level of independence and or stability, which indicates that these women continue a century old tradition of balancing racially gendered expectations with maintaining their femininity. Collins (2005), Harris-Perry (2015), and Jones & Shorter-Gooden (2003) referenced such a phenomenon, referring to the balancing act as a burden because it simultaneously asks Black women to secure stability for themselves and their families without appearing stereotypically masculine.

This balancing act is a precarious situation because “[A] delicate dance is required of women to balance what is viewed in many African American communities as the need to elevate and honor manhood (especially those who have committed to families) while carrying out necessary obligations and tasks” (Burton & Tucker, 2009, p. 142). Participants’ responses and perceptions made of independence and stability almost synonymous. The women wanted to portray that they were capable of taking care of a household and thus that they would make great partners due to their professions, incomes, and internal strengths. This aligns with Black feminist scholars’ contestation of racial archetypes that depict Black women as strong women incapable of functioning in loving relationships with a male companion (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1992, 2005). The majority of participants were accomplished in their own right with professions, incomes, and high levels of educational achievement. The emphasis on independence and stability is present also in the theme labeled personal, which described attractive qualities such as being employed, educated, not having children, and having a professional career.

Theme: Honesty and Transparency

A common problem in the online dating community is deceptive profiles. Research participants referred to honesty and transparency when discussing their levels of disclosure to men online. The women in the study were careful about the information that they chose to share, both in writing and images. They were conscious of their body images and cropped pictures to accentuate certain looks or to shift the focus to certain areas. In terms of personality, the women in the study tried different approaches when writing their profile summaries and bios. Cultivating an honest and transparent profile was a constant process that often required the

women to get help from their girlfriends who they relied on to critique their profiles. Angela admitted,

The last time I used Match was actually last year. And there was, there were better results, but admittedly I worked with a friend of mine who helped me write my profile in such a way that I think that got me better results. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Online dating profiles were purposefully curated by women who exhibited a high level of self-awareness; despite curating their images, the women still tried to maintain a high level of honesty and transparency both in images as well as in their written bios.

The search for honesty and transparency, a common theme in many online dating studies, was at the heart of all of the women's responses. Self-disclosure was a self-presentation strategy that allowed participants to curate their online dating personas to obtain maximum results. Nina, who found her husband on Match.com, knowingly altered her self-presentation during her second attempt at online dating. In response to a question about her strategy, Nina explained,

So they really, you know, everybody likes to go to the movies, so what makes you different? What stands out? What makes you unique? And I-I made sure that I tried to put a little bit of that out there, not too much. But just kind of a little teaser that I think allowed them to feel like they could get to know me. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Nina exhibited the sort of awareness about how she was perceived that allowed her to change her strategy when she spoke about herself with potential dates.

Based upon the positive experiences of a friend, Angela gave Match.com a second chance, and like Nina, she had greater success. The second time, Angela made her profile more welcoming and provided additional information about herself. She explained her new strategy thusly:

This was more like, you know, hey ... It was almost like me and you having a conversation, 'Hey. I'm Angela from Detroit. I like sports. I like this. I like that. My favorite team is X.' It gave enough information whereby if you read my profile and you connect with anything I said in that profile you automatically have 3 or 4 things to talk to me about in a conversation. And that to me was the difference. So it was almost feeding someone enough sounds bites where you could say, 'Hey Angela, I like ESPN too.

Who's your team?' You know. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Angela carefully presented herself in her second dating profile. She emphasized personal details that told potential mates who she was in a more conversational manner that could be expanded upon in later communications. Angela's second profile honestly and transparently presented aspects of her personality that she curated to give the best impression.

Like Nina and Angela, Maya cultivated her online dating persona carefully. Despite having a spontaneous side, as indicated by her previous participation with her mate and his friends at a strip club for birthday festivities, Maya explained that she would not put that in her profile because that would attract a certain type of guy who would not meet her dating goals. She explained how she balances truth and end goal:

So anything that I put out there is a calculated move that I put out there. I don't lie whatsoever, but, I may not say ... Like I would never put on a profile, 'I've gone to a strip club with my mate.' ... I would never put that out there on a profile because it's not going to attract the right type of guy... Because that's not, that's a small, small, small facet of me. So I'm not even going to put that on my profile because I don't want to be perceived that way. (Interview Participant, 4/5/2016)

Similar to a resume, these women highlight aspects of themselves in their profiles to attract specific types of men. After being permitted to look at five of their profiles, their responses matched their stated dating goals. The women's profiles and pages aligned with how they said that they presented themselves. The majority of pictures showed them having fun, smiling and were not overtly sexual.

Self-disclosure strategies prioritizing transparency and honesty refined their online dating profiles. In a sea of online dating advertisements endorsing self-commodification that promoted different dating outcomes, causal encounters or long-term relationships, the women in this study wanted their intentions to be clear. Collins (2005) argued that in a society governed by White gender ideology that depicts Black men and women as animalistic, it is difficult for Black relationships to be honest and affirming. Portraying Black men as "dogs" and Black women as "bitches" is a byproduct of negative gender ideology that hinders Black men and women's abilities, on a societal level, to see beyond such epithets as dog, bitches, and hos and love each other (Gilroy, 1994; Morgan, 2000). Some participants shared that they purposely interacted with men in certain ways or posted images that did not portray them as too flirty or open to sex. The women in this study were more than just a collection of attractive images assembled for men to window shop; participants wanted to be viewed as respectable women, and they therefore expected to be respected in dating situations. To achieve this goal, they crafted their profiles to privilege their own transparencies as a strategy to avoid men who were not serious candidates.

Participants described one particular group of men that spoiled the online dating experience because they were dishonest and disrespectful of women. Saintalia described this group using a 2016 term, "Fuck Boy." She explained how the term embodies negative gender ideology in today's dating market:

A fuck boy is someone who's just not about shit. You know? Like you just don't give a shit but, you know, you. Like women are there for, for you to fuck them and that's pretty much it, nothing else. So there were plenty of fuck boys on, on Tinder and you can tell just by how, you know, what they would put on their profile that they weren't about shit or that's all that they wanted from women. (Interview Participant, 5/8/2016)

Negative gender ideology has contributed to rape culture and toxic masculinity. Rape culture today includes prominent cases where college campuses and other social settings validate men taking sexual advantage of women who are under the influence. Toxic masculinity promotes masculine behavior that consumes women's bodies as sexual objects. The fuck boy is a byproduct of negative gender ideology that has promoted and reproduced toxic masculinity in the online realm. The women in this study wanted transparency and honesty and made it a part of their disclosure strategy. Self-disclosure was deliberate often resulting in strategic planning in posting of images and constructing congenial "about me" sections. Their self-disclosure strategies were also an effort to have positive dating experiences, requiring them to sift through fuck boys and men who were not looking for serious relationships.

Category: Self-Presentation- Physical Appearance

Theme: Body Type

Body type was not mentioned as much as other themes; however, based on participants' conversations around body type, the women in this study seemed to have accepted the role that body type plays in the online dating world, namely that a person's physique is another sorting mechanism in which the different platforms provide search filters (Andersen, Woodward, Spalder, & Koss, 1993; Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley, & Brownell, 1996; Miller, Smith, & Trembath).

Physical appearance is an important issue among African-American women presenting themselves on online dating platforms. The women in this study described a number of things that impacted the ways in which they presented themselves on different dating platforms. Participants expressed concerns with issues pertaining to physicality that ranged from wearing their hair in its natural state, presenting themselves as women, and not over sexualizing themselves in pictures. An often overlooked issue by dating companies was the women's expressed desire to accurately define their individualized body types. Images are the primary tool on online dating sites, and the women in the study were well aware of how to use photos advantageously. Body type was articulated differently among this group of women, which also impacted how they utilized images.

This sample of women spoke with a level of confidence that showed that they were comfortable with filtering mates by body types. Again, their sense of comfort seemed to be centered in their own confidence about how they viewed themselves. Understanding their body types allowed women to seek out sites that welcomed their figures, and the women were outspoken about the role that a person's physical build plays and how they negotiate and define body parameters on dating platforms. Ella and Khloe defined and described how certain body types may be more appreciated in certain online dating markets. Ella (30, Plus size but fit) said:

I feel like sites that are targeted to you or that recognize they have a lot of African Americans in general or even people of minorities in general...They offer you more options. They offer you curvy or uh plus, or I think what some of them say bbw...Some of em have uh, a few extra pounds. They ha-, they all have different options. Um, and I can honestly say that depending on the demographic of the site, I might pick a different option. Like if I know I'm looking at you know a mix of...you know, African American

and White and Asian folks, potential dating pool, um, I would go ahead and put, like, a few extra pounds cause I don't want you to be surprised when you meet me. Cause I'm not ashamed of it but I don't feel like you lookin' at me like I'm crazy cause I pushed the wrong button. (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

Not only does Khloe (33, Curvy) echo Ella's point about the importance of admitting body type in online dating, she also defined her own body type and what it means to be curvy, explaining:

I think it's not being a stick figure, not skinny, not, um, fat...It's kind of like a little extra pounds, but your little extra pounds are in specific places. Um, it could be a Coke bottle shape or a pear shape, um, but I think 'curvy' just helps to create a better visual of my body shape as opposed to just saying 'a few extra pounds' or 'average' because I'm finding that my average is not necessarily the next woman's average because we're all built a little differently...However, curvy can be a range in size from very skinny to (laughs) very large, so then again, it can be a double-edged sword, but I prefer that than 'a little extra pounds' or 'average.' (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

It was important for Khloe to define her body type in her online dating profile because it allowed her another avenue to devise and implement a self-presentation strategy. Moreover, defining and acknowledging body type was one more way for Khloe to increase her honesty and transparency while cultivating a specific online persona. Khloe's self-definition as it pertains to her figure is not unique, but it is representative of what many Black women confront in the "crooked room" of online dating. Mass-mediated representations often inaccurately portray Black women. The preset options provided on dating sites' emerge from and can be constrained by such erroneous depictions, which can make them too narrow and the site susceptible to inaccurate profiles that ultimately hinder user satisfaction.

Gwynn's (39, slender) reply sums up a majority of the women's responses, as most dating platforms allow subscribers to filter profiles according to body type. She said,

I think, when you don't know someone, I think it's gonna be a first attraction...If you're attracted to that person. And then, you know, for me, it would be, you know, body type.

That sounds so bad, but it's true. (Interview Participant, 4/11/2016)

In response to further questioning, she expanded on the way she evaluates and utilizes body type to filter potential mates, saying,

Well, 'cause I know for me, you know, if I'm online dating...Some of the profiles that I clicked on...It was really based off on how they looked and what their body type was like. And because I'm...I consider myself to be athletic, I prefer someone who is also athletic. (Interview Participant, 4/11/2016)

The haunting of such archetypes like the Mammy that depicts dark skinned Black women as cantankerous and asexual continues to influence the beauty ideals of Black women. Most notably, the Mammy archetype impacts dark skinned heavysset Black women by saddling them with inaccurate behavioral and beauty expectations; this particular cultural baggage affects Black women on and offline. In this section women's bodies are a sites of analysis where racism, colorism, and physical shape influences their lived experiences.

Saintalia described herself as a slender woman, who is aware of the intersection of body type, race, and skin complexion. Similar to Ella's description of "Plus Fit" Saintalia described her close group of friends saying, "I have like other friends who are like, they're very shapely, like maybe really wide hips and they're, you know, um, looking to like lose a few pounds but they, they're still fit. You know? They're still fit" (Interview Participant, 5/8/2016). Saintalia's insistence that her friends were still fit even though they were looking to shed a few pounds

indicates Black women continue to work on their femininity within the realm of European beauty ideals that praise smaller body types; these women also continue to move further and further away from characteristics within proximity of the unflattering Mammy archetype, that has normalized the idea that heavyset Black women, often with dark skin, are unattractive.

Saintalia's response also indicated a small intra-racial issue with other Black women, which alluded to aspects of the Mammy stereotype concerning women of different body types. Although only briefly mentioned, her response highlights the interplay of self-esteem, body type, and colorism on Black female bodies:

You know, um, um, yeah. You know like mostly like heavyset Black women. Like, they're definitely not getting, you know, the, the kind of attention that I'm getting, you know, because there, there's certain perception of heavy set Black women. Um, I'm also super petite, you know, um so I know that like when it comes down to like the mainstream look. (Interview Participant, 5/8/2016)

She continues acknowledging her fair skin and slender body type, explaining that those attributes help her avoid some of the negative societal stigma that darker heavy-set Black women face. Saintalia hints at "a very particular kind" of dark skinned woman who is deemed unattractive in American society. Contributing to this painful myth is the continued normalizing via the reproduction of heavyset dark skinned women as unflattering caricatures presented in mainstream media and consumed by members of the Black community. Female Mammy caricatures continue to be a common trope in Hollywood productions such as *The Help* (2011) and the *Deadwood TV series* (2004-2006); importantly, in more recent years the male Mammy has continued the tradition of poking fun at full-figured dark skinned Black women. This caricature of womae is often exaggerated and portrayed by actors like Martin Lawrence in the

Big Momma's House franchise, Tyler Perry in his *Madea* movies, and Eddie Murphy in movies like *Norbit*. Male mummies, who are often Black comedians in female fat suits, masculinize Black women who happen to be dark skinned and heavier set, characteristics that do not align with dominant beauty ideals (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Chen, Williams, Hendrickson, & Chen, 2012; Courtland, 2009). These reproductions of the very popular Mammy archetype that dominate advertisements and Hollywood films continue to negatively impact Black women. Male mummies are not Whites in Black face, but Black men in fat suits creating comedic relief. However, this creates a climate where Black America gives power to a stereotype that negatively impacts women. Saintalia said:

And, and also like this was years ago like, you know, like it, I, I do get that like my size and my complexion do pull me away from having some of the experiences that a heavy set woman would have or that a, um, a dark skin woman would have and not all dark skin women either. You know, like, it's- A very particular kind. You know like I've got- Plenty of dark skin friends as well. (Interview Participant, 5/8/2016)

Saintalia acknowledges that White beauty ideals have negatively affected heavysset women with dark complexions; however, her feeling is that Black women need to own their beauty.

Black womanhood is constantly being negatively impacted by dominant perceptions based on White beauty ideals. Throughout the study, this sample of Black women exhibited a high level of confidence and a level of certainty when it came to describing who they were as individuals and how they negotiated their individuality when engaging men online and comparing themselves to other women. Due to the co-present nature of online dating, participants were not only comfortable with body type parameters on dating sites, they also sought out different dating platforms that suited their own body types providing a different

dating arena with the body types that they were looking for. Self-presentation strategies are often utilized to portray the presenter's ideal self, but body type is inescapable and often made apparent in images, profile pages, and on offline dates. At times brutal honesty about their figures and body types affected both the women in this study as well as the type of men they were pursuing.

When considering self-presentation strategies surrounding physical appearance, two prominent themes emerged: body type and images. Body type was one of the more inescapable truths online daters confronted while looking for love on the Internet. Body type was a point of interest for this group for a number of reasons, one of which was participants' ability to match their physical build with the preset body types offered by the various dating platforms. Interview participants were aware of their own body types and understood how some areas of their bodies were shaped or not shaped more so than other areas. A common debate in the Black dating community regarding a Black woman's body is trying to define and articulate the array of shapes represented by Black women. What does it mean for a woman to be curvy? What does it mean to be considered both plus size and fit? Where does a woman cross over to being a few extra pounds? Articulating an understanding of body type required a level of self-assurance that allowed these women to maneuver within complex dating arenas, some of which favor certain body types over others. Consequently, participants began to learn which sites were more accepting of their body type as well as to provide men with the body types that these women were seeking.

Theme: Images

Regardless of the dating markets the women participated in, images held the most value. Images were often the first impression made on potential mates that were filtering and swiping

through dating profiles. Angela described the role of images as a process of self-commodification that drives marketability in the era of selfies:

How you brand yourself on these sites does make a difference I think. Same with Facebook. Branding is everything. I mean I never played around with my profile picture until I joined a lot of these groups. And what I mean by that is my profile picture was a standard photograph, something I took at random and I kind of went on about my business. But, um, a friend of mine who, or not a friend of mine, she's really an acquaintance, but she's a matchmaker and she was, she wrote a column on how people don't realize the whole thing with selfies has gotten to the point where a static picture doesn't work for people anymore. A lot of times they don't even come to your page until they see your picture change or you, you're posting something that's pulling them in. And she said in the age of cellphones and selfies if your intent is to use that page as a way of marketing and branding yourself even if it's outside of dating, you know, those pictures mean something. That's valuable real estate. It's almost like a billboard that you need to use accordingly. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Khloe discussed how important pictures were saying, "All you have is a picture. I mean, I'd rather have a picture and nothing written down on the profile than a profile with no picture" (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016). For Khloe, images were more important than the descriptive profile itself. Laura (37, a few extra pounds) likened profile pictures to a welcoming smile. She said,

Like, if you were, if you were in a crowd of people and you see several women in the room, more than likely you're going to gravitate to the one that's smiling, that's happy about being in the place that she is, because one no, no men like to be turned down. He

don't like rejection, neither do we, you know, so if we are open and willing, you know, we more than likely are smiling and, and happy about the situation, which gives you the okay to come over and talk to us. That makes it easy for you. (Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

Images were also a major point of contention due to the high premium placed on pictures in today's selfie driven society. The singles in the sample placed a high value on pictures in the dating market, as well as choosing pictures for dating profiles because the market places pressure on the individual posting the pictures. The women in the study had varied experiences dealing with the anxieties surrounding posting the "right" picture. A lot of the women struggled with posting a picture that showed who they really were without attracting the wrong type of attention. Cecilia (34, never married) offered insight into one reason why women struggle with posting images explaining, "I don't get as many hits because my profile pictures aren't flirty" (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016). Tanya also explained the pressures of deciding which pictures to use for her profile, saying,

For me there's not like, excessive like, sexy pictures. It's all like, my personality that I try to show. My smile like, laughing. Doing activities that I enjoy. Not necessarily like, tight dresses and boob shots and ass shots and whatever else. And pounds and pounds of makeup. It's like, it's just me. This is it. Like, this is what you're getting. A happy girl that likes to ride her bike. Like, with big curly hair. Do you want this or no? [laughter].
(Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Nina reiterated Cecilia's point about the right types of pictures when she discussed men's responses to her images. She said:

The fact that I was physically fit. Um, I looked like my picture. That-that seemed to be the big thing with guys. When they saw me it was like, 'Oh, you look like your picture!' Because it sounded like they had a lot of interactions with women that put these, like, glamorous, beautiful pictures on and then you meet them in person and they're, you know, not so glamorous. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

If images are not the most important element of dating profiles they are one of the most important as discussed by the participants. Khloe responded without hesitation, explaining that she placed a higher premium on images instead of written portions of a dating profile. Physical attraction, although seen as superficial, is often what makes a first impression in online courtship. Laura stated that a picture was like a welcoming smile, and a number of these women curated their profiles in a way that was welcoming. The idea of smiling in a picture, being happy and giving off positive energy that is welcoming to potential suitors can be easily overlooked, when in fact it is an important self-presentation strategy in a dating market that is also a numbers game. Examining America's dating market through a long-standing socio-cultural lens provides an inherently gendered understanding of today's society in which men are touted as the hunters or the pursuers. Men are viewed as the initiator in the courting process. Consequently, just as in offline encounters, men need certain social cues that allow them to initiate the communication process, a notion these women recognized and sought to address. The consistent theme with images was congeniality and looking like your pictures.

Neither negative nor positive feedback from men shook the confidence of this group of women. Positive feedback was accepted and served as a confirmation of what they already knew about their personalities; feedback was more readily accepted in instances of mutual interest. Negative feedback from dates was viewed in the same way, but feedback from rejected men

meant less because participants felt like the feedback was the result of the rejection and therefore was not genuine. The women admitted or understood why men perceived them to be too busy, opinionated, or argumentative, but sometimes still denied the importance of the negative feedback. Participants in the study were self-aware regarding the various facets of their personalities and how they were perceived in certain situations.

Participants exhibited high levels of self-awareness in their use of images. Self-presentation strategies involved women curating an online personas that was appealing to the opposite sex. Curating personas involved women consciously posting pictures that were welcoming to the opposite sex. In other words, participants posted images of themselves smiling and showing them happy in an effort to depict themselves as warm and welcoming. Other pressures surrounding posting pictures included picking the appropriate pictures to use in their dating profiles. These women went out of their way not to include over sexualized images, thereby unconsciously fighting the Jezebel archetype. The Black Jezebel archetype arose from centuries of unwanted male attention; in more modern times, Black women tried not to portray themselves as video vixens or women who were there for male consumption despite the social stigma they faced. The women in this study avoided misogynoir, or the anti-Black sexism geared towards Black women (Bailey, 2013). Flirty and sexualized images were not part of the self-presentation strategies of these women. The underlying sentiment was that these women wanted to be considered seriously for long-term monogamous relationships and not for casual sex. Another issue concerning images was men's reactions to the accuracy of these women's images. The women in the study reported that the men they engaged with expressed an appreciation for the fact that the images used in their online dating profiles matched who they were in person.

Category: Stereotypes

Stereotypes can be detrimental to self-presentation strategies. Social stigmas disrupt individual efforts to present their best selves. In this study, stereotypes or social stigmas oversimplified Black women, misconstrued cultural norms, and inaccurately depicted Black femininities. The prominent theme in this category was Black women; 14 responses were coded pertaining to stereotypes that these women felt impacted Black women in the online dating market

The group of women in this study understood anti-Black stereotypes against women. They were also well aware of how stereotypes influenced their dating experiences. Khloe explained how beauty is appraised in today's global media landscape. The value of beauty projected by media also impacted the dating market. She said,

[B]ecause of the American standard of beauty and what it's been for so long, and even around the world, the global standard of beauty, I think that Black women are at the bottom of the totem pole. I think now in the climate of America, we've moved up in the past (laughs) five years. I think, our, you know, I think we have climbed a little bit higher, um, and I think that's reflective in media, and we're seeing more Black women starring roles and Black women as starring love interests than we've seen before, and you just, for me, I've seen more Black women dating, uh, outside their race than I've ever seen prior within these last few years. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Khloe touched on the idea that African-American women are climbing up in the beauty totem pole in America. She mentioned this because it correlates media portrayals of popular culture that place a value on beauty that permeates online dating markets. Khloe continued, expressing her opinion on Black women's beauty on a global scale stating,

(Sighs) However, on the global scale, I don't know if Black women are there yet to be seen as equally as beautiful, being that our features can be completely different to what the, uh, standard of beauty in many countries is. Um, whether it's countries of color or not, um, there's still a level of (laughs) paleness that is more attractive than others, than more melanin folks, and so I think that, um, with that bias engraved in so many people around the world, I just, I kind of remember there was this, I don't know if it was an experiment, something that OkCupid did, and basically you got to submit your picture to be judged, and it's like, 'Dang.' (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Part of the underlying frustration of the Black women in this study was that they were tired of being lumped together as one group and being viewed as unattractive by virtue of their skin tones. Khloe mentioned “paleness” being normalized as a global standard of beauty. Her sighs and laughs marked how she felt about the hegemonic markers continuing to reproduce western beauty ideals—one of the many angles of the crooked room. Sighing and laughter also signified that the problem no longer bothers her personally. Instead, she was speaking in defense of other women who were less resilient to dominant beauty ideologies. Khloe continued,

I didn't realize I was doing that, but when they showed me who I was being compared to and different pictures being compared to different women, it's like, 'We look completely different, and if you're attracted to her, you wouldn't be attracted to me.' And it's almost, for me, when I looked at it, I was like, 'She's not even that cute!' (Laughs) And I'm like, 'This is one of my best pictures, and she's looking like, you know,' but then again, the people who were judging were from Israel. The people who were judging were from just different places in the world, and instead of saying, you know, and I had to correct myself. 'Well, I guess she's cute in her way; we're just not the same cute, and

um we look like we're at two different events in these pictures,' but whatever. I think that, you know, I had to stop myself from getting my feelings hurt because I didn't realize I'm not everybody's cup of tea, and that's fine. Starbucks sells a bunch of different varieties of tea and coffee. You don't have to like all of them. You can like what you like, and that's completely okay. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Western beauty ideals required the Black women in this study to constantly evaluate themselves. There was a clear awareness on their part of how they “measured-up” from a global beauty point of view as well as how they measured up to other women on the dating platforms they utilized. A number of women mentioned how they were not someone's or a dating platform's “cup of tea.” Khloe's responses are an example of the resilience that repeatedly emerged in subtle instances. Not being viewed as beautiful appeared to be common; it was so common, in fact, that the sentiment was recounted by participants as a way of emphasizing the necessity of not getting bogged down in the negativity and still seeking out positive interactions online. In this way, participants articulated not only one of the angles of the crooked room, but provided an example of a way in which they fought against the disorienting effect they faced.

Negotiating their identities as Black women while maintaining their “dateable” statuses required participants to weigh their own standards of physical beauty against those imposed by potential partners and Western standards. Tanya talked about how she likes to wear her hair and what makes her feel comfortable; however, what she likes may not be what is considered “popular,” especially in the media. Tanya explained,

For myself I personally prefer to wear my hair natural. Big curls, big Afro, I don't care. However it looks today is pretty much how it's going to look and I'm okay with that. It took me a while to get to that point though because there was always a comment on how

my hair should look, how my hair should this, should, should, should. And it's like, this is how it grows out of my head. Why is your standard of beauty...? Why are you trying to mold me into that? So, I see how people treat Black women and I don't like it. It makes them change their hair, their skin tone, how they wear their makeup. You know, it's covering up all the things that were made just for them to fit into what people think is date-able and what is attractive to other men. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Hair was a hot button issue for some of the women in this study, particularly with the way men in general, not just Black men, viewed women's hair. Cecilia also challenged conventional beauty, and for her, it has been both an inter-racial and intra-racial struggle. She said,

(Laughs) Especially with my hair being natural, I don't have the long, flowing weave going. I don't have, you know, I'm not hyper sexualized. I don't look like a stripper. Um, I just look like a regular, like a regular chick who has embraced the way that I was born and I don't know, I just...I mean I was...We were in Miami in September and I actually had a guy tell me that he did not like girls with natural hair. He preferred them to have a weave. He preferred the straighter, longer hair and I was like, 'That's really sad that you would literally not even bother talking to a woman because of how her hair is styled.' (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Saintalia also discussed the disagreements that she has had with men about her hair:

There are certain guys, they don't really have a hair preference and there are certain guys who have a straight hair preference and, you know, like, I've learned to stop arguing with people about it, you know. 'Cause on one end, it may be, just be preference and on the other end, it just may be like a self hating thing. Um, or it could be just like a you just haven't been enlightened sort of thing. (Interview Participant, 5/8/2016)

Within recent years popular Black culture has begun to re-embrace natural hair. However, Black female bodies remain contested sites, seen as either hyper-sexual vs. asexual; natural hair has been considered unprofessional compared to straightened or chemically treated hair; light skin is interpreted as more beautiful than dark skin. Black women confront unique racially-gendered issues concerning beauty that is both inter-racial and intra-racial. Khloe's reference and Cecilia's arguments with Black men for refusing to accept her hair in its natural state is a battle of beauty and femininity that seems to attack their self-identity on a number of fronts. For her part, Saintalia tried to keep men's preferences from affecting her. Knowing who they are and needing to be strong in online and offline environments is as an ongoing process for Black women. Those who participated in this study seldom had a moment to just be themselves in either the offline or online dating world since they had to constantly negotiate anti-Black stereotypes about beauty and femininity.

Oversimplifications characterize Black female identities and such generalizations appeared throughout participant responses, especially the underlying stereotype of the strong Black woman. The category stereotypes addressed the essentialized notions that these women felt directly impacted them in online dating platforms. A commonly remarked upon stereotype, which is prevalent in popular culture, views Black women as ugly. Again, the women exhibited high levels of self-awareness in articulating how popular media reproduces images that position Black beauty at the bottom of America's societal ladder. With that said, those same beauty standards influenced how Black women were perceived as dateable and attractive on dating platforms. Participants referenced the preference for White or lighter skin over darker skin; further, Black women's hair in its natural state was both a global issue and a local one with some participants expressing how Black men viewed natural hair as undesirable. Aware of these

beauty norms, these women sustained a level of resiliency that acknowledged what they were up against from a societal and global perspective while ultimately being satisfied with the idea that the majority of the world may not view them as its “cup of tea.”

Category: Negative Perceptions by Potential Mates

Interview participants reported a number of nonphysical characteristics that often held them back according to the feedback of men who they had previously encountered. Spirituality in the online dating arena was considered a negative trait, because in the participants' experiences, religion created conflict between them and potential mates. In some instances, the women in the study withheld their religious beliefs or were not immediately forthright with their level of participation in church. Even those women who identified as spiritual but not religious experienced conflicts with men who considered themselves to be religious. Withholding religious beliefs was a self-presentation strategy used to avoid scaring men off in the initial stages of dating. This was the same motivation behind not being completely forthright with the level of activity or participation in church. Participants did not want to begin their communication with religion, fearing possibly turning off the men with whom they were communicating. Interview participants who identified as spiritual but not religious experienced issues with men who considered themselves to be religious or men from different religious backgrounds. Spiritual but not religious in this study, represented a level of religious tolerance on the behalf of interview participant but was perceived as a level of unfamiliarity with religion to the religious men they encountered and therefore created conflicts. This might have been an ordinary mismatch between potential partners, but women like Tanya and Rose felt that religion and religious tolerance influenced their success and failures in the online dating arena. Rose, similar to Ella and Cecilia, withheld aspects of her religiosity from potential mates until she

realized she needed to remain true to herself and her beliefs. Tanya on the other hand, identified as not religious but spiritual, was forthcoming with her self-proclaimed religious tolerance and received negative reactions from men from different religious backgrounds.

Theme: Negative Perceptions In A General Sense

The majority of the women responded to this question indicating that most of the men viewed them in a positive light. Lailah, a 36-year-old widow with children, described her experiences and her thoughts on confronting the perceptions placed on her by men online. She said,

Give me a second. Let's see. I think I am often perceived as a educated single parent. So because I'm still a single parent, I'm not of the like highest-level quality woman because I can't just pick up and go anywhere. I don't think I'm considered like long-term relationship material, but because I'm educated and I have a job then I'm not like hood rat material either. So like I'm a step above hood rats, which sometimes impresses people because they're used to dating people who don't like, you know, have their own place to live and can't pay their bills, but, um, I'm still not, you know, girlfriend type material. (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Lailah appraised her value as a woman via the eyes of potential mates. When compared to other women, she often felt that men viewed her as less desirable in the dating market due to her being a mother. Lailah felt that men saw her as a step above a “hood-rat,” a 21st century pseudonym for “welfare queen.” Trying to understand herself through the eyes of the men she came in contact with, Lailah felt that men struggled. While her education and stability were positive attributes, having children and being a widow lowered her dateability; men were unsure how they fit into the world of a widow with children. Yet again, this represents the “delicate dance”

between independence and femininity that is at play. Lailah felt like her status as a widow and a mother, detracted from her marketability towards men, and kept her from obtaining meaningful relationships online. Her belief that she was datable and deserved love, was rooted in her experiences. Her husband passed away;, she did not date aimlessly and have children with different men. Lailah pointed to the negative connotations that constrain single Black mothers who are looking for love online. Instead of seeing a partner who is formally educated and capable of raising children on their own, Lailah felt that potential mates saw her widowhood and motherhood as causes for concern. In an effort to counteract any misconceptions, Lailah utilized impression management and self-disclosure strategies to anticipate potential mates' misunderstandings regarding her family situation. Lailah added how she attempted to shape the way she was perceived in a general sense, explaining,

It's frustrating so sometimes I try to change it up. Sometimes I try to put a lot of information out there, like my husband died a couple years ago so the fact that I am a young, you know, a younger widow...That's very different. Like being a single parent and some guy doesn't pay your child support, and I hate him...That's a very typical story. Like being a single parent because you were married and you were a stay-at-home mom and then your husband died, so now you're working again. Like nobody knows what to do with that. So sometimes I just put a lot of information out there to begin with therefore, you know, you know everything so if you...They'll approach me and then, you know, it's not a surprise. (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Lailah expressed her struggle of sharing and withholding. Aspects of her life that were out of her control often thwarted her self-presentation efforts. Both men and women in the dating community view children, in a general sense, as a non-negotiable. In fact, parental status

is a filtering feature on dating sites and apps. For instance, three of the women in this study reported having children living at home with them, leaving the remaining singles (13) childfree. When considering a mate, this groups' willingness to date a man with children broke down as follows: Yes (9); Yes, and it is okay if they live at home (2); No (3) and Yes, if they live away from home (2). Having or not having children in the singles market can make all the difference for being viewed as dateable. These women attempt to resist the Strong Black Woman or Matriarch archetypes. Lailah, an educated widow, fought to avoid being perceived as a hood rat. She participated in the delicate dance referred to by both scholars (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Tyree, 2009) and another participant as playing double-dutch, which is a racially-gendered experience that impacts their day to day both inter-racial and intra-racial interactions.

Category: Negative Non-Physical

In regard to criticism, four participants mentioned that there was negative feedback in a general sense. Questions four and five of the interview protocol examined the negative and positive perceptions of the men who interacted with the participating women. Question four required the women to talk about some of the negative feedback that they received from online dating.

Theme: Spirituality

These women exhibit a level of shifting. Shifting is similar to code switching. Common scenarios where Black people code switch are in corporate settings where they speak more proper English or "White" while shifting back to slang or "Black" when they are speaking in more comfortable social settings, such as with their family and friends (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). Code-switching is distinct from filtering in that the former simply speaks to deliberate manipulation of information in an effort to make it more

acceptable to recipients and while the latter refers to shifting between dialects, languages and communication styles in effort for Black women to navigate, both Black and non-Black, cultural codes, demands and expectations (Collins, 2005; Douglas, 1999; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) described shifting as an impression management strategy where Black women hold back aspects of their true selves in an effort to navigate racial and gender bigotry. This particular instance shows how these women shift in a socio-technological space. These women consciously withhold their religious beliefs and/or practices in an effort to appeal to men in the online dating market. Shifting offers a lens into the impression management strategies adopted by these women to maneuver within and around the cultural codes that influence their co-present identities of being religious and wanting to find love online. In one sense, religion is important to their daily lives, but finding a man to fall in love with is also high on their priority list, especially when presenting themselves on dating platforms. Shifting, in this instance, refers to participants' strategies which are designed to increase their marketability as it relates to their religion. How do religious, Christian, Black women maneuver in online dating spaces that promote casual hookups and various sexual motives? This section examines impression management strategies of women who identified as either very religious or spiritual, and how that impacted their dating experience.

Religion and faith were important, but not always positive, considerations when dating online. Cecilia, a pastor's daughter, waited to share her Sunday routine with potential mates. She said,

Um, I don't really state anything about my, my Sunday routine, my Christian routine so there's nothing too...I didn't want to scare people off with that so I purposely didn't put that on there (laughs). (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Similar to workplace environments, political and religious views are considered “hot button” topics in online dating. In Cecilia’s case, her Sunday routine was a little more involved than the casual churchgoer; therefore, she did not want to lead with her faith in her profile. If Cecilia led with her faith, it could have been perceived as a turnoff, and there was so much more to who she was as a person outside of her church practices.

Regardless of specific religious affiliations, the importance of faith remained an important aspect of courtship. For Tanya, her lack of a religious tradition resulted in negative feedback. She explained:

Uh, for my negative qualities it was very negative. Like, those who were strong on their faith wanted nothing to do with me in some sense, almost borderline not even a friendship for those that did that connect. And then once the topic of like, ‘Oh. Okay. What religion are you?’ It was like, ‘Oh. Well, I kind of don't have one. Like, I would consider myself, like, kind of Christian.’ Or however I would explain it. Like, you know, I’m very spiritual and I believe that God comes in all forms. Like, I do believe there is a God. They were like, ‘Oh. Okay. Well, obviously you’re not clear on what you believe, so I don’t know if this is going to work for me.’ And then I was like, ‘Oh. Okay.’ Like, I thought I was just more accepting of other people’s diversity and their faith and find beauty in it. But, never mind. Okay, cool. And for those who were, um, like, Muslim. They were the ones that would probably yell at me the most. That was probably one of my worst experiences. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Tanya’s experience illustrates the double-edged sword of faith. While Cecilia encountered negative feedback for being too spiritual, Tanya was criticized for not being spiritual enough or spiritual in the right way. Both Cecilia and Tanya’s experiences further show how

nonhomogeneous the sample of Black women was and the nonhomogeneous nature of their experiences. Moreover, the conflicting ways in which faith affected their online dating experiences highlights the paradoxical ways the crooked room affects the lives of Black women. On matters of spirituality, at least, there was no right answer for these women.

Ella, a Christian, realized that her faith could sometimes make her unattractive to certain men. She admitted,

Um, the fact that I am, like, I'm, I'm Christian, like old school. Not Bible beating, but like, I go to church. I'm not a real big partier. It's not gonna be uh attractive to everyone. (Interview Participant, 4/6/2016)

Tanya and Ella were from different backgrounds and both experienced negative feedback as a result of their religion—Tanya for not being religious enough and Ella, like Cecelia, for being too religious.

Religion remains an issue in the dating world. Either one person is religious and the other is spiritual, or two people practice completely separate faiths. Religious tolerance seemed to have varied slightly among the women in this study. Self-presenting their faiths was a sensitive topic mostly centered on the various rules that governed their religious practices. Tanya was the only participant who shared overtly negative responses due to her acceptance of other religions. Religion is another sorting mechanism among singles considering serious relationships.

Some of the other negative feedback pertained to how the women engaged the courtship process, specifically by clashing against some men's expectations of the courtship process. For instance, Sydney recalled a time where a date accused her of wanting a man to "chase her"

(Interview Participant, 4/8/2016). In another situation, Melanie (35, never married) was accused of being rough and unwilling to open up on her date as she explained:

I'm really, like, cautious when it comes to like, meeting and dating people. So, I can be real cool, but I'll be like, you know, friend mode with you before I'm like, romantic mode with you. So, you know, that's just, so the feedback is like, you know, why am I not more open, earlier, sooner. You know what I mean? So, yeah, that's about it.

(Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Theme: Race (Colorism)

Race emerged as an intra-racial issue with one of the two participants that self-identified as being both Black and White. All participants in this study self-identified as Black or African-American. The racial makeup of the participants consisted of two sets of women who self-identified as Black (14) and those that self-identified as both Black and White (2). All of the women in this study displayed a preference towards Black men (16). Other races the women were willing to date were Middle Eastern (2), mixed race (1), and Latino (3).

Due to the fact that these women primarily dated Black men, I expected that issues of race would be an intra-racial issue. Online dating platforms allow subscribers to filter potential dates according to race, religion, faith, political views, and other demographic elements. A major sorting mechanism is race, and Tanya who proudly embraced her mixed ethnic background, (she is Black and White), offered insight into how race is an intra-racial element of identity.

Sometimes race leaves daters in a cultural purgatory, where the combination of their preferences and how the men with whom they select self-identify culturally conflict and create awkward dating interactions. Tanya explained,

Well, for the most part I get ... They give you the option of like, selecting what you identify with and selecting like, the type of preference that you have when it comes to like, who they're going to bring up for your selection process. And it's like, if I say that I'm interested in Black men. And, 'Okay. Well, what do you identify as?' It's like, 'Well. I identify as both.' I identify as both Black and White...but for the most part like, I identify very closely with both ethnicities. But my personal preference in dating is Black. So, a lot of the time my Blackness comes into question when dating Black people because I don't know certain things or I'm not aware of certain cultural norms. And it's like, well, I did grow up with a White parent as well and some of my norms may not be what your norms are. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Markers of class may cause a cultural disjuncture, but race and ethnic background are another area where daters sometimes are not in agreement. Tanya grew up embracing both of her parents' ethnic backgrounds, but Black men sometimes questioned her Blackness because she did not fit their ideas of how a biracial Black woman is supposed to act. Similar to Saintalia's remark on colorism being *real*, Tanya continued to articulate how she had to resist the narrow boxes in which men try to place her:

I take offense to it a lot of the times. When some people make jokes about, 'Oh. Well, hey White girl.' And it's like, well, I'm not just a White girl. Like, I'm biracial. Like, because I do things that may tend to lean towards a White culture does not mean that it negates my Black side. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Sometimes angles within the crooked room of online dating involve uncomfortable moments of colorism projected upon Black women of mixed heritage, especially women whose parents were Black and White. The tragedy in the 21st century is that Tanya describes an experience akin to

women like her that predates the Internet: mixed race slaves exploited and fetishized in the fancy girl trades, and both 19th century literary quadroons and 20th century filmic tragic mulatto's inability to completely pass as White while also not completely identifiable to the Black community. Tanya's experience, an example of being burdened by perception, is laden with socio-historical baggage that is intertwined with an assumption of privilege and skin hierarchy that dates back to colonialism.

Summary

Research Question 2 examined self-presentation strategies and the perceptions of Black women who participated in online dating. This sample of women was a confident group, and the majority of them shared that they were perceived positively online by the opposite sex. When looking at self-perception, how the women in this study perceived the attractive qualities they possessed themselves, prominent themes that participants shared were their appearance, stability and honesty. In a general sense, the women shared that men viewed them in a positive light. Taking a closer look at negative perceptions by potential mates, the frequency count was fairly even across the responses, but the themes that were interesting were spirituality, body type, and race. The majority of the sample was Christian, but spirituality remained a point of contention as some women strategically held back from presenting certain aspects of their religious involvement and other women received negative responses due to their lack of religiosity.

Self-presentation strategies were also impacted by the respondents' body types. Body type played a role in posting images as well as filtering features provided by the dating sites. Due to the level of confidence exhibited by this group of women, body type was an understandable sorting mechanism and impression management strategies, such as selecting the

right body type for filtering purposes and picking the right images, were common practices among all of the women regardless of their own body types.

Another impression management issue was the confusion of social cues. Although, participants primarily interacted with Black men, race was still an issue, which created an intra-racial identity problem. Coming from and accepting two cultural domains, biracial daters identified and operated with social norms and social cues that were different than those of Black male suitors who strongly identified solely with Black or African-American culture.

Chapter 6 presents the findings for Research Question 3, which asked the women who participated in this study about their successes and failures in online dating. This chapter privileges the voices of participants.

CHAPTER 6: OPERATING WITHIN CROOKED SPACES OF INTIMACY

Overview

This chapter presents the findings for Research Question 3, which asked, “What are the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate the potential failures and/or possible successes delineated within the realities of their experiences of online dating?” This question examined how participants viewed the ways in which men perceived them online, and whether or not those perceptions had any impact on their successes and/or failures while dating digitally.

Delving deeper into the love-hate relationship Black women have with online dating along with the breadth of their individual experiences required me to continue using a phenomenological approach to illuminate other angles of the crooked room. Asking participants about their individual successes and failures and presenting the women’s responses allows the data to speak for itself, which helps map out areas of the crooked room that the participants acknowledged as relevant to their experiences.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section, Failures, Successes, and Lessons Learned, details participants’ perceptions of whether or not they feel that their attributes or behaviors influenced their dating outcomes. A phenomenological approach works to show how these women make sense of their varied experiences with online dating.

Section two, Experiences with Other Mates, explores how the perceptions of potential mates impact the online dating experiences of these women. Deceptive profiles emerge as an area of contention for participants. Finally, this section illuminates how physical locales have their own cultural nuances and norms that accompany each area. Prior to this section,

discussions surrounding proximity highlighted class markers such as income and education level, providing a lens into proximity as it pertained to social distance between professional women and blue-collar men. Participants' responses in this section illustrate the positive and negative interactions that contribute to Black women's love-hate relationship with online dating applications and sites.

Indicative of Dating Climate, section three, examines participants' perceptions of their own dating experiences in comparison to other Black women they know. This section offers a space wherein the data illuminated the ways in which these women alternately felt that their individual love-hate relationship with online dating expanded beyond their personal experiences to influence their perspective on dating in general.

The fourth section, Advice to Black Women from Black Women, uses analysis of the learned experiences to demonstrate the trajectory of personal growth necessary to function in a digital realm where appearance and other attributes are heavily scrutinized. This section continues the discussion of self-definition, self-value, and understanding one's authentic self by privileging individual testimonies to illuminate the transformative journey many women experienced while engaging men online.

Failures, Success, and Lessons Learned

Sub-Category: Failures

Controlling images serve as angles in the crooked room, influencing America's collective consciousness reproducing a monolithic understanding of Black women as failures incapable of sustaining meaningful relationships, especially with Black men (Collins, 1989, 1999; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The data revealed various reasons why participants were or were not successful in online dating. Online daters subscribe to dating platforms with the expectation of

finding someone who they can partner with romantically. When evaluating their experiences in online dating, a consensus emerged that defined an encounter as successful if it materialized into a stable relationship. Failure, as a theme, told a broader story about how these women respected themselves, refused to settle for less than they felt they deserved, and acknowledged that their beliefs may actually be the explanation for why they have not been successful in dating online.

Exploring their failures took a high level of self-awareness and an understanding of their own shortcomings. Common among these women were perceptions of being introverted, not being open, or being too nonchalant. Melanie acknowledged that her unwillingness to be open may have contributed to her missing out on potentially good situations, admitting,

Um, I wasn't open. I really wasn't open and so it's possible, I could have, you know, missed out on a couple of good opportunities just to really, um, have real connection with people just because I chose not to be open early on. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Melanie acknowledged that even though she embarked on a journey of intimacy, her level of effort was missing. Such an acknowledgment was commonly reported by a number of women in the study. Women signed up for online dating but hesitancy as a result of social stigmas, past dating situations, or simply being busy (or distracted) culminated into a lackadaisical online dating effort.

Gwynn pointed to her lack of effort to explain her unsuccessful experience with online dating, saying, "I feel like the reason why I was not successful was because I didn't stay on the sites long enough. I didn't give them a fair shot" (Interview Participant, 4/11/2016). Lailah's nonchalant approach to dating is often misread as disinterest. She said:

I think being so laid-back gave people the, um, the, um, the idea that they, there was no sense of urgency... That they did not have to try to move forward with the relationship

like, you know. Uh, sometimes people want to be pushed. They want those demands or those accountability or, you know, whatever else, but, uh, I think that sometimes hurts me. (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Lailah's status as a single mother further complicates the potential for her to succeed in online dating. She commented:

And then the other side, um, that the kid thing...I feel like it puts me in a, in a category where I'm not long-term relationship material because that means that that's a responsibility on them, even though it probably won't be. But they're not used to an idea of a woman having children. (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Potential mates considered whether Lailah was dateable based on her motherhood and were apparently unwilling to date her and create a bond with her children as well. Lailah knew it was her motherhood that made online dating difficult for her because she often had potential mates express interest in her through phone calls, but the relationships never progressed. For instance Lailah describes herself as a step above a "hood rat,"

So because I'm still a single parent, I'm not of the like highest level quality woman because I can't just pick up and go anywhere. I don't think I'm considered like long term relationship material, but because I'm educated and I have a job then I'm not like hood rat material either. So like I'm a step above hood rats, which sometimes impresses people because they're used to dating people who don't like, you know, have their own place to live and can't pay their bills, but, um, I'm still not, you know, girlfriend type material. (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Lailah's self-perception of being "a step above a hood rat" could be explained by highlighting the prevalence of the controlling image dating back to the government funded

Moynihan report (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Moynihan, Rainwater, & Yancey, 1967), which helped create the negative stereotype of Black motherhood. The Moynihan report described the Black family as a “tangle of pathology” attributing the Black community’s low station in America to Black Matriarchs. This report, along with revelations of welfare fraud, fueled narratives branding single Black mothers as welfare queens. Black matriarchs became the face of America’s welfare systems. Over the decades, the welfare queen birthed similar controlling images painting single mothers as “Hood rats” and “Ratchets.” All three of these terms devalue Black motherhood. Lailah, echoing potential mates, links her dateability with her being a parent; thus, the controlling images of the Black Matriarch and Welfare Queen offer insight to the perceived value of Black motherhood in the 21st century dating market.

Rose discussed her unwillingness to compromise as she felt that online dating sites and online dating applications across the board have been a waste of time. When signing up for online dating sites, she expected more of a variety of men to choose from, which would mean she would not have to compromise in many areas. As a result of her online dating experiences, she is comfortable with not compromising. She noted:

If I wasn’t so caught up on the fact that they had kids or not, you know, like if there’s certain things, or they have to be a Christian. If they put other, or you don’t even get a, you don’t even get a response back, you know. Um, so that’s something I won’t compromise on, but, you know, if I was a little bit more flexible about certain things, maybe it would have been more successful, you know, and I wouldn’t have such a hard time with it. And I wouldn’t be saying that I’m really not satisfied with it across the board. (Interview Participant, 4/21/2016)

Rose blamed her lack of flexibility for not being successful in online dating, but maintained her unwillingness to compromise in the face of failure. Rose's perspective on failure raises a few questions concerning Black women in the online dating market who view themselves as churched or unchurched. Examining the role of the Black church, in non-monolithic terms, and the strictures it places on various Black identities offers an entry point to examine a number of themes in this study. For instance, further analysis on Black women who consider themselves churched (Ella, Cecilia, and Rose) in comparison to women who considered themselves unchurched (Tanya and Saintalia) offers a deeper understanding of the various levels of the racially-gendered experiences of Black women in dating markets that are known to be Black dating markets influenced by cultural codes that govern the Black community along the lines of gender, religion, and sexuality. According to Douglas (1999) delving deeper into religion also offers a greater insight on the social construction of Whiteness and how Blackness was distorted via the negative constructions of the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes. Rose offers another entry point into understanding her racially-gendered experiences and the cultural and societal codes that shape her failures and successes in a changing dating market by highlighting the way she felt her uncompromising Christianity affected her success.

Laura offered three different reasons to explain why she may not have been successful in online dating. She stated:

Um, in my opinion I think there's maybe two or three um, reasons why they were unsuccessful and one is the distance, two is my unwillingness to give up the draws just because you showed up at my front door and then the third one (laughs) is um, I guess they say I have too many morals, like you know, like it's because there's so many women to choose from and they can get what they want from somebody else, why I'm going to

waste my time with you? (laughs) Which is a fair statement and I, and I accept it because everything ain't for everybody. (Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

The responses consistently painted a picture of confidence and self-assurance, as seen in Laura's accepting response to rejection. Interview participants wanted to protect themselves both physically and morally and often expressed that they were okay with knowing that "everything ain't for everybody."

Beyond the obvious failure of not finding a relationship that materialized into a long-term relationship or marriage, there were other opinions on what constituted a failed experience in online dating. Elements that contributed to failure were an unwillingness to be open, not staying on websites long enough, nonchalant approaches perceived by men as being uninterested, having a child, men who do not fit a list of ideals, and lastly, these women's unwillingness to have sexual relations right away. The most prominent archetype alluded to in this study is the myth of the Strong Black woman (SBW). When looking deeper into these women's stories, their experiences are more textured and nuanced than that archetype would suggest. The myth of heterosexual Black women not wanting or not needing male companionship is both hurtful and far from the truth. Like other women, participants shared various reasons why they may have been perceived as uninterested, but all of the participants had different approaches when it came to pursuing intimate relationships with men. The majority of failures related to testing the boundaries of their beliefs and what they were and were not willing to compromise on.

Sub-Category: Success

Another way to view failure is to not look at it as a failure at all. Sydney reoriented her perspective, saying, "there's guys that I've met through online dating that are my friends now so you know, technically in a sense it is successful" (Interview Participant, 4/8/2016). Sydney did

not define success merely based on whether she entered a romantic relationship, but added friendship and companionship into the equation as well.

Similarly, Terri (34, never married) used a highly individualized perspective to measure success, saying:

Well, I would say for the success, if you're overall goal is to meet someone and become pa- in a relationship, then that's the highest form of success for these apps. If your goal is just to meet people, go on dates, then that's...that...that would be the highest goal for you. Um, if your goal is to usually just use it as a sexual, as a forum to get hook ups, a sexual hook up, then that's your success...but if you're just dating and you meet people and that's your goal, then that's your...you're succeeding at it. (Interview Participant, 4/2/2016)

For Terri, success could be defined in many different and sometimes conflicting ways based upon an individual's specific needs and desires at any given time.

There is no indication that success or failure is a constant for Terri, while Cecilia expressed a strong definition for herself. She said:

That to me would be a success and my success would be keeping my preferences in place, finding somebody that fits those preferences, and then having that relationship work out whether it's for a short period of time or whether it results in marriage and kids. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Cecilia's idea of success was finding someone who fit her set ideals and preferences, ultimately resulting in a relationship, regardless of the duration. The majority of women who tried online dating walked away but later returned, used different platforms with more a positive outlook, and set forth a plan to actively engage the platform that they were utilizing. Success, like other

themes, was highly individualized. In some cases, participants felt that success depended on the dating goals of the two people involved. Meanwhile, other women felt that success was having a set of preferences and meeting a Black man who met those preferences. Participants detailed different experiences that illuminated additional issues compounding Black women's experiences in online dating.

Sub- Category: Lessons Learned

Along with failures and successes come lessons learned. A few of the women offered insights into what they learned from their online dating experiences. Although the outcome of her online dating efforts resulted in indifference, Tanya appreciated the online dating process. She said, "Like, in the sense of like, learning about myself a little more yeah" (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016). Rather than finding a mate, the lessons Tanya learned about herself were success enough. Melanie also discussed that online dating offered an avenue of self-exploration, saying,

I think, it could be a success. You just have to be honest. I think it's a learning process for people to start to figure out who they really are. Um, and not just who they perceive themselves to be. So, I think it could be a success. (Interview Participant, 4/28/2016)

The process of learning about herself was also important for Sydney, who said:

It was kinda, I don't know I kinda like, it's to me each situation is kinda like a learning experience for me so it's like if I learn something from the situation then I'm not mad at it, you know what I mean? (Interview Participant, 4/8/2016)

Thus, while the majority of the women felt that they had failed if their efforts did not result in love or a relationship, individual engagement with the process is yet another means of demonstrating the heterogenous experiences of Black women.

An occurrence that often goes undiscussed in the online dating community is learning about oneself. Whether the dating community refers to online dating as window shopping, a conveyor belt of singles, or a meat market promoting loose connections, singles learn a lot about how they fare among other singles. The online dating process helped a number of the participants redefine and or reaffirm how they viewed themselves in relationships. Self-definition is a necessary tool when operating within crooked spaces, especially within a space like online dating sites where self-disclosure is a constant practice. Knowing one's self is another key aspect of self-preservation for Black women operating in spaces that constantly attempt to label and redefine them inaccurately (Collins, 1999, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Both Tanya and Melanie offered insight to an aspect of online dating that tested women's identities, and either reaffirmed what they already knew about themselves or caused them to question how they participated in the dating arena. Many factors played roles when participants selected mates; these included: the number of men in the dating pool, the scope of religious beliefs, political leanings, racial backgrounds, and perceptions around body type. Given the socio-historical background of Black women in America, Black women participating in online dating have to be secure with who they are, especially since historically Black female bodies have been sites of cultural conquests (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1992, 1996, 2009).

Beyond lessons in self-awareness and personal growth, many participants emerged with the knowledge of how to maneuver within competitive dating markets and avoid chronic daters, men with dating ADHD, and commitment-phobes. Self-awareness is key for Black women, especially in a fickle dating market where gender ideology governs how Black masculinity and Black femininity mutually construct one another (Collins, 1989, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Nina walked away from online dating for a while, and when she returned she decided to

change her approach based on what she had previously learned. The lessons she learned were most evident in her interactions with the man who became her husband. Even though he had been on Match.com for a long enough period of time to raise red flags, she was open to interactions with him. She explained her approach:

So I'd ask for, you know, examples of some of the women that they interacted with...and my husband had a couple of really good statements, you know, he said that...you know, he had been on it, you know, more or less because he wasn't meeting women any other way. And he had some stints of some longer relationships, so he was on it, but then he'd get off for a couple of months, you know, because he had met somebody. So, it wasn't like he had been on it consistently over multiple years...he found that it was the easiest way to meet women, versus like going out to a club or something. And so that's why he tried it again after a relationship didn't work. Um, so he had some really good examples of, kind of the reasons why he stayed on it. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016).

Due to her past experiences, Nina was able to differentiate her husband from the kind of men who use online dating in an unserious manner or in ways that could be at odds with her own definition of success. Not only did her husband's answers help her strategize, but the answers other men provided in response to her questions about their online dating history also helped her achieve her goals. She explained,

I had one guy just say, you know, all the women I dated were crazy. And it's like...okay, well, that can't be the case, because, you know, I know there's some crazy women in the world, but ... not every single person that you date. So it's either who you're selecting...or, you're kinda crazy. So you know, it just, it depended on... their answers

to that question is really what set my husband out from the rest. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Nina engaged different types of men because she knew what she wanted, and therefore, she was able to discern between men who were still figuring out the dating landscape and men, like her husband, who displayed a level of emotional maturity.

Women have also taken some of the feedback from the men they met online as sage advice, incorporating it into other online dating experiences. Laura (37, never married, with children) said,

I'm finding out more about men on the Internet than I probably ever knew because I'm not one of those women who had like a dad to be like telling you what you should and shouldn't do. I get my man advice from a woman which is probably one-sided (laughs) because women don't know everything about men so a lot of these men or these different relationships that I have online, they've educated me a lot about what I thought men want or what I think men are looking at and what men are actually looking at. (Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

The dating market is an exchange of ideal selves and online personas; Laura offered insight into other aspects of success within a dating culture that is not often discussed. In a society where single parent households are common, a portion of the women self-corrected their dating behavior based on the feedback they mainly received in the online dating market. For example, Laura explained,

I learned that men don't give a damn about your hair (laughs). As long as it's combed they cool. That's you over here with all the colors and the styles and the chopping on it, they don't care (laughs). They don't care about your weave. They...as long as you look

presentable. That came from a man. I thought men cared about your hair. They be like, 'No, because I'm about to mess it up anyway.' Oh, my God! Who knew? I didn't.

(Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

Self-awareness and self-definition proved to be helpful to these women, and were further measures of success. While Black gender ideology simultaneously shapes Black masculinity and Black femininity in relation to one another (Collins, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), these women had a strong sense of themselves that allowed them to self-correct their behavior to align with their dating goals, while others utilized the feedback they received from the men they met online.

Online dating is more than an intimate space for romantic encounters. Ideas about success and failure in online dating are subjective. Each of these women had their own takeaways from their online dating efforts, but each woman learned something about herself. Interview participants also shared what they learned from the positive and negative feedback that they received from the men they met online. The majority of the women felt that negative experiences were often the products of bad interactions with men online. Participants defined bad interactions as lacking a minimum level of compatibility. Consequently, when the men offered negative feedback, the women dismissed it as being negative reactions from men who did not receive the type of attention they were looking for from these women (i.e. more dates and/or romantic physical activity). Reflecting on both positive and negative perceptions of men online, the women in this study revealed that the process of dating digitally was a positive learning experience in regard to learning about, confirming, and reaffirming aspects of how they viewed themselves. Responses revealed that the positive and negative interactions online pushed against or reaffirmed what these women knew to be true about themselves. Interview

participants revealed that in order to navigate the crooked space of online dating, Black women needed to understand who they were prior to joining any of the online dating platforms because online environments force Black women to define their body types and often provide a dating market that does not consist of a large number of datable men.

Category: Experiences with Other Mates

Question ten of the interview protocol elicited a large number of participant responses. Participants were asked whether or not their dating experiences related to other Black women. Four other themes emerged from this question: Black men (6), Deceptive profiles (2), Non-Black Men (6) and Regional (2).

The “Black men” theme spoke to how the women saw themselves in relation to Black men, offering insight about the demographic they all preferred. “Deceptive profiles” referred to women discovering that aspects of some men’s dating profiles were less than accurate, a common occurrence in the online dating community. “Non-Black” men referred to the exchanges that the women had with men of other races. Lastly, “Regional” is a theme featuring responses from women who felt that their dating experiences were influenced by their geographic locations. This section highlights the two prominent themes that emerged: Black men and non-Black men.

Maya discussed her positive experiences with Black men and the way they perceive Black women, which was apparent in her optimistic outlook. She said,

So, and with Black men, and maybe I’m just like Miss Positive Patty, but I haven’t met a Black man that sees a Black woman negatively... Um, most guys, most Black guys...Not most. All the Black guys that I’ve met are happy to meet Black women.

(Interview Participant, 4/5/2016)

Maya did not express having negative experiences with Black men, which was encouraging for a participant seeking to meet Black men online. At first glance, dating within their race was a desired outcome, but like other themes, the experiences varied among participants.

Not all of the women in this study had simple responses regarding Black men's perceptions of Black women. For example, Cecilia said,

There's just something about the way Black woman are perceived at this point in time that just, it doesn't seem like it's a positive thing. Um, we have a lot of folks that want to be like us but our brothers aren't necessarily ready to handle us or ready to necessarily deal with what you have to deal with in being with somebody like a Black woman. Um, we're just we're a different breed, we're a different breed of person and I think that's something that makes us awesome. Um, but I think it's also something that, um, a lot people either don't want to deal with or can't handle. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Cecilia touched on point that undergirds this study. The group of women in the study was confident, self-assured, smart, professional, and looking for love. There is a delicate balance between being a strong Black woman with a sense of independence and still being considered a candidate in today's dating market. In one respect, Black women who possess strength centered around their own self-assurance could be misconstrued to the opposite sex as someone not interested in companionship. The point that Cecilia made is that there a level of confusion developed in men, more specifically Black men, when they do not take the time to understand the complexities of dating a Black woman. She also alluded to Black men's willingness to date outside their race and also speaks to the success of Black women in the dating market. From Cecilia's perspective, it is difficult to find Black men who fully understand and can stand in the crooked room with them; moreover, the Black men they encounter are willing to date non-Blacks

who take on aspects of Black womanhood, but do not have to engage sexism and racism the way Black women must.

Theme: Black Men Part I (View of Black Women Online)

This section discusses perceptions the women have based on conversations that they have had with Black men throughout their online dating experiences. Online dating is another avenue of communication where daters exchange ideas about numerous topics. One aspect of online dating culture allows daters to appraise how they compare to other daters. Naturally, self-disclosure is a part of the dating culture, but among singles it is another way to find out how they measure up to others as well as get a feel for the current dating climate. Similar to the women acknowledging their shortcomings in Q07, Nina described her conversations with and shared experiences of other online daters. Whereas Cecilia regarded Black women a special breed that Black men sometimes do not want or know how to deal with, Nina shared some of the reasons offered by the Black men she came across online:

Interesting enough, I mean, I know a lot of women and that, you know, it's unfortunate, but you do get a lot of women that don't really show that stuff, show their positive attributes to men because they're so guarded. And so I-I do feel like that is indicative of, um, you know, the nature of how, you know, my other sisters are in in the community. And it's unfortunate because I feel like some of them have been jaded and don't, you know, and don't have that positive outlook, they go into it kind of with-with a little bit of negativity and I think...that was one thing that most men said was refreshing about me that they didn't get from other women that they dated. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Nina spoke to some of the other popular themes that were found, such as Black women not being perceived as open or coming off as disinterested or distant, a point also raised by Melanie in

regard to her lack of success. Nina discussed how both she and the men she interacted with noticed that Black women do not always promote a level of openness that allows men, more specifically Black men, to engage them in intimate interactions online.

The crooked room unrelentingly challenges Black womanhood. The collective consciousness of American society reproduces perceptual frames that caricature Black women in a carnivalesque manner where mediated spaces operate like fun houses with distorted mirrors that can contest individuals' self-images. Unfortunately, in some instances Black men contribute to the crooked room by ascribing and projecting negative perceptions onto Black women. For the women in this study, generally, and the descriptions Nina offered, specifically, Black women are often reluctant to open up to Black men. The persistent need to preserve their authentic-selves requires that these women search for men who understand them and how they must balance race, class, and gender in their lived experiences.

Nina also offered insight about women who were too open or assertive in the online dating arena. She said that some women came across as too eager to find a life-long partner, explaining:

Or the clinginess, you know, they find somebody and it's like okay, this is my man, I'm-I'm marrying you tomorrow. And it's like, well, you know, you kind of need to get to know the person and (laughter)...you know, take-take-take, you know, take your time, you know, still be independent. Figure out if this is a mate for you, um, both ways. So you know. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

The other end of the courting spectrum is when Black women are too eager to get into relationships and do not take the time to get to know the men who they meet online. Nina

expressed the importance of balance and the need to engage men online with a measured approach in order to achieve success.

The high value that participants placed on financial support is not surprising given this group's professional status and came up multiple times throughout this study. Themes such as stability, career, financial security, and employment were also previously mentioned in Q02. The women in this study viewed financial security as positive because they could take care of themselves and did not depend on anyone for monetary support. Desirée (31,) realized that she could be present and supportive when dating a man online without having to feel like she needed to save or support him financially. When asked what she learned about herself from the way men perceived her, she answered, "Even though I may want to help somebody with a certain situation whether it be financial or otherwise, also being more reserved in that area as well" (Interview Participant, 4/12/2016).

Like many other daters, male and female, the online dating process revealed Desirée's personal boundaries. Various perspectives make up the courting spectrum, including the many levels of emotional maturity and how daters articulate their affection for another person. Desirée's experiences are another example of how dating digitally requires Black women to maneuver the obstacles pertaining to their own growth while simultaneously participating in a space that sometimes operates by or rewrites dating norms. This is fundamentally the love-hate relationship participants described in this study. Nina discussed the dating climate for successful, financially secure women in Atlanta, GA:

I think, it-the-the three real patterns were, um, you have the women that are successful and that have their own, which is a positive, but they almost took it to another level like, I don't need you. Like, you're gonna, you're gonna be...I'm gonna help you and you're

gonna help me but, you know, I can move on to other things, like it's that mentality, which is unfortunate, it-it's a guarded woman. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Nina shared that there is no shortage of successful Black women in Atlanta, but they are guarded. From one woman to another, Nina viewed this level of independence as counterintuitive for women looking for love. Professional women's independence remains a quality that cuts both ways. In one respect, this type of woman is self-sufficient, but depending on how she self-presents her independence, she may be viewed as a turn-off to Black men. This particular theme pertained to what I call the cultural disjuncture between Black men and Black women. The issue that emerged was a miscommunication of gender roles, or the redefinition of traditional gender roles, or quite simply ignoring some gender roles while adhering to others. Women revealed that men have expressed that it was hard to get to know Black women. Looking at some of the other themes, this so-called difficulty is a consistent underlying issue. This professional group of Black women struggled to balance the pride they felt over their professional accomplishments with appearing so self-sufficient that they do not want male companionship.

Theme: Black Men Part II (Transformations in Dating Markets.)

The burden of perception is ever present and Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) articulate this problem utilizing Black feminist epistemologies to describe what they refer to as “double dutch”:

As girls, then as adults, Black women tell us again and again that they must struggle to keep their balance as they straddle the twin identities of race and gender, shifting their step, altering their rhythm, devising a new move at a moment's notice. Many do it with grace, navigating the intricacies of two realities: I am Black! I am woman! (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 37)

Building on this idea of double Dutch and the various ways in which, little Black girls and adult women approach and strategize their dual identities, participants in this study also expressed a duality that made pursuing a relationship with Black men difficult in various ways. The difficulties included societal negative perceptions of Black women, not seeing eye-to-eye with Black men, and misperceptions of the participants' personalities.

Laura associated negotiating perceptions of men online and the experience of double Dutch. She said,

The men that I've spoken to they tell me that it is harder to get in with a Black woman than it is to get in with any other woman so they go where the less work is I guess. It's easier to, you know, jump rope than it is to do double-dutch so they don't want to double-dutch they want to stay over there and jump single rope so that's what they do.

(Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

Laura spoke to the level of effort that she believes it takes to get to know a Black woman. Both Laura and Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) reference a level of consciousness that is required in order to fully understand how Black women maneuver within American society. Most of the Black women in this study spoke of how Black women are viewed as strong, but sometimes such strength of personality repels Black men.

Laura offered more examples and continued to discuss the delicate interactions between Black men and Black women. She said,

Um, the work is ... Black women have a lot of stuff to do. A lot of us are single women and we're doing everything by ourselves so since we are so fixated on making it and we're so fixated on, 'I got it, I got it, I got it' you don't allow the men in your life who are supposed to be there to take off a little bit of your weight... instead of allowing him to

be the man he wants to be for you. That's just like an example of what I see in like let you in, you know, other women, you know, they look forward to being um, put first. They look forward to their chair being pushed out, they look forward to the door being opened and flowers and candy at the door. For our, Black women, you bring a woman flowers and candy, she's asking you what you want (laughs) and so when I say let you in, it's just your ... and this is coming from Black men, I didn't make this up (laughs)...

Black men get tired of getting their feelings hurt so they go across the street where their efforts are welcomed instead of shunned. Does that make sense? (Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

This notion of a special breed and a balance between love and independence remains a consistent site of contention between the Black women in the study and Black men. The need to strike a balance between love and independence is at the heart of the difficulty participants experienced in creating romantic relationships with Black men and is yet another element of the love-hate relationship that the participants in this study articulated.

hooks (2009) described American society as a White supremacist capitalist patriarchy; this perspective is particularly instructive when examining the racially-gendered experiences of Black womanhood occurring within a crooked room where sexism and racism is consistently present. The women in this study, like many Black women, appear to actively create counter narratives to offset the prevalent negative perceptual frames that constrain Black womanhood with respect to their perceived dateability. According to *Report: Black Women Have Become The Most Educated Group In The U.S.* (2012), African American women are the most educated group in America. In stark contrast, other research also shows the grim reality of mass incarceration that has imprisoned generations of Black men (Alexander, 2012; Collins, 2005).

Compound that with Black women opting to be single in an effort to solidify their positions in the middle class (Lynda & Kris, 2008; Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper, & Salters, 2007), and this creates a cultural disjuncture that shifts gender roles and rewrites *traditional* Black masculinity and Black femininity.

What emerges, then, among the women in this study is a narrative that explains how traditional gender roles have become skewed to such an extent that they have changed the interactions between Black men and Black women. Based on feedback from her husband and other men, Nina shared how the change in perceived gender roles has begun to reshape Atlanta's, dating market:

[M]en need to be felt like they are actually needed (laughter). And, a lot of men see that as a negative thing, you know, a woman that's like, you know, I can live without you, it doesn't matter. You know, so it's that, you know, that independent woman, you-you get here in this city because there are so many strong Black women that are successful for themselves. Um ...which I think is completely changing the dynamic in this city, and the reason why there are so many successful Black single women. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Shifting gender dynamics alters the ways Black women fit into their dating spaces. Rose felt like Black women have taken on more of the courtship responsibilities, and Black men have become comfortable with being catered to. She saw herself as more traditional and wanted to be courted, but the men she came across were not meeting her expectations. Not only were these men not meeting her expectations, they appeared to not have a problem walking away and finding other women to date. Rose opened up her critique to women as whole, not just Black women. She felt

that the current dating climate is changing for the worse and traditional women like her are losing out:

But I hate to just limit that to just Black women because I know that it's not just Black women who are being aggressive. But I do know just from, you know, from my, from male friends telling me that like, 'These are Black women that are, you know, are super aggressive.' And, you know, they taking, they taking over. And I, and it just makes it bad. It makes hard for someone like me who prefers a more traditional approach.

(Interview Participant, 4/21/2016)

The cultural norms of the 21st century dating market have shifted. More Black women are becoming proactive or acting as the aggressors. Women like Rose, who consider themselves devout Christians and believe in traditional gender roles, feel like women who take the initiative are making Black men lazy. The combination of women assuming the traditional male gender role of being the pursuer and the number of women on online dating sites creates an obstacle for more traditional women who want to be pursued. Rose struggled with the shift of the crooked room. The crooked room constantly adjusts to account for dominant discourses within popular culture, making it difficult for some Black women to find equilibrium in American society.

While Rose appreciated a man who would court and pursue her, Nina had a lighter approach that emphasized positivity and communication with men online with little expectation. Nina continued the conversation about being positive and how that came across in comparison to other women according to men's feedback. After walking away from Match.com, Nina made a conscious effort the second time around to be positive and it appeared that the men she encountered were receptive to her positivity. She said,

The perceptions that I received and is that indicative of Black women as a whole? Um, I think so...So that statement in itself, I think, is-is an example of, you know, they-they mentioned that I was really, you know, positive, I was laid back, I...you know, I-I didn't really want anything from them, and I was kind of had my own thing. I was looking for a partner versus somebody to take care of me. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

The women who stepped away from online dating and changed their strategy the second time around, all have said writing profiles that were more open received positive feedback from men. Having met her husband during her second stint on Match.com, Nina understands how presenting herself positively while considering men's feelings and expectations was crucial to her success.

Terri offered insight on the issue that diversity poses on dating sites, saying, Um, so it is a little difficult if you're on the site and you're looking for more Black men, because they're not always there or if they are there you may not be the woman that they're looking to date. They may be looking to date other women outside of their race, so um, they kind of have a little bit more of a op- open forum to find exactly what they're looking for but versus Black women who are just kind of narrow minded in a sense of looking just for Black men. (Interview Participant, 4/22/2016)

Like many other studies on racial homophily, Terri discussed interracial dating. Like off-line dating markets, online dating markets can be clusters of love triangles consisting of singles chasing other singles both in and out of their own racial lines.

Laura jokingly offered insight on diversity as it pertained to Black men as well as men in general. She explained,

So I guess in essence it, I guess race is a factor but for a lot of people it's not. I know for men it's not an issue. Men like what men like. Men are sight and sound, from what I'm hearing, this is coming from men. If it looks pretty, it don't matter what color she is, she's pretty and she's nice to me, I'm going to hang out with her. That's coming from men. Now, I've heard from men that it's easier to date the others which meaning, Mexican and White and Chinese and everybody else. It's easier to date them because the wall is a lot lower to jump over you know? (laughs) (Interview Participant, 4/13/2016)

There tends to be point of contention regarding the transformation of cultural norms and how Black men and women court each other. Professional Black women who have successful careers tried to balance the same sense of independence that carried them in their professions without scaring off potential mates by seeming as if they do not want to be loved. The transformation of the 21st century dating market includes Black women who maintain traditional values and Black women who have taken on some of the roles of a pursuer. Today's dating culture includes Black singles, and they are in flux trying to find equilibrium among traditional and nontraditional dating norms.

Black men were separated into two sections as the themes emerged, which helped to illuminate particular aspects of the Black female and Black male dynamic. The first issue pertaining to Black women and Black men was their perceptions of themselves. Women shared that men told them that a number of Black women that they came into contact with were not positive in the sense of being unguarded and opening up to potential mates. In this study, failing to be positive caused men to view some of these women as cold and uninterested. On the other end of the spectrum, while messaging and conversing with men online, the women in the study revealed that men have also encountered Black women who were clingy, meaning women who

placed a lot of pressure on getting married and those who often tried to expedite the dating process. Some of the women struggled with supporting Black men online. Interview participants shared that they needed to learn how to be present for men without feeling the need to support them financially. Financial stability proved to be an issue between Black men and women in online dating. While some women in the study struggled not to support their partners financially, others offered insight on the more recent climate of successful Black women presenting themselves as being so independent, and thus not needing male companionship.

Theme: Interactions with Non-Black Men

Another element of this sample of women's successes and failures was their willingness to date outside of their race. For the majority of the women, they did not exchange messages with non-Black men, especially if those men were White. Maya offered her reasoning for not engaging with non-Black men. She said: "So, the White guys on certain apps, when White guys will hit me up, I don't really talk to them because I'm not looking to have a White husband" (Interview Participant, 4/5/2016). Maya's personal definition of success, wanting a Black husband and family, precluded her from even talking to a White man.

Ella represented a small group of the women that was open to dating outside of their race, but did not receive attention from non-Black men. She explained:

Even though my preference at this point just because it's just what I'm attracted to, is I do prefer Black men, I think I am open to others if they are showing interest. I've never had anybody approach me that wasn't [Black]. (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

A very small group of the women in this study were willing to date outside of their race.

Although a few of the women were willing to date men of other races the responses revealed

little success. It seemed that interactions with White men in particular were unwanted and interactions with non-Black men were nonexistent, ignored, or resulted in negative exchanges.

Lailah offered a common rationale among these women—their intolerance for both racism and sexism. Dating companies promote their platforms as fun and light hearted, but sometimes the combination of romantic encounters and playfulness causes individuals to overstep. At times, crossing the line is a cultural misstep. She explained:

And I also feel like, with, when you start talking about non-Black men...I can't do it. I'm on the phone...Um, then that's where a lot of the stereotypes start coming into play. That the stuff that they say is wild. Uh, the things that the non-Black men say. 'I have never experienced sex with a Black woman and, you know, wouldn't that be a great experience.' (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Lailah's experience is similar to that of many other Black women who have been subjected to the perceptual frame of the Jezebel, which paints Black womanhood as primitive, naturally lascivious and seductive. The Black Jezebel, which dates back to the slave era, is centered on White desire, exoticism, and consumption that objectifies rather than values the Black woman's body (Collins, 1999, 2005; Harris-Perry, 2015; Pilgrim, 2002). While it is true that women in America are sexualized regardless of their ethnicities, Black women often face a double burden. First, they are left out of discourses pertaining to beauty ideals, which privilege Whiteness and its physical attributes. Second, because of the historical antecedents, Black women in America are viewed as sexually open and available. Thus, the Jezebel stereotype differs from the general idea of hypersexualization that many American women face. The hypersexualization of women in general relies on beauty and desire while the Jezebel describes not only desire, but also consumption and the societal devaluation and dismissal of the Black

body post consumption. Race play and other racialized fetishes speak directly to centuries of American colonial gaze, which consumes and discards Black female bodies, and then rationalizes the process by burdening the victims with the perceptions of the Jezebel (Hernandez, 2004; North, 2012). Cultural missteps are also a testament to male daters' simple audacity reproduced by male privilege from a societal level, clumsily objectifying women as Desirée highlighted:

Oh, usually it, it results in, um, asked for nudes or being sent nude pictures very early on that I didn't ask for or I had one guy this week curse me out and call me a cunt because I didn't, I didn't do face meeting up with him after he kind of creeped me out so...

(Interview Participant, 4/12/2016)

Responses regarding non-Black men reaffirmed the participants' dating preferences and supported other studies on race fetishism, which highlight Black woman as hypersexualized and objectified in racially-motivated male fantasies. Simply put, this group of women was largely uninterested in non-Black men; they were especially uninterested in White men. A few of the women expressed a level of openness to try to date interracially, but Black men were their primary focus. The majority of responses pertaining to non-Black men were not positive. Interview participants recalled stories and gave multiple responses in which non-Black men expressed that their interest was purely to experiment and have sex with a Black woman. Interactions with non-Black men resulted in interactions that were indifferent or racially sexualized. hooks (1992) referred to this consumption of race along the lines of desire as "Eating the Other"(pp.21-39). In this instance, American mass culture commodifies otherness. This is no surprise as conventional sites predominantly use White couples to advertise their sites, with the occasional racially ambiguous person of color.

Theme: Regional

The theme regional represents the responses that discussed the impact of location on online dating pursuits. A common misconception about digital courtship is the technology's ability to bridge physical and geographical constraints. Despite the fact that online dating platforms allow singles to meet without being face-to-face, location and proximity are still important components that play a role in whether or not subscribers are willing to engage in long distant relationships. Also, online dating may not be popular among the demographic being sought after in certain cities. Just as each dating platform maintains its own set of cultural norms, which influence the types of people it attracts with marketing strategies, user interface, and pricing of membership packages, dating platforms serve singles nationally and subscribers are susceptible to the cultural norms of their local dating markets. In other words, the subscribers' dating experiences can also be influenced by other daters' willingness or unwillingness to date, and that willingness or unwillingness can be related to location.

Women continued to describe the transformation of the dating market in their respective areas. Location remained a considerable obstacle for these women. Desirée explained an aspect of dating culture specific to her area saying,

They used to call it chocolate city, the DMV area. I, I personally think that as a Black woman who is mostly interested in dating men of color that it can be challenging because at least in this particular area where the men are good looking and they have good jobs, it seems as if like they kind of know that so it's like there's this whole different swagger or attitude or different, different way of acting when it comes to dating women. So like a man that knows that he has a lot to offer or knows that he's somewhat of a, um, a catch in the sea of like crazy dudes is going to act differently, meaning that he can, you know,

date a whole bunch of women all at once and like, you know...do whatever because he knows that hey, I'm basically a prize in, in this dating arena so that has been, I think, one of the biggest challenges of dating in, you know, in the DC, Maryland, Virginia area, for me at least. (Interview Participant, 4/12/2016)

While the other women struggled to find good-looking, professional Black men, Desirée had access to many potential mates. Unfortunately, in her opinion, the ratio of Black men to Black women was exploited by the men. Nina discussed professional Black women in Atlanta struggling to find love due to their independence and potential inability to allow a good man to partner with them romantically. In this instance, Desirée has access to good men, but the men in the DMV, in her observation, utilized their standing as good men to date multiple women simultaneously.

Terri, a 34-year-old northern California native, also felt that her location was not conducive to her online dating efforts. She said,

I think for me being in the Bay area, I think it's not as...it hasn't been as successful versus the people that I know who've done this, they don't live in California, they live in Texas, one lives in DC, um so I think again, it goes back to the type of men that are um, on those apps um, and what you're looking for. For me, I'm looking for Black men and it's not as big of a concentration of that here in the Bay area versus it would be in maybe in Texas or in DC. (Interview Participant, 4/2/2016)

While Desirée complained about the DC area, Terri felt like there were more options in the DC area and other places such as Texas, which she perceived as having large Black populations.

Terri continued to explain the correlation between the importance of geographical location and who shows up in her online dating searches, stating:

I think it's a combination of people not necessarily participating in them, and I also think it...it depends on where you live. Um, if you're looking for a particular guy, like for me I'm looking for a Black man, so I feel like in other markets, um, there's a higher concentration of Black men...but it's just a higher concentration, so you get a bigger selection of them on the apps. Um, on the online dating sites versus being in areas like say, the Bay area where they may not be on the apps, it's not a, an extreme high population, so even with it being small, then there's a much smaller population of them on the online apps or the sites. (Interview Participant, 4/2/2016)

Location is another aspect online daters need to consider when searching for love on the Internet. Race, class, and gender all play parts in these women's dating experiences, but daters' locations also play roles in who appears as potential mates. Technology alleviates a number of spatial barriers; thus, singles online have different attitudes towards love and proximity. Some women expressed that they would like a dating site that offered more international options, matching them with men from other countries. Other women expressed that geographic closeness was important to them and tended to veer away from long distance relationships. Regional issues also included the cultural influences of each area. Despite being online, dating markets in various cities posed different regional constraints. Women in this study expressed that some areas such as Washington D.C., known as "Chocolate City," or southern states were better dating markets for Black women because such locations provided a greater number of professional Black men. California was mentioned a few times by participants due to the fact that it is heavily influenced by Hollywood and the state's liberal reputation explained the acceptance of interracial couples. Women not interested in interracial dating and for those who often do not fit the portrayals of Hollywood sex symbols were placed in a peculiar position in today's dating

market. Thus, these women experienced the unavoidable truth that offline cultural norms—the very angles of the crooked room—influence the online dating realm, in both positive and negative ways.

Category: Indicative of Dating Climate

Another aspect of understanding the women's perceptions of their successes and failures in online dating is how they viewed themselves among other Black women participating in today's dating climate. The independent theme undergirded many of the other themes and tells a story of Black female online daters attempting to fit within the frames of appropriate Black femininity.

Similar to other studies that examined perceptual frames constraining Black womanhood and their effectiveness at limiting their viability as dating prospects, participants offered insight into understanding how professional, middle class Black women negotiate historical and contemporary perceptions shaping the image of Black womanhood in an effort to integrate in predominantly White spaces. The majority of the responses indicated that the women in this study felt that their dating experiences differed from other Black women. Two women were unsure if their experiences aligned with other Black women, while 12 respondents shared the sentiment of having a different dating experience than other women and seven respondents agreed that their dating experiences were indicative of today's dating climate.

When asked whether or not they believed that their dating experiences related to Black women as a whole, responses varied. Some women felt that their dating experiences were similar to other Black women, while others felt like their dating experiences were either completely different or slightly different from other Black women.

In answering the question, Khloe acknowledged that Black women are not a monolithic group, and each woman experienced the dating market differently. She said:

No. I just don't know how to answer. I want to say yes, but at the same time, I know that it can't be Black women as a whole because we're multifaceted and everybody wants different things. I prefer not to date outside. I prefer a Black man first, whether there's women, Black women who want to date everyone equally, so their experience is different because they have a more broad, uh, net, (laughs) if you will. They have more of a broad spectrum of people that they're interested in or they're willing to date, where mine's more narrow, so my experience is going to be more narrow, um, and limiting, um so I think that women who have similar desires to have a mate like I want, yes, I think we do have similar experiences. If there—Yes, I absolutely think we do. Um, but for those Black women who are open to greater, uh, opportunities with people outside their race, I think that their experience is going to be a little different. (Interview Participant, 4/11/2016)

Even Black women who seek similar things are not exactly the same as other Black women who bring different attributes to the dating market. It all depends on how people are raised, their religious beliefs, personality traits, and other ideals that shape the individual. These individual differences either run parallel to or resist the angles in the crooked room. Despite Black women having different experiences with online dating, collectively, they are the least successful bloc in the online dating spaces. Participants experienced online dating differently, but struggled with the medium and the men who used it for various reasons. In conjunction with their individuality, as a whole, Black women's behaviors and dating goals influence the ways in which the women in this study engaged various dating platforms, all which yielded different results.

Lailah felt that her dating experiences were slightly different from other Black women due to the number of chances she allowed potential mates during the courtship process. In comparison to other women, she was willing to invest a little more time at the beginning of the courtship process unlike other women in her age group. She described her willingness thusly:

I can't say because I feel very, I feel very different. There's sometimes when I hear other people talk about what their experiences, um...It's not a lot...Sometimes when I hear other people talk about their experiences it's not something I can necessarily relate to because I'm the kinda person who gives lots of people chances. Whereas I think other women, especially women my age, they try to, um, eliminate people before they invest any time so they're more likely to, uh, ask a million questions up front, to have lots of requirements and, you know, conditions that I'm looking for this and I'm looking for that so that they, um, really, kind of, uh, narrow their field before they ever get to the first dinner. (Interview Participant, 4/7/2016)

Lailah discussed how women in her age group approached online dating differently. The women Lailah mentioned had set preferences in mind when deciding whether to date a man or to reject his advances. Much of the filtering process is done before going out on a physical date. Lailah's description of other women's dating strategies sounds similar to a formal questionnaire almost along the lines of an interrogation. The motivation behind the questioning process may be indicative of the other reasons stated, such as looking for a mate seriously, a reaction to bad relationships, or simply an adaptation due to the number of candidates they have come in contact with that are looking for casual trysts.

Rose, who, in her own opinion, had not experienced success, realized that other Black couples were in fact meeting online and getting married, which motivated her to give online dating a try. She said:

I know quite a few people who have had successful online dating experiences. Um, Black, Black women. Um, I have a friend who's engaged to be married next month. Um, you know, I have another friend currently who, they're not, they're not official yet but, you know, she's very, they're, you know, they're moving in that direction.

(Interview Participant, 4/21/2016)

Looking at Rose's other responses; she made a clear distinction between her unsuccessful attempts online versus some of her friends who have been successful. The enthusiasm to join online dating sites came from observing other Black people's success with the platforms. Rose explained,

And I have other people that I know who progressed into marriages from online, you know. Um, so and they're Black, you know, so that's that was part of the reason they, they were the ones who kinda had me going back. You know, because I'm like, 'Okay I know it's possible,' you know, um, these women, you know, have, you know, the same the, a similar makeup as I do. Um, and, you know, they're meeting quality men on here. So I know that it's possible. And, um, so then, and, you know, and there's also people I've, you know. (Interview Participant, 4/21/2016)

Midway through her response Rose shifted back to discussing women like her, meaning women who have not had much success with online-dating. Rose's shift turned a negative into a positive, explaining,

I have other friends who, who have similar, you know, have negative, more negative experiences as well. But, um, you know, but I, I do know that, you know, it, it can be a good thing. And that's what, what I was so optimistic about. Um, so, you know, and for a Black, you know, Black women, it can be, eh, I guess it's just, you know (laughs), it's just, it's just like a divine intervention. I guess if God sees for you to meet your man online, then it's possible. And, you know, for us, some of us it just may not be that avenue that he wants us to go. Because, you know, he knows our personalities and he knows what we need, so, uh, it's just not for everybody. (Interview Participant, 4/21/2016)

This is another instance where a woman in this study balanced both resilience and a firm sense of self. Rose described her overall experience with online dating as unsuccessful. She dove deeper and explained comfortably that her experiences differed from other women that she knew. She expressed enthusiasm and positivity for other Black women who found love online and in that same breath, she articulated very clearly that online dating may not be for her or women like her. Rose punctuated her response with a reference to God and her lack of success as divine intervention. The locus of Rose's resilience and strong sense of self came from her faith. Faith remained one of the many sorting mechanisms among singles in the dating community. The various views and priorities on faith provided a variety of outcomes in the match making process, sometimes resulting in a series of unsuccessful matches.

Although Sydney struggled in her response to the question, she essentially agreed with the idea that Black women were perceived the same way online, as they were off-line. She said, (laughing) I (sigh) I don't know because you know what, a lot of like, I don't, I can't say I have a lot of close friends that are on online dating, um, it's like people I meet now like

we may be in social groups and we talk about these things but like my, my immediate close friends, like none of them have done this online dating thing, like I have a few girl cousins who, who have done it but I can't say that, I don't know I just feel like, I feel like it's the same in real life there's like, Black women who are like this, there's Black women who are into this, like I don-I can't say that it's really, like I can't really tie the two in like I feel like Black women are perceived the same way online as we are in real life um...

(Interview Participant, 4/8/2016)

Due to the long history of systemic racism in America that has plagued Black couples, Melanie felt that it would take a very strong man to offset a strong Black woman. She discussed how hard it was for her to find a man who is stronger than her. Melanie met worthy men; however, they were not stronger than her. She described a discrepancy or a power imbalance between mates when dating, and also articulated her thoughts on what makes a "good man" saying,

But the thing is, is that like, due to what has occurred in America, you have this ridiculously large generation of strong women, strong women, and strong women want very strong men. And, so it's difficult because a strong woman doesn't...It's not that she doesn't want a man. She wants...She needs somebody who's stronger than her. And so, it's hard because you find yourself, like, if this is all I can get, I'll settle for him. And he's a wonderful person, but he's just not what I really want. So, I feel like as a Black female, yes. I am experiencing that, because there are a lot of really good men, but just not the right man for me because I am a very strong female. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Melanie's thoughts on strong women were an underlying sentiment sometimes hinted at or alluded to among this group of women. The women in this study acknowledged and discussed the socio-historical experiences of Black women and how they shape and mold their identities. Black women are individuals affected by both racism and sexism, discrimination that the women in this study are well aware of. Their strength was a combination of both resiliency and hesitancy. Responses similar to Melanie's depicted a commonsense understanding of Black women maneuvering within the matrices of class, racism, and sexism in American society. Any hesitation while discussing strength was a moment during which participants were processing the various case-by-case scenarios to decide which strengths were appropriate for dating. The demeanor of these women, via phone, revealed that these women started negotiating the balance between strength, femininity, and dateability at a very young age; moreover, they understood that they will continue to do so for years to come. The idea of a strong Black woman fueled the women's preferences for a Black man, in hopes that he could relate to their lived racialized experiences due to the level of potency behind her idea of strength.

Melanie was asked to explain her meaning of being strong. She answered,

I'm talking about some power. I mean, a man who walks in the room and his energy and his power, like, you can sense it... I mean like, a man who, like, takes care of his household and is the head and the king. I mean, a real man. And, like, a woman needs to feel and know that their man can do that. So a woman will love, and fall in love with and marry and have a child for a man because he's a good man. It's doesn't mean she's really trumped that he is the king. That's why there's always a constant struggle in households. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Melanie's ideas of a good Black man were partly based on traditional gender roles as well as her desire for being able to let go and have a partner to support her. These desires are an example of "Jumping Double-Dutch" or balancing strength, resiliency, and love. This sample of professional women makes decisions at work, manages employees, yet still in intimate relationships wants the option to defer decision-making duties to a partner they love and trust. For them, that is not relinquishing their agency, but joining forces with a male counterpart that has a strong sense of self and ambition.

Lastly, Melanie explained her idea of a good man versus a strong man. She described deeper qualities in the man she is looking for stating,

It's almost like, uh, um, it's like a spiritual and a mental state. Or it's like, I want a man yet I don't necessarily need a man, kind of thing. I want a man. I want, um, to surrender, but I know that I can take care of myself... There's a power that I embody and so I want to be with a man who's power matches mine. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

There were a number of accomplishments that defined Melanie's independence: owning a car, education, and a career. Her strength and confidence were both reaffirmed, and she wanted a strong man, but she did not feel like she would be dependent on one. She knew, believed, and described herself as "awesome." Melanie's viewpoint and sense of self not only came from her success but also from her faith.

A reoccurring theme was participants' unwillingness to put forth the effort or place themselves in situations to meet potential mates, whether online or in person. Angela took a more proactive approach, unlike some of her female friends and associates, and proactively sought out opportunities to meet people and socialize. For her, the end goal was not always to

find a romantic partner, but rather getting out there and putting herself in the mix. She explained,

I'm a member of a single ladies group and when we share stories I find that I'm probably one of the few who is trying to do something about it. Meaning, the days of sitting around single and some man better be the pizza delivery man otherwise I'm not going to meet anybody, that don't work no more and it never has. Right? So (laughing) um I, I the way I see it, I'd rather be out living my life than sitting up in the house bitching and moaning, excuse my language, about what men there are or aren't you know, to date and there's no good men and all that stuff. That is old and tired, and I think to me we have enough options socially that you can try. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Angela, however, did not view her experiences as widely applicable to other Black women. She explained,

I think there's a small number of us that kind of look at life through that lens of you should just be out living your life and if you live your life options will cross your path because you're out living and I think most women, especially after a certain age and I'm going to say maybe after 40, 45 they get real content to sit on the sidelines and have commentary about what everybody else is doing or not doing but won't get in the game, and that's kind of how I look at it. (Interview Participant, 4/18/2016)

Angela spoke to two popular schools of thought in both this study and within the dating community: women willing to put themselves out there and women unwilling to be proactive in their dating efforts. Angela's strategy was to live life to the fullest, and considered a man who was interested in doing the same an ideal candidate. In Angela's opinion, Black women need to position themselves in social environments in order to be successful in today's dating market.

Angela's dating experience was in clear contrast to what she considered the norm for Black women in her age group.

Maintaining an online dating profile by changing preferences or other categories might have helped some women find more potential mates. Gwynn felt that she did not have success in online dating; therefore, she could not completely relate to other women she knew and their dating experiences. Success stories in online dating for people that she knew seemed to be for non-Blacks. She later wondered if she could alter her success by changing her preference settings on her profile. She said,

Um, I don't really see good quality men in online dating. Maybe it's you know, the way I have my preferences set up or location set up. I don't know. But from where I live, I don't see a good variety of choices. (Interview Participant, 4/11/2016)

Gwynn's experience differed from Black women in her immediate social circles. By looking a little closer she offered insight into her online dating experience, and mentioned that possibly her search criteria and location may have contributed to her lack of success online. This is important because the women in this study experienced online dating differently due to religious beliefs, reluctance, and passively participating on dating platforms. Gwynn alluded to another potential issue, which was being "geographically unattractive," meaning her location was not a desirable dating market for many reasons. Also, the settings for her profile could possibly be set where it is not conducive to her relationship goals. Whether it was Nina bypassing serial daters, Laliah giving potential mates more chances than her peers, Melanie wanting a Black man that matched her strength, or Gwynn's search settings, the Black women in this study had different dating experiences for a variety of reasons. Although Black women's identities have historically been

defined by using race and gender, this sample voiced numerous perspectives that were influenced by many factors.

Theme: Advice to Black women from Black Women

Question Q011 was a wrap-up question that allowed the participants to share other aspects of online dating that they thought important. The rapport between me and the interview participants was fairly candid. Women were eager to join the study and offered insight about how it pertained to them as Black women, and in some cases, they offered advice to help other Black women who were either unsuccessful or embarking on online dating for the first time. Importantly, the “Advice to Black women” theme emerged because the participants’ wanted this study to aid Black women in their dating pursuits. The biggest take-away or common understanding among the women that provided recommendations was that in order to be successful in online dating, it was important for Black women to know who they are as adult women first and foremost.

Nina tried Match, walked away, tried Match for a second time using a different approach, and met her husband as a result. This experience helped her better understand herself and her desires more fully, and formed the foundation of her advice:

I think for me, what I share with other women that I know that are interested in online dating, I think it's-the biggest thing for me is just, make sure that you, one: are-one with yourself and know who you are because, you know, if you don't know, you're gonna go out and try to find and meet guys that aren't in line with your goals, your aspirations or-or how you see yourself as a married woman moving forward. And, I think that helps you narrow down who you're gonna talk to and who you're not cause, you know, I get, you know, a list of men that were

interested but I really only responded to maybe 25 of them. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Nina expressed the importance of knowing who you are as woman because it saves time. According to Nina, if a woman goes in with a strong sense of self her dating goals are clear, which allows her to understand the type of partner she is looking for and the type of marriage she is trying to obtain. Nina added,

Because I had an understanding of myself, who I wanted to be, and who I wanted as a partner. So I could skim through all the garbage to try to get to, you know, the type of people that I truly was interested in. And I think that—that a lot of women might not do prior to, so they're going through all these dates and they get frustrated. Because they're really dating anybody, versus truly getting to the core of who they are and who they want and then, you know, filtering through. And it's a part-time job, and you really have to make it that (laughter) because it's, you know, hard. But I think, that's—that's the biggest thing that I find most women aren't doing, that I feel like contributed to my success. (Interview Participant, 4/25/2016)

Similar to Black feminist epistemologies that stress the importance of self-definition, Black women's authentic-selves, and self-preservation, Nina felt that if more women worked to know themselves better, they would become aware of red flags earlier on when their dates' dating aspirations did not meet theirs. Knowing herself allowed Nina to cut through the red tape and discern who deserved her time. Time was at a premium due to the level of involvement required to be successful online, as Nina describes the process as a “part-time job.” A key element of surviving—literally and metaphorically—crooked spaces is a strong self-awareness anchored in

an unwavering confidence. Black women have to be confident in themselves when digitally dating because even the men they seek sometimes utilize the angles, stereotypes, and negative perceptions, both knowingly and unknowingly, when pursuing them. Online dating can be a dangerous place due to the prerequisite of self-disclosure situated in an intimate context; a Black woman unfamiliar with herself is vulnerable to the many perceptual frames that will inaccurately depict her and her definition of Black womanhood.

Melanie articulated a level maturity and transparency that also spoke to Black women needing to know who they were as women. She explained the importance of self disclosure:

Um, honestly, just approach it honestly. Like, don't pretend to be something you're not, and don't expect a man to be something he's not. Um, try to be who you are, I guess. And just, I mean if you're only looking for sex, just say you're looking for sex. You know, if you're looking to meet people, say you're looking to meet people. I just think people should just go into it just being real with themselves and with everybody else. (Interview Participant, 4/23/2016)

Melanie asks women to be themselves and to disregard taboos of single women seeking casual sexual encounters. Melanie speaks to a level of transparency that requires adult Black women to understand their physical and emotional limits as it pertains to engaging in intimate relationships with men. She offers a counternarrative that humanizes Black women beyond the perceptual frames that paint them as hypersexualized. Her remarks refer to Black women's sexual agency while simultaneously expressing that they have an array of dating goals. Moreover, the idea of transparency and honesty speaks directly to stereotypes that depict Black women as emotionally impermeable. Melanie still points to

a delicate balance of strength and vulnerability.

Dating online, at times, was described as an emotionally hostile place where participants were required to be resilient, which resulted in their growth into more self-aware individuals. For Tanya, the crooked space challenged her on an intra-racial and on a religious level, but it did not deter her. Tanya's advice to women spoke to a sense of resiliency exhibited by the women throughout the study. Fully acknowledging that negativity was imminent, Tanya wanted other women to present themselves candidly, but brace themselves for the inevitable negative reactions and not allow them to hurt them:

I think they should be themselves. Like, I think that should be their approach.

Like, be honest with yourself and be honest with what you want. And if anybody has a negative opinion of you you have to be sure in who you are and what you're really looking for, and if that person has something negative to say it's so easily to just delete them. And you can block them and you can go about the day as you want to and not have to fight every single battle that somebody brings to you. But there's going to be some because everybody ... You know, some people find it as entertainment. And, you know, there's some crazy people in the world. But at the same time, if I consider myself a good person and I've experienced online dating why shouldn't I think that somebody just as awesome as me is out there as well looking? (Participant Interview, 4/18/2016)

Tanya wanted Black women to be confident. Her strength came from not only learning who she was as a woman, but also knowing that she is an awesome person who deserves an awesome person. Tanya was also motivated by the fact that she knew it was possible to meet a good man online.

Khloe emphasized that women must understand their dating goals. She privileged openness as a way to successfully meet dating goals, saying:

If their goal is to be married, and their goal is to be in a certain type of relationship, um, I would say cast your net wide. I would say be open to dating not just Black men, but all men or as many as you can tolerate, (laughs) as many different races as you can tolerate. Be open to that because you might be missing out on some really good, healthy relationships because we're limiting our view.

(Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

Khloe echoed the sentiments of some of the other women pointing out that knowing oneself correlates with success in meeting relationship goals.

Khloe also offered advice about flexibility, urging Black women to enjoy themselves more throughout the online courtship process:

Um, I would also say, um ... don't be so firm and controlling. (Laughs) Don't be so firm in these perceived ideals we might have because we might, again, be missing out. Those, A lot of times I meet Black women who have dated, and who will say, and they will say things like, 'I only date this. I only do this. Only this. If he does this, I'm not,' and they are so rigid in some of their ways that they've missed out on some opportunity because, 'He didn't call me. Well, I'm not calling him.' (Laughs) It's not, um, practical, I think, in this day and age anymore to be so rigid when you're trying, especially the older you get, being so rigid in how you choose your mate. This is all easier said than done. (Laughs) (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

In certain instances, Black women grow frustrated by the misconceptions and the ways

they manifest in the dating arena, which results in rigid interpersonal communication practices with men; such inflexibility is a byproduct of the constant need to confront everyday crooked spaces like school, work, media, and now, online dating sites. Participants wanted to shed the SBW stereotype that depicts Black women as rigid. The women in this study thought online daters could acknowledge the struggles of Black womanhood while also enjoying the dating process. Flexibility was another point some of the other women made. Being approachable, having fun dating, and allowing oneself to be in the moment while online dating were repeatedly emphasized as positive approaches. Being quick to write men off with a dos and don'ts list was viewed negatively and as likely to be unsuccessful. The idea of flexibility in this instance refers to allowing the time to get to know the men women meet online and being receptive to possibilities that are not always apparent.

Khloe reiterated her point about the importance of flexibility, closing with the idea of allowing intimate relationships to grow organically. She said:

I still haven't included everybody on my roster of who I would date, but, um you know, just more flexibility and these, (sighs) these norms and beliefs that we believe a man has to do this, this, and this, maybe being more flexible in that and allowing the journey just to happen. Also not rushing things, and I don't know if this is just Black women or all women, but we're so quick to get to this end goal of marriage or this end goal of a serious relationship that we don't allow the journey just to, we don't allow ourselves to just be on the journey, and we don't allow ourselves to just, um, develop organically into that type of relationship because we're in a rush to get there. (Interview Participant, 4/26/2016)

Desirée pointed to the fact that Black men have struggled on a societal level, resulting in a decreased number of Black men in the dating market who are considered viable candidates by saying,

It's interesting this whole dating thing, especially being, you know, a Black woman. Online dating and even dating in general, um, and then I got ... I've seen some Black women who are just like, you know, they, they want to date a guy that has, has, is perfect and just has all his, his stuff together. But at the same time, like, you know, there's this whole, uh, stigma when it comes to, you know, Black men. There's a shortage of good Black men and so on. You know, I don't necessarily think that's true. (Interview Participant, 4/12/2016)

Desirée touched on a racially-gendered point that specifically affected the relationship between Black men and women--the shortage of qualified Black man who are also interested in dating Black women. In a sense Desirée juxtaposed Black women and their ideals with the belief that there is a shortage of dateable Black men willing to date Black women. Tanya asked women to stay positive and not give up while Khloe advised women to be more flexible, and Desirée asked Black women to relinquish the fatalistic stance that there are not enough good Black men out there to date. All three of these women spoke of the continuing struggle to stand upright in America's crooked room. They persist, for themselves, and urge other Black women to avoid becoming jaded by the stereotypes they face. More importantly, they will not allow the crooked room to force them to conform to the stereotypes that make up its angles.

After comparing their online dating experiences with other Black women, participants offered advice to Black women who are considering online dating and also to

the women who were unsuccessful finding love online. Consistent with the other themes, strength and resiliency were interwoven into the advice the women offered. Participants described a level of honesty that called for new users or unsuccessful users to know themselves as well as determining exactly what they wanted out of the online dating process. Understanding themselves aided in the process of achieving desired outcomes. Once women understand who they are as individuals and as women seeking love online, they gain a better understanding of how to utilize online dating platforms and also can then expect certain outcomes in relation to their approaches. Other women suggested that Black women be more flexible by opening up their dating preferences to non-Black men and to “cast a wider net.” Flexibility also extended to dating practices regarding relaxing strong beliefs and allowing the dating process to develop into enjoyable and organic relationships. Lastly, participants encouraged Black women to not be discouraged. There is a popular understanding in the Black dating community that Black women struggle to find good Black men. Interview participants wanted the best for other Black women, and to a degree, felt that in order to do better in the online dating realm, Black women must do the work of getting to know themselves prior to participating in online and offline courtship.

Summary

The phenomenological design of Chapter 6 highlighted the different ways participants experienced the online dating realm. The epistemological aspect of this chapter was the participants' voices, which mapped the online dating terrain via various online dating realities, including how they viewed their successes and failures, and what lessons they learned. Additionally, the participants' illuminated the interplay of cultural and dating norms in certain

metropolitan areas, shared the positive and negative interactions with Black and Non-Black men that shaped users' online experiences, and lastly, articulated their dating experiences in comparison to other Black women. In this chapter, participants shared their experiences of confronting potential mates' inaccurate perceptions of Black women, and the ways in which those perceptual frames affected their online dating pursuits.

The themes in Chapter 6 illustrated the various ways in which participants possessed high levels of self-awareness and the ability to stand in their truth in an effort to articulate how their own actions may or may not have contributed to their failures and successes while seeking love online. While experiencing failed attempts at dating online, participants sustained strong senses of themselves. Moreover, their reasons for success or failure were varied and nuanced and ran counter to the anti-Black archetypes that essentialized confident Black women. Participants' perceptions of success were also highly individualized, but the various articulations mapped a larger understanding of Black women's level of engagement with the online dating phenomenon. While detailing potential reasons why they felt their online dating efforts were a success and or failure, participants also shared the lessons that they learned. Similar to other works centered around Black women's voices, participants in this study collectively displayed a confidence anchored in their own self-assurance, self-definition, and an overall sense of strength seemingly synergized from Black women's shared socio-historical experiences. Experiences with other mates addressed specific incidents with Black and non-Black men and the varied experiences illuminated some of the angles in the crooked room, such as negative hair comments, fulfilling racial fetishes, and trying to find equilibrium in a singles market where the dating norms are inconsistent. The regional theme offered an entry point into the cultural norms impacting dating markets in specific regions. Previous chapters discussed how social-distance and class affected

dating online, but each physical region comes with its own unique set of norms and expectations; for example, Washington D.C. "Chocolate City," which refers to the high population of Black people, or Hollywood's influence on both interracial dating and the body politics in California's dating markets.

The conclusion of this chapter relates the responses the participants shared in regard to their experiences in comparison to other Black women. They considered their experiences and discussed whether they were indicative of today's dating climate. Like other themes, opinions varied, but together these remarks illustrated Black women's love-hate relationship with finding love online. Last, Advice to Black women was a discussion where participants shared their online dating wisdom with other Black women, which primarily centered on knowing themselves prior to engaging with dating sites and applications. Chapter 6 continued to build on previous chapters' exploration of online dating mediums as crooked spaces, along with Black women's continued intergenerational fight against negative perceptions.

Chapter 7 presents the discussion and analysis related to the research findings. The chapter utilizes material from all three research questions to provide conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

Overview

In this study, I interrogated the 21st century phenomenon of online dating, specifically to understand the online dating experiences of African-American women. In this chapter, I summarize the results of the study, provide conclusions, engage in discussion based on the in-depth interviews, and make recommendations to online dating companies, online daters, and for future research.

To understand the online dating experiences of African-American women, as well as their perceptions of the world of online dating in general, I recruited a purposeful sample of 21 female online daters who met specific criteria (i.e. age, racial identity, and recently engaging in online dating). This group of female online daters consisted of various professions, ages, educational levels (although all had at least a bachelor's degree or above) and geographical locations within the United States. During the month of April 2016 I conducted 21 interviews. One interview was canceled due to scheduling; five other interviews were eliminated due to participants' inability to answer questions, not completely meeting the study criteria, and overall saturation in relation to other interviews. As a result, 16 interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and coded. During the interview process, I gathered data in the following areas:

- -participants' histories and experiences with online dating
- -their perceptions of the qualities that they possess that should be considered attractive
- -both positive and negative feedback from potential mates online
- -perceptions about participants' dating experiences in the United States

- -and whether or not their successes and failures with online dating were indicative of the dating experiences of Black woman as a whole.

The first data set was generated using a Google forms electronic document that served a dual purpose, acting as the consent form and the demographic survey. The second data collection method was in-depth interviews, which interrogated the online dating world of the Black female participants. Once data collection was finished, I began correlating the demographic information from the Google form with the in-depth interviews using NVivo 11 software. The coding process was iterative. Participants were identified not only by name but also with their demographic information, providing context throughout the study. Due to the large number of interviews and the large number of themes coded, major themes were highlighted and/or supported by the number of interview excerpts given by respondents.

After organizing and analyzing participants' interview responses and their demographic information, I undertook the initial phase of coding, considered "open coding", which is a line by line coding method of gathering data by developing descriptive themes and organizing those themes within categories. This coding allowed for identification of parent categories taken from the interview questions themselves to gain an understanding of what themes emerged individually and what themes added up to categories and sub-categories. For example, when coding for the parent node Q02, I needed to decide how to separate the themes and sub categories "Appearance-Physical" and "Appearance-Non-physical." I also needed to determine whether the theme "Appearance-Smiling" should be placed under physical or non-physical, due to the fact that participants were talking about portraying a welcoming personality versus having nice teeth. This first pass coding process also included "in vivo" coding, wherein I selected specific words and/or phrases from the interview content to utilize for titling categories. Axial

coding was the second phase; during it, I interrogated patterns and emerging themes relating to the parent categories and research questions. This phase unveiled themes that directly aligned with the questions asked, as well as themes that were unexpected. I used the second phase to refine my coding scheme, merging, retitling, and eliminating categories. The third and last phase of coding was selective coding or substantive coding, which was a coding process that created and eliminated themes and categories. This was the deepest level of coding because I had to compare and contrast content and decide what themes would be double coded in multiple categories. The last phase of coding involved additional merging and clustering of themes and categories.

My first research question asked, “How do Black women perceive their dating experiences in the United States?” After reviewing the data, I identified multiple themes that depicted very subjective experiences across the women despite their commonalities of age, educational level, income, and racial and religious preferences. Prominent themes that emerged were: reasons for joining different dating sites and apps, attitudes towards different dating sites and apps, and the quality of men that frequented these dating platforms.

The second research question, “How do Black women perceive the impact of their race and gender on their experiences in online dating, and as they present themselves to the “market” of online dating?” revealed that the interview participants were confident and self-assured with respect to how they saw themselves. Participants also expressed a high level of awareness in curating their online dating profiles to fit and achieve their relationship goals. The majority of the women in the study consciously posted images and used strategic language in their profile summaries in an effort to optimize their experiences in the online dating realm; they engaged in such optimization when using both mobile applications and online websites.

The third research question asked, “What are the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate the potential failures, and/or possible successes delineated within the realities of their experiences of online dating?” The majority of the women expressed a level of control that indicated that they determined when online courtship was worth continuing or whether it should be terminated or shifted to friendship. Participants gave varied responses about how they defined successful online dating experiences. Failure was subjective as some women considered only long-term relationships that turned into a success while others felt that online romantic encounters that shifted to friendship were also positive.

Conclusions

1. The majority of participants joined dating services due to free trials, promotions, and, often, suggestions by girlfriends.
2. Women in this study utilized online dating as an option, not an alternative, to offline/traditional courtship. With the exception of Tinder's reputation for being a hook-up site, sexual stigma marking conventional dating apps and sites was not a major concern. Negative reputations hindered niche sites geared towards Black singles and free dating services like POF, resulting in participants' questioning the sites' and users' qualities.
3. Different dating platforms created different results. Black women in this study had varying experiences with online dating sites. Most research participants shared positive experiences with Match.com. They also felt that singles using eHarmony.com were weird. Men on eHarmony were described as being so eager to get married that they ruined the dating process by making participants feel pressured into matrimony. POF was used by participants but viewed the site as full of poor quality matches and only kept

the service because it was free. The small number of Black users on dating platforms and the lack of dating platforms that encouraged Black participation resulted in the repetition of the same Black faces on multiple sites and applications.

4. Body type was a routine and expected site of contention for participants. The women were aware of body type expectations and also searched for men utilizing their own preferences towards body types. Defining body types was a subjective process, despite the preset categories offered by the different dating platforms.
5. Women in this study preferred to date Black or African-American men. In a few instances, women shared that dating African men was also acceptable.
6. Non-Black men, particularly White men, were simply undesirable. For some Black women in the study, non-Black men never approached them even when they were open to dating interracially.
7. Independence, stability, and resiliency were consistent themes throughout the study. Independence was a positive and a negative attribute. Participants self-presented to potential mates as independent partners, but men often misinterpreted their autonomy as not wanting male companionship. Stability was an aspect of independence that was another issue between the sexes. Participants promoted education, career, and income in efforts to display stability, but men did not always respond positively to these attributes. Despite a lack of media depictions promoting the beauty of Black women, negative remarks towards Black female beauty, and participating on dating platforms with little to no dating prospects, respondents expressed a level of resiliency. Women in this study exhibited a strong sense of themselves; they also offered their resilient spirit via advice to other Black women who are considering online dating.

8. Markers of class also helped to shape the racially-gendered experiences of this cohort of women. Education, income, and profession acted as sorting mechanisms, explicitly and implicitly. Participants avoided certain platforms because of the number of “blue collar” men on the site. Good, in most cases, implied potential mates who closely aligned with participants’ spiritual, educational, financial, and professional levels.
9. Physical proximity was also both positive and negative. Dating markets operated differently in various geographic areas. According to a number of participants, cities that have a high population of Black people, like Washington, D.C., were desirable dating markets where Black women felt more appreciated. When describing Los Angeles, California and similar metropolitan areas that embraced interracial dating and Hollywood’s beauty ideals, participants were less than enthusiastic about those dating markets.
10. Interview participants exhibited an awareness of anti-Black stereotypes that affected women, especially with regard to hair. The strong woman stereotype was alluded to and directly mentioned. Strong woman was a positive quality in some instances and negative in others. Women in the study embraced strength and their ability to be self-sufficient. They also shared stories where men were not completely receptive to strong women who did not adhere to traditional gender dynamics. Interview participants were professional Black women who also took pride in not posting overly sexualized images online. Women in this study confronted two major stereotypes. At different times they embraced and rejected the strong Black woman stereotype, while also avoiding the Jezebel stereotype by not posting hypersexualized images of themselves.
11. Engaging Black men was a delicate balance. Participants had difficulty finding sites with

viable Black male dating candidates. Conventional dating platforms were diverse, but did not offer enough Black males from which to choose. Free and niche dating platforms were perceived to have men of lower class and quality. Black men were described as either quality men who dated multiple women simultaneously or did not meet the expectations of the women in the study. Interview participants sought “Black love” because of the example of Black love learned from their parents and grandparents.

Contribution to Current Research

Implications

The studies in the literature review used theoretical frameworks that interrogated race and racial stereotypes, yet their discussions and findings described Black women as a monolithic group. In this study, Black feminist epistemology was used specifically to understand Black women’s varied online dating experiences. This study contributes to the visibility of Black women and gives voice to their lived experiences, thereby allowing them the space to tell their stories from their own perspectives. In doing so, the study allowed these women to critically examine their identifications with or rejections of the dominant negative archetypes, which have historically shaped the perceptions of Black women in the U.S. In contrast to prior computer-mediated-communication (CMC) studies that interrogated race and mate selection in the online dating context, my study was from the perspective of the marginalized voices themselves, which provided a unique and understudied perspective.

Centering my research on the online dating experiences of Black women is innovative because it focuses on the individual experiences of a group often viewed as monolithic in behavior. Past research discussed how race is an influential sorting mechanism in online mate selection across racial groups. Prior studies have also revealed racial hierarchies within dating

platforms, which is consistent across the online dating industry. Previous research used data examining the interaction of users via their messages. Interactional data is an excellent way to observe online daters, but the quantitative approach examined groups as opposed to illuminating the nuanced ways interactional patterns impact individuals residing at the bottom of the dating sites' racialized and gendered hierarchies. My study utilized interviews to unveil the individual experiences of Black women, those who are so often situated at the bottom of the dating sites—and society's—hierarchy of desirability.

This study mobilized Melissa Harris Perry's conceptual framework describing today's mediated world as a crooked room (Harris-Perry, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2015). The crooked room concept refers to the fact that Black women are forced to constantly negotiate and contest their authentic lived experiences against dominant media portrayals in today's media driven society that often portray Black women in a less than positive light. Inundated with images that incorrectly portray Black womanhood, society becomes a crooked room where Black women fight to stand up straight. Black women, like any group, are not homogenous and experience their lives differently from other Black women. With that said, some Black women contest stereotypes while others succumb to them. The online dating realm is an extension of that societal crooked room. Ideologies, cultural contexts, traditional dating behaviors, familial pressures, gendered roles, and dominant beauty ideals culminate into sorting mechanisms for online daters; more specifically these sorting mechanisms are various ways in which today's single determine the desirability of potential mates they find online. In this study, interview participants discussed how they navigated the crooked rooms of online dating.

Stigma has always been a looming issue in the dating world since the beginning of modern courtship. Parts of the stigma are the social pressures that culminate from not marrying

within a certain window (Bailey, 1989; Cocks, 2009). That stigma held true for the Black women in this study. The majority of participants eased their way into online dating by taking advantage of free trials, promotions, and by listening to the suggestions of their closest girlfriends. Factors provoking contemporary stigma surrounding online courtship are similar to those that haunt traditional courtship. Those stigmas include dating in your 30s having never been married and seeking the help of a third-party for matchmaking purposes. Stigma extended to race as well, as the interview participants shared their experiences with positive and negative perceptions of themselves and potential mates.

Prior research revealed that racial preference intensified from 2009 to 2014, placing Black women at the bottom of the dating pool (Rudder, 2009, 2014a, 2014b). A number of the studies were conducted utilizing interactional data measuring the messaging patterns between online daters (King, 2013; Rudder, 2014a). Although utilizing interactional data illuminates accurate depictions of online dating behavior, more so than screen scraping techniques such as content and textual analysis of dating profiles, studies utilizing these techniques usually fall short of explaining the intricacies of why subscribers interact and act the way that they do on online dating platforms. Positioning both Black feminist thought and interview participants' responses, not only allowed me to delve deeper into why Black women were the least successful group in online dating, but also allowed the landscape of online dating to be mapped out via the voices of Black women. Findings in other studies for the most part emphasized groups as a whole in relation to their unwillingness to engage Black women online. This study extends previous research because participants exhibited a high level of racial homophily, but also gave reasons why they placed a heavy preference on dating Black men.

Previous studies reported their findings from the standpoint of Black and non-Black men's willingness to date Black women. This study examined racial preference through the racially-gendered lens of Black female online daters, examining their varied backgrounds, while simultaneously engaging their shared dating experiences as Black women trying to find love online. Similar to previous research, this study also revealed that racial preference is utilized as a sorting mechanism when choosing potential dates online; racial preference also shaped the online dating outcomes and experiences of Black women. Black women in this study described the various obstacles they encountered while seeking love online. This study's results align with previous studies, while also offering further insight into the online dating experiences of Black women. For instance, previous research posited that racial homophily was high amongst Black women (Fiore & Donath, 2005; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; McClintock, 2010; Rudder, 2014a; Smith, McPherson, & Smith-Lovin, 2014). Racial homophily was also high among the women in this study. Interview participants sought Black love and love that resembled the intra-racial marriages in their families. Scholars have discussed the fact that some non-Black men fetishize Black women (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1992, 1996, 2009). In this study Black women also shared instances where non-Black men wanted to participate in experimental sex with them.

Self- presentation is a major component in online dating. Researchers have discussed how self-presentation in online dating is a strategic behavior where online disclosure has to be accurate, due to the anticipated offline date or interaction between two daters (Downing Jr & Schrimshaw, 2014; Fiore, 2008; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Walther, 2007). Women in this study were well aware of their online presence and made it a point to post specific images that did not portray them as flirty or promiscuous. Other strategies included cropping pictures, having friends look over dating bios,

and changing the language on profiles to be positive and welcoming to the men reading them. Instead of simply reporting what women posted, like screen scraping data and interactional data, this study allowed women to share the reasons behind their impression management strategies.

The increase of professional Black women and existing traditional dating norms and gender roles create what I call a cultural disjuncture between Black men and women. Despite damaging studies like the Moynihan Report in 1967, which negatively framed Black womanhood as undesirable and incapable of sustaining male companionship (Moynihan, Rainwater, & Yancey, 1967), today news reports show Black women are the most educated social bloc in America (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), and that they are a part of an emerging Black middle class that is both single and never married referred to as *The Jones Cohort* (Lynda & Kris, 2008; Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper, & Salters, 2007). Scholars are also continuing the discussions on more systemic issues that negatively impact Black family formations like mass incarceration and political disenfranchisement (Alexander, 2012; Malveaux, 2013; Pettit & Western, 2004; Western & McClanahan, 2000; Western & Pettit, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009). Cultural disjuncture in this study referred to this group of professional Black women promoting their independence and stability to male counterparts, while simultaneously adhering to gender roles. In other words, the changing economic landscape allowed for these women to take on some of the traditional gender roles often reserved for men, such as maintaining financial stability, acquiring real estate, and running a household. Cultural disjuncture occurs because while Black women have taken on some of the gender roles traditionally assumed by men, they want to keep some of those traditional norms that require men to court them. Meanwhile, men struggle with dating Black women who are comfortable in their independence. Instead of seeing

a stable partner, study participants reported that men saw Black women's independence as domineering and assumed that they were not interested in male companionship.

Independence and stability were consistent underlying issues. This sample of women was gainfully employed professionals who struggled to find successful Black men. Interview responses raised another issue—distance. Distance in this study included physical distance, social distance, and sociotechnological distance. Interview participants shared their willingness and unwillingness to date men geographically near and far, and some mentioned as far as internationally. Physical distance and the desire to be close to dating prospects are common issues scholars report on, and they are also popular topics in various online dating communities; however, social distance is rarely considered.

Social distance often reflects class, neighborhood communities, family influence, educational homophily, and political and racial preferences (Smith et al., 2014). In this study, a small number of participants stated in the demographic survey (Google Form) that they were willing to date men who were not on the same economic and educational level as they were, but the majority of interview responses revealed that a number of women struggled dating Black men who were not on the same financial and educational level as them. Despite the fact that some women were willing to date men from various socioeconomic standings, all of the women expressed some level of difficulty with finding men who they liked online; according to their responses, either men were still working on themselves (educationally and financially) or they were successful career men wanting to date casually. From a socio-technological standpoint where human interaction operates within a technological infrastructure (Fuchs, 2002; Fuchs & Gasse, 2006; Raffl, Hofkirchner, Fuchs, & Schafranek, 2011; Reveley, 2013), each platform delivered different outcomes also resulting in various attitudes towards the different platforms.

Boyd (2011) used real estate terms to describe the cultural shifts, user migrations and changing norms that occur on social media platforms. Participants in this study also described their experiences as being unique, platform-to-platform, and similar to venturing through different neighborhoods online. Each online dating application and website functioned as a cultural cul-de-sac that acts with community of norms unique to that segment of the Internet. So whether it was BlackPeopleMeet.com not having quality members or SoulSwipe being more of a pseudo social scene, to an outsider those are two dating platforms that are geared towards Black people but have developed norms that deliver two distinct dating experiences.

Participants in this study painted a picture showing that race remains an issue in online dating (Adewunmi, 2015; Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2015; Christie, 2007; Epstein, 2011; Hitsch, Hortaçsu, & Ariely, 2010; Kolawole, 2015; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; McIntosh, Dawson, Scott, & Locker Jr, 2011). This was also the case for the women in this study. Participants wanted to date primarily Black men and this allowed for more intra-racial issues than inter-racial issues. Yes, the women in this study interacted with men across racial lines, but those interactions were minimal. When it came to Black men, some women recounted that their experiences with Black men were mostly positive. Other interview participants shared that their interactions with Black men were both positive and negative. Women explained the shifting cultural norms that transformed the dating behaviors that eventually led to dissention between Black men and women.

It seems useful to note that the media continuum's burdensome perceptions and expectations of the Black female lived experience are not uncontested in today's information age. The emergence of a Black digital intelligentsia—including Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jelani Cobb, Melissa Harris-Perry, Marc Larmont Hill, Mark Anthony Neal, and Jamilah Lemieux—has

offered counter-narratives to address the slanted perceptions of today's popular media (Dyson, 2015). An example of this counter-narrative in the social media public sphere is Black Twitter, which constantly holds celebrities and publications accountable regarding their perspectives on Black popular culture. Another example emerges with citizens who have offered counter-narratives to media coverage demonizing Black victims of police brutality through hashtag activism. #BlackLivesMatter was organized by queer Black women fighting to confront state-sanctioned police brutality of African Americans (Garza, 2014), while #SayHerName was formed to specifically address the following fact:

Although Black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality... Yet, inclusion of Black women's experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combatting racialized state violence for Black communities and other communities of color.

(Crenshaw, 2015)

Today's hashtag activists provide counter-narratives connecting the negative effects of historical misrepresentations to the dehumanization of Black female bodies. Black digital intelligentsia, an arm of today's Black public sphere, uses social media channels to illuminate how media portrayals of Black bodies dehumanize those same bodies. The work of this new era of intellectuals was highlighted at the #ThinkOutLoud: Panel on the Emerging Black Digital Intelligentsia 2015. The social media used in the Black public sphere has also given voice to other counter-narratives fighting to preserve the identity of Black women and Black girls. Stenberg (2015) utilized YouTube and Instagram to address the cultural appropriation of Black women's hair and identity commodified by White popular culture performers such as Iggy

Azalea and Katy Perry. Consequently, Black women must confront a changing social media landscape when they decide to date online, a fact which necessarily impacts their experiences.

Unlike other research, my study went beyond the interaction between racial groups, and emphasized the experience of the least desirable dating bloc online. By highlighting Black women online daters, I set out to expose how both race and gender hierarchies in online spaces affected the experiences of historically marginalized participants differently. This research can be beneficial to both Black women and the online dating industry because such knowledge could help Black women decide whether online dating is beneficial while illuminating the user experience in ways that would offer another level of insight for dating firms, which they could then modify to provide a more satisfying product.

Limitations

In this study, there were a number of limitations starting with the sample. Because of the use of snowball sampling, the conclusions are not generalizable. This was a purposive sample, where self-identified heterosexual African American female online daters were targeted. Sample size is another limitation. For this study, I interviewed 21 participants and utilized 16, which is not a generalizable sample. The interview participants provided insight on the phenomenon of online dating, but findings from a sample this size cannot be applied to Black women as a whole. Another limitation is that the sample is not geographically diverse. From a geographical standpoint, there were not a large number or a consistent amount of women representing any of the regions in this study. In this case, regional patterns and generalizability on a regional level could not be applied to larger groups of Black women.

Both ethnicity and sexuality were used as criteria to participate in the study, but the interview protocol did not interrogate the intricacies of Blackness as it pertained to each

participant's cultural identity, and sexuality was not interrogated further from a standpoint of fluidity or level of willingness to participate in romantic same-sex encounters. The amount of time used to recruit participants was limited to one month. Short time frames limit the breadth of participants, as well as the response time to review transcription. Utilizing a small time frame and a sample that only included African-American women who had used online dating services within the last two years, is another reason why this sample was not generalizable. Although, this sample is racially homogenous, it serves as a glimpse into the experiences of the women participating in this study. The majority of the sample came from word of mouth via Facebook communities within friend networks comprised of young Black professionals. This reflected the final sample where all of the women possessed at least a four-year degree and a professional career. Thus, the sample was not diverse from an educational and socioeconomic standpoint.

Data was analyzed by one person, which allowed room for bias in the interpretations. Rapport with participants varied, which could have possibly influenced participants to highlight only the positive aspects of their experiences. Differing rapport levels may have also impacted the way I interpreted their experiences. However, the strength of this study and its possible importance outweighs any potential limitations.

Future Research

Women in this study reported that the combination of undesirable matches, not enough matches, and the repetition of users on multiple platforms created "dating fatigue." This group of women was persistent and possessed a lot of positive qualities both professionally and personally and consistently put themselves out there seeking authentic romantic relationships. The women prided themselves on transparency and honesty, which was reflected in all of the responses. Ultimately, all 16 women in this study wanted transparency and a loving relationship

where they could be comfortable and authentic without having to worry about their male counterpart having “dating ADHD” or continuing to bump into serial daters. Future research should continue examining African American women dating in their late 20s and early 30s who have online dated longer than a year aiming to understand the factors that contribute to making this process tiresome, the ways in which a lot of the fun is taken out of digital courtship, and the emotional toll lack of transparency and a lack of consideration for other people’s feelings takes on Black women, or women, participating in online dating.

The interesting piece to this study was the level of disclosure these women shared with me. These women were confident and self-assured and they exuded those qualities throughout the interviews. The women worked hard to be successful at their profession as well as in their personal lives, which can be exemplary to young Black women observing these successful women. But Black women’s success creates a cultural disjuncture between male and female. Such a disjuncture requires not only men and women, but scholars and dating platforms to examine and potentially redefine the meaning of traditional in the 21st century.

Black women face another courtship problem that stretches across various cultural contexts. Alexander spoke of a new Jim Crow or mass incarceration systematically seizing generations of Black men thereby removing them from the marriage market (2012). Marsh et al. clearly stated that there are more professional Black women than there are professional Black men (Jazeera, 2015; Marsh et al., 2007). Future research should examine how the shift in the economic landscape influences how Black men and women, who prefer to date within their race, accept and/or resist traditional gender roles within the context of the 21st century. In other words, women in general no longer need men to be the breadwinners or to obtain property. Moreover, given the fact of mass incarceration, within the African-American community,

women cannot rely on men to assume that role; they simply are not available given the socio-economic realities of the 21st century. The question of how African American women who adhere to and uphold traditional views of the male-female gender roles operate within a relationship where she is the one who is more educated and affluent remains open. The ways in which Black women's self-assurance exacerbates any unbalance could prove fruitful. As a consequence of the society Black women find themselves, they are asked to participate in a sparse dating market and compromise on more fronts than their counterparts in other racial groups. The compromises are even greater for professional Black women like those interviewed in this study. The psychological, economic, and social consequences of such compromises are other potentially rich areas open to study.

Future research should examine the various cultural undercurrents centered on race and skin color within the Black community, such as examining colorism and other groups that identify as Black in the online dating sphere. Monoracial women who self-identified as African American discussed Black women and men as a whole within a lens of everyone being Black. The women who identified as multiracial exhibited an awareness of the various gradations of Blackness, sometimes referred to as colorism. Another participant self-identified as monoracial, African American, but through the interview process her West African heritage played a role when seeking out a mate. Future research should look into the ways in which colorism shapes the dating experiences of African-American women online. New research should also interrogate the intraracial nuances concerning the willingness of African Americans and Africans to date each other online.

Finally, future studies should examine the cultural norms that develop over time on various dating platforms. Open areas include the ways daters react to and respond to incomplete

profiles; the way pet peeves, such as grammatical and spelling errors, translate from the real world to the online dating space in today's selfie and smart phone era; and lastly, the role "Fuck Boys" play in ruining women's online dating experiences and deteriorate the integrity of the dating platform. If online dating companies wish to remain competitive in a constantly evolving dating marketplace, particularly with respect to the increasing importance of mobile dating applications, the platforms themselves must evolve to meet the different and sometimes conflicting goals of users.

Positionality Statement

The first time I tried online dating was around 2008 or 2009. The first site I joined was Plenty of Fish, having overheard someone talking about his or her sister using the site. Out of curiosity, I created a profile and began using it as a casual user in the sense that initially I did not have any intention of reaching out and dating anyone on POF. For me, it was a way to survey and/or window shop the possibilities of this new world. As I grew comfortable with online dating, I eventually ventured onto Match.com and later OkCupid. Plenty of fish, Match.com, and OkCupid were my primary sites for years. Due to the fact that my online dating predated mobile dating applications, my use of the sites was very sporadic for a number of reasons. I am an African-American male who identifies as heterosexual and is open to interracial relationships. Although I am open to interracial relationships, I know firsthand that interracial dating is not widely accepted. From 2008 to 2010, I do not remember ever going out on a date that resulted from online dating activity. I found women from various races attractive, but responses were rarely reciprocated. So my sporadic use of dating sites was a byproduct of being discouraged from not being able to interact with the women who I found attractive. Also, in 2008, and even today, many of the profiles are either fakes used for spam and fraud or they are abandoned

profiles of other discouraged online dating users or people who found love but have not removed their profiles. For years I did not pay for online dating sites (until 2011); I did not see a need for dating sites due to the lack of response, my infrequent use, and the negative stigma it had among my peers.

In 2011, I moved to a different state, and during my job interview, online dating came up and was suggested as a way to learn the city. As a young person entering a full-time career, I now had the money to pay for a year subscription to Match.com. This was the first time I paid for a site. In my opinion, the free experience is different from the paid experience. During the free experience, I was able to electronically wink and look at images of women in my area. Once I paid, I was able to see which women had viewed my profile, and I was also able to message them and receive messages from other women. During this time, I went on a few dates that did not materialize into relationships, but are now friendships that began with online dating. 2011 was the first time I paid for a service and eventually opened up my desire to check out other sites and try out their various subscription packages.

When I moved to the Midwest for graduate school, I found myself in a peculiar dating situation. I was living in a small town, which was predominantly White and geared towards undergraduate students. There I was, an African-American male, 34 years of age, in graduate school teaching undergraduate courses. So my situation was peculiar due to several issues: age, educational level, access to social groups, my position as a graduate assistant and the power differential that was present when teaching courses with students, and lastly, my race. I attempted to utilize dating sites the same way I did when I moved for work, but unfortunately, the dating market in Carbondale, Illinois is vastly different from the dating market in New Orleans, Louisiana. During the three and a half years I lived in Carbondale, online dating for me

was very unsuccessful and discouraging.

Initially President Obama's 2008 campaign was what drew me into social media, but online dating was always in the background. Being a Black male dating in different metropolitan areas, I was not always successful in the online dating market. After reading Rudder (2009), I knew I wanted to choose a topic that not only spoke to my experiences as a Black male, but also touched on my research interests: impression management, political economy, race, gender, and class. While other young scholars were clamoring to examine social media's impact on politics, I wanted to study a topic that was both academic and relatable to the public. As I began to dig deeper into online dating, I also began to realize how online dating draws together race, class, religion, politics, and other facets of American culture.

Throughout the dissertation process, I have gained a greater understanding of the number of obstacles facing Black women and men trying to find love online. This study revealed that the combination of Black women's dating preferences and other subscribers who populate these dating platforms ultimately shape individuals' dating experiences. When I first began this study, I was a huge proponent of dating sites to the extent that I seemed almost like a spokesperson for certain apps and sites, but now I am indifferent. My view of on online dating platforms for Black women is that the platforms are one of many options. I would suggest coupling a dating app and/or site with social activities focused on Black singles or single Black professionals (conferences, meetups, networking happy hours, graduate fraternity and sorority events, and cultural festivals). I would also encourage singles to look at Facebook and even Twitter. There are a number of ways to learn who is single in your network; their images and posts also reveal aspects of who they are as well as insight into their friends and family life. Until dating firms invest in increasing the number of African American subscribers and cleaning up abandoned

profiles, it is difficult to promote online dating to African-American women as a viable dating option.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Introduction to Study/Informed Consent (Google Form)

Dear Participant,

You have been invited to participate in a study entitled, “DatingMissRepresentation.com: Black Women’s Lived Love-Hate Relationship with Online Dating.” This study is being led by James Johnson, Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Thank you in advance for considering taking part in this study by completing this online component and scheduling an interview (Face-to-Face, Telephone, Google Hangout, or Skype).

This Introduction to Study/Informed Consent online component form will provide the following:

- An overview of the study and the nature of your voluntary participation and protection as a subject in this study.
- An opportunity to request a copy of study findings.
- A request for your contact information and your interview availability.

The following consent form contains legal language that is required by all research-granting institutions. The following provides mechanisms to ensure your safety during participation in this study. Please understand that your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. The following is a description of what your study participation entails, the terms for participating in the study, and a discussion of your rights as a study participant. Please read this information carefully before deciding whether or not you wish to participate. After you have read

and understood your rights and protections as a human subject in this study, given consent, and have agreed to participate, you will be contacted by the researcher for a Face-to-Face, Telephone, Google Hangout, or Skype interview.

I agree to participate in the research study under the direction of James Johnson, a doctoral student. This research study will be featured in future publications to be published in 2016. The overall purpose of this study is to explore how race and gender impacts your online dating experiences. The following will be vital questions for the study: (a) how you navigate online dating sites, (b) how you manage the realities of your experiences in terms of successes and failures, (c) and how your lived experiences impact your viewpoints as Black women in online dating.

My participation in this study is voluntary and will involve me completing a videotaped and/or voice and/or digitally recorded (Face-to-Face, Google Hangout, FaceTime, or Skype) interview consisting of semi-structured questions related to my online dating experiences and the impact of both race and gender, if any, has had on my dating experience. The interview will take place either virtually (Face-to-Face, Google Hangout, FaceTime, or Skype) or via telephone. I am aware that my interview will be recorded by either tape recorder or Google Voice recording. My participation in this study will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes, the time it takes to listen and respond to the given interview questions. If I consent to participate in the study, I will be contacted with a confirmed day and time for the (Face-to-Face, Telephone, Google Hangout, or Skype) interview. If, within one week I have not responded, I will receive a reminder email. I understand the timeframe for the study will be from March 2016 through May 2016, and that the actual data will be collected between March 2016 and April 2016.

I understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that might be associated with this research; however, safeguards have been enacted to minimize my risk. Potential risks and/or discomforts might include: feeling social pressure to participate in the study, and or a sense of having been inconvenienced in terms of time demands. I understand that I may choose not to participate in this research. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate and/or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the demographic survey and/or the interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I understand that the researcher will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records, and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. At no time will the researcher release the results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without my written consent. I understand that the researcher is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described.

I understand that I may contact James Johnson, principal researcher, about the proposed research, as well as my rights as a research participant, at (###) ###-#### or via email at email@mail.com if I have other questions or concerns about this research. I understand, to my satisfaction, the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read and understand this informed consent form. I hereby consent to participate in the research described above. I understand that by providing my name and today's date in the box below that I agree to willingly participate in this study. If I would also like to download, print, sign, and return a hard copy of my informed consent, I may sign and return this form to the address below. This is optional.

Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject? This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee.

Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be address to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, IL 62901-4709 Phone (618) 453-4533. Email: siuhsc@siu.edu

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Why did you decide to try online dating? In what ways did you think it would be more beneficial to you? Tell me about the history of your involvement in online dating. When did you first enter the online dating space? What were your expectations at the initial phase of this activity?
2. What was your perception of the qualities you felt you possessed that should be considered attractive to a potential mate in the online dating space?
3. How do you think you were perceived by potential partners in traditional dating? How do you think you were perceived by a potential mate in the online dating space, in a general sense? How do you think you are perceived by others in non-romantic online social spaces (Facebook, Twitter, other forms of social media)?
4. Did you consider any of your characteristics to be potentially negative? Did you think they or any others were perceived as potentially negative or harmful with respect towards your “dateability” in an online space? If so, please describe. Give an example. How did you feel? How did you deal with this?
5. Were there any particular characteristics you possessed that you feel a potential mate may have perceived as positive toward your ability to be considered “dateable” in this online space? If so, please describe. Give an example. How did you feel? How did you deal with this?
6. During the time you encountered these perceptions by potential dating partners, what was your understanding of why you might have been perceived that way?

7. What is your understanding now of how these perceptions around your “dateability” may have affected the outcomes in terms of your successes and/or failures in the online dating space?
8. Did you think that these perceptions around your “dateability” may have affected the outcomes in terms of your successes and/or failures in the online dating space?
9. How many of those perceptions are still a part of how you see yourself now?
10. Do you believe that your experiences and the perceptions you have encountered as a Black female in the online dating space are indicative of the climate or “condition” of Black women as a whole? How, if at all, do you think such perceptions of Black women in online dating may vary from how you think you may have been perceived?

Appendix C: Code Book

Code	Definition
Jezebel	Lascivious by nature, seductive, alluring, worldly, beguiling, tempting, and lewd promiscuous, predatory.
Mammy	Big, overweight, cantankerous, asexual dark skin, amiable, loyal, maternal, non-threatening, obedient, and submissive, deference to White authority, old
Matriarch	Both mother and father to her children, dark, fat and ugly, as acting and looking much like a man, “Welfare Queen”
Sapphire	Rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing, This is the Angry Black Woman (ABW) emasculating, hand on a hip , rocking her head, mocking African American men for offenses ranging from being unemployed to sexually pursuing White women, shrill nagger with irrational states of anger and indignation, mean-spirited and abusive. Although African American men are her primary targets, perpetual complainer, but she does not criticize to improve things; rather, she criticizes because she is unendingly bitter and wishes that unhappiness on others.
SBW	Masculinizing, domineering, attitudinal, bossy

Appendix D: Reflexive Journaling

Date	Brief/Debrief	Description
4/2/16	Brief (Terri)	This is my first interview and I do not have a lot of thoughts going into the interview. My only concern is that I hope the interview questions yield rich data.
4/2/16	Debrief (Terri)	The interview was interesting. The participant almost seemed indifferent about online dating. The largest take away was that it depended on the woman and what she was looking for. The participant also struggled with a number of the questions and asked me to clarify. I will keep that in mind moving forward.
4/5/16	Brief (Maya)	Similar, to my first interview I do not have a lot of thoughts going into the interview. I am noticing from the Google Form that participants are college educated.
4/5/16	Debrief (Maya)	Very Interesting. Maya is very selective. She definitely prefers certain dating platforms over others. Her opinions about the quality of members echo both mine and others I have come in contact with that participate in online dating. Plenty of Fish for some reason always gets labeled as having subpar dating candidates. She also mentioned that her education and West African heritage impacts her dating experiences. She also mentioned that she never takes Plenty of Fish seriously, and only uses it when she wants a confidence booster. I am curious to how the other women view the dating sites. Also, men often were surprised that her parents were still together.
4/6/16	Brief (Ella)	I am getting less nervous. I have also resorted to studying participants survey responses in an effort to have more follow up questions and to probe deeper into their experiences.
4/6/16	Debrief (Ella)	The interviews are starting to take shape. Similar to Terri, Ella felt like the California dating market was not for her. Online dating experiences vary city to city. Also, she mentioned that she is into church and had a lot to say about body types being more acceptable on certain websites over others. Labeled her body type Plus Size but Fit.
4/7/16	Brief (Lailah)	I definitely need to work on making these questions more conversational. I will not change the questions, but I will try and find better ways to clarify questions when and if needed.
4/7/16	Debrief (Lailah)	She offered a lot of insight on Widows trying to re-enter the dating market. Interesting to hear her struggles as a young widow with children and men not knowing how to take her. She could easily fit the Strong Black Woman or Matriarch archetypes, however how she defined herself went against that. Despite men not knowing how to approach a widow with three children, she took pride in who she was.
4/8/16	Brief (Sydney)	No thoughts going in.
4/8/16	Debrief (Sydney)	I will have to come back and write on this one. She definitely had a lot to offer when it came to profile images and her opinions on them. Nothing glaring is jumping out at me at the moment.

4/11/1 6	Brief (Gwynn)	Interested in hearing her experience. She is a single mother dating online.
4/11/1 6	Debrief (Gwynn)	Met her ex fiancé online. She actually had to open her mind to date men with children, because her child is an adult. She lost a lot of money on paying for sites
4/12/1 6	Brief (Desirée)	Interested in hearing how divorcés utilize online dating platforms
4/12/1 6	Debrief (Desirée)	Opinionated and comes off argumentative. In my opinion there seems to be an underlying theme with the women's "strong" personalities. Although, pleasant in interviews they describe themselves as being difficult to team up with in relationships. What she shares as honesty and being upfront, essentially good qualities, are taken in a negative way by men.
4/13/1 6	Brief (Laura)	The only participant that used Tagged
4/13/1 6	Debrief (Laura)	In my opinion Tagged and Plenty of Fish are similar when it comes to the quality of subscribers. I think this also has something to do with the fact that she received so many "dick pics" that looked like "crunch bars" and "Snuffaluffagus."
4/18/1 6	Brief (Angela)	She is a little older, and I am curious to hear how her experiences vary from the the 30 year olds.
4/18/1 6	Debrief (Angela)	I appreciated her honesty. She was self-assured and offered a lot of insight. She tried online dating a number of times and realized she had to change her approach. I also appreciated her insight/experience in finding other avenues to date: Facebook, Facebook Communities, Travel Groups and meet ups. Parents are still together, and wants Black love.
4/18/1 6	Brief (Tanya)	This is one of the few participants that self-identified as (Black and White)
4/18/1 6	Debrief (Tanya)	She considered herself by racial. Preferred to date Black men, like the other women so far. Her race was an issue with Black men not viewing her as being Black enough and taking issue with her natural hair. Religion was another hot button issue with her dates. Her religious tolerance or acceptance of other religions resulted in negative interactions with religious Black men
4/21/1 6	Brief (Rose)	I know that this participant was referred by another participant.
4/21/1 6	Debrief (Rose)	She was unwilling to lighten up on her requirement. Very underwhelmed with her online dating experiences. Continue to have Plenty of Fish on her phone simply because it is free. Religion seems to be a big part of her decision making when considering a date online. Dates Black men, but prefers not to date Africans due to past experiences.
4/23/1 6	Brief (Cecilia)	Cecilia is the only participant that has used Coffee Meets Bagel. I am unfamiliar with that platform.

4/23/1 6	Debrief (Cecilia)	Cecilia and Ella both mentioned that they hide aspects of their religious practices from their dates. Similar to Tanya, Black men say negative things about her natural hair. She also has to hide her shape in her pictures, because men tend to say sexual comments if she doesn't. Tanya also mentioned this.
4/23/1 6	Brief (Melanie)	Other than having to reschedule multiple times, I do not have any thoughts going in
4/23/1 6	Debrief (Melanie)	She had a big personality and was very confident. She referred to herself as AWESOME... A few times throughout the interview. She described herself as a Strong Black Woman. She definitely has a strong presence, that was evident even listening to her on the phone.
4/25/1 6	Brief (Nina)	Nina is married and also self-identified as both (Black and White)
4/25/1 6	Debrief (Nina)	She had a lot of opinions on what contributed to her success. She tried Match twice. Second time around she met her now husband. Her approach and tone about online dating was be who you are, but be positive. Being who you are allows you to move past the less serious candidates. Being positive shows men that you are approachable. MAKE SURE YOU LOOK LIKE YOUR PICTURE.
4/26/1 6	Brief (Khloe)	One of the few participants who prefer to date Black men, but also open to date across racial lines.
4/26/1 6	Debrief (Khloe)	She offered insight on body type. Unlike the other participants she labeled her body type as Curvy. She suggested that Black women should cast a wider net and date outside their race.

Appendix E: Audit Log

Date	Time	Description
3/28/16	8:45:13 PM	Terri - Signed Consent Form
4/2/16	9:57pm	Terri Interview -29:41
4/3/16	1:04:09 PM	Danai - Signed Consent Form
4/4/16	11:59:19 AM	Maya - Signed Consent Form
4/4/16	12:29:26 PM	Ella - Signed Consent Form
4/4/16	2:06:17 PM	Lailah - Signed Consent Form
4/5/16	6:13:11 PM	Sydney - Signed Consent Form
4/5/16	9:21:16 PM	Gwynn - Signed Consent Form
4/5/16	5:50pm	Maya Interview - 50:12
4/6/16	4:30:14 PM	Melanie - Signed Consent Form
4/6/16	12:10pm	Ella Interview - 35:49
4/7/16	3:52pm	Lailah Interview - 22:37 & 17:03
4/8/16	12:00pm	Sydney Interview - 48:37
4/10/16	10:39pm	Sydney Member Checking Email
4/10/16	10:39pm	Maya Member Checking Email
4/10/16	10:40pm	Lailah Member Checking Email
4/11/16	7:05am	Maya Profile Review
4/11/16	7:46am	Sydney Profile Review
4/11/16	12:13:27 PM	Cecilia - Signed Consent Form
4/11/16	1:07:42 PM	Laura - Signed Consent Form
4/11/16	1:49:35 PM	Tanya - Signed Consent Form
4/11/16	6:59:30 PM	Dolores - Signed Consent Form
4/11/16	4:13pm	Gwynn Interview - 24:44
4/12/16	8:31:34 PM	Christine - Signed Consent Form

Date	Time	Description
4/12/16	1:33pm	Dolores Interview - 50:53 (Omitted)
4/12/16	10:02am	Desirée Interview - 50:18
4/13/16	4:52:44 AM	Angela - Signed Consent Form
4/13/16	12:38pm	Terri Member Checking Email
4/13/16	8:45:44 PM	Rose - Signed Consent Form
4/13/16	5:56pm	Laura Interview - 56:05
4/15/16	10:13:43 PM	Nina - Signed Consent Form
4/18/16	7:00pm	Angela Interview - 50:24
4/18/16	9:53am	Tanya Interview - 11:39 & 20:22
4/19/16	5:00pm	Danai Interview - 42:59 (Omitted)
4/21/16	7:15pm	Rose Interview - 37:33
4/23/16	11:59am	Participant (Omitted) 31:21
4/23/16	11:27:58 PM	Khloe - Signed Consent Form
4/23/16	11:59pm	Christine Interview - 31:21
4/23/16	8:02pm	Cecilia Interview - 43:30
4/23/16	9:29am	Melanie Interview - 23:59
4/25/16	6:00am	Nina Interview - 29:50
4/26/16	1:40 PM	Closed Survey 18 participants
4/26/16	11:21am	Khloe Interview - 50:06
4/27/16	11:26am	Laura Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:26am	Desirée Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:30am	Dolores Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:32am	Tanya Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:33am	Angela Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:34am	Danai Member Checking Email

Date	Time	Description
4/27/16	11:36am	Rose Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:40am	Christine Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:44am	Cecilia Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:46am	Nina Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:47am	Khloe Member Checking Email
4/27/16	11:53am	Gwynn Member Checking Email
4/27/16	1:57pm	Angela Profile Review
4/27/16	2:35pm	Melanie Member Checking Email
4/28/16	7:18am	Melanie - Match.com
4/29/16	5:56am	Rose Profile Review
5/4/16	4:46pm	Cecilia Profile Overview
5/8/16	1:00pm	Saintalia Interview - 48:33
5/29/16	4:14pm	Participant (Omitted) 34:02
5/9/16	12:00pm	Saintalia Member Checking

Appendix F: Recruitment

Email message:

Subject: Online Dating Study

Hello Everyone,

I am a student in the Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Your e-mail address was either obtained from my personal contacts or this email was forwarded to you from a shared contact. A blind copy format will be used so that the list of recipients will not appear in the header.

The purpose of the enclosed survey is to collect data and set up an interview for my dissertation on the online dating experiences of Black women. I am in the process of recruiting women interested in telling their online dating stories, so I am emailing to ask for your help.

You were selected to participate in this study because I am looking to interview women who have participated in online dating and who self-identify as Black (or African American) who meet the following criteria:

1. Heterosexual women between the ages of 28 and 55.
2. Have used online dating services (i.e. Match, OkCupid, eHarmony, Tinder) between January 2014 – January 2016
3. Have participated in online dating services for at least one month.

Completion and return of this survey indicate voluntary consent to participate in this study. Questions about this study can be directed to me or to my supervising professor, Dr. Novotny Lawrence, Department of Radio, Television and Digital Media, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4619.

Phone (618) 453-4308. (6609 SIU mailcode)

If you (or anyone you know) are interested in sharing your online dating stories, for research purposes, please follow this link: <http://ow.ly/Yf4K9>. The link is a consent form and questionnaire used to schedule interview times.

Thank you in advance, and I look forward to speaking with you.

James H. Johnson
(###) ###-####
email

Note: This email is not intended to be sent out to the same recipient more than once. In the event that you have received this email more than once please let me know, jbxnr@siu.edu, and you will be removed from the mailing list.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Committee Chairperson, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, SIUC, Carbondale, IL 62901-4709. Phone (618) 453-4533. E-mail: siuhsc@siu.edu

Recruitment messages – To be shared and retweeted

Tweet: #ONLINEDATING #STUDY: #Blackwomen needed, share your #dating experiences by May 25th 2016. Click here for more info <http://ow.ly/Yf4K9>

VITA

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Special Honors and Awards:

2015 - 2016

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Dissertation Title:

Datingmiss-Representation.Com: Black Women's Lived Love Hate Relationship with Online Dating.

Major Professor: Dr. Novotny Lawrence and Dr. Aaron Veenstra

Publications:

Online Dating: Interpersonal Interactions Across Borders. Eds: A Degim, J. Johnson, & T. Fu. Amsterdam: Institute Network Cultures, 2015

Presentation: “Commercializing Men—Beauty, Color or Just Whiteness: Convergence of Gender Stereotypes in Indian Advertising.” International Association of Mass Communication Research (IAMCR) Conference. Hyderabad, India. July, 2014.