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From the auction block to the Tinder swipe: Black women's experiences with fetishization on dating apps

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Abstract

The digital has been celebrated for its objectivity and lack of bias, yet digital media scholars have addressed the ways that inequity is embedded in technology. What is often missing from this discourse is the voices of Black women. Drawing on interviews with 20 self-identified Black and African American women, aged 18–30, who have used dating apps in the preceding 6 months, we invited participants to share their experiences with online dating and racial fetishization. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we explore how Black women perceive and navigate racial fetishization and stereotypes often informed by racialized and gendered ideologies. Our findings trace Black women's movements through three phases of the dating process in which participants discussed feeling fetishized; a sentiment that we identify as racial desire that is rooted in colonialist ambitions.

Keywords

Black women, fetishization, online dating apps, qualitative research, sexual racism

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Introduction

In today's technology-mediated society, many have sought out partners through dating apps. Despite the potential of dating apps to connect people who otherwise might not meet "in the real world," the Internet is not a neutral space (Nakamura, 2008). Race has consistently been shown to be a factor in predicting online connections and offline meetings (Conner, 2019; Curington et al., 2021; Robinson, 2015; Williams, 2024) as online technologies change the ways we meet, find, and express desire for potential partners, it becomes critical to investigate how race and racism shape desire and dating experiences. Despite the supposed advancements of feminist dating apps like Bumble or identity-specific apps like BLK and Her, Black women still have more trouble finding partners. Just as with in-person dating, race shapes these online dating experiences (Curington et al., 2021). While some have argued that we are living in a post-racial society, racism and sexism have simply expanded to online environments where they remain concealed and deeply embedded in platforms. It is clear from the existing research that Black women are having disparate experiences in online dating environments. Yet the impact of these inequities on Black women's self-perception and mental health are less clear. Hence, we examine how interaction with hegemonic, mainstream gender roles, and Eurocentric beauty norms shape Black women's sense of self.

The Black body has historically been targeted as a site where ideas about racial inferiority are projected. These stereotypes about Blackness also take on a gendered path, disproportionately impacting Black women (Collins, 2004). This article aims to center Black women's voices in exploring their conceptualization and experience with non-consensual racial fetishization, particularly in the context of online dating. Specifically, we will investigate how racial fetishization and stereotypes manifests in online dating and the impact this has on Black women's wellbeing. The article will discuss the impacts of experiencing fetishization and the role it plays in Black women's dating experiences. In addition, it will explore how this phenomenon replicates larger systemic conceptualizations of Blackness that have roots in colonialism, capitalism, and how they appear in the 21st century. Our study highlights the need to address the role structural racism plays in creating these discriminatory experiences, and to make online dating platforms equitable for Black women.

Literature review

Gender and sexual ideologies are also implicated in the racialization of bodies. A key part of this argument is that underlying racialized and gendered assumptions are imposed onto the body in a "racialized interaction order" where the presentation of self takes center stage and unwritten rules about racial difference mediate the hierarchical determination of who is desirable (Goffman, 1983; Lugones, 2007; Meghji, 2018; Rosino, 2017). This can be drawn back to colonialism. An example of the ways in which colonial power dynamics manifested is through the emergence of a logic of differential superiority and inferiority. This logic served to rationalize the domination of colonizers over colonized subjects, and was informed by racialized interactions that were shaped by sexualized representations of race.

Controlling images, sexual racism, and economies of desire

Bailey and Stallings (2018) posit that Black sexuality has a "painful history" that cannot be separated from American histories of chattel slavery, colonialism and imperialism, scientific racism and eugenics, and institutions like the prison industrial complex that have continued to profit from Black pain and victimhood. Miller-Young (2010) contends that Black women's sexualities are informed by the historical objectification "necessitated by the sexual economy of slavery," in which Black bodies were viewed by their (re)productivity and physicality that ultimately determined their economic value (p. 222). Black feminized bodies were constructed as primitive and vulgar, in opposition to White femininity (and sexuality), which was viewed as pure and in need of protection (Hobson, 2005: 92–93). The fear of Black sexuality has been a "basic ingredient" of racism, and problematic assumptions about Blackness, Black sexuality, and Black humanity that have been used to maintain hegemonic structures of power (Collins, 2020: 217). Collins (2002) analyzes "controlling images," rooted in stereotypes about Black womanhood emerging in the Antebellum period: the hypersexual Jezebel, the asexual matronly Mammy, and the angry man-hating Sapphire. Bailey (2021) extends Collins' argument, developing the term misogynoir to describe the "co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women, particularly in visual and digital culture" (p. 16). While misogynoir addresses problematic mediated representations of Black women, Bailey (2021) asserts that these images impact Black women's lived experiences, often resulting in racist and gender-based violence. As we will explore, misogynoir and stereotypes about Black women, such as being hypersexual, combative, hyper-independent, gold diggers significantly impact Black women's experiences with online dating.

Dating apps are best understood as sites where power, culture, and technology collide, heightening rather than ameliorating the significance of race and racism (Stacey and Forbes, 2022; Williams, 2024). Colonialism, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the troubled history of slavery in America have rendered Black women as both eroticized and othered. This legacy continues in dating apps, which function as an "erotic marketplace" (Curington, 2021). Evoking the logic of the slave auction, dating apps require Black women to present themselves for public sexualization, and objectification. Black women's desirability is heavily dependent on cultural perceptions of skin tone, hair texture, and body size, all of which are subject to scrutiny from others. We argue that the platforms enable the consumption and reproduction of these stereotypes and ideals. Research on platform affordances (Brock, 2019; Gray and Stein, 2021; Noble, 2018) has addressed the ways that racism and sexism are "baked in" to digital platforms (Bivens and Haimson, 2016). Bivens and Hoque (2018) contend that technological design is a "social and political act that is both influenced by surrounding sociocultural and political-economic contexts and actively involved in constructing such contexts" (p. 443). Concealed discriminatory design in dating platforms' algorithms help to curate a space where sexual racism and racial fetishization appear natural, neutral, and normative (Williams, 2024). Hence, we introduce affordances literature because technological affordances can mediate how individuals situate race and gender on dating platforms (Comunello et al., 2021; Pruchniewska, 2020). We aim to build upon this scholarship to

illuminate the deep rooted connections between colonialism, the political economy of desire, and how these in turn cause fetishization and stereotyping that is rampant on dating apps.

Black women and online dating: Navigating fetishization and "personal preferences"

Dating apps are presented as objective and unbiased; simply designed to help people find true love. However, online dating is product of the "desire industry" where sexual harassment is normalized, and racialized and gendered ideologies of attractiveness (Lugones, 2007) shape people's ability or inability to accrue "erotic capital" (Brooks, 2010). Racial hierarchy becomes "naturalized" through dating apps through preference discourse (Curington, 2021: 276). How users swipe left or right, ultimately assigns value to certain bodies. Stacey and Forbes (2022) use racial fetishization to describe a form of "virtual segregation" that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) gay men experienced (p. 381). In addition, racial fetishization is a product of racism and sexism and can have material consequences for Black women with the stereotyping and fetishization they experience ultimately hindering their relationships (Stacey and Forbes, 2022: 373). Here we note that racial fetishization and race play are complicated; being rooted in historical power dynamics. Yet, many Black women experience consensual race play as a subversion of traditional gendered power dynamics (Abrams, 2020; Cruz, 2016; Mollena, 2024). Hence, we hold space for Black people who may enjoy racial fetishization and race play by critiquing non-consensual race play. But we argue that racial fetishization that occurs on dating apps, outside of a matched pair cannot be consensual as individuals have not yet spoken. Because the women in our study refer to negative experiences of non-consensual racial fetishization, we follow the lead of our participants and offer a critique of racial fetishization in accordance with this lens unless otherwise noted.

Stating racial preferences is encouraged by online dating technologies (Williams, 2024). Participation on dating platforms requires users to rank potential partners by visual markers of hegemonic attractiveness (Stacey and Forbes, 2022). Hegemony refers to the power afforded to dominant groups to shape cultural and societal norms (Avery et al., 2021). Hegemonic beauty standards in the United States center Eurocentric features, including light skin, eyes, and hair color, as well as thin bodies and smaller facial features (Avery et al., 2021). Within these confines, Afrocentric features, such as darker skin, wider noses, full lips, and short and kinky/curly hair are deemed less desirable and unfeminine. Sexual racism in online dating environments fosters the filtering of entire groups of people on the basis of phenotypic markers of racial difference (Robinson, 2015; Smith et al., 2022; Williams, 2024). Yet, the ranking and sorting work that mediates preference discourse and racial hierarchy are obscured through algorithms. We cannot properly address fetishization without discussing racial preferences. Racial preferences in dating and intimate life have largely been regarded as a personal choice that should not be open for discussion or judgment. Yet, scholars who study sexual racism urge us to consider how "the personal is political" (MacKinnon, 1987) and the ways that racial discrimination masked as racial preference can harm Black women (Bedi, 2015; Williams, 2024).

Metrics of desirability in online dating platforms seem to mirror those enacted in real life, with an emphasis on hegemonic, Eurocentric beauty standards. Existing scholarship on the experiences of Black women on online dating platforms has revealed that Black women are perceived as less desirable than other demographic groups, while at the same time experiencing higher levels of sexual objectification (Curington et al., 2021). While often regarded by some online daters as a neutral statement of sexual preferences, it is clear that these "preferences" reflect racist, fatphobic, and anti-Black beliefs rooted in historical stereotypes and systems of oppression. The rampant adoption of discriminatory practices on online dating platforms have tangible consequences for Black women, including reduced engagement with their profiles and, therefore, fewer opportunities to make romantic connections compared to White women (Curington et al., 2021). When Black women do receive messages, they are often sexually explicit, including exotifying comments that hypersexualize them and invoke racist tropes like the Jezebel stereotype (Curington et al., 2021). For example, one Black woman shared in a qualitative interview: "He literally said, 'I don't want to date you long term. I just want a sex goddess. I'm really into white girls'" (Curington et al., 2021: 126). From emerging scholarship, it is evident that online dating platforms passively permit and actively reinforce existing systems of oppression, facilitating sexual racism and discriminatory dating experiences.

Through online dating, there is also the potential for what Miller-Young (2010) describes as "erotic autonomy," in which Black women leverage the fetishization they experience to service their own needs and desires. Our interviews illuminate the complex and often contradictory experiences of Black women in online dating spaces in which their bodies are given lesser value in the "sexual economy" (Davis, 2002). Yet, online dating spaces provided many of the women we talked to an environment to pursue their offline encounters safely, through screening potential partners, while also enabling them to act upon their sexual desires. While we acknowledge the troubled and ever-present history of fetishization that is deeply embedded in online dating spaces, and that for Black women, joy and pain often exist simultaneously. We found that Black women are able to engage with online dating spaces in ways that facilitate pleasure, from making the first move on a dating app, to using dating apps specifically for kinks like group sex, to feeling validated and desired through interactions with potential partners online. The women we talked to expressed a serious disillusionment with online dating and had very negative experiences to share, yet they continued to use the apps. The pleasure gleaned from online dating apps, while not the focus of our article, cannot be ignored.

Methods

Participant demographics

Data from this study are a part of a larger project that investigates Black women's online dating experience. We invited participants who self-identify as Black or African-American women between the ages of 18–30 for one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted by the first and second authors, who are also Black women, which allowed us to understand the nuances of participants' experiences and provided a comfortable space for our participants to share. Participants were recruited through

convenient sampling on social media, with the first and second authors posting the study flier on their personal social media accounts, and in relevant social media groups. Interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes and were conducted virtually via Zoom. The interview audio was recorded and the interview transcripts were edited verbatim by an undergraduate research assistant. All participants were given or chose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. After the interview, participants completed a post-interview questionnaire to collect demographic information and to give space to share any additional thoughts. Participants received a $25 gift card as compensation for their time. This project received institutional review board's (IRB) approval prior to the start of data collection.

The average age of participants was 26.5 ($R = 22–30$, $SD = 2.54$). Participants described their sexuality at the time of data collection as bisexual ($n = 2$), pansexual ($n = 2$), asexual/queer/androsexual ($n = 1$), fluid ($n = 1$), queer ($n = 1$), bicurious ($n = 1$), and straight/heterosexual ($n = 11$). Most participants reported that they were single ($n = 13$), born in the United States ($n = 17$), from the Midwest ($n = 9$) or Southern region of the United States ($n = 7$), had a graduate or professional degree ($n = 13$), and employed ($n = 19$). When using online dating apps, many participants described using dating apps to date in their same geographical region ($n = 16$) and looking for long-lasting relationships ($n = 15$). On average, participants reported online dating for 2.25 years ($R = 3$ months–10 years, $SD = 34.96$).

Analysis

Data from interviews were entered into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, and transcripts were analyzed iteratively by the first and second authors utilizing reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive theoretical analysis (RTA) enabled us to effectively gather and analyze data in a way that was sensitive to the participants' perception and experiences while also acknowledging our interpretive biases as the researcher. The first and second authors began the analysis by familiarizing ourselves with the data taking note of themes that were recurrent and/or surprising. We then generated initial codes by writing memos from each transcript in response to our guiding question: "Do Black women experience fetishization when engaging in online dating, if so how and what are the implications of this?" For example, when a participant describes her experiences by detailing racialized and problematic messages she receives regarding her as "exotic," the authors take note that objectification was a manifestation of fetishization. The codes were then consolidated based on likeness and similarity. Next, we began synthesizing our codes by combining like codes into a theme. For example, we grouped all the codes related to objectification and dehumanization into one theme. Given that this is a recursive and iterative collaborative process; as we developed the themes, we found that they began to lend themselves to be reflective of each phase of the dating process. We realized that the lens we can understand the impact of fetishization and stereotype play on Black women's online dating experience was by mapping the dating process as to not collapse or strip the ideas from their nuance. This follows a similar model to the way Hanson (2022) reports on how heterosexual college students use dating apps with their peer groups in the linear trajectory of how they normally use dating apps – download a dating app, make their profile and find matches, and move off the app to in-person meetings.

Table 1. Three phases of the online dating process for Black women.

Phase 1: Consideration of offline experiences	Phase 2: Creating a dating app profile	Phase 3: On-app interactions
Theme 1: Awareness of algorithms as biased →		
Theme 2: Understanding of and experiences with fetishization →		
	Theme 3: Identity curation and selection of profile photos →	
	Theme 4: Concerns about safety online and offline →	
	Theme 5: Intersections of race, gender, and body size →	
		Theme 6: Decoding potential partners' profiles for bias, racism and misogyny
		Theme 7: Encountering and responding to fetishization in direct conversations

This approach also enables us to examine the impacts of stereotypes and fetishization both independently at each phase and as a part of the whole experience of Black women. Furthermore, the use of RTA allows us to develop our definition of racial fetishization in concert with the Black women we spoke with; positioning them as the generators of knowledge about their own experiences.

Results

Our findings suggest that Black women adopt a linear strategy when discussing the online dating process (Hanson, 2022). We identify three phases of the online dating process: (1) consideration of offline experiences, (2) setting up a profile on a dating app, and (3) on-app interactions. Within these three phases, the following emerged from our analysis: offline experiences described as awareness of algorithms as biased and an understanding of fetishization before even engaging with dating apps; creating a dating app profile, which often involves identity curation, particularly through the selection of profile photos, concerns about safety online and offline, and intersections of race, gender, and body size that impact Black women's self-perception and their interactions with potential partners; and finally, on-app interactions consisting mainly of engaging in emotional and physical labor to decode potential partners' profiles to determine if they held racist and/or misogynistic beliefs and to determine if they might be unsafe, as well as navigating racism, sexism, and fetishization in direct conversations with potential partners. The three phases and the accompanying themes are outlined in the table below. Some themes, particularly related to fetishization and safety were present across multiple phases and are also noted in the chart. In the sections that follow, we offer a detailed discussion of these separate but cyclical phases to better understand the nuances of Black women's online dating experiences and to deconstruct how Black women inevitably encounter and navigate fetishization on dating apps. Like many digital media scholars before us, we contend that the online experiences shared by Black women in this study are informed by socio-historical ideologies about race and gender, specifically Black

womanhood. In turn, these experiences impact Black women's self-perception and attitudes toward relationships (Table 1).

Phase 1: Consideration of offline experiences

Before opening the apps and the swiping begins, it is important to recognize the ways that Black women are acutely aware of the interlocking oppressive systems that perpetuate harmful stereotypes and further the wrongful assumptions about Black women's demeanor and ultimately their desirability. Furthermore, Black women understand and recognize the ways in which racism and sexism are deeply embedded in online platforms and undergird their online dating experiences. Our conversations with participants illustrated that a consideration of offline experiences consists of an awareness of algorithms as biased digital structures, and an understanding of fetishization as an objectifying and dehumanizing experience, both informed by racism and sexism.

Theme 1: Black women's awareness of algorithms. While participants were not exactly sure how dating app algorithms functioned, they expressed awareness of the ways their intersecting identities put them at a disadvantage in the online dating environment. Users described dating apps as having a recommendation system in which potential matches were presented to them based on phenotypic similarity. They also recognized that there were biases embedded into the apps. Sarah and Alicia explained that algorithms can never be equitable because they are "made by humans," thus social biases like racism and sexism are "built into the online experience." These discussions of algorithmic bias reflect Black women's extensive knowledge crafted by lived experience. This knowledge also situates Black women's digital practice as well-thought and self-reflexive, contrary to prior scholarship that depicts Black women as late adopters, technologically illiterate, or ignores Black women's experiences in the digital entirely. This knowledge gained through positionality and lived experience informs how Black women perceive dating before they even open the apps. The norms of platforms encourage publicly expressing one's racial "preferences," and racial preference is often used to backpedal out of accusations of racism (Pandika, 2021; Williams, 2024). As Tasha noted, "online dating as a way of perpetuating . . . preferences, even if it's rooted in racism." "Personal preference" discourse not only perpetuates sexual racism, but also often leads to racial fetishization, which Stacey and Forbes (2022) define as "fixation on a bodily part or characteristic that people associate with a member from a group based on racial sexual stereotypes" (p. 373). Like Stacey and Forbes (2022), we built our analysis off of the participants' definitions of fetishization and stereotypical assumptions they described encountered on dating apps.

Theme 2: Black women's understanding of and experiences with fetishization. Through our interviews, 80% of participants described experiencing fetishization on a dating app. In this section, we work to create a cohesive definition of racial fetishization that is shaped by the knowledge and experience of the women we interviewed. It is our hope that this definition may extend the collective understanding of non-consensual racial fetishization. Participants defined racial fetishization as objectification and sexualization, often

focused on the body and informed by stereotypes, an experience compounded by multiple marginalized identities. Fetishization is driven by an effect of uninhibitedness, which Cynthia noted as an "uncontrollable obsession." Yet, what Liliana described as an "overzealous infatuation," racial fetishization is not an affection or romantic affinity toward Black women. Rather, it is a sexualization of Black femininity. According to Emily, a fetish is something "you would be looking up on PornHub, but then wouldn't necessarily tell your friends [about]." Emily's insight provides important context for situating racial fetishization. Most do not openly disclose racial fetishes with family and friends because they are seen as taboo. Providing further evidence that expressed racial fetishization is not simply a matter of neutral personal preference (Williams, 2024). Quite the opposite, users tend to share these desires online because they know that the racial nature of their preferences would not be readily tolerated in polite conversation.

Black women likened the fetishization they experienced to a guilty pleasure. Janell Hobson (2005) describes Black women's fetishization as a "curious ecstasy," something desired and sought out in secret, behind a screen or behind closed doors (p. 39). Fetishization is highly affective, especially for those who experience fetishization. Stacey and Forbes (2022) contend that racial fetishization "produces racialized feelings" (p. 373). Racial fetishization is not just something people of color experience, but it is a "unique way in which race and racism are *felt*" in the Black body (Stacey and Forbes 2022: 381). Affect is an important, unexplored component of the online dating process. We sought to understand how fetishization made Black women *feel*. The most common feeling emanating from our participants when confronted with fetishization was feeling objectified and dehumanized, which ultimately shapes how Black women perceive themselves and their prospects for long-term relationships. Participants expressed the fetishization was a form of objectification and dehumanization hinging upon their Blackness. Tasha expressed the fetishization was different from loving a Black women's "wholeness," appreciating and respecting her many identities. For Tasha, fetishization reduces Black women to mere objects in a form of crude yet covert dehumanization: "It really doesn't matter about the person. It matters about an attribute." Fancy shares a similar sentiment stating that dating apps make her "feel like an object" to be looked at, appraised for erotic value in the visual economy of desire online. For the women we talked to, fetishization was viewed as a sexualization of Blackness and Black sexuality as objects, parts of a Black woman's body meant to be controlled and possessed, or to be experienced sexually and later discarded.

Though some participants referenced pursuing other women while online dating, it is important to note that queer women's experiences of fetishization often focused on the advances of men. For instance, one participant, Grace, mentioned that while searching for queer women, she was inundated with invitations to join couples as a "third" (referring to a person who engages sexually or romantically with an established couple). Though not all consensually non-monogamous couples approach queer women this way, participants in this sample felt these advances were often strictly sexual, objectifying, and led them to question whether the woman was queer or appeasing a male partner. For most queer participants in this sample, experiences of fetishization on dating apps predominantly came from men, both single and partnered. While it is entirely possible that queer women may not encounter fetishization from other queer women online as

frequently, when it does occur race may be especially salient. Further work assessing Black queer women's experiences with fetishization with other women, both inter- and intra-racial couples, on online dating platforms is imperative (Ferris and Duguay, 2020).

Previous literature has illuminated how niche dating apps, such as Her, aimed at women seeking women (WSW), represent potential safe online spaces for WSW. However, these apps have faced criticism for their exclusively White initial marketing, reflecting and promoting limited views of desirability centered on White femininity (Ferris and Duguay, 2020). Given the capabilities of online dating platforms, both those designed for WSW and general heterosexual audiences, to prioritize users embodying White femininity ideals, further research is warranted to understand how these interface norms shape the online dating experiences and behaviors of Black women.

Altogether, given these findings, we frame racial fetishization as non-consensual objectification and sexualization of the Black body that is rooted in gendered stereotypes that amplify marginalization. Here, it is important to note that though the practice is taboo, it does not always occur in private. In fact, all too often, the expression of racial fetishization occurs in public attempting to destabilize and delegitimize the Black body. For those on the receiving end, both queer and heterosexual, the affective result is often disorienting, dehumanizing and traumatic. In the next section, we discuss the ramifications of this affective trauma, that in some cases, shapes how Black women curate their profile content.

Phase 2: Creating a dating app profile

While setting up their dating profiles, participants work within the affordances of dating apps to carefully curate photos, respond to prompts, and share relevant personal information. Black women rely on the affordances of specific dating apps as well as an acute awareness of their social positionalities to construct their profiles. We found that Black women are cognizant of the stigmatization of Black women as undesirable as well as the simultaneous hypersexualization that results in the fetishization they experience. Black women must condense their multifaceted identities into simplified online dating profiles while being cautious about how they may be perceived, as well as taking additional steps to stay safe, working to eliminate any potential harms by concealing certain information and aspects of their identity.

Theme 3: Identity curation and concerns about safety. An affordance of some dating apps is that users are able to connect with diverse potential partners. Yet, Pruchniewska (2020) points out that this same affordance can lead to risk where safety is concerned. Affordances on dating apps consist of both the actions enabled by platform features and the users' perceptions of how those options animate their experiences (Pruchniewska 2020). On dating apps, Black women are placed in a precarious position where they feel burdened to craft profiles that appear "authentic" and ultimately desirable to potential partners while also avoiding appearing "too sexual." Because platforms only allow a limited number of photos to be uploaded at a time, participants reported having to creatively navigate this constraint. To this end, Fancy spoke to the kinds of photos she puts on her profiles: "I'll have one or two bikini pics. But I start[ed] taking them out . . . because I

don't want that to just be portrayed that way." Fancy was aware of the ways Black women are sexualized online, removing photos of her body because she did not want to be solely viewed as a sexual object. Nia recognized that her own profile photos featuring a professional headshot and a graduation photo presented her as "uptight, or stuck up." We argue that this serves as a protective measure to shield from unsolicited comments and sexual harassment. Yet, these preventive measures do not prevent all sexualization. Fancy recalled a profile photo of herself in her room surrounded by her plants, "and somebody was like, 'oh, let me water you!'" It also appears that the clothing Black women wear in profile photos is not always a determinant of the harassment they receive. Vivian explained that her personal style included baggy clothes. She recalled still receiving sexualized comments on her photos like, "I know you've got a body on you underneath those clothes."

Black women also ascribe meaning to the way they present themselves in photos and the reasons people may be interested in them. Sydney realized that certain photos on her profile where she was wearing colored contacts received more engagement which she attributed to the exoticization of Black women: "[men only like you] in photos where you look exotic." Black women take additional steps to manage their physical appearance (wearing makeup, posting photos in different hairstyles, colored contacts, etc.) which they understand as the primary way to receive engagement on the apps. Similarly, Cynthia recognized the relationship between the types of photos shared and the assumptions potential partners might make: "If I know that I have these pictures where I'm in a party dress or more tight revealing clothing, then I'm like, 'all right, that's why you're here . . .' But if . . . I'm at the mall just walking around or [out to lunch] with friends . . . then I'm more likely to be like, 'okay, this person might see me for me and not what I look like." Cynthia's comment also points to the desire to find something "real," to meet a partner who "sees them," cares for them, and ultimately acknowledges them as human. Participants also discussed how they used their profile pictures to portray the most accurate and authentic versions of themselves, especially regarding body type and size.

Theme 5: Intersections of race, gender, and body size. Plus sized participants like Rose, Alicia, and Honey felt the need to share full-body photos to avoid being accused of "catfishing" or hiding their weight, perpetuating the ideology that fatness is shameful. Participants were forthright about their bodies, intentionally posting full-body profile photos because, according to Rose, "what you see is what you get." It is also worth noting the ways dating apps might afford Black women a certain level of control over their representations and enable potential partners to be vetted to ensure potential partners are safe and that their personal values align with their own. Rose shared that she has heard stories about plus-sized women being rejected after showing up for an in-person date. Similarly, Alicia explained that she shares full-body pictures on her profile so that potential matches know "what my body shape [is] . . . so no one's like, 'I'm so surprised—you're fat . . .'. I can't emotionally be dealing with that. So I'm like, 'this is me and what I look like'." These conversations demonstrate Black women's deep understanding of how their multifaceted identities, prevailing stereotypes converge, and a need for self-protection from rejection or other forms of violence converge, manifesting in comments, such as "you're

so pretty for a fat girl." These safety measures are often not available to Black women in other dating contexts and are one of the reasons participants continued to use dating apps despite the harassment experienced and the difficulty finding matches.

In addition to disclosing racial preferences in user profiles, many of our plus-sized participants shared encountering profiles that listed detailed preferences about body type. Grace recalls seeing a bio that explicitly stated "no fat people," along with other specific physical requirements like straight teeth and being over a certain height. To indicate their interest in hooking up with plus-sized women use phrases like "thick queens only," "looking for fluffy goddesses to worship," and "BBW [Big Beautiful Women] lover" in their profiles. Yet, the profiles of potential partners that signal a love for big women are also red flags to the women we interviewed. According to Rose, online dating is complicated as a "Black woman, but then also a fat Black woman." Rose shared that because of her race, gender, and body size, she feels that she experiences multiple levels of fetishization, especially from cisgender White men who have never had sex with a Black woman before. Similarly, Honey expressed that men are attracted to her because of her race and her body size. She recalled, "I've had men just straight up say . . . 'so you're a big woman so I bet you can cook . . . I bet you got good pussy.'" These examples illustrate that Blackness and fatness are presented as doubly fetishized or undesirable. Hegemonic beauty standards that value a proximity to Whiteness and thinness are deeply rooted in racism, sexism, and fatphobia, resulting in multiple levels of fetishization and hypersexualization for bigger women.

Phase 3: On-app interactions

In our conversations, we asked participants how they identify potential partners on dating apps to understand how Black women use written and visual cues in potential partners' profiles to identify matches, but also to identify racist individuals. While prior scholarship on dating apps has addressed the gamification of the platforms, reaffirming racist and sexist beliefs as users absentmindedly swipe (Narr, 2021), we noted that Black women studied the profiles of each partner, making conscious decisions regarding whether to initiate or engage in conversation. Just as careful consideration went into selecting their profile photos, participants carefully examined the profiles of other users to determine whether or not they held racist ideologies or would even date Black women.

Theme 6: Decoding potential partners' profiles. Participants used cues and context clues on potential partners' profiles as indicators of potential biases. Most participants (75%) had a list of red flags that could be identified through a potential partner's profile pictures. These included: pictures with American or confederate flags, guns, fish, or some other dead animal, are likely to be racist or misogynistic and are likely to fetishize. For Vivian, who attended a primarily White high school in a small rural town, White men who are "fish holders," or take photos of themselves brandishing a freshly caught fish, are red flags. One of Tasha's red flags was men who hunt as representative of toxic White conservative masculinity:

> they love posting these photos [of] them with a gun in the woods. I'm confused, why do you think that's cute? When I see the hunting gear? Left [a swipe left, indicating that she does not

> find the person in the profile attractive] . . . I just would not fit in this space, and I don't want to voluntarily put myself in a space where I don't feel comfortable.

The red flags mentioned were related to specific hobbies commonly associated with rural, politically conservative, racist White masculinity. Profile photos of men hunting and fishing, which seemingly signify strength, skill, and an ability to provide for a potential partner, were interpreted by participants as a colonizing dominance over nature and an affinity for violence, which participants overwhelmingly deemed unsafe.

Tasha explained that she is more selective when looking at White men's profiles because "stakes are so much higher." Tasha is expressing a concern for personal safety, particularly regarding a fear of experiencing racial and gender-based violence at the hands a White man. She shares that regarding political views, she is much more lenient if a Black man says he's politically moderate, versus a White man: "If it's a white man . . . 'he's conservative . . . he voted for Trump . . .'" For Tasha, political affiliation is a direct indicator of an individual's personal beliefs, implying racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia, which could deem them unsafe or potentially violent. Safety was an element of online dating frequently discussed by participants. According to Sydney, Black women recognize that they aren't safe and the online is no exception. For Vivian, a detailed examination of a potential partner's profile is a "matter of protection," and Caroline described this vetting process as the "pre-check before the main event." While an important preventive measure to potentially avoid harassment, this becomes an additional level of labor that Black women must engage in to ensure their safety online because the platforms do not. Vivian commented that Black women "have to protect [themselves]," but that exercising protection takes away from the pleasure of online dating.

Theme 7: Encountering and responding to fetishization in direct conversations. The primary ways participants engage with potential partners is one-on-one conversions through direct messaging on the platforms. It is evident that while the functions of the platform might remain consistent for all users, the profiles presented and experiences encountered by Black women differ significantly. Vivian explains that there is a "diminished sense of accountability" on dating apps that emboldens White men in particular to share their racialized "preferences" on their profiles and approach Black women in inappropriate ways. Previous research supports Vivian's feelings about diminished accountability. The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) suggests that users behave differently online than they do offline because degrees of anonymity afford some protection from social stigma. There are blatant signs of fetishization on user profiles. Forty percent of participants also recounted stumbling across profiles that explicitly indicated users were looking for Black women, often referring to them as "Nubian queens" (exoticizing Black women through associations with African royalty), or comparing their skin colors to desserts (caramel, chocolate, brown sugar, etc.). Williams (2024) argues that this online disinhibition effect is exacerbated by racially curated sexual marketplaces afforded by dating platform's loose safety regulations regarding fetishizing language and sexual racism.

While dating apps do allow Black women to filter and select potential partners based on a multitude of interests, identities, and other categories, it is clear that others are doing the same. A quarter (25%) of participants discussed being approached on apps by potential partners who explicitly noted they had "never been with a Black woman before" or by

non-Black men who explicitly professed that they only date Black women. Black women are treated as an experience, or as objects to "try," monopolize, or dominate. The desire to conquer Black women is rooted in colonialism and through slavery (Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Another common comment participants received was that they were "pretty for a Black girl." While supposedly being a compliment from potential partners, this harmful phrase asserts that Black women are beautiful *in spite of* their Blackness. Colorism also plays a significant role here. Sarah explains that living in a small college town near a predominantly White institution, she is often matched with White men. She recalled conversations where White men have told her things like, "I've never been with a Black woman, but I think you're really beautiful . . . I've never been with someone as dark as you . . . [you're] pretty for a dark skin." For the dark-skinned Black women, we interviewed, their skin was a contentious site of stigma and eroticism, as dark-skinned Black women are viewed as especially undesirable by hegemonic beauty standards, yet also exotic. Natalie recounts matching with a biracial Black man on Tinder who sought her out because of her darker complexion. She states that he was interested in slave play and was looking for a dark-skinned Black woman to play "slave" while he played the "housekeeper." Even though slavery has supposedly ended, the sexualization of Black women continues, manifesting in sexual fantasies of racial difference, and even sexual fantasies of slavery itself.

For participants, these racially and sexually motivated encounters are an instant end to the conversation that also often results in the user being blocked. And while these problematic encounters are quickly dismissed, they have lasting impacts on Black women's self-perception and understanding of their desirability. Some of our participants mentioned trying not to let acts of racial fetishization undermine their self-perceptions, while also discussing the inherent difficulty in doing so. According to Vivian, the comments she has received can make dark-skinned Black women like herself feel "uncomfortable about things that you should really celebrate about yourself." She continues that these unsolicited and racially sexually motivated comments "undoes" the work that many Black women have done to rebuild the self-esteem that society continuously chips away at, especially dark-skinned Black women. In addition, as Rose addresses, the objectification and hypersexualization of Black women reveals an insidious hegemony: "[people] want to have sex with you, but don't want to date you." By only viewing Black women as one-time experiences or mysterious objects to conquer and dominate, Black women are not viewed as viable long-term partners. We are able to trace the presence of colonialism and racism flowing through online dating platforms, which renders Black women's bodies "byproducts of an ongoing manifest destiny" (Holmes, 2016: 9).

"As Black women, we don't have a lot to choose from": A discussion of the material impacts of online dating

Online dating promises to offer users access to more potential partners to facilitate more intimate connections. Yet Black women face barriers related to their racial and gender identities that ultimately impact their potential partners and their experiences. Lola describes that her interactions with potential partners makes her Blackness feel like something to be "dealt" with, rather than cherished. Like many of our participants, Sarah expressed that Black women are rarely extended the same care as White women. Ultimately, Black women's awareness of the cumulative impact of their identities in

online dating environments leads to feelings of defeat and hopelessness. Natalie acknowledged the harm of the "strong/independent Black woman stereotype": "we are strong, but we are deserving of softness . . . just as much as anyone else." Because of the assumptions around Black women's temperament and emotional fortitude, Black women are frequently denied femininity, softness, and care. Acutely aware of the stereotypes and controlling images of Black womanhood, Black women carefully curated their dating app profiles to mitigate harassment and fetishization.

Throughout our study, every participant illuminated aspects of the complexities of online dating as a Black woman, all underpinned by systemic and historical constructions of race and sexuality, which remain ever present in the digital, invisibilized by algorithms that are assumed to be objective and unbiased. Through unpacking the three phases of the online dating process: consideration of offline experiences, creating a dating app profile, and on-app interactions, we explored the ways in which Black women navigate rampant fetishization while mitigating safety concerns, all at the expense of pleasure. We then addressed the ways in which Black women's online experiences continuously shape and reshape their material lived experiences, including self-perception and attitudes toward relationships.

Our methods center Black feminist thought as an invaluable framework, situating the lived experiences of Black women as "critical knowledge producers" (Miller-Young, 2010: 221). A strength of this study is its use of a definition of fetishization created in collaboration with participants based on their personal experiences. Our interviews offer an opportunity to dive deeper into the nuances of Black women's online dating at various phases. In doing so, we contribute to the limited literature in which fetishization is rarely discussed in the context of Black women's experiences. Our study is not without limitations. Our sample was mostly heterosexual, and relationship diversity (ethical non-monogamy, polyamory, etc.) were not represented. Finally, our sample had higher education levels that could result in a skewed narrative of Black women's dating experiences based on their social positioning and advanced degrees.

While this study provides valuable insight into Black women's experiences with online dating, particularly the intersections of racism, sexism, and body type, it is not representative of all Black women's experiences. Future studies should continue examining the role of fetishization in the online dating environment, attending to other identity categories like nationality, ethnicity and citizenship status to explore how non-American Blackness is further eroticized. In addition, more research should be done on Black men's experiences with online dating, particularly regarding their attitudes toward relationships with Black women and their perceptions of Black women's attractiveness. Understanding Black and non-Black men's approach to online dating can create a fuller understanding of how the mechanisms of racism, sexism, and desire operate. In addition, further studies should explore the interconnected nature of fetishization and on self-esteem and relationship and sexual satisfaction.

Conclusion

This project offers insight into the socio-historical processes that shape Black women's online dating experiences and center Black the nuances of women's digital practices as explained in their own words. Our research illuminates that the experiences of Black

women on dating apps and the harassment they receive are shaped by the intersections of their racial *and* gender identities as well as ethnicity and body size. Through our analysis, Black women are continuously concerned for their safety and bring acute awareness of their positionalities to online dating spaces. In turn, participants are also aware of the legacies of colonialism that are embedded in online dating platforms, which are motivated by hegemonic standards of desirability. Being hyper aware of one's identities leads to a vigilance about their self-presentation and the intentions of others, which ultimately detracts from the possibilities for pleasure that accompany online dating. Participants discussed that because of the entanglement of colonialism, racism, sexism, fetishism, technology, and desirability, their online dating experiences vastly differ from non-Black women. The sentiments shared by our participants illuminate the importance of Black women's pleasure. Black women deserve "softness," they deserve to feel desired and to act on their desires. Black women deserve to feel attractive and sexual on their own terms, and they deserve the space to safely do so. We argue that Black women should have access to not only safe online dating environments but also ones in which they are nurtured and cared for. Given the existence of the "strong Black woman" trope, too often Black women have not been afforded spaces and relationships in which they are treated with softness, care, and ultimately, love. We argue that shifting the landscape of online dating environments for Black women is at the very core of racial justice efforts.

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