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## The Dating and Hooking Up Experiences of Black Women at Predominantly White Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

Within this study, we explored the dating and hooking up experiences of Black women interested in dating men while attending predominantly White institutions. Using a phenomenological approach, we investigated how participants' dating and hooking up experiences influenced their college experiences. We used intersectionality, thriving, and belongingness to theoretically frame the study. Five themes emerged: defining dating and hooking up, the value of education, Black women's wants, Black women's experiences, and men's expectations. We close with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

### Keywords

Black women, dating, hooking up, intersectionality, phenomenology, thriving, belonging

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# The Dating and Hooking Up Experiences of Black Women at Predominantly White Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

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Research suggests that recruitment and retention are concerns at colleges and universities (Bok, 2015; Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 1993). Further, the quality of academics at institutions should be the most important determinant in students' enrollment and successful graduation rates (Bok, 2015). However, if students do not feel they fit into the culture of the institution because of their race, ethnicity, or sociocultural backgrounds, among other identities, no matter the quality of the academics, there is a disconnect from the university as a whole (Cuyjet, 2006; Schreiner, 2010). Not feeling part of the community can lead to issues with performance, retention, and graduation rates (Schreiner, 2010). Of particular concern is when predominantly white institutions (PWIs) successfully recruit African American or Black students yet lack a well-developed infrastructure to ensure their success (Cuyjet, 2011).

Black students are expected to assimilate to academic life and adjust to living in mostly White environments (Spencer & Hughey, 2016). Feeling that they do not belong at PWIs is accelerated when Black students find themselves the only one or one of a few in the classroom or on campus. One area of inequality is what Black women encounter at PWIs when they are interested in dating and hooking up with men. Dating is defined as having a close friendship with someone based on "romantic interest and/or physical and sexual attraction" (Mongeau et al., 2007, p. 528). Hooking up can mean anything from casual sexual encounters to kissing, making out, or holding hands, and there is usually no strong commitment to the other person (Bogle, 2008).

Although the number of women exceeds men at many universities, inequity in numbers is just one issue that Black women face with regard to not having partners when interested in men (Birger, 2015). Research suggests that men desire Black women significantly less than other women (Bany et al., 2014; Feliciano et al., 2009). The problem is even more significant at PWIs, where the number of men, especially Black men whom Black women often prefer (Aud et al., 2010), is even lower. The lack of dating and hooking up options can cause students to feel discontented within their universities, which could affect performance and sense of belonging (Barnes & Bynum, 2010; Walley-Jean, 2009; Wilkins, 2012; Yancey, 2009).

Further, studies have demonstrated that when students lack the feeling of belongingness, retention and graduation rates suffer (e.g., see Cole & Arriola, 2007; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

The purpose of this study was to explore the dating and hooking up experiences of Black women interested in dating men at PWIs. We explored how these experiences influenced their thriving and sense of belonging. The following research questions shaped the study: what are the dating experiences of Black women at PWIs? How do dating experiences influence the thriving and sense of belonging of Black women at PWIs? How do the dating experiences of Black women at PWIs shape the perceptions of their universities?

### **Black Women at Predominantly White Institutions**

Because of the interlocking oppressions of racism and sexism suffered by Black women, their experiences at PWIs should not be expected to conform to the common characteristics and development theories used to predict behaviors and needs of students (Rendon et al., 2000). Institutional support for Black women should be deliberate and proactive when attempting to meet the academic and social needs of Black women (Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter, 2022). Howard-Hamilton (2003) noted that Black women face the stressors of racism and sexism to an unparalleled degree. Howard-Hamilton further noted that it is essential for faculty and administrators to support the needs of Black women or the “oppressive cycle” (p. 25) they experience at PWIs would persist. Institutional support for Black women can come in various forms.

In Miles and colleagues’ (2011) qualitative study, they suggested that Black women should have programming and other assistance in place that catered to their specific intersecting needs. Miles et al. noted that Black women were more successful when there was a connection to the campus community, suggesting organizations for students of Color provided positive experiences by helping them build a social community. Similarly, Mina (2011) explored the needs of Black women at PWIs and proposed that faculty integrate assignments that compliment all learning styles; for instance, allowing students to incorporate oral history projects showcasing their lived experiences.

When institutions do not provide formal support structures for Black women, they often create support structures for themselves (Porter, 2022). Croom et al. (2017) explored Black women’s social engagements and how they adapted and learned to survive at a PWI, particularly their involvement in sister circles, which are groups centering Black women. Some participants expressed that while it was vital for them to join the Black student association, there was a yearning to belong to a group that consisted of just Black women. Likewise, Greyerbiehl and Mitchell’s (2014) and Mitchell’s (2014) research suggested that Black women use historically Black sororities as retreats from everyday life at a PWI. Along with supportive campuses and peers, some Black women also want to have fulfilling romantic relationships with men; however, this can be difficult at PWIs.

### **Dating and Hooking Up for Black Women during College**

College is a time for individuals to grow, explore, and experiment in their lives (Barnes & Bynum, 2010; Tinto, 1999). An essential part of the process is developing goals, aspirations, and ideals outside the realm of parental influence (Melendez & Melendez, 2010; Wells et al., 2013). Learning experiences are not just confined to the classroom (Schreiner, 2010; Tinto, 1999); attending college is also a time for students to experience adulthood in a safe environment by exploring their sexuality (Barnes & Bynum, 2010).

The idea of individuals coming of age during their college years has relevance, as displayed by the number of studies concerning dating on college campuses among Black

women (see Fisman et al., 2008; Ford, 2012; McClintock & Murry, 2010; Wilkins, 2012; Yancey, 2009). During college, students struggle to figure out the role dating, sex, hooking up, and sexuality will play in their lives (Uecker & Regnerus, 2010). This adds to the already turbulent time facing Black women attending PWIs (Barnes & Bynum, 2010).

Researchers suggest that Black women are disadvantaged when dating because they are the least desired racial or ethnic group when considering men's preferences (Wilkins, 2012; Yancey, 2009). Many Black women choose to date within their race, which further exacerbates their disadvantage because of the low percentage of Black men attending college (Barnes & Bynum, 2010; Wilkins, 2012). Researchers also suggest that when students are unable to form close, intimate, or romantic relationships at PWIs, it can affect their socialization, sense of belonging, and self-esteem (Cole & Arriola, 2007; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Schreiner, 2010). This lack of socialization can lead to low retention and graduation rates (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010).

### **Theoretical Framework**

We used intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), thriving (Schreiner, 2010), and a sense of belonging or belongingness (Maslow, 1943/2000; Strayhorn, 2019) to frame the study. Together, the frameworks selected for this study reflect the importance of understanding Black women's unique college experiences and consideration should be given to the fact that they are individuals with multifaceted, intersecting identities which shape their experiences. As such, we used intersectionality to assist in framing this research. Using intersectionality positions the research in a manner that reflects the lives of Black women, which are different from White women or Black men. The final two frameworks, thriving and a sense of belonging, are vital to the success of all students and are sometimes an afterthought when seeking ways for Black women to be successful at PWIs. Therefore, we also used the emerging theory of thriving and a sense of belonging to frame the study.

#### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality highlights the ways systems of oppressions overlap (e.g., intersection of racism and sexism), creating unique experiences of marginalization for Black women who live at the intersection of those systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality was first used to describe how Black women are rendered invisible in law because of single-axis applications of discrimination law (i.e., viewing discrimination through anti-racism *or* anti-sexism rather than at the intersection of the two), but the concept is now used to explain marginalization beyond the law. As Black women face marginalizing experiences at PWIs, their ability to thrive is hindered.

#### **The Thriving Concept**

Schreiner (2010) described *thriving* as “measures and perspectives of psychological well-being and student success” (p. 3). Although the idea of student success, which includes retention, persistence, and graduation, is not new. Schreiner focused on “flourishing” (p. 4), which she described as entailing more than graduation as success. Schreiner noted that flourishing students perform better academically, remain socially engaged through interpersonal relationships, and are emotionally secure. Schreiner added that thriving students have better retention and graduation outcomes. Thriving requires a sense of belonging.

## **Belongingness**

The framework of belongingness is not a new notion as Maslow (1943/2000) introduced the idea as the third tier in his “hierarchy of basic needs” (p. 372) concept. Maslow described belongingness as the need for “love and affection” (p. 380) from family, friends, and people in general. Maslow suggested that without having belongingness, individuals would face instability, maladjustments, and, in extreme cases, psychological problems. Within a college setting, Strayhorn (2019) defined a sense of belonging as

students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

## **Researchers’ Positionalities**

In addition to us theoretically framing the study, we also brought ourselves to the study. As qualitative researchers co-construct the findings with the participants, we found it important to acknowledge our positionalities as related to the study.

PC: I am a Baby Boomer, and the participants were millennials. Their college journeys were unlike mine, yet similar. I was a married part-time student; therefore, I never had to maneuver the day-to-day life of living on a college campus nor figure out the dating scene. The social activities at the large state college I attended were not a part of my life. Nevertheless, I understood the feeling of isolation from being the only one or one of the few regarding race in the classroom or at the office. I was familiar with the sense of isolation and not feeling a part of the group. During my tenure as an advisor for the Black Student Union, it was made up entirely of Black women. This phenomenon afforded its advisors, all Black women, the opportunity to offer retreats catering to the needs of these students. During these retreats, the students talked about having no one to date from their school which became a scholarly interest of mine to help document and improve the experiences of Black women in college.

DM: I am a Black man who attended a Historically Black University for my undergraduate studies. My research explores race and racism, gender and sexism, and identity intersections and intersectionality in higher education settings. Even though my scholarly agenda explores identity and systems of oppression, I never considered how dating and hooking up experiences might influence a student’s college experiences, particularly the experiences of Black women attending small to mid-size predominantly White institutions. I can attribute this to my undergraduate experience at a predominantly Black institution and my male privilege. In addition, I acknowledge that while I participated in co-constructing this study, I could never fully understand the participants’ experiences like PC could and that she offered the participants something I could never provide. Still, because I hope to help foster equitable and inclusive student postsecondary experiences, have experience conducting qualitative research, and realize Black women are often marginalized in higher education, I did as much as I could from my positionality to help amplify the voices of the participants.

## Method

### Research Design

We used a phenomenological approach to conduct the study. Creswell (2009) described phenomenology as a research design that explores the diverse lived experiences of participants around a specific occurrence. Since we entered this study to center the voices and lived experiences of Black women in college, we found using a phenomenological research design coupled with the theoretical frameworks used would be the most appropriate way to share their stories.

### Sample

Because Creswell (2009) suggested including between five and 25 participants in a phenomenological study, we interviewed 20 women using purposeful sampling. Using purposive sampling is intentionally selecting participants who are vital to answering the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). To participate in the study, participants had to self-identify as Black or African American women, have an interest in dating men, attend a private PWI, be undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25, and classify as sophomores, juniors, or seniors. We recruited participants from five private PWIs located in the Midwestern and Southeastern United States with enrollments under 5,000 students. Their grade point averages ranged from 2.0 to 4.0 on a four-point scale. Five identified as first-generation college students while 15 had parents or guardians who attended college. Their family yearly income levels were diverse ranging from less than \$25,000 a year to over \$100,000 a year. We asked each participant to choose a pseudonym for the study by selecting the first name of a Black women they admired to promote confidentiality.

### Data Collection

After we received Institutional Review Board approval, gatekeepers (i.e., faculty and staff) at each PWI provided access to the participants. Ravitch and Carl (2016) describe gatekeepers as people who can give or deny access to participants. We collected data through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. After the interview protocol underwent peer review, two Black women were interviewed using the adjusted interview protocol as a piloting process. They offered suggestions on strengthening the interview questions to finalize the interview protocol. Each interview lasted between 20 and 90 minutes.

### Data Analysis

Using Denzin's (1989) steps for qualitative data analysis ensured a fluid process, so our analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Denzin suggests that researchers find key phrases that answer the research questions, interpret the meanings of these phrases, obtain the subject's interpretations, inspect these meanings, and offer a tentative statement or definition of the phenomenon. While using Denzin's steps, we used two cycles for coding the data. The first coding cycle took place in the form of preliminary coding. Then the second coding cycle consisted of ways to connect codes, combining them into themes and subthemes.

As suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), to account for the trustworthiness of the study, we used the criteria *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (see Ravitch & Carl for descriptions of each criterion). To promote credibility, we triangulated the

data with existing literature, conducted member checks with the participants to ensure the findings accurately described their lived experiences, and conducted peer reviews of the themes throughout the data analysis process. To ensure transferability we provided rich, thick descriptions of the findings. For the criteria dependability, we provided an audit trail of our data collection and analysis techniques. Finally, to promote confirmability we provided our positionalities and journaled to highlight our biases and challenge our assumptions.

## Findings

Five themes emerged: defining dating and hooking up, the value of education, Black women's wants, Black women's experiences, and men's expectations.

### Defining Dating and Hooking Up

As part of the research, it was important to understand how the women interpreted or defined dating and hooking up. There is no one definitive way to define these terms as they change with age, and from person to person, group to group, and culture to culture. As the women talked about their experiences, we felt it was important for them to use the terms that made them feel comfortable. Therefore, we asked them for their definitions of dating and hooking up. Beyoncé stated, "Dating in this generation is nonexistent. Me personally, I think if someone's dating then ... it can either be them getting to know each other, going out, texting, that kind of stuff, or they're dating in a relationship." Some of the women, such as Jada, preferred the terminology "talking." Jada stated:

That is such a question for my generation. There [are] different levels of dating for us new generation folk. You have your talking stage. Your talking stage is you might go out on dates with them, and you're just texting them or calling.

When asked to define dating, Solange responded that dating was "kind of like the talking stage." Lisette began her definition by saying, "In my generation, people call it the talking stage, but I would consider that dating." Although "talking" is not new terminology, as some of the students alluded to, it was the most frequently used term.

In dissecting this overarching theme, we thought there would be more pushback when asking the women to define the term, as we felt that they would find the word old-fashioned. The women's descriptions of dating were wide-ranging, and they defined it anywhere from a casual outing to get to know one another to something more serious that could lead to marriage.

None of the women questioned the use of the term "hooking up." Most described casual sexual encounters when discussing the meaning. Many of the women described hooking up as "meaningless sex," as did Natasha who said, "I feel hooking up is just meaningless sex ... No commitment attached to it." While sex was prevalent in describing hookups, some women noted that sex was not a requirement. For example, Natalie stated, "Hooking up is, I feel like, a one-night stand. Not necessarily having sex with someone but having a one-time thing with a person."

All but four women shared that they had engaged in at least one hookup. The experiences they shared suggested that some of the women tried hooking up once or twice to experiment. Some of the women were in relationships or at different stages in their lives and no longer participated in hookups, whereas other women engaged in them regularly. Having the women define these terms gave them a voice and allowed them to express sexuality on their terms.



## The Value of an Education

Most, if not all, of the women, were pleased with the academic education they received at their universities. Many of the women praised their professors and felt that many faculty went out of their way to ensure that their classroom experiences were positive. The participants also shared examples and instances that were less than affirming, particularly when considering activities and functions outside of academics. Five subthemes emerged within this theme.

**Not thriving.** Schreiner's (2010) theory of thriving was explained to the participants, who were then asked if they were thriving. Most frequently, the women said they were not thriving. Loretta shared:

If I were to do it all again, I wouldn't pick my same institution now that I know about the dating and hooking up scene. Honestly, it's really discouraging going through four years of never getting to know or date anyone on this campus. There really is a difference between just being "okay" and thriving. I would definitely have chosen to go somewhere so that I could have the opportunity to thrive.

Loretta was not the only one to have these thoughts. Simone said, "I don't feel that and thriving, I think the only reason why I'm thriving now is 'cause I learned how to be independent and not depend on others to fuel my fire."

In contrast to most of the women, Beyoncé said she was thriving: I'd say so. I think that a large part of that is because I'm on the basketball team, and we're one of the better teams on campus. We're a national championship program, so that might play a part in it, but I think that the community here is very close-knit ... family-like, family-oriented.

Beyoncé shared that her sports team helped her fit in, and although there were not as many options for romantic relations as she would have liked, she was satisfied with the school.

As evidenced by Loretta and Simone, and to a lesser extent Beyoncé, even though Black women were persisting and graduating from PWIs, their experiences were not positive or gratifying in all phases of their lives as suggested by the thriving concept.

**Sense of belonging.** The women were also asked if they had a sense of belonging. Maslow's (1943/2000) hierarchy of needs was explained; however, it was evident that most of the women were familiar with his work. Natasha shared that she felt like she lived in two different worlds at her university:

I am a[n] African American woman on campus, and I am also a student athlete on campus. Being a student athlete on campus, I feel like I do have a sense of belonging, and they try to commit you to be fully invested in the school because you contribute to their athletic program, so they want their athletics to do well, which brings in money, brings in alumni ... But then, as a[n] African American woman, I don't feel that sense of belonging here because I'm forced to put that identity aside because I am a student athlete.

Natasha went on to state that being the only Black woman on the team meant that she had no one to relate to about her Blackness at a PWI. Natasha also shared that she felt she had no one to date and would have to wait until she graduated to pursue a relationship.

Hope said that she was aware that there would be a struggle with developing a sense of belonging on her campus:

I fully came into this knowing. But it was my fault. ... The school, it doesn't really offer much for me in that area when it comes to community and belonging. I thank God for a relationship with God. Otherwise, I wouldn't have continued going here, most likely ... 'Cause you feel alone. You just feel so distant, and it makes you just, especially if this is technically your home, 'cause now you're not living with your family or whatever. Right now, this is my home.

Hope had no extended family to go home to when she was lonely. She depended on her church family and her campus housing as her home.

It was clear that the women lacked a sense of belonging. They also knew that they had to choose whether to stay for what they all considered a quality education or leave for a more inclusive setting.

**It's not the university's fault.** Although most of the women were unhappy with their lack of social and relationship opportunities on campus, some did not fault their universities. Others were distraught with their institutions but did not expect their schools to be concerned enough to address their issues. Solange shared that her PWI "for people of color, is a place for study, rather than a place for social (dating) activity/events." Natasha shared that she did not expect anything more from her institution, noting, "I expected this type of dating and hooking up scene from a predominately White institution." Simone added, "When I applied to this university, I understood that Black people were underrepresented on campus. I hoped that the academic and career opportunities would override [dating] issues. But they don't."

The participants overwhelmingly voiced that navigating their schools was difficult because of the lack of diversity. However, they felt that they had learned to adjust to environments that were unfamiliar and, at times hostile, to them.

**College is a time to explore sexuality.** Some of the participants voiced that they missed parts of their life experiences by attending a PWI, particularly, exploring their sexuality. Loretta was frustrated because she had not dated anyone on her school's campus. Lorena also expressed her desire for more options:

Yeah, I would have wished. Like a lot of people say, like in the movies, you go to college, you find the love of your life, everything is great. Not having that has really, I don't know, messed with my mind and my perception of college. That doesn't happen, you know? For Black women anyways. I know for a lot of White women, at the end of your [college] career, they do get married.

Kay agreed that her educational experiences were also lacking regarding dating and learning about sexuality:

I don't know. I feel like college is a place where you're supposed to go out to meet potential, I don't know, someone that you could spend the rest of your life with. So, I think I would kind of be upset because I never would get the chance to.

While Kay was dating someone at her university, she voiced this sentiment on behalf of Black women who attend PWIs, especially those who have not had a college relationship or had to look elsewhere to date.

**If I had the opportunity for a do over.** The women varied on whether they would still attend their PWI, knowing what they learned about opportunities to date and hook up. Most said they would choose their institution again. Hope said:

I would've still chosen this college. I say this because I didn't come to college to find someone but to learn. I think I might've actually chosen this college because of the [lack of a] dating scene here. Before choosing, I would know that there would be a rare occurrence of distractions from guys. Having someone compliment you feels good, but at the end of the day, anything else becomes a distraction.

Conversely, some of the other women felt differently and suggested that they would look for alternatives. Lisette stated:

I would not choose [my PWI] knowing what I know about the dating and hook up scene. Growing up, I would watch Black college movies and TV shows (such as "A Different World") and always assumed that it would be very easy to date in college because there would be so many options and that there would be Black men who would find me desirable. I had no idea that dating at [my PWI] would be as hard and cause me to have insecurities and an overall sense of hopelessness when it comes to dating. Although I've had the opportunity to date outside of [my PWI] and no longer have a desire to date on campus, I sometimes wish I'd gone to a bigger school, perhaps in a bigger city or town, in a different part of the country, or an [historically Black college or university] where dating would be so much easier.

Lisette was clear that she was looking for more than just academics. More broadly, the women felt as if they missed important phases in their lives by choosing to attend PWIs. Nevertheless, most of the women said they would still prefer their schools despite the lack of dating and hooking up options.

This overarching theme addressed how Black women had to, unfortunately, choose between attending PWIs or thriving and having a sense of belonging. Further, White women and men did not have to make these kinds of decisions as they had viable dating options. The marginalizing experiences faced by the participants, as articulated by intersectionality, were unique, as they could not separate their race from their gender.

### **Black Women's Wants**

Most of the women in the study were sure about what and who they felt were best for them in a romantic relationship. The women discussed their needs and wants in a relationship, and they shared why race in a mate did or did not matter. Further, they discussed the complexity of relationships with Black men. These women also shared how online sites have changed the trajectory of dating and hooking up during college. Five subthemes make up this theme.

**Race doesn't matter.** As the populations of Black men at PWIs were, in some cases, less than one percent, we were interested in hearing who the women dated and if they would date or hook up with anyone outside of their race. The women had mixed feelings on the matter. Some of the women were open to relationships outside of their race, while others had strong preferences. Beyoncé stated, "You can't put a race on attraction." Natalie, who is biracial, was in a relationship with a White man who attended her college. She shared:

I met somebody, but it was weird because I was a freshman and he was a senior, and so I was kind of nervous, and I didn't know how to [act], you know. And so, I think that was weird because I had never dated a White guy before. And so that kind of just made me question like who I was and like if this was right for us to be together because it's not normally ... I don't think it's normally accepted that a White guy is interested in a Black girl. So that made me question a lot about myself and about him.

Overall, as long as the men in their lives understood the plights that come from the intersection of racial and gender biases, some of the participants had no preferences with regard to race.

**I want a Black man.** Other women in the study were clear about their preference for Black men. Jana shared that her preference was "Black men though I don't limit myself to that just because there are other fish in the sea." Maya found herself in a couple of bad situations with White guys when she was in high school and changed her preference:

I mean really like ... It was—at first like way before, it was White [men]. Because I felt like no Black guy liked me or would like me for my skin color, and but I know, after what happened to me, I feel like now is just like Black. [I] kinda feel like Black guys respect me more.

Yvonne stated that she "definitely likes Black men." When asked what she would do if a White man asked her out, she said, "I would definitely think about it long and hard, because I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but I would just turn them down." Solange was explicit in her preference for Black men. When asked if she would at least consider dating a White man, she said, "From having my one experience I had with that White guy ... probably not." So, while some women did not have a preference on race or ethnicity, many of the women did have preferences, and in most cases, their preferences were Black men.

**Relationships with Black men are complex.** As the population of Black men was relatively low at the participants' institutions, the women were asked about the options on their campuses to date or hook up with Black men. Some of the women talked about the fact that Black men were attracted to White women. The women also spoke about other dynamics with Black men on the campus. For instance, Jana explained:

So, because of my preference of a Black male on campus and there's only maybe 25 of them. I'm not saying they're not awesome people because they are, and they're fantastic, but it's just so limited that if I were to date one and then break up and go to another guy, they're also friends. So that's just ... It's weird. It's a weird dynamic, so I just kind of stay friends with them instead.

Loretta was disappointed that Black men on her campus were not interested in dating Black women. When asked why she thought men were not attracted to Black women, she responded:

I don't... I could not tell you. I've been trying to figure that out ... [it's] very confusing because you were brought into this world by Black women. The people that I do know, the Black women, are still a part of their lives, and they highly value, but they don't even mess with Black women themselves. They don't even ... then they're not even seen as options for me because they're constantly looking at other races besides a Black woman.

These excerpts voiced the strong sentiment that the Black men on the participants' campuses did not want to date them or felt too close to date or hook up.

**My man needs to understand me.** Many of the women felt that when they were in relationships, their partners had to understand the lived experiences of Black women. The women understood intersectionality even if they were not familiar with the term. Kay expressed that White men who were interested in Black women did not get a free pass: "If you're not Black, you still have to understand the things that come with me being a Black woman and respect that." Misty agreed with this sentiment by sharing a story about a past relationship:

I was talking to this guy, and I had never shown him my true self, like my 'fro; I feel like that's the rawest I can be. And ... when I showed him finally, he just simply said he didn't like it. I don't like that on you. And I was like, "What?" He was like, "I don't like that on you." That broke me, and not completely; it just hurt because he was White, and I actually cared about him. I cared about his opinion. I cared about what he thought about me. I cared, and I felt like, when I showed him my true self, he wasn't satisfied, and he didn't like who I was. And I said, "Well, I don't know how you're going to like any other Black woman because this is us."

In sum, the participants highlighted how men, no matter their race or ethnicity, needed to understand them as Black women.

**Online dating apps as valuable options.** As many of the women felt that there were no viable options for dating at their universities, they enlisted other alternatives. One of those alternatives was using online dating applications (apps) to find potential men. Maya met the man she was in a relationship with on the dating app Tinder. Misty also met her boyfriend on social media. Initially, they followed each other on Instagram. However, a relationship did not form at that time, but they found each other again on Tinder.

Conversely, Issa's experiences with dating apps were not as satisfying. In her pursuit to find someone to date, she tried Tinder. She said, "And you could go on websites like Tinder...That stuff is terrifying. I did it for like a month, and I'm glad I'm alive. It was horrible. You just meet really weird people." In general, the women felt the need to use dating apps because of the lack of dating or hooking up options at their institutions.

This theme and subthemes highlighted how being on a small college campus with a modest population of Black men influenced the participants' dating options. While the women were sure about their needs, meeting them was illusive. The women understood their tenuous position, looked for other options, and found online dating apps, but online dating had its own set of issues, especially for Black women. Beauchamp et al.'s (2017) study pointed out that Women of Color were sexually victimized more than other groups when using these online dating tools. This phenomenon verifies how intersectionality further impacts the lives of Black women.

## **Black Women's Experiences**

This theme, supported by three subthemes, is dedicated to Black women's issues regarding being stereotyped, the concept of colorism, and doubts that plague women because of the ill-treatment they receive from men.

**Stereotyped.** As the women began to open up about their experiences with dating and hooking up on campus, they began to voice some of their frustrations about the stereotypical treatment and views of some of their White peers. Simone shared:

Like, people looked at me and said, “Oh, you’re an activist.” I’m like, where you get that from? ‘Cause I wear headwraps? They’re like, “Yeah, you know, you’re all about the [power to the people].” You don’t like White people. I’m like, “I like how y’all just gonna put this whole exhaustive list on... who I am without even asking my first name.”

Kay explained the stereotypes associated with Black women on her campus:

You’re loud. You’re rude. Black women can be independent, and a lot of men don’t like that we fend for ourselves. I don’t know, just being independent and not having to rely on them. A lot of men feel like they don’t want a woman that can do things on her own. They want a woman that will rely on them and ask them to do things for them. A lot of Black women aren’t really like that.

Stereotypes were not the only barrier faced when dating; colorism was also a noted issue.

**Colorism.** The participants spoke of the differences that Black people, and more specifically Black women, dealt with based upon the hue of their complexion. For example, Issa felt that people had negative connotations of her because she had darker skin:

There’s not that many of us to begin with. And that whole colorism thing. So, a lot of the Black guys here typically go after White girls. That’s a huge thing. And if they do end up with a Black girl, if they do try to hit on a Black girl, it’s going to be a light-skinned girl... But you have to have a strong sense of self as a Black woman going through all of this. I remember I was walking with my friend [] on the sidewalk, and these two Black guys definitely hit on her a lot. And we’ve had this discussion about colorism. So, she’s kind of mixed, but I know both of her parents are Black. But she’s light-skinned. She has really loose curls. And she’s always getting hit on. And she’s like, “[Issa] you’re so pretty. I don’t understand.” I’m like, that’s the Black community for you.

From a different perspective, Jada stated that her lighter skin tone gave her more options with men on her campus:

The thing is me, as a light-skinned woman ... Even though I’m Black, as a light-skinned [woman], we have this privilege over a lot of other people. So, [men are] more willing to “wife me up” and take me more seriously than they would dark-skinned women. I notice it a lot. A lot of them get played really badly, and then light-skinned girls, we’re [considered] “wholesome” or whatever. There is no correlation between the two of those [things, though].

Colorism was a divisive weapon recognized by the participants on their respective campuses. However, the participants shared that they were aware of the pitfalls and worked to avoid the hazards.

**Questioning worth.** Some of the participants discussed how not being pursued by men on their campus played on their psyches. When asked how she felt about never being asked out by a man on her campus, Loretta shared:

Sometimes it’s like, “This really sucks,” but other times it’s like ... you have to be comfortable with just being with yourself kind of thing. Also, ...there aren’t

many options anyway on campus, just from maturity level and this and that. Yeah, I don't think it ... necessarily bothers me anymore.

Shaka questioned why Black men do not approach Black women on her campus:

[W]hy am I not even approachable to you? It's more of an internalizing thing, rather than external thing. What is wrong with me? Maybe I should dress better, or maybe I should do this or do that in order for you to see me. But they will never see you until they're ready to see you. And I think that is the issue that lies on this campus specifically.

Shaka also shared that she felt that Black women were too challenging for Black men. She thought that they were looking for easy sexual encounters and Black women were not as accommodating, which was a sentiment expressed by other participants as well.

Black women have been stereotyped for centuries. They are often stereotyped as overly sexual, loud, and argumentative. These concerns have been around and have beleaguered Black women for centuries. The participants felt that men sometimes used these stereotypical characteristics to deflate, disregard, and ignore their needs. The hue of their skin tones also caused Black women to be valued or devalued regarding attractiveness. It is well known in the Black community that the lighter the complexion, the more beautiful the majority population considers Black women. This distinction stems from slavery, where women with lighter skin worked as house slaves, and women with darker skin worked in the fields. This colorism continues today and caused self-doubt and impacted some of the participants' senses of belonging and thriving.

### **Men's Expectations**

We also wanted to understand the experiences and views on what and who held men's interest. The women, for the most part, agreed on two issues. First, they agreed that White men fetishized Black women, and second, many Black men were more interested in the pursuit of White women.

**White men fetishize Black women.** One of the topics that seemed to cross all five institutions was the unhealthy treatment of Black women by White men; however, the experiences were not 100% negative as at least three participants were in relationships with White men. Still, there was an abundance of conversation about how the White men on the campuses fetishized Black women. Elizabeth explained, "It's very aggressive," and in some ways, "White guys objectify the Black girls." Issa said, "And then there's a thing with White men fetishizing Black women. And it's horrible. That's happened a couple of times at [my PWI]." Kay discussed being approached by a White man on a sports team:

I feel like, for dating, it's really not a lot of options. I know, for instance, last semester when I was single, there's a guy on the basketball team, and he only liked talking to Black girls, just so he could have sex with them. I'm not like that. If that's the only reason that you want to talk to me is because you want to get the Black experience, then no, I'm not with it.

When asked if he was White for clarification, she said yes, and went on to say how it made her feel: "Bad. I don't know, I feel like people are just using Black women for our bodies, really, and they don't really care what we really ... Like the substance that comes, other than

your body. That's kind of annoying." Their experiences with Black men were different, but no more promising.

**Black men want White women.** As with research, most participants agreed that Black men preferred to date White women. Because of the small number of Black men who attended PWIs, because Black men were more willing to hook up and date outside of their race, and because Black women preferred Black men to other races, Black women face precarious and unenviable positions as they attempted to blossom into educated, well-adjusted women. It put into question their ability for a healthy outlook on life concerning men, their sexuality, and their place at PWIs because of the intersection of their race and gender.

Just about every woman had something to say about Black men dating or hooking up with White women. Maya said, "I feel like there's not many really many because the Black guys here kinda either go for White girls." She went on to say that she was not going to put much effort into the men on campus because they would probably leave her for a White girl. Yvonne said that some of the Black men like only White women:

Well, I know some of the ... A couple of Black men here, they've said that they're only into White girls and whatever. I'm just like, okay. Fine with me. I don't care. So, they wouldn't even be looking at us anyway.

When Natasha was asked how the options or lack of options made her feel about her college campus, she responded:

The lack of options makes me feel like I have to wait until after I graduate from this college. Because I feel they try to recruit Black men here on campus, but I feel like Black men on this campus do not date Black women. They date White women [mostly], and I'm not against interracial dating, but it stings a little bit because it makes me question my worth as a Black woman. I was raised on Black love, so when I see a Black man with a White woman here on campus, I'm just like, dude, there's not that many of us, but you chose the majority. So, it's like, what don't I have that she does? It makes me want to wait until after I leave here.

It was clear Black men's preferences for White women influenced the participants' experiences.

The women discussed their experiences with dealing with long-lasting stereotypes that have plagued Black women for decades, if not centuries. For example, the participants experienced that some men thought that the women were hypersexual and would easily submit to their desires. Other men stereotyped the women as being overly angry and aggressive. As such, the men were apprehensive about approaching the women or expected unsubstantiated behaviors. The women faced a unique marginalization in that men tended not to place these stereotypical characteristics on women of other races or nationalities. Having no way to overcome these unfair and negative stereotypes impacted their sense of belonging and thriving.

## Discussion

In most cases, our findings suggests that Black women were not having experiences where they fully belonged. These findings are similar to Hannon et al.'s (2016) study that suggested that Black women were only accepted within their own racial and ethnic groups or clubs, but not so much in predominantly White organizations. Similar to Schreiner et al.'s (2011) study, most women in the present study indicated that they were not thriving. Schreiner



et al. indicated, unlike with White students, that campus involvement was not enhancing Black students' ability to thrive. Though many of the participants felt their lack of social options was at times intolerable, some said it was what they expected when they chose a PWI. Even so, many of the women indicated that they had more challenging times than initially expected.

As with this study, the literature suggests that Black women prefer to date within their race. Keels and Harris's (2014) study indicated that Black women were less likely than any other group to date outside of their race. While most of the women in the present study preferred Black men, some were open to other races and ethnicities, and were more concerned about their treatment. Six of the 20 participants were open to dating and hooking up with men outside of their race and had no racial preference. While the other women had preferences for Black men, many did not rule out dating or hooking up with men of other races. Conversely, a few women did not intend to ever date outside of their race.

Yancey's (2009) study suggested that Black women were less apt to venture into dating men outside of their race because of the ill-treatment they had been subjected to in the past. For instance, one participant reflected on the abuse she received from two different White men she dated. Other women spoke about how White men expected them to be overly aggressive or hypersexual. Because the participants preferred Black men and there was a short supply at PWIs, many of the participants used online dating apps. Beauchamp et al. (2017) suggested that online dating applications (apps) such as Tinder are mainstays in the lives of students seeking hookups. Many participants pointed out that they would not have anyone to date or hook up with without using dating apps even though they wanted to date and hook up on campus. Their lived experiences, and dating and hooking up experiences specifically, highlight the unique experiences Black women face at predominantly White institutions and how their sense of belonging is hindered, which also hinders their ability to thrive.

The theme "Black Women's Experiences" addressed issues surrounding the treatment received by Black women from men, PWIs, and society and reinforced the need for intersectional analyses to explore Black women's experiences. Much of this unwarranted behavior is based on historical and stereotypical views of Black women that individuals continue to manifest (Corbin et al., 2018). For instance, the women's experiences revealed that many men at their campuses viewed and judged them in stereotypical ways. Studies suggest that Black women are depicted as loud, angry, oversexed, not in control of their feelings, and inept, and these views cause stress in Black women (e.g., see Corbin et al., 2018). Viewing Black women in these ways is contradictory to their thriving and belonging.

The women also expressed concern over being judged because of their skin tone. Studies have shown that, for centuries, Black women with lighter skin tones have been sought after in comparison to those with darker hues (Craig, 2002; Keels & Harris, 2014). Some participants spoke about how the Black men on their campus only sought out women with lighter skin tones. Similarly, Keels and Harris (2014) found that Black men preferred Black women with lighter skin tones. Because of this preference, some Black women were left with few to no options to date.

Although many of the participants stated that they were open to dating outside of their race, they also expressed concern over the treatment they received by some of the White men at their PWIs, as some White men viewed them as sexual. West (2008) suggests that this type of behavior is carried over from the slavery era, where White men saw themselves as superior and Black women as sluts, promiscuous, or worse. There were a few instances in which participants were in healthy, positive relationships with White men. However, they, too, expressed concerns over their partners' understanding and supporting their Black womanhood. McClintock and Murry's (2010) study suggested that Black men were more likely to date and hook up outside of their race than any other group of men. Similarly, many of the participants' feelings were diminished because Black men were more interested in White women.

The participants' experiences highlight the need for using intersectionality as a framework to explore the unique experiences of those marginalized at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression as they often fall through the cracks when examining oppression and marginalization singularly (e.g., just racism *or* just sexism). More specifically, the use of intersectionality helped us articulate their unique dating and hooking up experiences, and further, shed light on why Black women might have different experiences with thriving and belonging at predominantly White institutions.

### **Implications for Practice**

The participants were pleased overall with their academic experiences; however, they felt underwhelmed with their social lives. While there are no expectations for their institutions to provide dating and hooking up experiences, institutions do have a responsibility to understand the needs of Black women. Instead of their institutions, many of the women depended on each other to provide safe havens, motivation, and advice. This is unfortunate, as PWIs should assist Black women by providing outlets for them to work through issues affecting their social lives.

For instance, Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) and Mitchell (2014) posited that historically Black sororities provide safe havens for Black women. Further, groups such as sister circles also offer safe havens for women to support one another (Croom et al., 2017). Research also suggests that mentors, faculty, and staff of Color can provide outlets for Black women to voice concerns (Love, 2010; Miles et al., 2011; Porter, 2022).

Finally, research suggests that online dating sites and apps are here to stay (Beauchamp et al., 2017). Student affairs divisions may be wise to explore this phenomenon to understand to what extent students utilize dating apps. While student affairs offices cannot dictate the use of dating sites, it would be prudent to educate students on using them. Providing training on how to be safe when engaging in hooking up while using apps would provide a layer of precaution.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As this research explores Black women at private PWIs with enrollments under 5,000 students, we recommend studies examining dating and hooking up experiences for Black women be expanded to larger PWIs and recommend studies concerning Black women who have dating interests beyond men.

Finally, because research suggests that women of color encounter sexual victimization more often than other groups (e.g., see Beauchamp et al., 2017), we recommend exploring the topic of Black women in college utilizing dating apps. As the participants were often unable to successfully engage in intimate relationships on their campuses, they sought other outlets, especially dating apps. Understanding the experiences of Black women who use apps can provide helpful information about the satisfaction of sites, safety mechanisms employed, and how apps assist with their experiences.

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