DO BLACK MEN REALLY LOVE BLACK WOMEN?

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON HOW MASS MEDIA SHAPE BLACK MEN'S PERCEPTION

OF BLACK WOMEN FOR LONG-TERM ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP – OR NOT

_____

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

_____

by

DAPHNE S. VALERIUS

Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

MAY 2021

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School,
have examined the dissertation entitled

DO BLACK MEN REALLY LOVE BLACK WOMEN?

A QUALIATIVE STUDY ON HOW MASS MEDIA SHAPE BLACK MEN'S PERCEPTION

OF BLACK WOMEN FOR LONG-TERM ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP – OR NOT

Presented by Daphne S. Valerius
A candidate for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

_____
Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Ph.D.

_____
Julius M. Riles, Ph.D.

_____
Yong Z. Volz, Ph.D.

_____
Cynthia M. Frisby, Ph.D.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of Dr. Lez Edmond, Uncle Melex Regis and Ton Ton Gerald Cherubin,

as your legacy I hope my work continues to make you proud.

To the voices and the truth of Black men, as a Black woman I *hear* you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, above everything I would like thank my Heavenly Father and Savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth for guiding my footsteps and placing me on this journey and assignment. You have been the source of my strength and the wind beneath my wings in all that I have done to get to this place. It is all unto you.

To my mother, Adeline Regis you are the first example that I had of a strong, resilient and hardworking Black woman. It is your example and your sacrifice that makes me the woman that I am today. To my father, Herntz Valerius the man who first protected me, provided for me, comforted me, disciplined me, covered me and first set the example of true unconditional sacrificial love thank you for always being my rock and supporting me like no one else. To my sister, Dr. Cynthia Valerius my first friend and the one who knows me better than most and my brother Chris thank you both for always going hard for me the way that you do being my biggest cheerleaders along the way. To my nieces and Goddaughters Neveah, Sariya and Almerinda – each of you came into my world, stole my heart, made me an auntie and my life would never be the same. I only hope to be the auntie that you can look up to as a role models for years to come.

To my beloved big brother and my other half, Marc William Boucher there are no words to articulate just how grateful I am to have you in my life. Since the beginning of time, God knew that I wouldn't need a cousin but a big brother in my life, to stand alongside me with every venture, endeavor, aspiration and to lift me up every time I have fallen and fallen hard. And just like everything else our talks and hour long conversations gave birth to the thesis of my dissertation - *I thank you.*

To my dear brother, confidante and friend Bacchus thank you for being a constant source of motivation, encouragement, and support. Thank you for always reminding me of the purpose of my assignment but most importantly thank you for allowing God to use you in such a special

way to pour into my life as you have over the years. To my beloved Dr. Beverly Fields, ever since Dr. Edmond walked me into your office that day you have held my hand as your own, guiding me and supporting me along my journey that has brought us to this moment. Thank you both for first allowing God to use each of you that rainy day in order to push me forward in the direction of this program. And thank you for not only getting me here but for your unwavering commitment to ensuring that this moment would come to be. And to my big sister, Dr. Yvette Morgan, thank you for being one of the first Black women to show me what it looks like to be a Black female PhD, you adopted me as your little sister from the moment Dr. Edmond brought me to your office and you've been a champion and advocate of my work ever since. Thank you for setting the standard of excellence that we both inherited from Poppa – *We are his legacy.*

To Dr. NaTashua Davis thank you for taking Dr. Fields' call concerning me and to Dr. Tiffanesha Williams thank you for embracing me with open arms and for all of your efforts to ensure not only my admission but my success as a Scholar. You both labored on my behalf and made tireless efforts to get me in the door which have brought me to this moment. For that I am forever thankful.

To my advisor, ally and advocate Dr. Lissa Behm-Morawitz, thank you for taking Dr. Davis' call concerning me. You believed in me and my work before we ever met and once we did, through it all you have held my hand, refusing to let it go. You have advocated on my behalf in ways that I will never know and you have worked tirelessly to ensure that I would make it to the finish line - for all of your efforts and your commitment to my success, I owe you a great debt of gratitude. It is my only hope to continue your legacy of success and excellence in all that I endeavor to do from this moment forward.

To my committee members, Dr. Julius Riles, Dr. Cyndi Frisby and Dr. Yong Volz - thank you, thank you, thank you for your "yes" and your commitment to ensure to my academic

success. Each of you have not only challenged me as a student but you've brought out the best in me along the way. Thank you for pushing me to rise to the occasion to be a better scholar and researcher than I was the first day I entered your classroom.

To my PhD Brother, confidante and friend, Dr. Darvelle Hutchins — when they would see you, they would see me, they would see us - two peas in a pod. We started this journey together, we have walked along side each other, and we have lifted each other up through every trial, setback and tribulation. Words cannot begin to fully express just how grateful I am to have a friend and brother in you. As iron sharpens iron, you have been a rock and covering for me on this journey and I am forever thankful that God saw fit to place us together on this path and to God be the glory we have made it to the finish line — *together*.

To my dear Sisterfriend and colleague Dr. Dena Lane Bonds, you embraced me with the warmth of your heart and the generosity of your friendship from the moment we met. I thank God for placing you in my life on this PhD journey and for the memorable moments we shared together as D & D. As iron sharpens iron you have walked alongside me and lifted me up when I needed you most. Thank you for being the gift that is you and of course hugs to hubby Dr. Ransford Pinto too.

To my mentor, confidante and big brother, Dr. Anthony Pinder thank you for being everything that my soul needed since day one and for pushing me with encouragement and unconditional love. Even from a distance your presence and support have always been steadfast and continue to remain. To my beloved family, The Harper's Candace and Marquis Harper Sr - thank you for every prayer, every word of encouragement, every word of counsel and for showing up for me in this journey when I needed you most - *I thank you.*

To my sisters Conchita Tucker and Nappaye Myers-Hailey you both have been solid rocks for me that I could lean on throughout this entire process from the moment I decided to

pursue this PhD. For every moment we shared together in preparation of applying to a doctoral program, for being my support system and for rooting for me even when I doubted myself, and for laboring alongside me, every step of the way - for all these things and more I am forever grateful.

To my Sistertribe Chanda Womack, Amanda Basse and Lynda Kashouh - each of you have always and continue to play your part showing up for me, lifting me up and being my Amen choir in the background of all that I do. To my line sister Joi Danelle Whitehead, as my friend, sister and confidante you have seen me through so many peaks, valleys and seasons of life but through it all your love and sisterhood has remained constant and steadfast. I am just so thankful that in this lifetime God saw fit to give me you. To the sisterhood of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated and especially my Sorors from Theta Psi Omega Chapter you will always have a special place in my heart and I'm never letting go. To my Pinky Phi Pinky Tribe, to my praying warrior sister Diana Carreno, Stacy Lloyd, Ilia Harris Prado and to my Seesters Crew – thank you for showing up for me and lifting me up the way that you do. To my big brothers Frantz Boucher, Jae Williams, Jonathan "Satch" Satriale and to all of my family, friends, colleagues and the ones who have prayed for me, checked up on me, encouraged me, supported me and cheered me on from the sidelines throughout this journey - thank you for being a constant source of motivation in my life especially in the moments when I may have considered giving up. It was that one word of kindness or act of love that sustained me through. Thank you for pouring into me when my strength was running low and I felt like I had nothing more to give – *you know who you are.*

To my friends and colleagues again Dr. Darvelle Hutchins, Marquis Harper Sr., Marcus Ferguson, Dr. Colwayne Morris, Dr. Ransford Pinto, Dr. Jonathan Ferguson, Dr. Edwin Bonney, Warren Davis, Justin Springer, Christopher Michaud, Vladjimir Pierre, Mitch Barrionette and all

of the Black men who unapologetically showed up and generously shared their truth as part of this important work, I speak your names. Each of you played a pivotal part in this work. I am indebted to each of you for this monumental moment in my life and I only hope to ensure that your voices and the truths about Black men continues to be heard.

And finally to my person, the one that God preserved over the years just for me - Mr. Barry Alexander, thank you for showing up for me the way that you do. Ending this journey with you by my side is nothing more than an extension of God's love and faithfulness towards me. Your presence in my life at this moment is like heaven to me because you are my answered prayer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

When confronted with the presence of a Black man in relationship with a non-Black woman whether in media messages or real life, more often than not Black women are also met with feelings of rejection and inadequacy. It is a form of rejection experienced by Black women that is often discussed behind closed doors, within her inner circle, in conversation with other Black women and/or trusted Black male confidantes. It is also a form of rejection that is often left unexpressed or silenced for fear of being labeled an "angry Black woman". When considered from the lens of race, the trope of the "angry Black woman" becomes even more problematic when the landscape of contemporary television media is dominated by non-fiction, reality television programming, featuring Black women displaying socially aggressive behavior. This calls into question whether or not media depictions of Black women further perpetuate the trope of the "angry Black woman" and make her less suitable or desirable for long-term romantic partnership.

By taking a qualitative approach to examine media perceptions of Black women, this dissertation concerns itself with situating how colorism as an extension of whiteness, stereotypical media depictions and representations of socially aggressive behavior by Black women in the media all work in concert to further complicate perceptions of Black women as suitable long-term partners in the eyes of others – specifically Black men. The present study situates the voices of Black men and examines how they read, receive, interpret and make meaning of media messages of Black women in order to better understand their selection and consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships in comparison to non-Black women. Taken together through the theoretical frameworks of audience reception theory, symbolic annihilation, and social aggression, the present study investigates how media portrayals of Black women and Whiteness shape heterosexual Black

men's perception of Black women and their decision to be in long-term romantic relationship with Black women – *or not.*

The present study consists of five focus group conversations with Black male participants that reveal the most problematic media messages of Black women in consideration of long-term romantic partnership are those that perpetuate the normalization of the strong Black woman and socially aggressive behavior. Based on lived experiences with Black women, Black men recognize that the trope of the strong Black woman is problematic and misguiding. Black men are also cognizant of the fact that a Black woman's expression of passion is often misinterpreted and perpetuated by the media as anger. However, conversations with Black men further reveal that in spite of media messages, Black men love and advocate for long-term romantic relationship with Black women who they collectively agree are the ideal romantic partner for Black men regardless or shade, hue or skin tone. However, the façade of strength and media depictions of hypermasculinity as propagated in the media and internalized by Black women contributes to a level of tension between Black men and women that oftentimes pushes him away.

Chapter One: Introduction – The Problem

Like all women, Black women are socially constructed to believe in the idea of love and 'happily ever after' as early as childhood through fairytales that reflect societal ideals (Neikirk, 2009; Louie, 2012). Patricia Louie (2012) explains the significance of fairy tales and the socialization of young girls as the following:

> "Fairy tales written in the nineteenth century were intended to teach girls how
> to become domesticated, respectable and attractive. (…) From generation to
> generation, they (fairy tales) are passed down serving as a powerful socialization
> force that reflects embedded cultural norms and values." (p.74)

Through media representations of fairy tales through Disney animations, as audience members Black women are not only conditioned to believe in the idea of love and what is attractive, historical representations of Black women in animated films which have been limited to the stereotypes of the mammy, maid, auntie, washerwoman, pickaninny, or savage further complicate this process (Breaux, 2010). According to scholar Richard Breaux, "stereotypically racist and sexist images of Black women in animated film are as old as animated film itself" (2010, p. 407). Critics of Disney films argue that Disney animated films have a long history of "presenting non-whites as racial stereotypes and women of all colors as helpless, sexual objects" (Breaux, 2010, p. 399). As a result, the possibility of love for the Black woman as prominently depicted in Disney animations remains complicated while the possibility of love with a Black man remains unattainable given his absence.

As early as childhood Black women are socialized to learn what is attractive and what is not based on media depictions of the European aesthetic as the standard of beauty through the portrayals of Disney princesses such as Snow White, Cinderella, Belle, Princess Jasmine and Rapunzel. For the Black woman, not only is she made aware of what idealized relationships

should look like from the media at an early age, but she is also made aware of her racial identity that defines her as Black and what it means to be attractive or not (Epstein, Blake and Gonzalez, 2017). The possibility of love and 'happily ever after' for the Black woman in animated film did not exist until more than seventy years after *Snow White* when Disney introduced its first animated Black princess in the 2009 movie *The Princess and the Frog*. Princess Tiana was characterized as being intelligent, attractive, active, ambitious and enterprising – all of which are the opposite of the racial stereotypes of Blacks being stupid and ignorant (Blankestijn, 2015).

But the possibility of love for the Black woman as depicted in *The Princess and the Frog* was limited to a romantic relationship with a racially ambiguous male and *not* to a Black man. After decades of Disney magic there has yet to be a Disney prince that identifies as Black. According to critics of the film, "Tiana had no Black prince and this jaded the positive impact *The Princess and the Frog* would have on African American girls" (Breaux, 2010, p. 411). For the Black woman, who desires to believe in the power of love, the fairy tales and all of the possibilities it represents, the factor of race presents its own set of complications. As a result, the Black woman is also fully cognizant of the limitations ascribed thereto as a remnant of colonialism, slavery and race relations that she is forced to deal with present day – often at the cost of her heart.

While U.S. Census data suggests an increasingly diverse number of romantic relations among Black men with non-Black women, this reality complicates the romantic interest of Black women who desire to be pursued by Black men as they navigate a society where their race, color, and bodies are portrayed negatively through media in comparison to Whites. On the one hand, while interracial couplings with Black men and non-Black women are on the rise, on the other hand, more and more dark skinned Black women are being faced with the reality that the lighter the shade of skin, the higher the probability of marriage (McClinton, 2019; Hamilton, 2009). As

a result, Black women are becoming more increasingly aware that they are not regarded as prized possessions in the eyes of Black men as they would like to believe.

Black women like Dream McClinton, who recently documented for *The Guardian* her experience as a dark-skinned Black woman in the online dating market, are coming to the realization that inhabiting a Black body with a darker skin tone may also contribute to their chronic single status in spite of their success and "higher status" pedigree (McClinton, 2019). While research demonstrates that Black women in the US marry less than others, which some scholars have attributed to the scarcity of "marriageable" Black men due to lower employment rates, high rates of incarceration, drug use, and mortality, those numbers are even lower for darker skinned Black women (Hamilton, 2009).

According to marriage and family research, most Americans marry within their race (Kent, 2010). Among Blacks, intra-racial or same race marriage make-up the majority of the overall married Black population with only 7% of Black women and 15% of Black men marrying non-Black partners (Kouri and Lasswell, 1993; Livingston and Brown, 2017). However, research studies of interracial courtship between Blacks and Whites online demonstrate that "Black men are much more likely than Black women to be married to someone of a race or ethnicity not their own. And with respect specifically to Black/White marriages, the ratio of Black husband/White wife to White husband/Black wife couples approaches two to one" (Mendelsohn et al, 2014). Even further, Journalists such as Matthew Allen and Tiffany Onyejiaka argue and make note of the fact that modern media depictions of interracial relationships over-represents and contradicts the reality that the majority of Blacks exist in long-term relationships or marriages with members of the same race (Allen, 2016; Onyejiaka, 2019).

In consequence of the over-representation of interracial relationships found in the media, more often than not when confronted with the presence of a Black man in a relationship with a

non-Black or light skinned woman, for some Black women they are also confronted with an internalized and unspoken feeling of rejection (McClinton, 2019; Childs, 2005). According to Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins, "Black women remain called upon to accept and love the mixed-race children born to their brothers, friends and relatives . . . who at the same time often represent tangible reminders of their own rejection" (2000, p.165). It is a form of rejection experienced by Black women that is often discussed behind closed doors, among her inner circle of other Black women or trusted Black male confidantes. In her journey with online dating as a darker skinned Black woman, McClinton shares the following of her own experiences with this type of rejection:

> "I feel like dark-skinned women were just the women that men had behind closed doors. They weren't trophy wives enough for you to show to the world. Somebody wouldn't want to show me off but, next thing you know, they've got somebody lighter and they're showing *them* off … It made me feel like I would never be wanted" (2019, para. 22)

It is also a form of rejection that is often left unexpressed or silenced for fear of being labeled as the stereotypical "angry Black woman." As an example, in response to a seeing a prominent Black actor walking into a restaurant with a White woman as his date, author Bebe Moore Campbell explained, "for many African-American women, the thought of African American men, particularly those who are successful, dating or marrying White women is like being passed over at the prom by the boy we consider our steady date, causing us pain, rage and an overwhelming sense of betrayal and personal rejection" (1992, para. 6).

In a qualitative study conducted with a group of Black women, scholar Emily Chito Childs (2005) presented the perspectives of Black women on heterosexual, Black-White relationships as a counter-narrative to the overrepresentation of White female voices in interracial relationship research. The study was also a counter to the assumptions that Black

women were angry and in opposition to interracial relationships according to studies on interracial couplings. Studies concerning interracial relationships have documented that Black women represent the strongest resistance and unfavorable attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage, based on qualitative research with Black men–White women interracial couples (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 1999; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995; Spickard 1989) and quantitative survey data of White and Black attitudes toward interracial dating (Todd et al. 1992). The Pew Research Center notes that the most dramatic increase in intermarriage since 1980 occurs among Blacks with numbers that have more than tripled from 5% to 18% (Livingston and Brown, 2017). However, there are notable gender differences as intermarriage for Black men (24%) are much more prevalent than for their Black female counterparts (12%). As of 2015, the Pew Research Center reports that Black men are twice as likely to date outside of their race by 24% in comparison to Black women who accounted for only 12% of newlyweds married to someone outside of their race (Livingston and Brown, 2017). While Black women are involved in interracial couplings with individuals outside of their race or ethnicity, research has found that overall interracial marriage for Black women is rare (Hamilton, 2009; Qian, 1997).

Equally of importance, Childs' study presents a different narrative from the Black female perspective that is often left out of research concerning interracial couplings. Her conversations with Black women reveal that in response to interracial couplings, Black women were not angry but rather their opposition to interracial relationships had more to do with White racism, rejection, and the social value of Black women. According to Childs (2005), "Black women's opposition to interracial dating is not simply rooted in jealousy and anger toward White women but is based on White racism, Black internalization of racism, and what interracial relationships represent to Black women and signify about Black women's worth" (p. 544). An excerpt from Child's conversation with Black women reveals the hurt and betrayal experienced by Black

women as they encounter Black men involved in interracial relationships with non-Black women.

> "As a Black woman, it is difficult enough to have to deal with Whites who [act] as if [Black] is inferior, but it is even harder to have your own men act like White is better and systematically choose White women over you; it is hard not to get angry because it feels as if no one values your worth as a woman" (Childs, 2005 p. 554).

Suffice it to say, based on interracial relationship research and the perpetuation of couplings in the media involving Black men and White women and/or lighter skinned Black women, Black men may appear to be involved in long-term relationships with everyone else but a Black woman, particularly darker skinned Black women. As a media scholar who identifies as both Black and female, my personal interests lie in situating how colorism as an extension of whiteness, stereotypical media depictions of Black women, and representations of socially aggressive behavior by Black women in the media may further complicate perceptions of Black women as suitable long-term partners in the eyes of others – specifically Black men.

One of the earliest mentions of the term colorism is attributed to Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker who describes colorism as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (1983 p.290). While this type of discrimination based on skin color dates as far back as colonialism according to scholar Trina Jones the existence of colorism is often overshadowed within the construct of racism given that people are not accustomed to think about the concepts of race and skin separately (Jones, 1999). Research studies have also found that light skinned people of color have substantially benefited from privileges unattainable for dark skinned people of color associated with skin tone in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Hunter 1998, 2005). As a result, the present study argues that colorism as a manifestation of whiteness, may

work in concert with stereotypical media portrayals of Black women and the trope of the angry Black woman, to shape Black men's perceptions of Black women as relational partners. This dissertation explores Black men's perceptions of the portrayals of Black women in the media, their ideals of romantic relationship partners, and how media have inform their perceptions of attractiveness and ideal romantic partners.

When taking a look at the landscape of media representations of romantic couplings, specifically of Black couples, what is often portrayed are Black men involved in relationships with non-Black women, light skinned Black women, or women who appear to be racially or ethnically ambiguous. Oftentimes, within these couplings the male identifies as Black while the female is visibly of a lighter skin complexion and/or identifies as something other than Black. Furthermore, when taking a look at fictionalized media representations of Black romantic couplings in entertainment, there are few portrayals or depictions of couples where both partners identify as Black. Research demonstrates that Black men are in fact twice as likely as Black women to have a spouse of a different race or ethnicity (24% vs 12%), representing only a small portion of the general population, representations of Black couplings in modern television and film indicate otherwise (Livingston and Brown, 2017). As a result, some researchers argue that there is an overrepresentation of interracial relationships in the media, in comparison to intra-racial or same race relationships among Blacks (Onyejiaka, 2019; Allen 2016).

In an article titled, "Where Have All the Black Couples on TV Gone?", Journalist, Matthew Allen poses the rhetorical question in his analysis of the underrepresentation of Black couples in the media. According to Allen, portrayals of Black couples in the media appear to be on the decline with the exception of Black couples prominently featured on reality television programming:

"It's painfully apparent that there are institutions and energies attempting to render the Black American couple extinct. Methods of this madness, however, have gone far beyond killing its young, but also by diluting the race. Although interracial couples on TV and in life were borderline taboo when Helen and Tom Willis debuted on *The Jeffersons* back in 1975, today it seems to be a tactic of killing Black-on-Black love" (2016, para.10).

As a result, it is important to situate not only how Black romantic partnerships are portrayed but also how audiences interpret or make meaning of Black couplings that are both prominently portrayed and Black couplings that remain absent from the media. The present study argues that how Black couplings have been portrayed in the media, both past and present, and how those portrayals inform perceptions of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationship is also worth scholarly attention.

Furthermore, less is known about how Black men perceive stereotypical depictions of Black women in the media and the trope of the angry Black woman that has been widely accepted as true (Willey-Jean, 2009). As Childs' (2005) work reveals, Black women are often mischaracterized as being angry, jealous, or envious of interracial relationships when in fact racism, internalized racism, the value of Black women, and social rejection remains at the core of this opposition. As an extension of this work, it is my hope that by conducting focus groups with Black men directly, spoken from their own voices and lived experiences, scholars and Black women may gain more insights into the role media may play in shaping Black men's relationship ideals.

The present study argues that, not only is the rise of interracial partnerships and couplings among Black men warranting of scholarly attention, but what is also of importance is how historical and contemporary media depictions of Black women shape perceptions of this group in the eyes of Black men, who may choose to be in long-term partnership with light skin Black

women or non-Black women. By unearthing the lived experiences of Black men, this study seeks to investigate how media messages of whiteness as an ideal, colorism, and stereotypical portrayals of Black women are received and interpreted by Black men while subsequently informing their perception of this group as suitable long-term romantic relationship partners in comparison to non-Black women.

Significance of This Work

Historical and contemporary media portrayals of Black women have situated her lack of humanity as a part of the Black female identity in comparison to the media messages of whiteness as the ideal and the overrepresentation of the White female voices in interracial relationship research – all of which warrant further analysis. As a media scholar that identifies as both Black and female, it is my hope that this work will advance the theoretical application of symbolic annihilation to the underrepresentation of Black women in the media, and to the underrepresentation of Black women in interracial relationship research. The present study seeks to theoretically contribute to the existing scholarship of colorism in the media while exploring how Black men receive, interpret and make meaning of media messages of Black women. Furthermore, this study has the potential to distinctively draw attention to the significant role of the media within intra-racial interpersonal relationships between Black women and men. Taken together through the lenses of audience reception theory, symbolic annihilation, and social aggression, the present study seeks to investigate how media portrayals of Black women and Whiteness shape heterosexual Black men's perception of Black women and their decision to be in long-term relationship with Black women— *or not.*

Aim of Present Study

To date, media research has neglected to situate the voices of Black men as a marginalized group and as a result, less is known about how Black men interpret media

messages and how depictions of Black women inform their perceptions. More is known about audience reception as it relates to examining Black men's portrayals of Black women and the objectification of Black women in hip-hop music videos (Brooks and Herbert, 2006). However, beyond media research on misogyny, seldom are Black male voices used to discuss their interpretations of media messages of Black women with the outcomes of long-term romantic relationships in mind. As a result, within media research less is known about how Black men experience media depictions of Black women and how negative portrayals of Black women inform or problematize romantic relationship outcomes.

With the overarching research question in mind, do Black men really love Black women, it is the intention of the present study to seek a better understanding of how Black men receive, interpret and make meaning of media messages of Black women in their consideration of suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships. Through the multidimensional model of audience reception as posited by Carolyn Michelle and the resistant position as posited by Stuart Hall, the present study seeks to understand the positionality of Black men and how they interpret media messages of Whiteness as the ideal and stereotypes of Black women in the media in their consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationship (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into 5 chapters, including the introduction which explores the problem the present study seeks to address along with the significance of this work. Chapter 2 presents the literature that supports the research questions for the present study. The literature review discusses relevant research studies, reviews major issues central to the present study, and provides an overview of the theoretical foundation of this study, which includes symbolic annihilation, audience reception theory, colorism and the historical representations of Black

women in the media. The literature review also demonstrates the gaps in the literature as it relates to social aggression of Black women in the media and interracial relationships. In doing so, the literature review provides an explanation of the purpose of the present study and the research questions the present study seeks to explore.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation presents and describes the methodology employed in the present study. It also describes the research design, sample and procedure, coding strategy, and data analysis plan. Chapters 4 presents the research findings of the study with particular attention to the ways in which Black men receive, interpret and decode of media messages of Black women as guided by the research questions or the present study. In this chapter, the dominant, secondary and unexpected themes as revealed from the data analysis are discussed along with their implications on whether or not Black men find Black women to be suitable for long-term romantic relationship as guided by the research questions of the present study. Throughout this chapter findings from the data analysis of conversations with Black men are organized according to the research questions of the present study and discussed based on how they support each research question accordingly.

Chapter 5 of the present study address the overarching research question of the present study by providing a summary of the results and suggesting theoretical, practical and methodological implications of the conversations with Black men as guided by the research questions. In this chapter, the significance of the present study is discussed along with the limitations and potential avenues for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Symbolic Annihilation

Given the historical media depictions of Black women and the few portrayals of Black women prominently featured in leading film and television roles, it is important to consider the significance of the underrepresentation of this group within the existing landscape of media images as compared to where they are predominantly seen in the media. When taking a look at the landscape of media portrayals of Black women, often one will find the Black women are either absent, underrepresented, and/or trivialized through stereotypical representations. These representations of Black women can be understood from the theoretical framework of symbolic annihilation. Symbolic annihilation was first coined by media scholars Gerbner and Gross who mentioned that "absence [from media] means symbolic annihilation" (1976, p. 182). Tuchman and Merskin later extended the idea of symbolic annihilation to include media representations that trivialize, ignore, marginalize, or exclude socially devalued groups within a particular culture or society (Mersksin, 1998). Within the symbolic media environment, this type of annihilation refers to the exclusion or underrepresentation of marginalized groups within a society. Members of socially devalued groups are often underrepresented or portrayed through media that are demeaning or condemning in comparison to members of the socially valued groups who are most frequently represented within symbolic media environments. According to Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film's annual *Boxed In* report (2017), researchers have found that Black women account for 19% of all female speaking roles compared to 69% of White female characters. Although the report reflects that the percentage of Black women in speaking roles represents an increase of 3% from 2015-2016, symbolic annihilation as a theoretical framework can be useful to further understand the absence of Black women on television and its significance.

Since the release of the report, research demonstrates that there has been some progress made in the increased representation and visibility of Black women on screen. A study by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found "positive levels of representation, with Black girls and women — 6.5% of the U.S. population — representing 6.1% of all characters and 5.7% of leading characters in 2019 family films" (Tapp, 2021). The study found that Black women "were more likely to be depicted as "smart" than white female characters or other female characters of color" (Tapp, 2021). While the study reflects a positive shift in the types of representation of Black women and girls on screen "only 3.7% of leads or co-leads in the 100 top-grossing films of the last decade" were representative of Black women and girls" (Tapp, 2021). Although the numbers have improved, the increased visibility of the Black women on screen can also be attributed to an increase of more representation of Black women behind the camera and taking on leadership roles behind the scenes. Examples of this can be found in the current television programs such as *Insecure* as executive produced by Issa Rae, *Queen Sugar* as executive produced by the Oprah Winfrey Network and films such *When They See Us* as directed by Ava Duvernay –all of which have been trailblazers for creating content prominently featuring Black women as leads on screen (Herndon, 2020). While the media portrayals and depictions of Black women and girls has started to experience a positive shift, there still remains a need for an awareness of the persistence of stereotypes related to the media representation of this marginalized group.

As it pertains to Black women, historical portrayals of this marginalized group consistently found in the media landscape are often depictions based on stereotypes or generalizations (Collins, 1990). Even further, Black women are either stereotyped within the media or situated through absence. While contemporary depictions of Black women in the media have somewhat evolved since the 1940's, research suggests that historical stereotypes of the

Black women as found in the media such as the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire remain present and have since been repackaged and redistributed through modern media messages of Black women often found in television, film and music videos (Hall and Witherspoon, 2015; Collins, 1990).

However, while media depictions of Black women in the media stem from the historical stereotypes or generalizations of this group, on the other hand for White women, history paints a different story, one that situates White women in the media as the standard of desire and beauty. Research suggests that media often represent the values and the ideals of the dominant group through its the systems and structures such as media and as a result White women have always been situated and protected as the ideal standard (Hall and Witherspoon, 2015; bell hooks, 1999; Collins, 1990). As a result, media representations of White women have perpetuated the idea that White is superior and to be desired above all others. As an example, whiteness as an ideal is also the premise and sentiment that behind the mantra, *"mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?"* as prominently articulated by Snow White's step-mother in the Disney animated film, *Snow White* (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003; Lewis 2011; Dam, 2014).

Research indicates that stereotypes are situated in the minds of audiences as early as childhood even before children are able to begin to process or make meaning of these ideas and develop attitudes and judgments (Devine, 1989). Even furthermore, these stereotypes also have a history of being activated in the minds of individuals over time and research suggests that media contribute to the chronic activation of stereotypes through encounters with media messages. Research also suggests that the mental activation of stereotypes persist unconsciously and automatically (Devine, 1989). Cultivation theory as posited by Gerbner and Gross suggests that the long-term consumption and accumulation of media messages, subsequently shapes and influences our perception of the world around us (West and Turner, 2010). As a result, the

present study argues that the cultivation and accumulation of whiteness over a period of time taken together with the symbolic annihilation of Black women further exacerbates the social value of Black women and sustains stereotypes of Black women along with the ideal that fairer is better in the minds of audiences but for Black men in particular.

Audience Reception Theory

While research into how audiences interpret media messages have been widely published in the field of cultural studies, little audience reception research has been applied as a theoretical lens to understand the interpretations of media messages specifically of Black men as audience members. Of the audience reception studies that involve the interpretations of Black audiences, among them include, early efforts by cultural studies scholar Jackie Bobo who is credited with introducing the voices of Black women and their interpretations of the films, *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of The Dust* (Bobo 1989; 1995). Bobo's application of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework revealed that despite the patriarchal nature of the film, Black women audiences reconstructed the film and found ways to empower themselves through a complex process of negotiated readings of media texts (Livingston and Das, 2013). As a result, "the disputes *over The Color Purple* actually stimulated meaning production that connected with a larger movement of Black women" (Bobo, 1989 p. 341).

In the same manner, this study will draw upon the systematic framework of audience reception theory as posited by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which was used to describe how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted by the audience (1991).

Through this model, Hall acknowledges that audiences of media messages are not passive receivers of media but in fact play an active role in the deconstructing or decoding of messages by relying on their own social contexts for understanding and comprehending messages as

constructed by the encoder of the message (Hall, 1991; Martin, 2007; Shaw, 2017). Hall's

encoding/decoding model itself describes a system of coded messages and meanings as created

by the sender or producer of the message using verbal and non-verbal symbols to express a

thought or idea to the intended receiver of the message also known as the audience (Martin,

2007; Shaw, 2017). Once the message has been expressed through its verbal and non-verbal

symbols the process continues with the encoding or interpretation process of the message by the

intended audience member upon receiving it (Martin, 2007; Shaw, 2017). It is during the

encoding process that the message is read, interpreted and translated by audience members for

the purpose of comprehension and understanding the meaning of the message. During the

encoding process the audience is actively engaged in trying to reconstruct the idea by giving

meanings to the symbols and by interpreting the message as a whole (Martin, 2007).

However, Hall argues that effective communication is accomplished only when the

encoded message by its sender is received and understood by the audience through active

decoding by the audience in the way the producer of the message intended. Unless effective

communication is achieved between the encoding and decoding process there is also an

opportunity for the message as originally intended by the encoder to be distorted and

misunderstood if there is "lack of equivalence" between the two sides in communicative

exchange (Martin, 2007). As a result, Hall further elaborates on this idea by suggesting that the

positionality of the audience receiving the message also shapes and influences their interpretation

or decoding of the message in a particular way (Shaw, 2017). Hall suggests that there are three

hypothetical positions that an audience member can take upon receiving a message during the

decoding process, known as dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the

oppositional position (Shaw, 2017).

According to scholar, Adrienne Shaw, "on the 'decoding' end, there are three ways

an audience member might decode any given message. This first is dominant or preferred readings, in which the message is decoded with the same meaning as was intended when it was encoded. Second, negotiated readings involve a mixture of preferred and resistant readings. Third is the oppositional reading in which the audience member decodes the message in the opposite way as was intended by the producer" (Shaw, 2017 p. 593). For the purpose of the present study, it is possible that Black men, may negotiate readings of the texts in the same manner that other audience reception studies have found ethnic audiences to negotiate readings of media texts (Brown and Herbert, 2006). Perhaps during the process of reading texts, Black men acknowledge the dominant message, but are not willing to completely accept the message completely as a result of their racialized identity. The present study also argues that it is also plausible that Black men may question, negotiate or make up their own separate rules to coexist with the dominant messaging due to the influence of race, gender, socialization and other determinants during this decoding process despite the intentions of the encoder.

While the encoder of the message may have intended for the audience to receive or decode the message in a certain way, Hall's model of encoding/decoding acknowledges that the audience member is actively engaged in the reading of the message in decoding process which can result in multiple interpretations. "Messages are always polysemic, never becoming wholly closed around one reading; audiences are always required to "read." (Steiner, 2016 p.105). As a result, Hall's encoding/decoding model would also suggest that producers of media messages cannot force or enable its audience to behave in a certain way given their involvement in the reading of the message. However, Steiner suggests that Hall's model "retained the notion of the power of media in providing cultural categories and frameworks within which members of a group tend to operate. Institutions producing messages can set agendas and define issues. His crucial intervention was to see responses and interpretations as socially structured and culturally

patterned" (Steiner, 2016 p.108). Given the power of media to produce messages that also inform or set agendas for the audience to decode, it is also worth applying this theoretical framework to better understand how media socially construct whiteness as the ideal and stereotypes of Black women to suit its agenda.

While research into how audiences interpret media message grew out of cultural studies, in response to the need within audience reception research for a systematic framework to categorize dominant modes of audience reception of media, scholar Carolyn Michelle extended upon Hall's encoding/decoding process by proposing a model of audience reception (Schroder, 2000; Granelli & Zenor 2016). Michelle categorizes, four different modes of audience reception which form the composite multidimensional model of audience reception (2007). According to Michelle, the first mode of audience engagement is transparent where audiences read the "text as life" (2009). The individual is transported in the text and may get "lost" in the fictional world of the text. As a result, the individual may experience a strong immersion into the text and feel strong emotion toward characters and themes. The second mode of audience engagement is referential. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as like life" (Michelle, 2009). In assessing the meaning of the text, the individual moves outside of the text itself and compares it to his or her own real life for interpretation. The third mode of audience engagement is what Michelle describes as mediated. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as a production" and interprets a text based upon its aesthetics and his or her capacity to understand the process of media production and media literacy by engaging the themes and messages of the text. The final mode is of audience engagement is described as discursive. In the discursive mode, an individual reads the "text as a message" and analyzes the intended meaning of the text. As a result, the individual adopts an ideological position or interpretation of the message, by making a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of it (Michelle, 2007).

As it relates to Black men, less is known about how Black men interpret media messages and how depictions of Black women inform their perceptions of this group. According to Brown and Herbert (2006), "studies of media institutions and their production and encoding processes could provide invaluable insights into our understanding of the ways the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality structure media content" (p.310). While scholars like Bobo have devoted time to the studies of Black women as media audiences, less scholarship is devoted to the interpretations of Black men as media audiences and how they negotiate readings of media texts or analyze the intended meaning of texts. Among audience reception research, as it pertains to men, most academic writings are often focused on examining Black men's portrayals of Black women and the objectification of Black women in hip-hop music videos (Brooks and Herbert, 2006). Black male interpretations of misogynistic portrayals of Black women in hip hop often reveal the justification to objectify Black women in order to play into male sexual fantasies (Brooks and Herbert, 2006). Beyond misogyny, rarely are Black male voices used to discuss their interpretations of media messages of Black women whether in music videos, films or magazines with the intention of long-term partnership or relationship in mind. As a result, it is through the discursive mode of audience engagement as posited by Michelle and the negotiated position as posited by Hall, this study seeks to understand the positionality of this Black men and how they interpret media messages of whiteness as the ideal and stereotypes of Black women in the media in their consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationship. Taken together, symbolic annihilation and audience reception studies will be used as a theoretical framework to conduct an interpretive thematic analysis of focus group conversations with heterosexual Black men to explore the following research question:

    RQ1: How do heterosexual Black men make meaning of or interpret media portrayals of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships?

Colorism— a manifestation of Whiteness

As history tells us, the institution of slavery as a byproduct of colonialism was based on the racial hierarchy that established a color caste system that was used to kidnap and enslave Africans around the world (Williams, 1944). Also referred to as colorism, the color caste system was a process of discrimination concerned with skin tone as opposed to racial or ethnic identity that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter, 2007; Hall, 1995). Under colonialism, this racial hierarchy based on whiteness situated that White skin was pure and superior leaving dark skin at the bottom while placing light skin in the middle or in between (Hunter, 2007; Burke, 2008).

During the era of colonialism and thereafter, dark skin was associated with savagery, irrationality, ugliness and inferiority while White skin was associated with civility, rationality, beauty and superiority. According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, colorism is defined as "the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin. The practices of colorism tend to favor lighter skin over darker skin, although in rare cases the opposite practice also occurs" (Burke, 2008 p. 17). As a result, lighter skin Blacks who were often of mixed race were also considered to be more valuable than darker skin Blacks given their association to whiteness, but still less valuable than pure whiteness (Harris, 1993; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Seiler, 2003). While this racial hierarchy resulted in the discrimination of all Blacks it concerned itself with making a distinction that privileged lighter skinned Blacks from darker skinned Blacks. As a result, the color caste system used during slavery situated that lighter skin Blacks were to be granted privileges that were not attainable to darker skin Blacks (Goldsmith et al; 2007; Hunter, 2007).

Although chattel slavery was abolished through the thirteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the use of colorism or the color caste system continued post slavery as a way of

maintaining White supremacy beyond the era of colonialism (Balkin and Levinson, 2012).

According to scholars, White domination rewarded those who emulated whiteness culturally, economically, aesthetically and ideologically (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Seiler, 2003; Hunter, 2007). As a result, the colorism that continues to persist today is a manifestation of racism and concerns itself with skin tone and not skin color. Research suggests that light skin Blacks benefited and continue to reap the rewards from their association with whiteness in areas of housing, income, the marriage market and education. However, these privileges based on skin tone although apparent among Blacks are rarely discussed within or among the Black community (Yancey, 2009; 2009).

As an example, in the area of housing and income, research has found that light skin Blacks earn more money while dark skinned Blacks are disproportionally represented in lower socioeconomic status in comparison to middle and upper-class Blacks (Yancey, 2002; 2009). As it relates to education, research has found and demonstrated that light skin Blacks complete more years of schooling. In fact, a groundbreaking study by scholars Hughes and Hertel (1990) found that the same education gap between White and Blacks were nearly identical to the education gap of light skin Blacks in comparison to dark skin Blacks. Even furthermore, research has also demonstrated that physical attractiveness as a cultural construct is also related to the perceived social value of being smarter, friendlier, happier and more successful in comparison to those perceived as unattractive based on racial aesthetics (Dion, 1972). As a result, light skin Black females that also have Anglo-Saxon or Caucasian features such as straight, light hair, light eyes, narrow noses and light skin are perceived as more attractive amongst African Americans and more socially valuable than their dark skin counterparts (Yancey, 2002; 2009).

Among Blacks research has found that light skin women are perceived as more attractive and have more advantages in the marriage market in comparison to their darker skinned

counterparts. According to scholar Margaret Hunter, light skin Black women exchange their high-status skin tone in exchange for high status spouses with higher income, higher education and occupational prestige. However, for darker skin Black women research demonstrates that they are perceived as less attractive, ugly and disadvantaged in dating and the marriage market (2007). As an example, a study based on physical attractiveness of African American females in advertisements found that Black males perceived light skin African American models as more attractive than darker skin African American models (Watson, Thornton & Engelland, 2010). In this experimental study, researchers measured skin-color bias and physical attractiveness from a fictional advertising booklet featuring the same Black female as both a light-skinned model and a dark-skinned model promoting toothpaste and chewing gum products respectively. According to the experiment, the Black male participants evaluated lighter-skinned model higher on physical attractiveness in comparison to the darker-skinned model. As a result, researchers of this study found evidence of skin color bias which appeared to have a significant effect on the males' evaluation of the same model despite being of the same race. These findings also suggest the possible adoption of the whiteness as an ideal standard of beauty and femininity among Black males (Watson, Thornton & Engelland, 2010).

While colorism is a manifestation of racism experienced by all Blacks research suggests that the intensity, frequency and outcomes differ dramatically based on skin tone. As an example, research demonstrates that while light skin Blacks are privileged through colorism, light skin Blacks often experience the emotional burden of being perceived as ethically illegitimate and inauthentic in comparison to dark skin Blacks (Hunter, 2007). For dark skin Blacks, the ethnic authenticity of their skin allows for the reclaiming of their power from light skin Blacks. However, while there are disadvantages on both ends of the color spectrums, the disadvantages for dark skin Blacks outweigh the disadvantages for light skin Blacks. Even

furthermore, the consequences and penalties for dark skin Blacks are more frequent and more severe (Hunter, 2007). Given the research that demonstrates the privileges, benefits, disadvantages and penalties associated with skin tone among Blacks, it is also worth considering whether or not colorism informs the suitability of Black women for long-term romantic relationship among Black men. Even further, it is also worth considering whether or not media portrayals of Black women privilege light skin Black women over dark skin Black women and subsequently shape or inform perceptions of this group. As a result, for the purpose of this study, colorism as a manifestation of whiteness and the physical attractiveness stereotype will also be used to better understand how depictions of one woman over another type of woman within the media also shape and inform Black men's perceptions of Black women as physically attractive. Taken together with symbolic annihilation and media reception studies, colorism will be used as lens to examine the following research questions:

> **RQ2**: How do Black men make sense of media portrayals of Whiteness and attractiveness?

> **RQ3:** Are Black men's interpretations of attractiveness informed by media portrayals?

> **RQ4:** Are Black men's perception of Black women as physically attractive informed by media portrayals?

The next section of the present study considers the historical and contemporary depictions of Black women in the media. Specifically, literature surrounding the historical stereotypes of Black women in media will be reviewed in order to lay the groundwork necessary to consider the possible readings or interpretations Black men may make of media depictions of Black women.

Historical Representations of Black Women in Media

To better understand the meaning behind the stereotypes of Black women in the media, we must also consider the historical and contemporary representations of this group in film and

television programming. To begin we will first draw attention to the historical stereotypes of Black women found in the media known as the "mammy," "sapphire," "jezebel," "matriarch," and the "welfare queen" (Abdullah, 1998; Greene, 1994; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995). Contemporary stereotypes of Black women in the media are known as the "strong Black woman," "superwoman," and the trope of the "angry Black woman" (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). Taken together, we will then discuss the significance of the Black woman's absence and symbolic annihilation in media to better understand the meaning behind stereotypes of this group.

As history shows us, chattel slavery through the kidnapping, transportation and subsequent buying and selling of human beings of African descent was crucial to the "founding of capitalism in the United States and established the economic and racial oppression of African Americans" (Mustakeem, 2016 p. 55). The Transatlantic Slave Trade within itself became what Sowande' M. Mustakeem (2016), calls the "human manufacturing process" by which human beings were transformed into chattel for the purpose of being bought and sold. It was also a manufacturing process that involved the capture, warehousing and delivery of Africans into slavery like cattle for the purpose of being sold to slavers and financiers in the Americas. As a result, the history of Black women in the US begins with her dehumanization, objectification and commodification.

Under chattel slavery, Black women were denied their humanity and oppressed by their gender as they performed hard manual labor alongside men, while their sexuality and reproductive capacity were opportunities for exploitation (Hall & Witherspoon, 2015; Collins, 2004). According to Barbara Omolade, the commodification of Black female slaves allowed for the master to use every part of the enslaved African woman as he so pleased. "To him she was a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices were rarely considered: her head and her

heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina" (Hill Collins, 2004 p. 56). Given that the identity of Black women in the US is one that has been stripped of her humanity and only limited to the performance of manual labor, sexual pleasure and reproduction, the history of media images of this group reflects these identities. As a result, humanity is not a part of the Black female identity and media subsequently reflects the absence of her humaneness.

While the institution of slavery situated the racial hierarchy of whiteness through the color caste system, post slavery the maintenance of White ideals and White supremacy was sustained through media depictions of Black women as stereotypes. According to Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins, the early characterizations of Black women during slavery have since been repacked and redistributed through depictions of media stereotypes of this group (1990). Stereotypes of Black women in the media dates back to the historical representations and portrayals of this group that served to situate White supremacist ideals and perpetuate the devaluation of Black women. Collins suggests that the representations of Black women in media images are subtle modifications of the Black woman as derived from chattel slavery. Given her history, media representations of this group have situated the place of the Black woman and limited her capacity to be a sexual being, reproduce and perform manual labor. Even furthermore, Collins describes how media depictions of Black women that counter or portray anything beyond the performance and labor of her body meant that she was "out of place", "untamed" and "unruly". "Representations of Black women as bitches abound in contemporary popular culture, and presenting Black women as bitches is designed to defeminize and demonize them" (Hill Collins, 2004 p. 123). As a result, the controlling images of Black women since chattel slavery were reduced to the mule, immoral jezebel, breeder woman, mammy, and welfare queen. According to Collins, these images have since been repackaged as the modern mammy,

Black lady, and the educated Black bitch for contemporary mass consumption and to justify her exploitation (2004).

The mammy is among the oldest of all of the stereotypes of Black women characterized by a large, full figured, dark skin Black woman who is often depicted in the media as a faithful, self-sacrificing, loyal servant to White people. The mammy is represented as one who loves, cares for and provides for the White family to the detriment of her own. According to scholars, media portrayals of Black women as the mammy were also meant to justify the exploitation of the house servant in order to justify the role of Black women as domestics (Greene, 1994; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995). An example of this stereotype is depicted through Hattie McDaniel's' character as portrayed in *Gone with the Wind* for which she became the first African American woman to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, Florida Evans as portrayed in *Good Times*, Nell Carter as the housekeeper on *Gimme A Break* and Viola Davis as Aibileen Clark as featured in the film, *The Help.*

Equally important as an early stereotype of Black women in the media is Sapphire inspired by the character of the same name from the 1940's radio and television program, *Amos and Andy*. This particular stereotype of Black women is often characterized as nagging, argumentative, angry, hostile, loud, emasculating, comedic, not to be taken seriously, never satisfied and not easily shaken emotionally. She is also depicted as a master of verbal assaults (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995). Research also suggests that the sapphire image is also related to the contemporary trope of the angry Black woman (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995). As an example, contemporary depictions of this stereotype are often portrayed by Tyler Perry's *Madea* character.

Another early stereotype of Black women in the media is that of Jezebel who is often characterized as the hypersexual siren who is only concerned with her own sexual satisfaction.

She is often depicted as a whore that displays and flaunts her sexual prowess. The jezebel refers to the media image of the Black woman who is over-sexualized and always available for sexual conquests (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; West, 1995). According to Collins, this depiction served as a means to justify the acts of violence committed against Black women during slavery that often resulted in rape. During the time of slavery, given that Black women were perceived and thought of as "sexual animals" by slave masters, White men claimed that they were "helpless" against her sexual nature which subsequently characterized her as inhumane (Collins, 1990). As a result, sexual assaults and acts of sexual violence against her did not matter and she was deemed "un-rapeable" and could not possibly be raped because she "always wanted it". In contemporary media portrayals, the jezebel stereotype is often depicted as a bitch, hoe, whore, slut or thot ("that hoe over there").

In the same fashion as the mammy, another prominent stereotype of Black women in the media is the matriarch who is often depicted as the Black mother in the home. However, she is also referred to as the "failed" mammy given that she also works outside of the home. The 1960's Moynihan report solidified this image of the Black woman as one who works outside of the home while her children suffer and fail for it (Collins, 1990). She is also characterized as someone who also dictates to her husband and children and is portrayed as overly aggressive, emasculating and overly controlling (Collins, 1990; West, 1995). Media research suggests that the character of Claire Huxtable as portrayed on the *Cosby Show* was a modern representation of this stereotype.

Just as significant as the early stereotype of the Jezebel as derived from slavery so is the stereotype of welfare queen. The welfare queen is representative of the "breeder" woman from slavery who was characterized by slave owners as a "beast". Media portrayals of this stereotype are often depicted as breeding animals with no desire to work, content with living off the state

and pose a costly threat to political, economic stability and heterosexual relationships because she is often alone with children. Collins suggests that images of the welfare queen places blame on the Black mother for poverty as opposed to social structures and also justified efforts to control the fertility of Black women (1990).

In comparison to the early stereotypes, the strong Black woman or superwoman is a more contemporary stereotype of the Black woman in the media that characterizes her as being smart, dependable, successful, resilient in the face of adversity and one who places the needs of others before her own. She is perceived as one who has all her "ducks in a row". She has a fear of failure or confirming negative stereotypes of Black women and experiences great difficulty with asking for help (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Media research also describes this fear as stereotype threat as posited by Steele and Aronson (1995). Stereotype threat refers to the fear experienced by members of stereotyped groups of confirming the stereotype. While depictions of this stereotype seem to serve as a counter to the negative historical stereotypes of Black women, research has found that there are also detrimental psychological and emotional costs associated with this portrayal of Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

Also fundamental to the understanding of stereotypes of Black women in the media is the trope of the angry Black woman, which research suggests is related to the Sapphire stereotype. This trope characterizes Black women with unjustified anger, hostility, socially aggressive behavior and being confrontational while often being referred to as a "bitch". While this stereotype lacks empirical research, and is less studied than the other stereotypes of Black women, it is generally accepted to be true (Willey-Jean, 2009). Media depictions of the angry Black woman have been popularized by reality television portrayals of Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth in *The Apprentice* and Tami Roman as featured in the *Real World* and *Basketball Wives*. A recent content analysis of ten reality television programs also found evidence of the

angry Black woman trope based on the confrontational, socially aggressive behavior and facial expressions of Black women featured in reality television programming (Tyree, 2011).

According to Collins, "the controlling image of the "bitch" constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy. Increasingly applied to poor and/or working-class Black women, the representation of the "bitch" constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery. Whereas the mule was simply stubborn (passive aggressive) and needed prodding and supervision, the bitch is confrontational and actively aggressive. The term bitch is designed to put women in their place" (Hill Collins, 2004 p.123). Taking each historical and contemporary stereotype of Black women in the media together, media depictions of the Black woman have situated her presence in the context of the performance of her body for manual labor, sexual conquest and reproduction. As a result, humanity is not a function or a part of the Black female identity. The present study argues that despite the repackaging and reframing of the identities placed upon Black women since chattel slavery, her humanity and suitability for long-term relationship or partnership also remains fractured, questionable and absent from mainstream media messaging. As a result, in the eyes of others both historical and contemporary media portrayals of Black women may further perpetuate the idea that she may not be suitable for long-term partnership or relationship in comparison to the non-Black women.

Not only have the historical and contemporary media representations of Black women established the perceived stereotypes or generalizations of this group, but they have also situated and sustained her presence as absence. bell hooks' historical account and analysis of the history of Black women in film dating back to the release of *Birth of a Nation* in her essay, *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Women Spectators* offers the oppositional gaze as a framework in which to describe how Black women consume media portrayals of her presence as absence.

hooks describes the positionality of the oppositional gaze as a posture adopted by Black women akin to a self-defense mechanism in response to the violence against Black women in the media. In particular she writes, "with the possible exception of early race movies, Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the "body" of the Black female so as to perpetuate White supremacy and with it a phallocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is "White". As a result, Black women adopt the oppositional gaze as a form of armor in order to process the mischaracterization of their presence and/or their absence from film.

It is through the representation of the Black woman as portrayed in *Birth of a Nation* that not only situated her presence as absence but also established the value and the presence of one type of women over another within media. According to bell hooks', the release of this film was also the very moment in which the White woman was established as a standard of beauty and desire within mass media, thus whiteness was further established as the ideal. In particular she states, "politics of race and gender were inscribed in to mainstream cinematic narrative from *Birth of a Nation* on. As a seminal work, this film identified, what the place and function of White womanhood would be in cinema. There was clearly no place for Black women" (bell hooks, 1999). It is through the representation of the Black woman as portrayed in *Birth of a Nation* that not only situated her absence but also established the value of whiteness as the ideal and the presence of one type of women over another within the media. It is also the representations of whiteness that situates and sustains the presence of one woman over another type of woman within media messages that still persists today.

hooks describes the posture of the oppositional gaze as the act of being sensitive to the absence of the Black female presence in mass media, the insertion of violating representation or the act of interrogating the work by cultivating a way to look past gender and race for aspects of

content, form and language. According to hooks, Black women as spectators of mass media adopt the positionality of the oppositional gaze as a means of numbing and desensitizing oneself when viewing mass media messages that perpetuate White supremacist ideals and the devaluation of Black women.

Today stereotypes of Black women in the media and the trope of the "angry Black woman" can be more even more problematic for Black women who remain inaccurately portrayed and underrepresented in comparison to the portrayals and depictions of White women. Even furthermore, hooks' oppositional gaze also gives language to the act or positionality of Black women when they are confronted with the with the presence of a Black man in relationship with a non-Black woman.

Social Aggression of Black Women in Media

When considered from the lens of race, the stereotypes of Black women can be even more problematic for Black women who remain inaccurately portrayed and underrepresented within the media. Today, we now live in a world where the contemporary landscape of television media is dominated by non-fiction, reality television programming, featuring Black women displaying socially aggressive behavior and calls into question whether or not these portrayals further perpetuate the stereotype of Black women and the trope of the "angry Black woman". Although Black women and their social interactions may have a limited presence on primetime television programs, Black women continue to lead the pack of reality television programming while their social interactions with one another remain in heavy rotation given the genre's airing format. To date, the images of Black women that are the most visible, free, readily accessible and seen on rotation are media portrayals that are often negative, stereotypical, and socially aggressive interactions as portrayed in reality television programming. As an example, the initial airing of a reality television program is often followed by a two or three-part reunion specials

and/or a series marathon of the entire season serving as a recap for audiences. The high frequency of airing and re-airing of reality television programs often leads up to the release of a new season of the series or series spinoffs creating media franchises while surpassing the shelf life of primetime television sitcoms. As a result, the portrayals most frequently in rotation often feature a cast of Black women behaving badly towards one another and rewarded in the form of financial status, fame and celebrity. Even furthermore, the portrayals of Black women on some of the most successful reality television programs often perpetuate the stereotype of the aggressive, angry Black woman. The frequency of reality television programs on air taken together with symbolic annihilation, erasure and absence of positive social interactions among Black women would suggest that the portrayals of Black women most socially valuable are that which stabilize and perpetuate various stereotypes of this group as derived and subtly modified from the time of chattel slavery.

As part of the exchange required of cast members to participate in contemporary reality television programming, the one consistent price that must be paid to play is confrontation and/or what theorists would describe as social or relational aggression. According to existing literature on this type of behavior, social aggression involves direct forms of verbal rejection and indirect behaviors that are used by individuals to assert social status over others, harm others' self-esteem, or harm a relationship often leading to social exclusion (Galen & Underwood, 1997). Typically, the intentions of social aggression are to manipulate an individual's social standing by damaging his or her reputation through activities such as gossip, name calling, and social exclusion" (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2015 p. 2). Social or relational aggression is a form of interpersonal communication often depicted in reality television programming through the surveillance of interactions with cast members and during confessional-style "self-disclosure" interviews that act as a narrative device (Giggey, 2017). The key element of relational or social

aggression often observed throughout reality television programs allows for an effective storyline or plot which then perpetuates conflict, season after season. As a result, the success of reality television programs hinges upon relational aggression, which often lead to media franchises produced, distributed and watched by audiences worldwide, season after season. This also means good business or "good television" for stakeholders invested in these types of programming.

According to the American Advertising Foundation (2016), "most people are still living strikingly separate racial lives. This not only suggests that people are missing out on the cultural exchange and fluency necessary to navigate a modern global society, but it also signifies that for an astonishing number of people, their only exposure to people of color is through their television or computer screen". As a result, some people never come in contact with Black women and their exposure to this group is often through media. For Black women, there are a number of harmful stereotypes of this group portrayed and perpetuated in the landscape of media images. In contrast to the underrepresentation of Black women in prominent roles on broadcast, primetime television, reality television is where Black women continue to prevail as leads.

Given the stereotypes of Black women that are prominently portrayed in reality television as combative, manipulative, catty, devious and socially aggressive, media studies must consider the implications and influence these images may have on perceptions of Black women from others outside of this social group and the implications of those perceptions. With the framework of symbolic annihilation in mind, essentially one does not belong or exist if one is not seen or heard and for Black women the underrepresentation of this group in media images means that Black women and their humanity are not socially valued or valid in mainstream media.

While reality television programming is good business practice for producers, networks and stakeholders, prior research shows that the viewing of social aggression in media is directly

correlated to increased aggressive behavior. According to social aggression research, this type of behavior or interpersonal communication can have damaging emotional consequences for the victim or target of such behavior (Coyne, 2016). "Unlike victims of physical aggression, victims of relational aggression do not typically show the physical scars of being abused. However, relational aggression can be extremely harmful for individuals, with victims reporting a host of psychosocial problems including depression, anxiety, loneliness, social withdrawal, somatic complaints, low self-esteem and self-concept, less positive peer relationships, and in some cases, suicide" (Coyne, 2016 p. 284). Research has also demonstrated that among young adults socially aggressive behavior is thought to be a means for advancement in life. According to the findings of Behm-Morawitz et al. (2015), "emerging adult women who put more faith in the accuracy of the depictions of the reality characters' lives reported less egalitarian gender role beliefs and believed more strongly that social aggression is necessary for getting ahead in life" (p. 350).

In terms of perceived realism, young women who view reality TV as being an accurate representation of the characters' lives may "put more stock into the gender-related and social aggression depictions and, thus, be more likely to use this knowledge when making related real-world judgments" (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2015, p. 350). As a result, young adults are unaware of the dangers, backlash and unable to discern the consequences of socially aggressive behaviors. Collectively, media send the message that relational aggression is a normal, acceptable, and often consequence-free behavior that the aggressor can use to obtain what he or she wants, particularly among girls (Coyne, 2016). Even further, the exploitation of bad behavior as portrayed by Black women in reality television programming could potentially send a message to others including Black men that this type of behavior is a normal way of being, making her less desirable for long-term romantic relationship.

The frequent depictions of Black women engaged in socially aggressive behavior in reality television has left some Black women with combating not only the historical stereotypes but also the perception of being confrontational and argumentative in their longing to be with a mate. Given that Black women seem to have mastered the necessary ingredient of social aggression as leads in the most successful reality television programs, this type of behavior may also further perpetuate the idea that she may not be suitable for long-term partnership or relationship in comparison to non-Black women. As a result, the present study argues the chronic accessibility or repetition of socially aggressive behavior as depicted in popular reality television taken together with symbolic annihilation and whiteness as an ideal, further complicates the perception of Black women as suitable long-term romantic partners. Socially aggressive behavior of Black women as depicted in reality television will also be used to examine the following research question:

> **RQ5:** How do Black men interpret media depictions of Black women as socially aggressive as characterized by the trope of the "angry Black woman"?

> **RQ6:** How do Black men's interpretation of Black women as socially aggressive in the media shape their perceptions of Black women's suitability for long-term relationship?

> **RQ7:** How does socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media complicate social desirability for long-term romantic relationship among Black men?

Interracial Couplings with "The Trophy"

Apart from the stereotypical depictions of Black women as portrayed in the media that situate and sustain her social value and worth, the nature of interracial relationships is also worth considering in order to better understand how perceptions of Black women shape, inform and complicate a Black man's preference for an interracial relationship or long-term relationship with women of lighter skin complexions. As mentioned, according to the US Census data, interracial

couplings among Blacks and Whites are on the rise with increasingly more interracial dating and marriage, coupled with the evidence that millennials have more favorable attitudes toward interracial relationships than prior generations (Pew Research, 2010; 2015).

Research on interracial relationships has demonstrated that males have much more favorable attitudes towards interracial relationships overall. However, among Blacks the percentage of Black men involved in interracial marriages are almost three times greater than Black women. A study by Pew Research found that Black men accounted for 24% of interracial marriages while Black women accounted for only 12% (Livingston and Brown, 2015; Wang, 2012). Quantitative research on interracial relationships have demonstrated that women overall have less favorable attitudes towards interracial relationships in comparison to men, however Black women have the least favorable attitudes of them all. While there remains a considerable amount of research on interracial relationships the findings are inconsistent and typically reflect the views of Black/male-White/female relationships. When considering thoughts and perspectives of those involved in interracial relationships, qualitative studies of interracial couplings often place emphasis on the trope of the "angry Black woman" based on the narratives of couplings between Black men and White women. As a result, research on interracial relationships tend to privilege the voice of the White woman with little consideration of the Black female voice (Childs, 2005).

Contrary to research on interracial relationships, according to Childs Black women's opposition to interracial relationships is based on more than anger, jealousy and envy but is rather rooted in racism, internalized racism and what interracial relationships imply about the social value and worth of Black women. Even furthermore, the lack of research on interracial relationships from the perspective of Black males and females leaves a gap in the literature that

has not provided any evidence of what other factors may be contributing to the rise of heterosexual interracial relationships among Black men.

Given that interracial relationship research demonstrates that Black men are involved in interracial relationships almost three times more than Black women, the present study is concerned with understanding how media representations of interracial couplings and the trend of prominent and influential Black men being involved in interracial relationships also factor into these findings. Even further, given the frequency in which the media depicts and portrays prominent Black men in long-term relationship with non-Black women, perhaps Black men interpret these couplings as an example of success. As a result, the present study suggests that it is possible that the relational desires of Black men are influenced and informed by media depictions of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black women as an example to follow and emulate in their own lives. As a result, this study will attempt to draw connections between the media portrayals of prominent and influential Black male public figures in relationship with non-Black women in comparison to Black women and the subsequent perceptions of these couplings that may also lead Black men to choose to be in long-term relationships with Black women – *or not*. It is the intent of this present study to account for the voices, perspectives and opinions of Black men in their own words and told through their own lived experiences in order to examine how they make sense of Black women as suitable for long-term partnership or marriage – or not – as well as how their perceptions of media representations of interracial couplings involving prominent and influential Black men inform their judgments of potential romantic partners. Taken together with colorism and stereotypes of Black women in the media, interracial relationship research will also be used to examine the following research question:

RQ8: How do Black men make sense of prominent Black men in relationships with non-Black women in making their own decisions to be in long-term romantic relationships?

Chapter Three: Method

Design

In order to investigate how media portrayals of Black women are interpreted by heterosexual Black men as well as how Black men believe media shape their perceptions of suitable partners for long-term relationships, the present study applied the method of conducting focus group conversations with Black men. Focus group interviews involve conversations that take place among six to eight participants (no more than 12) that have been selected to discuss a specific topic (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Participants involved in this type of study can come from a pre-existing homogenous group and/or drawn together for the purpose of the study based on specific criteria. This type of interview is concerned with the group dynamic and learning from the group perspective (Wilkinson, 1998). Benefits of focus groups are the abilities to observe the group dynamic and how participants interact with each other, which is the hallmark of this method (Wilkinson, 1998).

For the purpose of the present study, focus group conversations were used as a stand-alone research method concerned with coming to know the experiences of Black men from the group perspective (Wilkinson, 1998). Given that focus groups are concerned with the group dynamic, research questions that are most appropriate for this methodology are those that seek to better understand people's beliefs, attitudes, experiences, motivations, opinions and viewpoints. As a result, participants of the present study were asked to share their attitudes about colorism, ideologies concerning ideal romantic relationships, and thoughts on media representations of Black women as suitable romantic partners which provides insight into how media shape and complicate perceptions of Black women when in consideration for long-term relationship or partnership.

Sample

The present study consisted of focus groups in an effort to account for the beliefs, attitudes, experiences, opinions and viewpoints of heterosexual Black men over the age of 21. Five focus group conversations took place among a snowball sampling of 35 heterosexual Black men ages 21-52 with the average age of the participants being 32 years of age as illustrated in Figure 1, which demonstrates the distribution of study participants. Of the participants, 40% identified their relationship status as "Single" (n = 14), 31% identified their relationship status as "Married" (n = 11), 17% identified their relationship status as "In a Relationship" (n = 6), 5% identified their relationship status as "Engaged" (n = 2), and another 5% identified their relationship status as "Divorced" (n = 2). Given that the present study was concerned with the group dynamic and learning from the group perspective, focus group interviews were conducted with heterosexual Black men until saturation or the point at which no new information or themes were being observed within the data collection process.

#	Location	# of Participants	Region of Country
1	Providence, RI	9	Northeast
2	Boston, MA	3	Northeast
3	Columbia, MO	12	Midwest
4	Columbia, MO	6	Midwest
5	Columbia, MO	5	Midwest

Figure 1. Focus Group Participant Distribution

Recruitment of Black men to participate in the present study took place through snowball sampling in order to examine their lived and personal accounts of media depictions of Black women (Wilkinson, 1998). While conducting focus groups typically consist of small groups of participants and are generally unrepresentative of the larger population, the conversations allowed for the simulation of social behavior as represented in the real world. Understanding the lived experiences of Black men as research study participants as told through their personal

accounts remains at the foundation of the present study. Researchers who choose to make use of focus group interviews as a qualitative method for data collection concern themselves with coming to know the beliefs, attitudes, experiences, knowledge, opinions and viewpoints of their study participants (Wilkinson, 1998). As a result, observing the conversations of Black men was necessary to in order to come to a better understanding and gain insight into their attitudes, viewpoints, perspectives of Black women and beliefs about long-term romantic relationship with this group.

According to research on interracial relationships, patterns of interracial relationships vary geographically (Yancey, 2002; Livingston and Brown, 2017). As a result, demographics related to geographic location, pre-existing romantic preferences, relationship status and previous relationship experiences were all accounted for in order to understand how media inform the selection of Black women for long-term romantic partnership by Black men. By having a conversation with Black men from a variation of geographical locations, it allowed for the accounting of any differences in romantic relationship preferences based on geographic locations. It also allowed for the expansion of the dataset to include a larger group of Black men.

In order to simulate interactions of Black men in the real world and learn from the group perspective, the focus group conversations allowed for natural and organic conversations to take place based on participant interaction with one another. As a result, the focus group conversations were used to ascertain how Black men interpret or make meaning of media depictions of Black women and Whiteness as an ideal from the group perspective based on their interaction with each other (Wilkinson, 1998). Conducting focus group discussions also allowed for the present study to simulate the social behavior of Black men in the real world who tend to abide by the "guy code" and have conversations among themselves in "packs" or within private spaces away from women like the proverbial "man cave." Given that academic research is rarely

focused on how media portrayals are being processed, received and interpreted from the male point of view, there is a need within academic scholarship to give voice to the lived experiences, beliefs and viewpoints from the Black male perspective.

Although there have been research studies conducted to examine Black male perceptions and attitudes for example toward light-skinned and dark-skinned African American female models in print advertisements, often these studies have used quantitative methods such as surveys or experiments, leaving even more questions that could be answered through the voices of this group (Watson, Thornton & Engelland, 2010). As an example, focus groups have proven to be effective as a research method to illuminate the views, perspectives, and lived experiences of Black males related to sexual decision-making practices and ideologies of masculinity (Bowleg et al., 2011; Gilmore, DeLamater & Wagstaff, 1996). However, given that perspectives of this group remains largely absent from media research studies, conducting focus groups with Black men for the purpose of this study was the most appropriate method with the intent to situate the voices of this marginalized group. As audience members of the media, focus group conversations with Black men also allowed for the investigation of how media messages inform pre-existing romantic preferences, beliefs and attitudes of Black men while unearthing how they make meaning, receive, interpret and make sense of media messages of Black women as guided by the research questions of this study.

Data Collection Procedure

Upon IRB approval, research participants for this study were recruited through the snowball sampling method beginning with the personal contacts of the researcher. The five focus groups conversations took place in the states of Rhode Island, Massachusetts and on the campus of a large mid-western University located Missouri. Heterosexual Black males were identified by the researcher within each state in order to serve as moderators to facilitate the focus group

discussions based on their prior experience with working with young men, leading groups, and managing discussions. Once the moderators for each focus group were identified within each state, the researcher collaborated with the moderators in order to recruit study participants. A recruitment flyer was created and distributed amongst the focus group moderators for outreach purposes. The recruitment flyer informed participants of the nature of the study. In addition, on the campus of the large mid-western University a recruitment ad was distributed via email to the campus community including but not limited to students, staff and faculty. The email announcement also informed participants of the nature of the present study. Focus-group participants were also provided with food incentives for their attendance in exchange for their time and participation.

In order to qualify for participation within this study participants were required to identify as Black heterosexual males between the ages of 21 and 50. The participants were assured of confidentiality. Only first names were used in all contacts and during group discussions. The research setting for the focus groups varied per state however, four of the five focus group conversations were held in private rooms located on academic campuses based on the accessibility of the focus group moderators to those spaces while one focus group conversation was held in a private room located in a media lab. Before the commencement of each focus group, the researcher conducted a focus group training with each moderator based on the focus group protocol that was created for the purpose of this study. The moderator training guide included a warm up, introduction script, step-by step instructions for the day of the focus group discussion along with the focus group interview questions. The moderator training guide was based on the purpose of the study and reflected a semi-structured interview style with probing questions used to encourage communication and explore the issues related to the research questions.

Once the focus group moderator obtained verbal consent from each study participant, they were then introduced to the topic of the study and asked probing questions in order to ascertain their pre-existing thoughts and opinions about romantic relationships with Black women, media depictions of Black women, colorism and interracial relationships. All focus group discussions were audio recorded and conducted by the focus group moderator. The five focus groups spanned from 90 - 120 minutes in length.

Before the focus group discussions, it was also important for the researcher to gain insight into any pre-existing preferences or previous romantic experiences of study participants and to account for any variation in romantic relationship preferences based on geographic location. As a result, study participants were asked to document their own romantic relationship preferences and previous romantic relationship experiences based on race. Among the study participants, 65% (n =23) indicated a preference to be in romantic relationship with Black women and 35% (n = 12) indicated that they have no preference as it pertains to the race of their romantic partner. Of the participants, 57% (n= 20) reported having been involved in a romantic relationship with a White woman or someone who was racially ambiguous in appearance, while 11% (n = 4) indicated that they are currently involved in a relationship with a woman is White or racially ambiguous in appearance. Even further, results of the present study reveal that romantic relationship preference did not vary based on geographic location but based on availability and accessibility to Black women.

Group Interactions Data

The five focus groups discussions were led by Black men with prior experience with working with young men and leading groups and as a result the subsequent conversation that transpired were not dependent on the moderator. Participants in all groups interacted with each other and expressed their own opinions and ideas. Among all five focus group conversations,

none of the participants assumed a dominant role. Each participant was given the opportunity to express his/her individual opinion. Differences among participants were allowed within the groups, and no conflicts arose. Even further, study participants experienced a sense of community amongst one another throughout the conversations that allowed for them to express their deeply held beliefs, attitudes, experiences and viewpoints.

Data Analysis and Management

Upon completion of the focus group discussions, each moderator provided the researcher with access to the audio-recordings after uploading them to a file hosting service operated by Dropbox. The audio recordings of the five focus group discussions were then uploaded to Temi, an online software program for transcriptions that was used to transcribe the audio-recordings verbatim. Transcripts of the discussions were made within one week after the focus group discussions had taken place. Once the initial transcriptions were completed, the researcher reviewed and finalized the transcripts by listening to them and re-reading them while highlighting statements that carried unique ideas based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Thematic coding of each focus group transcript was conducted inductively and deductively by listening to conversations and highlighting the transcripts as guided by the research questions. Throughout the coding process, memos and notes were made within the transcripts. During the immersion process of listening to the audio conversations multiple times, participants of each focus group were given anonymous letter names in order to ensure that their voices were identifiable during the transcription process. The voices of focus group participants were identified and matched as a result of being able to distinguish between the voices of the focus group moderator and focus group participants. A third listening of the focus group conversations were made in order to synthesize the data for patterns and to identify themes. As a result, quotes were extracted, defined and refined from the transcriptions and placed under the

guiding research questions of the present study. Data were reduced through setting aside quotes unrelated to the purpose of the study. Quotes with similar meaning were combined and key concepts emerged that led to the final interpretations of the data.

Member Checks

For the purpose of verifying the accuracy of the interpretations of the focus group conversations, member checks were conducted with a random selection of study participants. In order to do so, selected focus group participants were provided with excerpts from the data analysis in order to ascertain whether there were any discrepancies with the interpretations of the transcripts. Based on the member check process, there were no discrepancies or disagreements indicated from the interpretations of the focus group transcripts.

By conducting this type of analysis of the focus group transcripts, this methodology would allow for the researcher to begin an investigation to answer whether or not Black men really love Black women and how the media informs their selection of Black women for long-term romantic partnership.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

Qualitative research via semi-structured focus group discussions with heterosexual Black men reveal that Black men interpret media messages from a mixture of modes as posited by Carolyn Michelle's multidimensional model of audience reception and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). Data analysis of the focus group conversations reveal that Black men receive, interpret and decode media messages from the mediated, discursive, resistant, referential and transparent modes of reception which tend to change based on the content of the media message itself.

Firstly, throughout the focus group conversations, Black men demonstrated a heightened awareness of the constructed nature of media messages which is representative of the mediated mode of audience reception. According to Michelle (2009), in this mode an individual reads the "text as a production" and interprets a text based upon its aesthetics and his or her capacity to understand the process of media production and media literacy by engaging the themes and messages of the text (p.141). Second, focus group conversations reveal that Black men interpret media messages of Whiteness as the ideal and colorism from the discursive mode of audience reception. As posited by Michelle as an extension of Hall's encoding/decoding model, the discursive mode of reception, which includes a positionality of resistance describes how an individual reads the "text as a message" and analyzes the intended meaning of the text (2009, p.141). As a result, the individual adopts an ideological position or interpretation of the message, by making a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of it (Michelle, 2007). Focus group conversations also reveal that stereotypes of Black women as depicted in the media are interpreted by Black men from a referential mode of reception based on their lived experiences with Black women. According to Michelle (2009), in the referential mode an individual reads the "text as like life" (p.141). In assessing the meaning of the text, the individual moves outside of

the text itself and compares it to his or her own real life experiences for interpretation (Michelle, 2009). Conversations with Black men also reveal that media depictions of gender roles of Black women are read and interpreted from the transparent mode of audience reception. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as life" where the individual relates to the text as if it were an accurate depiction of life and reality through a strong immersion and emotion towards the text, characters and themes (Michelle, 2009, p.141).

Based on the data analysis of focus group conversations as part of the present study, 13 dominant themes consistently emerged from the narratives of Black men. The dominant themes that emerged from the data analysis of focus group transcripts were those concepts, ideas and arguments that continued to emerge across all focus group conversations with Black men as guided by the research questions of the present study. The dominant themes that emerged from the focus group conversations were, "False Narratives and Symbolic Annihilation of Lived Experiences", "Internalization of Gender Roles & Personal Preferences Most Salient", "90's Sitcoms of Healthy, Black TV Relationships vs. Toxic Black TV Relationships of Today", "White Male Gaze Determines What is Beautiful", "Cultural Appropriation of Blackness to Perpetuate Colorism", "Constructed Nature of Media Messages", "Colorism as a False Narrative, Agenda and Construction of the Media", "Anger as a Human Emotion Ascribed and Associated Only with Blackness", "Normalization, Internalization and Re-enactment of Socially Aggressive Behavior ", "Hypersexualization and Twerking Culture", "Normalization and Internalization of the Strong Black Woman", "Black Men are Not a Monolith", and "Black Women as Ideal Long-term Romantic Relationship Partners for Black Men".

In contrast to the dominant themes that emerged from the focus group conversations, data analysis of the transcripts also revealed 4 secondary themes that were based on either direct or indirect experiences with White women as guided by the research questions of the present study.

While the majority of Black male participants of this study had a preference to be in long-term romantic partnership with Black women, more than half of the participants also had direct experiences with White women which allowed for them to speak upon their own lived experiences while speculating about those Black men who are resistant to being in relationship with Black women. As a result, these themes were labeled as secondary themes given that they did not represent the experiences of all of the study participants. Among the secondary themes that emerged from the focus group conversations related to Black men and their experiences with White women were "Interracial Dating: A Complicating Compromise for Pleasure and Play with Forbidden Fruit", "White Women are Not the Trophy but a Danger to Black Men", "Messages from Our Mothers" and "The Traumas of Colorism".

Other unexpected themes that emerged from the focus group discussions with Black men tell the narratives and lived experiences of heterosexual Black men and how they internalize media depictions of themselves and experience rejection from Black women for long-term romantic relationship. While the present study was centered and focused on media depictions of Black women and the complications associated with romantic relationship with Black men as a result, data analysis of the transcripts revealed a need for Black men to also share and disclose their own perspectives and point of view. As a result, the themes that were labeled as unexpected unearthed the ideas, beliefs and attitudes of Black men that diverged from the original focus of present the study but also provided great insight into how Black men experience, receive and interpret media messages of themselves as suitable romantic partners for Black women. Among the unexpected themes that emerged from narratives of Black men were, "Rejection of Black Men", "Over-representation of Hypermasculinity Internalized by Black Women", "Black Men are Trash, Toxic and Not Good Enough for Strong Black Women" and "Experiences of Rejection from Black Women with White Men". Taken together the dominant, secondary and

unexpected themes as revealed from the data analysis of focus group transcripts, and their implications on whether or not Black men find Black women to be suitable for long-term romantic relationship are discussed as guided by the research questions of the present study.

Triad of Media Messages

The narratives of Black men as part of the present study can also be interpreted and understood through the proposed conceptual framework which is described as the "Triad of Media Messages". Historically, there have been many conceptual models of communication to describe the process of transmitting information from the sender to the receiver. The proposed triad of media messages is adapted from the transactional model of communication that demonstrates the ongoing, circular process of sending, receiving, encoding, decoding and interpreting information and messages (Barnlund, 2008). Based on traditional models of communication, the conceptual triad of media messages was created to understand how media messages are not only encoded and decoded but also how certain media messages are interpreted and inform interpersonal romantic relationships between Black men and women. This conceptual model was applied to the interpretations of the most problematic media messages and themes that emerged from the focus group conversations that illuminate how media messages complicate long-term relationship outcomes for Black men and women. This conceptual model was also applied to better understand the overall experience of Black men with negative media messages and how their reception of these messages inform their consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships. The conceptual triad of media messages was also used to understand and describe how Black men receive and interpret media messages both directly and indirectly.

As illustrated in the proposed triad of media messages as referenced in Figure 2, at the top of the triad lies the sender or source of media messages. The sender is representative of media stakeholders who also serve as the initiator and encoder of media messages while the
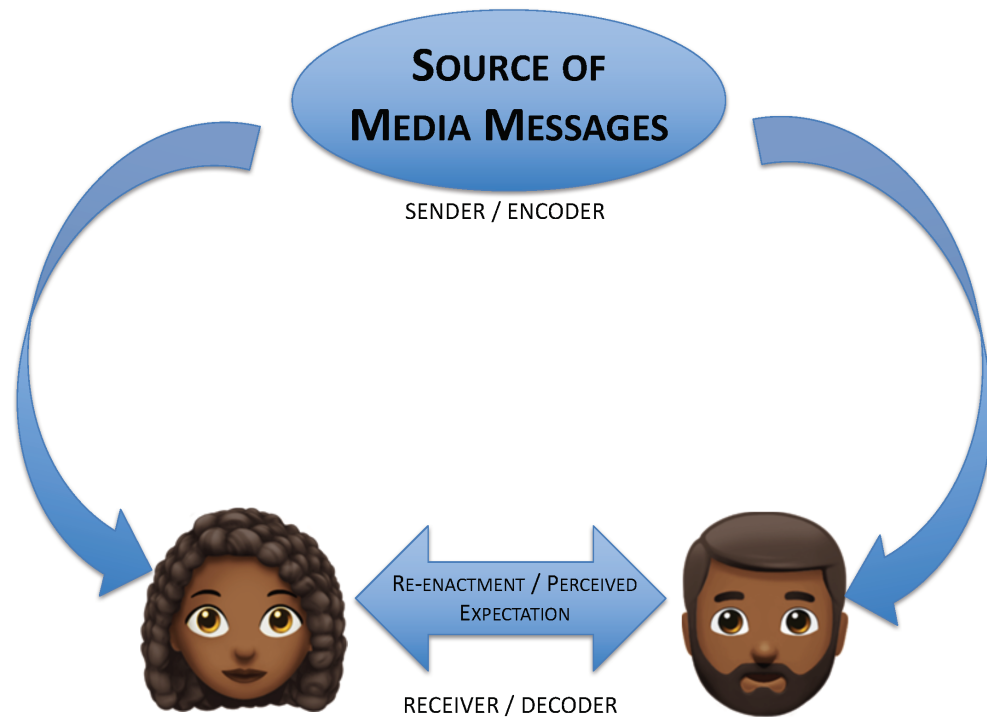
Figure 2. Triad of Media Messages as proposed by Valerius, D. (2021).

receiver is representative of the audience who also act as the listener or decoder of media messages. Media messages are created by the sender and distributed to the receiver through multiple channels including but not limited to film, television, music, advertisements and/or social media. As media messages are distributed and disseminated from the sender through multiple channels, they are then received by audiences of Black men and women who are equally represented on each side of the receiving end of the triad. One side of the triad represents how Black men receive and interpret media messages directly while the other side of the triad illustrates how Black men indirectly receive media messages as they are first internalized by Black women and subsequently re-enacted upon them as a result. On the receiving end of the

triad, both Black men and women receive, interpret and internalize media messages resulting in a bi-directional relationship of perceived expectations and the re-enactment of media messages.
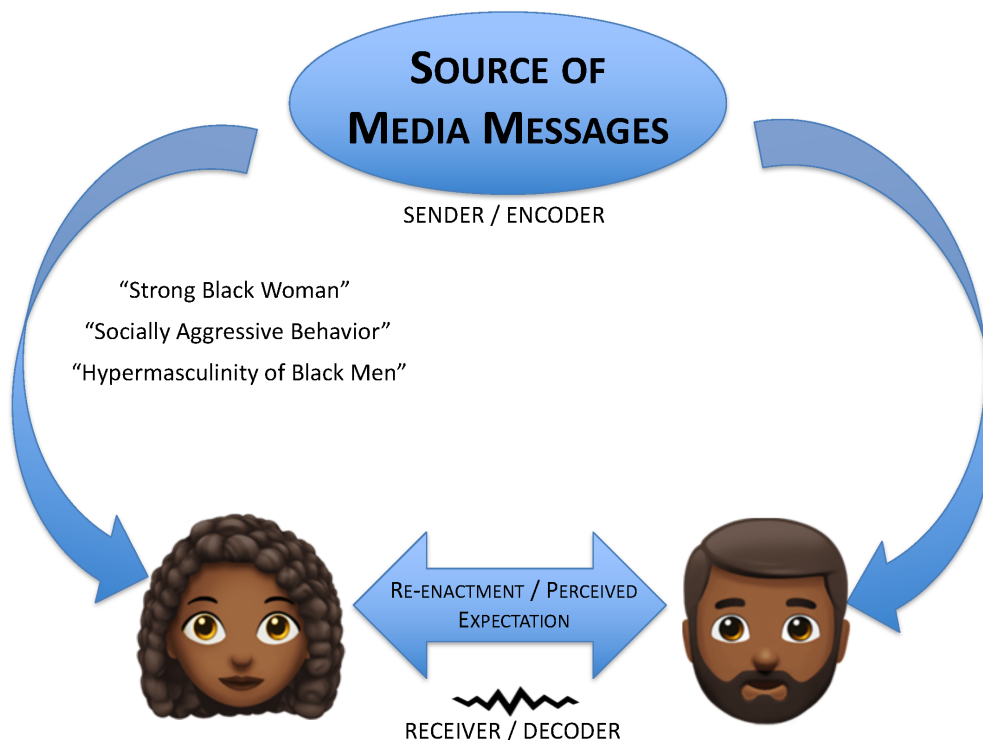
Figure 3. Triad of Media Messages as proposed by Valerius, D (2021).

As illustrated in the triad of media messages as referenced in Figure 3, focus group conversations reveal that Black men experience how Black women internalize dominant and problematic media messages of the trope of the strong Black woman, socially aggressive behavior, and the hypermasculinity of Black men as perpetuated in media messages. Black men also share that once these media messages have been internalized by Black women, they are subject to the re-enactment of socially aggressive behavior, behavior associated with the trope of the strong Black woman and the expectation of hypermasculinity when dating and/or in relationship with Black women. According to conversations with Black men, Black women receive and internalize dominant media messages and re-enact them upon Black men resulting in the perceived expectation of problematic outcomes for long-term romantic relationships. As a result, conversations with Black men suggest their perceived expectation of Black women to use

media messages to reinforce their pre-existing thinking of romantic relationships, masculinity and Black men.

Within the triad, Black men not only receive media messages indirectly as internalized by Black women and re-enacted upon them through their perceived expectation of Black women, but they also directly receive media messages as originated by the sender or source of media messages. As illustrated in Figure 4, analysis of focus group conversations reveal that Black men experience the internalization of gender roles of Black women and negative media messages of themselves as perpetuated by content creators and sometimes authored and/or performed by Black women, often resulting in their own experiences of rejection from Black women.
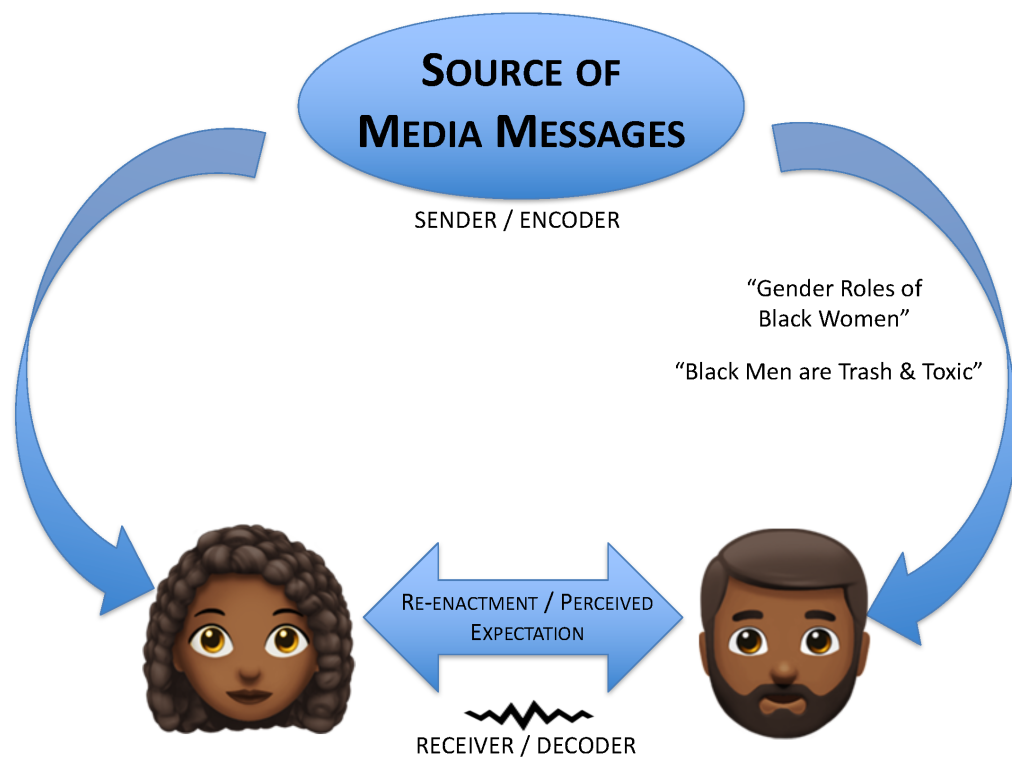
Figure 4. Triad of Media Messages as proposed by Valerius, D (2021).

As illustrated, the conceptual triad of media messages allows for a better understanding of how media messages are received and experienced both directly and indirectly by heterosexual Black men as well as how Black men believe media shape their own suitability as

partners for long-term romantic relationships with Black women. The conceptual triad of media

messages was also used to make meaning of the most problematic dominant, and unexpected

themes that emerged from the data analysis of focus group conversations with Black men. Taken

together with the dominant, secondary and unexpected themes that emerged, findings from the

data analysis of conversations with Black men have been organized according to the research

questions of the present study and as a result they will be discussed further and presented based

on how they support each research question accordingly.

RQ1: How do heterosexual Black men make meaning of or interpret media portrayals of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships?

According to narratives of heterosexual Black men, there is a process of

compartmentalization that occurs in their interpretation, readings and sensemaking of media

portrayals and depictions of Black women as suitable long-term romantic partners that is

informed and constructed by their personal lived experienced with Black women. These readings

of media messages by Black men are representative of the referential mode of audience reception

whereby Black men read media messages of Black women and compare them to their own lived

experiences for interpretation (Michelle, 2009). As a result, given their lived experiences with

Black women, collectively the Black men in this study agreed that media portrayals of Black

women depict false narratives of Black women for the sake of monetary and financial gain of

media stakeholders. However, in their consideration of long-term romantic relationship partners,

conversations with Black men reveal that they often internalize and reference gender roles of

Black women as depicted in 90's television sitcoms and films. Narratives of Black men reveal

that readings of mediated gender roles of Black women are much more influential in their

interpretation of Black women as suitable long-term romantic partners as opposed to physical

appearances. Even further, Black men in this study expressed agreement that personal

preferences are much more salient in their consideration of long-term romantic relationship

partners regardless and irrespective of colorism and skin tone. These findings will be discussed further through the themes: False Narratives and Symbolic Annihilation of Lived Experiences; Internalization of Gender Roles & Personal Preference Most Salient; and 90's Sitcoms of Healthy, Black TV Relationships vs. Toxic Black TV Relationships of Today.

False Narratives and Symbolic Annihilation of Lived Experiences. One of the primary re-occurring themes that emerged from the analysis of focus group conversations with Black men was categorized as "False Narratives and Symbolic Annihilation of Lived Experiences". Black men agreed that the media propagate and perpetuate false narratives of Black women that they inherently know not to be true based on their lived experiences with Black women. Black men also suggested in their conversations that media depictions further reinforce the trope of the angry Black woman. In particular, Black men expressed that media depictions of Black women are false narratives and a problematic exaggeration of their lived experiences. They also recognized that these characterizations of Black women are marketed and redistributed as a source of entertainment. Focus group participants often made reference to the profitability of false narratives not only for mainstream media but also for Black media figures such as media mogul, Tyler Perry and television personality, Shaunie O'Neal *(Basketball Wives)* who further perpetuate Black women as socially aggressive and crazy in their media productions.

For Black men, there is also an awareness that false narratives of Black women are problematic for those who do not have lived experiences with Black women. Black men articulated that audiences who do not share lived experiences with Black women, may interpret and perceive that media depictions of Black women represent reality when in fact Black men know and experience Black women differently. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant E:
(Providence, RI)

There are stereotypes of all of us, you know, especially Black people who are easy. I mean, it's actually kind of a decent business, you know, plan, because a lot of people in different parts of the world aren't exposed to Black people. So, you just put an image out there. People will believe it, you know, and so they're, you know, they're thugs or whatever in a lot of part of our worlds, they would say fine. A lot of the part of the U.S. would say fine.

Participant J:
(Providence, RI)

Even like Basketball Wives it's Shaquille O'Neal's ex-wife's that owns that. So, it's like Black women put out that image themselves and not to say Black men don't put out the image of, you know, gangster movies and shit like that to but in the conversation being in conversation about Black women. Yeah, I think they do. There is a false image, but a lot of them are executive producers of their own false images You know what I mean?

Participant C:
(Providence, RI)

Tyler Perry is good with the Black thing. But it's like emasculating. Tyler Perry shows a lot of points, key points, jewels for the Black family and the culture. But he, emasculates Black men still regardless. It's like that sells. It's like a self-contradiction.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)

Men, with media, I would say that's Black media too, but that's why I can't stand Tyler Perry honestly like, you know what I mean? Like some of the portrayals that he does of Black woman and make them look crazy as shit.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)

You know like I think for both of them. I was told get a white woman, she going to do whatever you want her to do. She can be passive, passive and non-aggressive. A sister ain't taking those types of behavior. That's exactly the outcome that you get. You can go around this room and all of us would say, we don't see that with every Black woman that we know but that's what's depicted. That's what's reinforced for us and it's not being reinforced just by the media we're being told this by ourselves. So that's the implication of the media portrayals of it. More of a reinforcement of stereotypes and concepts that are kind of percolating in our community and we know them not to be true.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)

As far as a suitability goes, you don't see Black women as wives as much as you see white women as wives. You have your Michelle and Barack and then like that's boasted up. For a little while you had LeBron and his wife, Steph Curry and his wife. And I feel like it comes in segments versus other people where it's, you know, whether it's white people, usually it's white people, they're like always married. Like you look at like modern

family and then like you got married, marry white folks and stuff. You don't see much diversity with racial diversity. You see other types of diversity? Um, or just movies and stuff. Like in general, it's typically that I think every Rock movie I've ever seen, he's been married to a white lady and every movie that The Rock has been in. So stuff like that I think is, um, it's interesting.

Internalization of Gender Roles & Personal Preference Most Salient. Another

primary theme that emerged from the focus group conversations with Black men revealed that

gender roles of Black women in the media are much more influential to informing Black men's

perception of Black women as suitable long-term romantic relationship partners as opposed to

their physical appearance. According to the data analysis of focus group conversations, Black

men interpret media messages of gender roles from a transparent reading of media messages.

Through the transparent mode of reception, Black men read or interpret gender roles in the media

as "life" and perceive the gender roles of Black women as authentic, accurate and truthful

depictions of how Black women should be in relationship with Black men (Michelle, 2009,

p.141). During the focus group conversations, many Black men were able to recall dominant

media messages of Black women based on their gender roles as housewives, career women

and/or women often described as the "ride or die". Media portrayals of gender roles are read and

interpreted by Black men as a realistic reflection or mirror of reality which subsequently informs

what they may desire in a long-term romantic partner. For Black men, these gender roles were

often recalled from media depictions of Black women from 90's sitcoms *The Cosby Show*, *Fresh

Prince of Bel-Air*, *Martin*, and messages from films and popular music. The following are

excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as

categorized under this theme:

Participant A:
(Providence, RI)   When you think about it, media shows you a Black woman cooking all the time. You don't necessarily see the same about white images in the media or lighter skinned woman. So you're like, all right, I need a woman. I needed a woman that can cook. If your woman can't cook, you're like, all

right, what's up? Is she appropriate marriage material? You know what I mean? So there are little pieces that you see, you know, or should a woman wear, you know, lingerie or should a woman, like you see these things that you're like, all right, I should want that.

Participant B:
(Providence, RI)   If I'm gonna be honest, I gotta say that media influences me. And some of it I'm unlearning. For example, like growing up, I, you know, I saw Dr. Huxtable and Claire Huxtable like I want Claire Huxtable, you know, so that's just one example, you know, or you saw uncle Phil and aunt Viv and I was like, that's what I want. So for me to step back and say, it didn't influence me at all, I would be, you know, I would be dishonest in saying that.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   Like you had Martin and Gina Dwayne and what's her name? Whitley. Yeah, like it used to be like super in your face. Like you know, you know, or even like uncle Phil like that whole family dynamic. Like, like growing up seeing that or even hearing about like, nah, I mean I can't think about how many rap songs say, you know Bonnie and Clyde, you know what I mean? Like that's what you're looking for. Like, so I feel like they, they kind of breed that mentality from the git, you know what I'm saying? Seeing someone who looks like you, who also goes through the same struggles and you know what I'm saying, that can relate to what it is. It might've been Menace to Society, but you know he had went through something and the Black woman sat next to him and she could relate to what he was going through and I can still remember my mom in the room watching the movie with me saying, see no other woman could do that. You get what racism is too. I don't have to explain to you or racism is.

Participant B:
(Columbia, MO)   But do we still get those messages through media though? I mean you dating all these show that were in the nineties. You know the same shows I remember you know. *Living Single*, *A Different World*, *The Cosby Show*, *Martin*. And you had the wife or the girlfriend who was there, career woman doing her thing. I don't know that we have that on TV anymore. I don't see it.

Participant F:
(Columbia, MO)   If there are, there aren't much.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I know for me as I think about messages I received growing up from media it's like this needing a ride or die, somebody, a woman who was going to ride for me both in just like allowing me to do whatever the fuck I wanted to do, but also hold down a household and cook and clean and all that stuff. And so this, these are the kinds of things that I received and, but I also remember kind of getting this message that if she doesn't do all of

this, then it's, that's not the one, right? Like that's not wifey material, that's, that's the side piece, right. Or something like something along those lines. And I just, now I look at that, I look at it a little bit differently. You know what I mean? Like, I can cook. Like I'm not going to starve if my wife don't cook. You feel me. I can figure some things out. I can make some pots shake.

Participant D:
(Columbia, MO)   That's interesting that you mentioned that because it makes me think about like even my current relationship and how I expect my partner to perform these roles of like cooking and cleaning and like doing these things. I'm like, this is what you're supposed to do. Like, why aren't you doing this? You know? And so I think media has a role in that.

Even further, conversations with Black men also revealed that as part of their long-term romantic selection process, their personal preferences are much more salient and often driven by their own lived experiences with Black women regardless of skin tone, and beyond the influence of media depictions of this group. Conversations with Black men reveal that colorism is perceived as a byproduct and extension of White supremacy and as a result, Black men adopt a discursive or resistant positionality towards notions of colorism and vehemently reject them in favor of their personal preferences. These interpretations illustrate the discursive mode of audience reception whereby Black men read media messages of colorism and resist those messages while adopting a resistant positionality in their reading of them (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). Although colorism is acknowledged by Black men as a divisive and racist agenda of the media, collectively Black men do not consider or distinguish skin tone during the process of selecting a mate for long-term romantic relationship. Colorism as it relates to the long-term romantic relationship process is a non-issue for Black men and not considered or referenced consciously in their selection of a partner or mate. According to the focus group participants, most desire to be in long-term romantic relationship with Black women regardless of skin tone even when their personal preference does not subscribe to the media ideals. Personal preferences are much more salient for Black men and some even argue that personal preferences

should not be deemed as bigotry, which further illustrates the discursive mode of reception

towards colorism in contrast to their adoption or acceptance of gender roles in the media. The

following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and

perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant E:
(Providence, RI)   As a man, I'm a hunter. Our goal for what I want, the best thing, the fliers
thing, I want someone who's smart. For me as a person, as a man, I always
want to get the best that I can get. And that's the example of the best that
they can get. So yes, the media affects me. I'm not going to say I'm above
it, but for my own personal preference, I know that I'm constantly
thinking, you know, maybe perfect plus one.

Participant M:
(Providence, RI)   I don't feel like guys' decisions are based so much on emotions as females
think. As you said, we like what we like. We're hunters. Like, it doesn't
matter. At the end of the day if I like you, I'll make everybody like you.
That's pretty much it.

Participant J:
(Providence, RI)   I think its preference. I love Black, Black, Black and Black. Like real
Black women. Like I like, like real oil, Black women. I love Lupita, I love
Black, so it's preference. You know what I mean? Like I'm attracted to
light skin women yes but I love Black, Black women.

Participant G:
(Providence, RI)   I'm attracted to attractive women. I'm attracted to pretty. Whether she's
light skin or whatever. If she fine, she fine. I'm attracted.

Participant B:
(Providence RI)   Unhealthy people are unhealthy people regardless of race. So if you want
a healthy relationship with a nice attractive woman, that's what you want

Participant J:
(Boston, MA)   My girlfriend is dark skin. I wasn't searching for anything. I was just really
searching for someone to really love me unconditionally. And she's
probably been the most loyal person in my life. But does that. So should I
say, all, dark skin women are loyal you know I mean maybe, but I don't
know. I don't, I think I've come to a point in my life where I don't let the
media dictate any of my decisions you know what I mean.

Participant A:
(Boston, MA)   I don't think that preference should be inherently like deemed as. Bigotry.
Like that's one of the things that I feel like in today's society is getting a
little confusing. Like, if a man comes out and says, I'm not interested in
like trans women or something like that, then he's considered a bigot.

Participant O:	
(Columbia, MO)	There are people that will come out and say like I only want to deal with light skin women And I was like that is like part of what we're talking about right now. But like there's a difference between like having a preference just because of how you feel.
Participant M:	
(Columbia, MO)	Yeah. I like, I feel like as a man, you know, you pick who you want to pick. You know what I mean and that's just is what it is. Like I got a homeboy that like, you know likes bigger girls and that's just not my thing. You know what I mean and I do look up to him.

90's Sitcoms of Healthy, Black TV Relationships vs. Toxic Black TV Relationships

of Today. Another primary theme that emerged from the focus group conversations with Black

men was categorized as "90's Sitcoms of Healthy, Black TV Relationships vs. Toxic Black TV

Relationships of Today". According to Black men, contemporary media messages perpetuate

gross depictions of toxicity and violence in romantic relationships between Black men and

women in comparison to media messages of the past. Black men perceive current media

depictions of Black relationships as toxic and turbulent. As a result of the gross propagation of

toxic narratives of Black relationships, Black men agree that there is a perception among

audience members of media messages that violence is a part of what it means to be in a Black

relationship. Black men agree that these perceptions also result in what they would describe as

the normalization and false expectation of toxic and turbulent relationships among Black men

and women. For some Black men, there was a period of time, during the popularity of television

sitcoms and films of the 90's *(The Cosby Show, Martin, A Different World, Fresh Prince of Bel-*

Air, Family Matters, Menace to Society), whereby media portrayals of Black relationships were

depicted as healthy. However Black men agreed that Black relationships today are depicted as

toxic, unhealthy and riddled with violence whether physical, mental or emotional which is

problematic for long-term romantic relationship. Even furthermore, while the age range of the

participants varied between ages 21-52 younger Black male participants continue to watch and

make reference to television sitcoms and films of the 90's era given their accessibility. As a result, despite the age range of the participants Black men agree that there are gross differences between the media of the 90's era in comparison to contemporary media. Conversations with Black men also reveal that early influences of media during childhood and adolescent development shape and inform romantic relationship ideals such as gender roles that are held up as a standard in their adulthood. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant A:
(Boston, MA)   I think that even us, even in the show that wasn't a successful relationship. Yeah. Like what they depicted in the show [*Martin*]. It's like that was turbulent as fuck. And honestly by the last season it could have been because of the drama outside or just because of the storyline within, like it was no relationship by the last season. Like that literally even in the span of fiction, like was not sustainable.

Participant A:
(Boston, MA)   [Media] doesn't say that much positively. At the top they sprinkled down and toxicity you got Black folks telling Black folks that you should be looking for toxic relationships and shit like that. You got Black man telling me like you got to find submissive woman, you got Black women telling each other, you got to find a man out and put you in your place and this, that and the other. On the, on the level of like my, like colleagues and parallels media wise, social media and stuff, not getting too much positivity on the level of like coming, like from the top down, not getting no positivity.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I think there was a pocket of time, like early nineties where you had like Martin and Gina and you had, and you had um, Dwayne and um, I can't even remember her name, but yeah, but you and you have Fresh Prince of Bel air. Like you saw these, you saw these like very successful, healthy Black relationships. Then after that it was like all unhealthy Black relationships. And so I think the media wanted everyone to believe that Black relationships were just really toxic and unhealthy, right? Like, and every movie that you would see in every situation, like even if people stayed together, they were staying together through like cheating and affairs and beating and alcoholism and all of these negative things that do impact our communities. But it was like your gun, like you said earlier, you're going to get cheated on if you would a Black dude or you're, you gotta get your car tires slashed or your car burned, like waiting to exhale style if you're with a Black woman. And I have now, I think now I think

maybe it's because I'm intentional about going to look for it or maybe it is, it's getting better.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)

I want to be clear in saying that I love Issa Rae and I love what she's doing at the same time though, I think her narratives, the narratives that she propagates can be pervasive in the sense that she is showing what, what the lived experience may be like for a millennial or generation Z or whatever it may be and what our like, what our experiences are like in today's dating world. But she's shown, I feel like a very narrow view and it's contributing to the narrative that relationships are toxic, that men are toxic or that women are toxic and like she's not really focused on.

Participant S:
(Columbia, MO)

So if you believe in, see that relationships are all going to be toxic all, going to be devastating to and aggressive. That's what you're going to soon attract and then you start seeing within social media, people portraying your women are horrible, men are horrible. And then it floods into the continuous, writing of these stories. But then it plays into how media then now is not just what we see on TV, but what we see on our phones through like Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. And then now you see these navigation of celebrity relationships, your relationships, your friends' relationships. You can just see how it all comes together to maybe, you know, this Black love isn't the right thing because you see all these negative components coming together and maybe that's what leads people to be like well it's not working for you. It's not working for you. It hasn't worked for me. So, let me go try something new. But I don't know, maybe that's just like a circle or cycle that connects everything.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)

To that point it's like you see people talking about Insecure and they're like Team Lawrence or Team Issa and stuff like that. Like how about team like morality and ethics. You know, Lawrence is trash for X, Y, Z and Issa is trash for X, Y, Z and it's like dog low key they both trash like, come on now let's, let's be honest about this. Keep it a buck. And then you see this narrative that's like, you know, all men are trash or you know, uh, you know, all dudes cheat and stuff like that and it's like, I don't know if that's been your lived experience and if that is the case, I'm sorry. On behalf of all them dudes who dragged you. But like that's not the case. And so to propagate this like mean world syndrome does nothing to push our community towards developing healthy means of one, uh, interacting with one another but to, you know, uh, propagating, you know, healthy relationships for generations to come.

Participant R:
(Columbia, MO)

Being angry is part of human life, right? You can be angry, but do not let that anger extend into becoming violent. Right? But constantly we see a healthy Black relationship filled with violence in it, right? So the media is

still saying that, Oh you can, you can be very successful in your relationship, but it's also comes with a little bit of violence and the women have to deal and whenever the woman is the strongest in it, the woman reprimands that man, you know, and all that. I see marriage as being able for a long-term relationship, being able to navigate these challenges in a way that becomes a learning curve for you as a man and for the woman as well as a way to bring harmony and then, and then also accepting who you are and accepting your partner as who she is. That's how I think a relationship should be. But I wonder if that is how media portrays.

To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to consider the ways in which Black men make meaning of media depictions of Black women for long-term romantic relationship. In the same manner, findings from conversations with Black men will now be discussed to better understand how media depictions of Whiteness are received and interpreted by Black men related to the next research question as guided by the present study. The findings associated with the next research question will be discussed further through the themes: White Male Gaze Determines What is Beautiful; and Cultural Appropriation of Blackness to Perpetuate Colorism.

RQ2: How do Black men make sense of media portrayals of Whiteness and attractiveness?

According to the narratives of Black men, collectively this group recognizes Whiteness as a form or extension of the White male gaze, White supremacy, and White male patriarchy. These interpretations of media messages by Black men are representative of the discursive mode of audience reception whereby Black men read media messages of Whiteness as the dominant message and resist those messages while adopting an ideological position while applying an oppositional reading them (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). As a result, Whiteness is very "see-through" for Black men who are able to compartmentalize media messages of Whiteness rather than internalizing them. Even further, Black men also recognized the marketability and cultural appropriation of Black features that often perpetuate colorism while privileging Whiteness. As previously mentioned, for Black men the distinction between lighter

skin and darker skin is a non-issue however they believe that media depictions of such are a false narrative by the media to perpetuate colorism as a divisive tool. According to Black men there is an agenda by the media to perpetuate colorism that is not a reflection of the beliefs of Black men and only creates tension between Black men and women rooted in racism and the White male gaze.

White Male Gaze Determines What is Beautiful. Collectively, Black men agreed that according to the White male gaze, in order for a Black woman to be deemed as beautiful she must also be exceptional in her physical appearance based on her marketability for mass consumption. According to conversations with Black men, the exceptionalism required for Black women is intended to protect the legacy and lineage of Whiteness. Black men observe that according to the media, Black women who are not exceptional in terms of their achievements, education, success and appearance are not suitable long-term partners. An example of Black women who are perceived as exceptional and rare are women of the likes of Michelle Obama or fictionalized characters such as Olivia Pope *(Scandal).* Black men perceive that the suitability of Black women as long-term partners in the media is often situated through the lens of the White male gaze. For Black women to be deemed as attractive in the media, according to Black men, her physical appearance should appear to be "thick, full-figured or curvy with straight hair" and she cannot have "hard features but softer features" that are marketable and easily emulated by White women. Black men collectively agree that according to media messages what is physically attractive and what is sexy as it relates to Black women are those who are appear to be on the lighter spectrum in terms of skin tone or complexion.

Black men also shared they felt that whatever the White man perceives as beautiful in the media is the standard, while everything else is a deviation of what is acceptable, rejected, and beneath heteronormative White standards. Collectively, Black men agreed that media messages

privilege women who appear to be "light skin," "long hair," "mixed" or "super Black" as what is considered pretty or physically attractive, while Black women who are in "the middle" are not as celebrated. It is also worth noting that Black men distinguish between "dark skinned" Black women and those who are characterized as "super Black". An example of women who are considered "super Black" and privileged within the media are Black women who are often natives from African countries such as actress, Lupita N'yongo and model, Alek Wek in comparison to "dark skinned" Black women such as singer, Kelly Rowland and actress, Viola Davis. According to Black men, what is celebrated in the media are the extremes of Blackness as opposed to just regular Black women. For some Black men, they agree that according to the media either lighter skin is more attractive or someone who is "super, super, super dark" leaving nowhere within the spectrum for "regular or average" Black women to also be perceived as attractive. For some Black men, they believe that in order for Black women to be marketable according to the media, they must be "unique" for the sake of commercialism and profitability which they describe as either exotic, African, super dark and/or light skin. Even further, scholars such as bell hooks suggest that Black women with natural hair, tribal outfits and diverse body types are often exoticized in the media and treated as a novelty because they are rarely showcased or displayed (hooks, 1992). These perspectives also reflect the findings of a content analysis called, "Light except Lupita", where researchers found "more token and time-sensitive images of one, single, darker skinned, afro haired Black woman – the US-based actress Lupita Nyong'o" that skewed the analysis of mainstream magazines (Jankowski et al, 2017, p. 12). Researchers attributed the unusual media and commercial attention to N'yongo based on her 2013 Oscar win, becoming a face for cosmetic distributor Lancôme and "less because of a breakthrough in racialized appearance pressures but rather because of Lancôme's profit imperative" (Jankowski et al, 2017, p. 13). In the case of N'yongo, her Oscar win and becoming

the face of Lancôme further validated her beauty and the novelty of what Black men refer to as "super Black". Taken together, according to the interpretation and reading of media messages by Black men, "regular or average" Black women are not as marketable or profitable as "light skin" or "super Black" women in accordance with the White male gaze.

Even further, Black men argue that media portrayals and depictions of darker skinned Black women are negative and based on colorism as an agenda of the media. Black men, observe that "regular", "average" or "darker skinned" Black women are often depicted in the media as the "lowest grade". As an example, some Black men noted the visible manipulation of tennis player, Serena Williams by the media in order for her to be more marketable as opposed to being "too Black". Even further, some Black men point out differences between the marketing of both Venus and Serena Williams based on physical features and having a "strong African American" look. Taken together, some Black men believe that media depictions and portrayals of Serena Williams is evidence of whitewashing that further perpetuates colorism. As a result of colorism and the privileging of certain types of Black women over another as perpetuated by the media, some Black men read and interpret media depictions of Black women as partners that you "settle for". Even further, Black men recognized that the media globally perpetuate the agenda of colorism that also causes Black women to feel the need to bleach their skin. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)   I think you have to be unique and where they can market you. But I think the, what you're seeing now is like, am I the Blackest. You can name the Blackest woman, she's a model. She might have a bald head, natural physique and everything. Oh, African women, they want to portray that to make money off the Black woman. Opposed to say she's just a Black, beautiful woman. It don't matter. What shade you put her on? Whatever, whatever, her skin color. But that's unique and different. And you know, people who's going to be attracted to it because that's different, right? Opposed to what the norm is. If I just see a regular Black woman she's just

a Black woman from dada, you're not really, it doesn't stand out. So I think whatever can sell in the media and they can portray it then they going I mean, that's what they're going to target.

Participant T:
(Providence, RI)   It's like whatever the white man perceives as beauty and that's, that's what's going to be beautiful to the media. And so it's like whatever is in their lens and their view that's just what it is and everything else is wrong.

However, for one focus group participant he shares that actress, Regina King is a refreshing portrayal of a "regular" Black woman that is not exoticized in accordance to the White male gaze.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   Regina King won the Academy Award last year. I been following Regina King since she was on 227. Her performance aside, it was just so great to see a Black woman, she's she just a Black woman, she ain't Halle Berry fine, you know like that but she's, she's a beautiful woman. But what you always saw before was the Halle Berry's and the Gabrielle Union's to a some extent. She's not a Lupita N'yongo exotic. She's not Halle Berry exotic. She's a sister. She got the eyes you know but other than that, you know, it was refreshing to see that portrayal of a Black woman at the top of her game and she didn't have to be exoticized at all.

Cultural Appropriation of Blackness to Perpetuate Colorism. Another primary theme that emerged from the focus group conversations with Black men was categorized as "Cultural Appropriation of Blackness to Perpetuate Colorism". Conversations with Black men revealed that they recognize the cultural appropriation of Black features by White women who attempt to emulate Black women, as a result of Whiteness that privileges them with the ability to do so. Even further, Black men agreed that Black media entities are also guilty of appealing to mainstream media's ideal of beauty, given that Black people do not own media at the same level of their White counterparts. They also recognize that within the Black community certain type of looks are prioritized, and this level of prioritization is based on Whiteness or as one participant put it, "chasing the generational curse of Whiteness". As a result, some Black men report being intentional about curating their own social media feed in order to consume Black media or media

that they perceive more accurately depicts Black women consistent with their lived experiences.

The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and

perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant F:
(Columbia, MO)   Some white women, they trying to look like, not just white but Hispanic, whatever, other race than Black. They trying to look like our Black women.

Participant G:
(Columbia, MO)   Lips, done. Butt done. They way their butts look now, it's crazy. I ain't see no white girl with an ass until I got to college. I turned around and I was like whattt?

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I see a lot even on Black media or if I look at Black fitness women or something like that, it's not typically like a regular Black woman or a Black woman with like regular 4C like hard hair. Like it's the Black woman with like the perfect big Afro curl or like she's super, the skin is 100% like perfect, right? Like her waist is small, her ass is huge. Like the thighs is nice. Like it's like that or it's like maybe she is like a skinnier girl, but she's the Lupita, you know what I mean? She's like the Lupita on the beach shot and you're like, Aw dang. You know what I mean? Like she bad. Like, and I think that it's awesome to see people, like Issa Rae right, who I would consider Issa Rae a regular Black girl. She is a regular Black woman, but she, like you said, she's created her own lane. Her own space to where she's the leading lady, right? Her friend Yvonne Orji, dark-skinned, regular looking Black woman. And so you see them, you're like, wow, like they're attractive. Like to me at least they're attractive and I don't think that you see that a lot, but I think it's interesting that even within the Black community, I feel like we've prioritized certain looks like a light skinned girl with like some foreign looking eyes. I feel like she's getting a billion likes on Instagram.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)   A lot of it is just we still chasing the thought of being white, the thought not being white, but you want to be put on the status. So, when a Black person is, I want to be perfect. You're comparing yourself to your counterpart, which is white and that hasn't done anything compared to what you had to go through to get to where you're at. So, when you finally get a little buzz now it's like I got to be perfect because that's what the expectation is. I have to be perfect. And your mentality. So, I think for the clicks and likes, if you a little rugged, then you get put back in that box of you're ghetto, you're from the hood. It's like, it's like a generational curse about what the perception is about Black women and Black men. And I just think that's when you said like even with certain Black media you gotta be perfect, it's like that's not true.

To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to consider the ways in which Black men make meaning of media depictions of Whiteness in their consideration of long-term romantic partners. Equally important, findings from conversations with Black men will be discussed to better understand how media depictions of physical attractiveness are received and interpreted by Black men as guided by the next research question of the present study. The findings associated with the next research question will be discussed further through the themes: Constructed Nature of Media Messages; Colorism as a False Narrative, Agenda and Construction of the Media; Over-representation Of Hypermasculinity Internalized by Black Women; Black Men are Trash, Toxic and Not Good Enough for Strong Black Women; and Experiences of Rejection from Black Women with White Men.

RQ3: In what ways might Black men perceive their physical attraction to Black women to be informed by media?

  Constructed Nature of Media Messages. Based on the narratives of heterosexual Black men for this study, collectively physical attraction for this group is often based on personal preferences rather than media depictions. Conversations with Black men reveal that they are able to distinguish and discern the constructed and fictional nature of media production which results in their ability to compartmentalize or adopt a mediated mode of reception of media messages. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as a production" and interprets a text based upon its aesthetics and his or her capacity to understand the process of media production and media literacy by engaging the themes and messages of the text (Michelle, 2009, p.141). This mode of media reception contrasts from Black women whom they believe read or interpret media messages from the transparent mode of reception where media messages of physical attractiveness are interpreted and internalized as a mirror of reality (Michelle, 2009). Black men are attuned to the construction of media as a form of entertainment that benefits or generates a

profit for media stakeholders. As a result, they exhibit a heightened awareness of the
construction of media messages of beauty, and physical attractiveness as curated by the media.
As a consequence, Black men adopt a discursive or resistant positionality toward physical
attractiveness as depicted by media messages that is counteracted by their personal preferences
(Michelle, 2009). Black men observe the constructed nature of media messages related to beauty,
physical attractiveness and colorism and subsequently reject them in favor of their personal
preferences. As a result, the majority of participants report that they are not directly influenced
by media depictions of Black women or perceive their physical attraction to Black women to be
informed by the media. While the majority of Black men demonstrate the ability to distinguish
and compartmentalize constructed media messages, some describe that there are some personal
preferences that are admittedly informed by the media. Whereas some Black men report their
own awareness of the ways in which media messages may inform their selection of a romantic
partner, the majority of study participants interpret media messages from the mediated mode of
reception where they are able to compartmentalize or distinguish between media messages as a
form of constructed "show business" while opposing false narratives that are created for
entertainment purposes (Michelle, 2009). The following are excerpts from the focus group
discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant M:
(Providence, RI)   I never would have been married for 23 years if I didn't know who I was. I
had to know who I was because then she can't disrespect me because I
know who I am. So no matter what comes out of her mouth, I know who I
am and I can't disrespect her because she knows who she is. So I think
what the TV tries to, to put two jacked up people together and then it
doesn't work rather than to say find out who you are, fill yourself,
strengthen yourself and then you're going to find the perfect woman
because believe it or not, once you find that you're going to find the right
woman.So the TV does not create in me any perception cause I knew who
I was and all that stuff was just like BS when I'm watching them, like nah
nah, that's not for me.

Participant F:
(Providence, RI)   I think if it wasn't the media it would be your environment, if you live in a predominantly Black environment and that's what you see on an everyday basis, that would influence what your view of beauty is, what the tricky part about it is that I think you know. The media is so pervasive that regardless of what environment you're in, if you're watching TV or you're surfing internet, you're seeing images that are skewing your, your view of beauty more towards the lighter skin because that's what media is pushing and that's their product. That's what they, you know, and that's run by white or lighter folks, you know what I mean? So that's, that's understandable. What's tricky, and then talking about this where, you know, Black women over the years we've had those complaints about Black men not liking Black women and all that is, it's, crazy because there's a lot to it.

Participant E:
(Providence, RI)   For sure. Yeah. like it definitely influences me. I think there's two different ways to look at it. Like I, you know, obviously the genuine way that you're supposed to love someone, it's just about who they are and all that that's there and your connection and all that. As a guy and I'm kind of competitive, I kind of want to have like the baddest chicken in the room. You know what I mean? I want, I feel good when I, when I date the chick that looks good, even if she's crazy or whatever, I'm like, fine. Unfortunately, I make that decision. Sometimes that's just kinda how it works. But, but long story short, when it comes to that, yeah. I mean I'm looking at two women and all else is equal. If one is more appealing to everybody else. And I know it's wrong, I'm conscious of it. It's like it's not on the, it's kinda like below the surface. But if I just unpack it a little bit, I'm like, yeah, she's got like if she's got green eyes or something unique. She looked like me so she wasn't that fair. But you know, if she's got, if she has those looks that I know are appealing, if she looks like Lenny Kravitz's daughter or something that's just the novelty of it is appealing. And I think that applies a lot. I think applies to a lot of my boys too. And probably some people in here, like I see it all the time. My boys that day exclusively white women, I do think there's something behind it. I think people have preferences for a reason. And I do think it's influenced by culture and everything and how the people think.

Colorism as A False Narrative, Agenda and Construction of the Media. Another

primary theme that emerged from the focus group conversations with Black men was categorized

as "Colorism as A False Narrative, Agenda and Construction of the Media". According to

conversations with Black men, there is a misconception that Black men have lighter skinned

preferences based on the over-representation of such in the media. Black men agreed that they do

not internalize and/or enact colorism as part of their romantic relationship selection process. These interpretations of media messages by Black men are representative of the discursive mode of audience reception whereby Black men read media messages of Whiteness as the dominant message and resist those messages while adopting an ideological position with an oppositional reading of them (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). Collectively, Black men agreed that they do not distinguish between light skin versus dark skin for long-term romantic relationship despite what is defined as physically attractive and what is perpetuated and sustained by media messages. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant P:
(Providence, RI)   You know what? Let's talk about the, let's talk about the truth. Listen, a lot of these shows that have these light skinned women, Black people didn't produce them things. Them things were produced by Hollywood, by white people. They put that light skinned girl there. So why, why, why is this? Why is it now a trend and we're getting blamed.

Participant C:
(Providence, RI)   Like we did it and we didn't.

Participant B:
(Providence, RI)   Like it doesn't make sense when you stop and think about it, it's like, you know, this narrative is messed up to begin with. And in a way that we even thinking about the conversation is crazy. It's like the light woman is not your competition. She's still Black. You know. Sit with yourself and your issues like you said, getting to know yourself, know yourself so you can present your best self to that person.

Participant P:
(Providence, RI)   What they present there is not our perception. And so because it's because it's on YouTube, it's on, it's on Facebook. It's on everything. It appears that it's mass and it's not mass. Cause as I've listened to everyone around the room, none of us think that way. I don't care if you're Black, Brown, Latino, whatever. If you find, and you will look me in the eye, are you going to be truthful to me and you're going to have my back and I'm getting beat up in the street. You gone pull up. You're going to take your shoes off or come help me out like we good.

Participant A: *(Boston, MA)*	They try to, but it's like honestly because of social media, which is why you have to differentiate between media and social media. Media is still on that same old cookie cutter shit. But social media will, Oh hell nah, the fuck out of something really quickly.
Participant B: *(Boston, MA)*	I mean even the light skin privilege thing, you know what I'm saying? Oh she looks so beautiful. You don't put a dark and it goes through social media too. I keep mentioning my social media. I've seen posts where someone put some real dark skinned woman and say, okay, let's go. What'd you think? Oh, crispy and all the other different names. I'm like, really? Cause she's dark skin. Wow. They never do that to light skinned women, they never do it to light skin women. It's always dark skinned Women that we have to ridicule and make, you know, slick you know insults with, you know what I'm saying? Just recently, Ayanna Presley cut her hair. Well, she had to alopecia. Yea and she's still gorgeous. You know what I'm saying?
Moderator: *(Columbia, MO)*	What types of women are considered to be pretty or physically attractive according to the media?
Group: *(Columbia, MO)*	Light skin, long hair. Light skin long hair.
Participant M: *(Columbia, MO)*	Or super Black line. Not Black Black but Super Black.
Participant O: *(Columbia, MO)*	Because then you're exotic. Yeah. I think what they all have in common is the exotic. They don't fit neatly into one group. You're either super Black, meaning you probably from Africa, you know or light skin, long hair and you can be a little bit of everything. Or Mixed.
Participant K: *(Columbia, MO)*	Or than can perform mulatto. The Kardashians. Latino and Black with long hair.
Participant M: *(Columbia, MO)*	It's either one extreme or the other pretty much one extreme or the other. The middle ground. It's just like eh, you know media wise, like that's what you see represented. I think there's somewhat of a push to like get rid of that. But I think that even with that push like, cause you like Kendrick who is like real big on like, you know, be natural, be you, you know. Give me stretch marks, give me this, give me that. But even then like you start seeing people take that and then they're like, okay we want dark-skinned people. We gone get the darkest person. I could find. I'm still going to go get the lightest girl I could find with this curly hair or this, you know, perfectly curled fro or some shit.

Participant H:	
(Columbia, MO)	It's even simpler today if you look at all the different party like around here, you know, when they have the party promotions, what kind of females do they have?
Participant D:	
(Columbia, MO)	She gotta be the bad Brazilian.
Participant H:	
(Columbia, MO)	Yup. Even when you throw parties.
Participant B:	
(Columbia, MO)	Well the media need to definitely pushes the light skin stuff and I think that makes a lot of Black women, and this is kind of coming from the Caribbean where a lot of Black women feel so insecure, insecure about themselves so they start bleaching and wearing a bunch of weave even blonde weave And stuff like that's how they think by all these white women trying to to be, to be Black, trying to look Black, trying to get some of the physical characteristics of Black women. But, but yeah, that's what the media pushes and its prevalent in the Caribbean even and even Black men are bleaching. Sammy Sosa did it.

For one participant, he offers an acknowledgment of colorism shaping his perception of what his long-term relationship partner should look like based on media depictions of singer, Vanity and Denise Huxtable *(The Cosby Show)* from his childhood.

Participant J:	
(Boston, MA)	My grandmother, dark, dark skin, my grandfather, dark skin, my grandmother, grandmother, light, light skin. So, like it wasn't for me as you were saying earlier, Black was just Black to me. But I think the media when I was a kid affected me. And then also watching television, I was attracted to light lighter skinned girls cause I would see the Vanities and I would see, you know, the Denise Huxtable's and stuff like that. Uso I, but I always had the examples of my grandparents too. You know what I mean? So, I think more when I see the media affected me, it was more of like if I'm gonna have a girl she's going to have to look like Denise Huxtable or Vanity.

But overall for most Black men, the distinction between light skin and dark skin is not something that they are consciously seeking as it relates to long-term romantic relationship. For Black men, whatever skin complexion a woman he selects to be in long-term romantic relationship may be, occurs by happenstance as opposed to an intentional and conscious effort. Even further, colorism does not factor into the Black man's selection process for long-term

romantic relationship unless one has experienced trauma related to colorism in an effort to prevent his own children from having the same experience. The following is an excerpt from the focus group discussions that captures this perspective as categorized under this theme:

Participant L:
(Columbia, MO)   It be this situation where it just happened that it was like two or three in a row that was light skin. I wasn't like going towards light skin it just happened but if you caught me a few months ago. She was galaxy Black. You know it's just the weirdest dynamic that I always thought that was weird because me, preference wise, I didn't prefer, I've never preferred light dark whatever it just happened to be who I was vibing with at that time.

Even further, conversations with Black men also reveal that they observe a heightened level of colorism that is much more prevalent on social media platforms due to the immediacy, frequency and accessibility of media messages in comparison to traditional forms of media. This can also be interpreted and understood from the concept of chronic accessibility as posited by media effects scholarship. According to media research, "factors that influence the extent to which a construct is frequently or recently activated, or is vivid in nature, will increase the likelihood that the construct will be used in the judgment construction process" (Shrum, 2004, p. 332). Accordingly, Black men report that the chronic activation of messages from social media have the potential to be an influential source of informing their understanding of what long-term romantic relationships should appear to be or resemble as part of their information gathering process. Chronic accessibility of ideal romantic relationships and colorism is often triggered in the minds of Black men upon viewing the chronic repetition and vividness of media messages on social media platforms. While content found on social media platforms are typically user-generated, algorithms and social media influencers are often leveraged and skewed for marketing purposes and to shape and influence perceptions of social media users. In comparison to other forms of traditional media, Black men perceive the attempt to reinforce distinctions between what is deemed beautiful and what is not especially on social media platforms. Black men also

report that due to the incessant and constant perpetuation of colorism on social media, they often experience adopting a more resistant positionality to colorism on social media by intentionally curating their social media feeds. As a result, some Black men report that social media can potentially trigger some Black men to feel the need to be with someone outside of their race due to the messages as perpetuated through social media. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant B:
(Columbia, MO)

I mean even the light skin privilege thing, you know what I'm saying? Oh she looks so beautiful. You don't put a dark and it goes through social media too. I keep mentioning my social media. I've seen posts where someone put some real dark skinned woman and say, okay, let's go. What'd you think? Oh crispy and all the other different names. I'm like, really? Cause she's dark skin. Wow. They never do that to light skinned women, they never do it to light skin women. It's always dark skinned Women that we have to ridicule and make, you know, slick you know insults with, you know what I'm saying?

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)

Certain ones, lighter ones. Yeah. And I think with the algorithms on Instagram for instance, you can, whatever you search, it will tailor to what you look at. So, whatever's being promoted. And as far as lighter skin, I would say mostly foreigns once again. And lighter skin. I think they market that the most. And that's the popular thing. Black is like dirty almost in a sense. If you look at Serena Williams, great example, if you look at her face now and all her pictures, it's white, it's a lot of makeup. Her skin is not dark. And when you seeing, things of her, wearing all this makeup, extensions we, yes Black girls wear weave, white girls wear weave but her face is not dark or showing a strong Black woman. In my eyes, I think the media is putting that you need a lighter skin so we can market you with different avenues. Because when she bought her Black cat suit, everybody was like, Oh, she's too strong, she's too masculine or whatever. So they were looking at, she was too Black.

Participant H:
(Columbia, MO)

It's whitewashed.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)

I think it's, yeah, I think it's been whitewashed. And you hear of stories of people bleaching their skin. That's a part that seems like a popular thing to do or whatever for the Black image. Like let's soften it up, let's make it a lighter tone and it's not dark. So that's the thing that I seen her

transformation and she's getting more marketing as you can see. So many endorsement deals that she didn't have before and she still was beating the brakes off of people right and left.

Participant S:
(Columbia, MO)

So if you believe in, see that relationships are all going to be toxic all, going to be devastating to and aggressive. That's what you're going to soon attract and then you start seeing within social media, people portraying your women are horrible, men are horrible. And then it floods into the continuous, writing of these stories. But then it plays into how media then now is not just what we see on TV, but what we see on our phones through like Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. And then now you see these navigation of celebrity relationships, your relationships, your friends' relationships. You can just see how it all comes together to maybe, you know, this Black love isn't the right thing because you see all these negative components coming together and maybe that's what leads people to be like well it's not working for you. It's not working for you. It hasn't worked for me. So let me go try something new. But I don't know, maybe that's just like a circle or cycle that connects everything.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)

I think there's a big difference between a man, a Black man who ends up with a white woman versus someone who's resistant. Because that shit is like, I don't do Black women. And I think there's a like versatile amount of reasons, right? And one of them media wise, because you know, you go on social media, right? And you see these videos and I still remember my, I have a close friend, he said, I don't want Black kids. And I'm like, what? You know, I don't want Black kids. I said, why? Because they're killing them. I don't want to have a kid. And they die because they're Black. And although it's not a movie, you know what I mean? I mean like Fruitville station, it's not a movie. He's consuming this media every day saying, you know, Black kid killed by police or Black kid gets disrespected by a teacher. Right. Or a Black kid can't graduate because he has, he has locks. I remember me even growing up being dark skin in a time where light skin was everything, right? Light skin was everything very your skin, the better. Like the lighter you are the righter you are right. And I was like, man, I don't want dark skinned kids. I remember telling my mom mad like I love chocolate women, but I was like, I don't want dark skin kids. And my mom is dark skinned and she's looking at me like that hurt and she was like, why? I was like, I don't want them to have to go through what I'm going through. I don't want you to go through the ridicule and all the dark skin jokes and the Black jokes and, and you know, I used to try to be funny off the strength of either I'm going to be funny or I'm going to fight cause I'm done with y'all talking about me like this. Right. And then media wise, it was like, man, the dark dude on TV was always ignorant. He was the janitor, he was the goofy guy. He was, he was this, he was that. Right? And so I think about some resistance being, uh, a coping technique. Like I'll get with someone white so my kids fair are better than me. I also feel

like that's self hatred comes in, right? Where it's like some Black men are resistance because of the stereotypes, the different things that they see on TV. Like I don't know about y'all, but I, I drive a Toyota, but I don't want to get scratched up, keyed up brick through the window. And so if that's what I see there, maybe that's why I avoid that.

Conversations with Black men also revealed that as a result of colorism as an agenda of the media, some have experienced false assumptions and/or being wrongly accused of having a desire to be with White women or women outside of their race. These false assumptions also result in Black men experiencing a level of conflict with Black women "thinking" that they have a preference for White girls, when in fact White women are typically the ones that are "chasing after" them. As a result, Black men experience conflicts with Black women that result in their own rejection by Black women due to these false assumptions. The following is an excerpt from the focus group discussions that captures this perspective as categorized under this theme:

Participant S:
(Columbia, MO)   In high school I can remember like I went, so for like about like a year or two, I went to a school that was out in the kind of, almost in the country side of the city. So, it's predominantly white, but they bused in kids from the inner city to there. So there would be like, you know, a small portion of Black people at the school, but all the Black women who looked at me saw me as someone that was more proper, more well-spoken. And just assumed because I was that way, or assume that based off the way I dress, that I wouldn't be into Black women. So now as I've like come to college and I like they've seen like the people that I interact with as well as like who I am as a person more openly. When I've come back they're like, I never would have thought that, you know, you were into like Black women or you want to talk to about one. I just always thought you would be interested to be with a white woman.

While the primary aim of the focus group conversations was to unearth the ways in which Black men may perceive their physical attraction to Black women to be informed by the media, conversations with Black men unexpectedly revealed that, in fact, Black men experience rejection from Black women themselves. According to the lived experiences of Black men in this study, their narratives revealed that they perceive that Black women are not attracted to certain

types of Black men for long-term romantic relationship as informed by media depictions of

Black men.

Over-representation of Hypermasculinity Internalized by Black Women. One of the

most prevalent unexpected themes that emerged from the focus group conversations based on the

beliefs and attitudes of Black men that diverged from the original focus of the present study was

categorized as the "Over-representation of Hypermasculinity Internalized by Black Women".

According to conversations with Black men, some have experienced being dismissed and/or

rejected by Black women as a result of not having the physical appearance, characteristics, or

disposition of hypermasculinity as perpetuated and internalized from media messages. Some

Black men report that Black women internalize media depictions and stereotypes of Black men

as hyper masculine, aggressive, and "hard" which results in some Black men being pushed away

by Black women based on a perceived lack of hypermasculinity. Black men describe that some

Black women have an expectation of hypermasculine behavior from Black men as a result of

media messages and struggle with receiving acts of kindness and genuineness from Black men.

Even further some Black men share that they have also experienced the regret of Black women

who pushed them away for their acts of kindness after they have moved onto another

relationship. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their

voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   I think that Black love is beautiful. I love to see Black people together.
                        When I think back to when I was in high school, I remember trying
                        multiple times to like date a Black woman and how difficult it was for me
                        because I was proper, I was very soft spoken. I wasn't like tough and
                        masculine. And so I remember always being overlooked. But when I
                        would talk to white women or biracial women, like they just loved
                        everything about me. Right? And so I was like, well, and my mother was
                        even like, I think you're going to bring home a white woman. Are you
                        going to date like a white woman because of that. And I was confident that
                        I was too because like, I just wasn't Black women type. Now that has
                        changed and I found a Black woman who actually does like me and I'm

like, Oh, great. And so like, you know, I'm fortunate in that regard, but I think it's like a two way street. It's like, it depends on the type of person that you are. And I grew up in a time where Black women wanted like the thug and like the street dude and like all that stuff. And I just wasn't that. And so I didn't feel accepted by Black women

Participant V:
(Columbia, MO)   One of my best friends, he like dates exclusively white women or Latino women, just not Black women. Right. and a large part, the reason of that is Black women not choosing him. Know what I mean? Like that's, that's a space where he's not really validated in we keep it a buck like Black folks as a whole, we have, we've internalized a lot of these stereotypes. We have an idea of what a Black man should do. What he should act like. My boy likes anime. I mean like He likes Anime. White women cool with that you know what I mean. Black women for him his experience has been, they're not really vibing that. So he goes, when he feels validated, he can do whatever he wants to do. They just smoke weed and watch and do his shit. Right. And so I think part of it is just about vibe and who vibes you in a lot of ways.

Participant E:
(Columbia, MO)   Even among Black women, there's that idea that they also take the idea of what Black man should be, right? So whoever the Black man is not that aggressive. He's not vocal, he's not, I didn't know. He doesn't have all the, uh, the muscular tendencies and all those things, then that's not a Black man who can handle the Black women. So even that, even they also take in those, those ideas as well.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)   So I mean the idea of somebody saying, you know, I'm not, I've had people tell me like well you're not Black or you're not Black enough and things like that. It's like Black is not a monolith and my experience as a Black man is completely different from yours. So who are you to say I'm not Black, but on top of that it's like if you don't think that I'm enough for you that that's fine. You're missing out. You're missing out Sis, not I so you have to keep it pushing.

For one focus group participant who was once married to a White woman, his lived experience revealed that not having the physical attributes or characteristics of hypermasculinity was a factor that not only kept him from being with Black women but also resulted in him finding comfort in White women. While he found Black women to be attractive he also experienced a great amount trepidation that hindered him from approaching Black women given his lack of hypermasculinity, media depictions of Black women that characterize them as

intimidating and his own rejection from Black women. The following is an excerpt from the

focus group discussions that captures his experience as categorized under this theme:

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   I'm divorced but I was married to a white girl. She's my mom to
my children for 15 years. I had known her since I was like five years old.
We kind of grew up together in church basically. I didn't actually start, uh,
dating outside, you know, interracial dating. I didn't start until I was like,
basically, I think it was like eighth grade. What I've found, combativeness
yes. I didn't necessarily bother me per se, in that my mom is a very, very,
very, very strong Black woman. What I found was that there was, seemed
to me a perception about, uh, maybe things that weren't necessarily, I
would say they were somewhat. It was more about, you know, uh,
physical attributes, you know, like, Hey, you know, are you tall? I wasn't
tall as you can see I'm not tall. You know, or are you, you know, a good
athlete, are you a baller per se? And like, and it was kind of that, and then
it was also, back then it was, you know, are you, uh, how's your street
cred, you know, are usually, you know, tough in the streets? Do people
respect you and that kind of thing. At was difficult, you know, growing up
and then trying to basically form relationships, you know, as a teenager
with, African American girls and then I also always did well in school. So
that was another impediment as well. It was like, Oh, you know, it was
kinda like you were penalize as a young Black man if you got A's in
school. It was just difficult and it just seemed like, I wanted to date, you
know, the girls in my neighborhood, the girls in my race, I wanted to, I
just it was difficult and then, you know, I started going to school, being
around, you know, white people, people of other ethnicities, and then it
was just kinda like boom. It just kind of happened. It's like, you know,
Hey, you know, white girls are like, Oh, you're so nice and it was just kind
of those things character, it seemed to make a difference and then next
thing, you know, once I started dating, it just seemed like that was where it
kept going. It never went back. It just like, okay, I dated this white girl,
then I dated another one, then I ended up marrying a white girl.

Black Men are Trash, Toxic and Not Good Enough for Strong Black Women.

Another prevalent unexpected theme that emerged from the focus group discussions with Black

men was categorized as "Black Men are Trash, Toxic and Not Good Enough for Strong Black

Women". According to the focus group conversations, Black men interpret and internalize media

depictions of themselves as perpetuated by the media and as authored and/or performed by Black

women. Black men report that they perceive negative and emasculating media messages of

themselves that perpetuate the idea that Black men are "trash" and have an inability to be loyal

or faithful in long-term romantic relationships. This is not only problematic for Black men but results in the generalization and stereotyping of Black men in the media. An example of these types of media messages are found in the lyrical content of Grammy nominated and chart-topping female anthems like, "No Scrubs" by TLC, "Tyrone" by Erykah Badu, and "Irreplaceable" by Beyonce. For some Black men, the media narratives of Black men as failures are interpreted as "Black men can't be struggling to be with Black women" while further exacerbating the problematic trope of the strong Black woman. As a result, Black men experience the residual effects of the dominant narrative that Black men are trash and the internalization of these media messages by Black women. Black men report these perceptions of Black men as disposable also lead Black women to seek long-term romantic relationship with men outside of their race who are perceived as more successful and valuable. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant J:
(Providence, RI)   Another piece on the media sort of add to the conversation I think is look how many songs there are out there about, you know, not wanting scrubs, Black men and scrubs. You better call Tyrone girl. Uh there, there is this perception in the media and maybe it plays out in reality that you can't be a struggling Black man trying to get at a Black women.

Group:
(Providence, RI)   Yes, yes. Great point.

Participant B:
(Providence, RI)   You know, you can't be working on yourself. It can be the worst low. You hit the nail on the head. I remember sometimes I'd be thinking like, yo back good times. That's all I had. Great times. But when I'm not, it's like when you're a lower you're like, damn, I'm not trying to talk to no Black woman right now.

Participant H:
(Providence, RI)   They made movies about stuff like that. Right. They got songs about that stuff independent like you said, you gotta be, you gotta be perfect when you go. I mean obviously like you said you gotta, you gotta bring your best self and you're hopeful that they will bring their best self. But the overwhelming can't say overwhelming because now I'm

generalizing but all of our experiences dictated just by our response that if just stuff ain't together, don't come to me until your stuff is right. There's a couple of pastors at our church, single, you know, relatively attractive. But yeah, they talk and they walk and everything is like this. Right. And then talk about why you don't, why can't I find a good man?

Participant C:
(Providence, RI)   It's like I've been trying to come at you since middle school. You still told me I ain't shit now you got four kids. I ain't got none of you and I still ain't shit?

Participant B:
(Providence, RI)   One thing I would also, you know, share with Black women in general is there's no monolithic Black man. Like you had a bad experience with one Black man. And on top of that, relationships are just hard. You know, the divorce rate, Black people are 12% of the population, we don't make up that 50% divorce rate. Relationships are hard. So you're going to date a lot of people that things don't work out with. It doesn't mean that Black men don't love Black women. Like at the end of the day, relationships are just hard. The media exacerbates that for sure. There are a lot of things that some of us as Black men need to, you know, unlearn for sure. But at the end of the day, I don't think you can put that on Black men to say that the reason that there aren't more, strong Black relationships cause Black men don't love Black women.

Participant I:
(Columbia, MO)   The way social media is right now, like some, some Black women is just like, you know, EFF Black men right now. You know what I'm saying? Because they ain't nothing but dogs, every time you look up, like, you know, you got the basketball wives club, that's up there Love and Hip Hop, Black Ink Crew Chicago, you know what I'm saying? That's, they give us a bad light. Social media has been like a negative impact to where sometimes when I'm dealing with certain students. They're like, you know, I would rather be with somebody that's not looking like me because of social media.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   It pushes those same negative stereotype and narratives against us as well too. And especially social media. I mean, one Black dude mess up the whole fucking, all of us done fucked. Why can't it just be that one dude. Niggas ain't shit, ain't never gone be shit. Daddy wasn't shit. So I think that gets put out there that get put out there quite a bit as way of, you know what I'm saying? So you combating at the same time looking for some thing and you know what I mean?

Experiences of Rejection from Black Women with White Men. Conversations with

Black men also revealed that for some they are unexpectedly starting to see more and more

Black women involved in relationships with men outside of their race, and as a result they experience a similar feeling of rejection. Black men report that they often experience the same visceral and emotional reaction of disappointment when they observe a Black woman with a White man in the same way that a Black woman may experience rejection when the reverse occurs. For some Black men, colonialism, the history of chattel slavery, generations of Black men being lynched and the breakdown of the Black family all serve as sources of the "emotional reaction" and betrayal experienced by both Black men and women. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant C:
(Columbia, MO)   There's like a historical component to this too. When we think about, think about slavery, like Black families were torn apart. Literally torn apart and so what's been generationally transferred has been like this is this like broken Black home. And so there's, there's so much pride now with like Black families being intact because like historically speaking that has not been the case. And so not suggesting that like someone who has an interracial marriage or interracial relationship, is lesser than, but it's almost like Black love is like so much more important because we haven't been able to do that for a generation or several generations not even just a generation but several generations. So it's, it's critical for well it seems to be critical like culturally speaking for, for Black families to be intact.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   And I think culturally there's an emotional reaction to seeing someone with the oppressor, right? There's something that's an emotional reaction that we have as Black men to seeing a Black woman with a white man or vice versa, that Black women have with seeing us with a white woman. It's, it's not, it's not, it's bigger than just that simple relationship. Like how could you do that? They, they white women were the reason you Black men were castrated historically speaking.... Emmett till all that kind of stuff

As an example, conversations with Black men revealed the great disappointment they experienced as a result of tennis player Serena Williams choosing to be in relationship with a White man. In response to Serena Williams going on record saying that Black men didn't treat her well, resulting in her being in a relationship with a White man, Black men agreed that

Williams may have settled for a White man. For some, their reaction to Serena Williams was shock and described as "crazy". Even further, some Black men believe that it's also possible that for Serena's husband, she may also be a trophy in accordance to the White male gaze. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant K: *(Columbia, MO)*	When you see a Black woman, what a white man as a brother do you think we react the same way?
Group: *(Columbia, MO)*	Yeah, yeah.... Serena Williams. [In Agreement]
Participant M: *(Columbia, MO)*	I ain't gonna lie. I used to be like what the fuck?!
Group: *(Columbia, MO)*	Serena Williams.
Participant M: *(Columbia, MO)*	For real when like Serena Williams came out with her interview, I was legit mad that she was like Black dudes don't treat me. I was like what? I was upset because I'm like, I know plenty of brothers brothers, Serena you bring that ass here, they're going to do you right you know what I mean, Like our culture, Black culture is like the only culture that I've, I've, I've studied, looked at that we're all delegates or tasked with speaking for our whole culture in everything we do. You said it earlier, like you said, you're the trailblazer. Now you've got to set the trail for everybody. White people don't say that to each other. Them white people is like, it's about me and mine. But every time we do something, it's for the whole culture. So when I married a Black woman, I got so many hashtag "for the culture". But like when you, so when you do something against it, you have now disrespected the whole culture. Like you've done it right, it's canceled, it's over with it. You see what I'm saying? So I feel like that is another added layer to this whole thing.
Participant M: *(Columbia, MO)*	I think that that oftentimes gets ignored. And I think that's another added layer because it goes like, Oh, I married a white woman. See all Black men want white women. But it's not, taking to account that no that brother wants a white woman, you know what I mean.
Moderator:	She even went on a record in a magazine saying that she gets treated better by white men. And that's why she was a, she's happier with white men than Black men.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)   I don't know for sure. They, they probably do treat her as a trophy though, you know? I mean, it's probably the forbidden fruit right now, even though she is um. That's crazy. Cause Serena finer than a mother. She ain't hollered at me. I would've got on that. I would've treated her way better than white men.

Narratives of Black men also revealed that they observe the normalization of Black women involved in interracial relationships in the media and find this to be problematic. Black men recall media representations of Black women involved in romantic relationships with men outside of their race from the depictions of Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope as portrayed in *Scandal* and Viola Davis as Annalise Keating as depicted in *How to Get Away with Murder*. For some Black men they also make note of the fact that certain media messages perpetuate the idea that Black men and women are broken and as a result whether dead or alive, only those who are "unbroken" are suitable romantic partners for them. In other words, Black men and women are not suitable partners for each other. While Black men perceive the normalization of Black women in relationship with White men in the media, they are also quick to point out that this does not apply to all Black women but only to certain types of Black women - those who are assimilated and acceptable according to the White male gaze. The following is an excerpt from the focus group discussions that captures this theme:

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   There was a long time in the media where there was depictions on both sides of Black men and Black women as broken and you can't get nowhere with a broken individual. So I like, we weren't good together, but if I go and get a white person or get somebody of another ethnicity. They weren't broken. Right. You think of Olivia Pope in a sense, very successful, so unbroken, but you're messing around with this white guy or, uh, how to, how to get away with murder. Her husband was white and he dead, but he was white. Right? And she's a successful lawyer and like top of this and top of that.

For some Black men, their interpretation of Black women involved in relationship with White men is more of an "excuse" in response to the internalization of the idea that Black

women can't find a good Black man as a partner. As a result, some Black men believe that some

Black women are involved in relationship with White men for status purposes. Collectively,

Black men agree that in spite of media messages of Black women in relationship with men

outside of their race, they do not internalize interracial relationships as a form of rejection in the

same way that Black women do. The following is an excerpt from the focus group discussions

that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)   You from the pockets where that you don't see successful Black men and
women all the time. So in your mind its like, well I got to get what I can
get in with the social status. If I get with a white guy, I don't know how
people will look at me and if I have a kid by him, they have to accept me
because they accept the kid. But not knowing that it doesn't work like that
in my opinion, that they only look at you. You're only doing this just for
the status opposed to, you can't find you. You're making up excuses of
why you can't find a strong Black man

      To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to consider

the ways in which Black men make meaning of media depictions of physical attractiveness in

their consideration of Black women as long-term romantic partners. Taken together,

findings from conversations with Black men will be discussed to better understand how media

depictions of Black women as socially aggressive are received and interpreted by Black men as

guided by the next research question of the present study. The findings associated with the next

research question will be discussed further through the theme: Anger as a Human Emotion

Ascribed and Associated Only with Blackness.

**RQ4: How do Black men make sense of media depictions of Black women as socially
aggressive as characterized by the trope of the "angry Black woman"?**

      Anger as a Human Emotion Ascribed and Associated Only with Blackness. One of

the primary re-occurring themes that emerged from focus group conversations with Black men

was categorized as "Anger as a Human Emotion Ascribed and Associated Only with Blackness"

in response to the discussion of the angry Black woman. Collectively, Black men agree that the trope of the angry Black woman is a product of White supremacy, not only for the Black woman but for the Black man as well. These interpretations of media messages by Black men are representative of the discursive mode of audience reception whereby Black men read media messages of the angry Black woman as the dominant message and resist those messages while adopting an ideological position with an oppositional reading of them (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). Black men reported that, according to media messages, anger as a human emotion is wrongly ascribed and associated with Black women in comparison to other women of other races who exhibit the same emotion and as a result, Black women are often condemned for their own humanness. Interpretations and readings of the angry Black woman by Black men is representative of the referential mode of audience reception whereby Black men read media messages of Black women and compare them to their own lived experiences for interpretation (Michelle, 2009). The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   Like my wife, my wife can't catch an attitude at work. She sucked her teeth one time and the girl just frightened after scared as hell like she finna blow this bitch up. You know what I mean? Like they were afraid to talk to her for a whole day because she went [sucks teeth] you know, and that's, and that's like, I can't even catch an attitude. I gotta be superhuman different. And you know what I'm saying? To be that way, you know? Because every person in the media that looks like her for the longest time has been angry. Black woman, angry Black woman. Waiting to Exhale. A Thin line between Love and Hate. That's what, that's what, that's what they see. So even when they do show normal human emotion. So sometimes these stereotypes are put on us, but for just basic human reaction, you know? And I think that the media kind of drives that continually in our head and our brains. Like you know, that's why these are, these extremes are more attractive. Whereas this right here in the middle, you don't want to mess with that honest and that's the majority of them.

Participant C:
(Columbia, MO)   The media play into these extremes though. The wildest most

negative stuff about us, whether it's a guy or a Black woman, you know, she's always burning cars, always breaking a window, rolling her neck, smacking her lips down. That ain't. Only on the extreme are you going to see that. My wife going to smack her lips at me too if I get out of line. It's not what she does every day. She definitely ain't burning up my car. So I think they take more negative aspects of our culture and highlight them for laughs where it's just more of the humorous aspects of other cultures that they highlight.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   For me, if I see a show and a sister jumping on somebody's car burning up they shit. I don't ever sit there and go, that's how every sister is though. But I'm around a lot of sisters. I got three sisters. Biological sisters. Uh you don't, I don't take that as an example of all Black women because I'm a Black man whose raised in Black culture. Somebody who ain't got my experience looks at that and go, damn, that's how they really act? Hell no. That ain't how they act but that's the only thing you see.

According to conversations with Black men, due to White privilege, White women are able to

position themselves in such a way that their anger is profitable in the media while the anger of

the Black woman is condemned. Black men also recognize that as a result of White privilege,

White women are protected from the stigma of being angry. The following are excerpts from the

focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this

theme:

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I feel like media that plays on aggression of Black women is pulling on different statements and stereotypes that are pervaded throughout time. But I think they, people pay more attention to it and ascribe negativity to it because when you look at other reality shows, like little women, LA or some of the White Housewives and they're doing the same shit, but the Black woman when she does it is like, look at this angry crazy. Wild bitch versus this white woman where it's like, "Oh that girl, they shouldn't have did that". And so for me, I think it's, I think it's sad because a lot of people began to believe that these Black women are overly aggressive and overly angry and wild. White women who kill, kill men in movies but we don't run around saying, oh, these white women will chop your ass up and put you in the fridge. But a Black woman, you know, can cuss a dude out and throw his shit on the street. And we think that every Black woman will do that. I personally don't hold those beliefs. Right. I know better. My *mom,* my mom did conduct herself in that way at birth. Does she get angry? Yeah. But who doesn't you know what I'm saying? Did she get frustrated. Yeah. Who doesn't? Did she whoop my ass. Yeah. She's a good mom. I

think it's all about the media that you choose to consume because I think there's a lot of Black women out here who are producing media or media outlets that are, that are pumping out the adverse. Yeah. Right. The opposite to that negative stereotype and that stigma. even when white girls act angry and wild, loud and talking shit, it's not only acceptable and they get paid off of it, but they say, why is she trying to act Black? And that shit pisses me off cause she's not acting Black. She's acting angry. You see what I'm saying? But we ascribe anger. Like I think about like these little, Instagram, YouTube sensation, girls and shit, catch me outside girls. Catch me outside. How about that? Bitch, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah it's this little white girl and she gets paid so much money and people always comment, Oh, why are you trying to act Black? Why are you trying to act? That's not acting Black? That's an angry white girl. Right? But because we ascribe them to a higher level, they don't get that stigma attached. It's like they got that status shield. They're protected.

As an example, one focus group participant describes the difference between the acceptance of anger as expressed by Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, in comparison to the acceptability of anger expressed by former First Lady Michelle Obama.

Participant F:
(Columbia, MO)   I, 100% feel like the media, like portrays them in this negative, aggressive light even till today. And I just think that, but I also feel like it gets ignored when you don't see that. Like you never seen Michelle Obama wild out and she was highlighted the media for eight years, but we don't really talk about that. You know what I mean? Um, now if Michelle Obama would've did the same thing that Nancy Pelosi did to Donald Trump's, uh, uh, presidential address, they would have been like look at that ghetto upset, mad dah, dah, dah, she would've had all of these things thrown at her. So I think there's a certain amount of pressure that Black women have to adhere to.

Based on their lived experiences with Black women, for some Black men they recognize and describe media depictions and characterizations of Black women as " loud or angry" as problematic. Black men argue that they inherently know that Black women speak and articulate themselves "passionately" which is often misconstrued as anger, being loud and ignorant. Conversations with Black men also revealed their need for others to actively "listen" to what a Black woman is saying out of passion as opposed to assuming that it is from a place of anger and rage given that Black women speak from a place of passion. The following are excerpts from the

focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this

theme:

Participant N:
(Columbia, MO)   I think it's an unfortunate myth for Black women because of the passion
when they talk and everybody perceived them as being really just loud.
And then if you, if they're passionate and if they, I think if anybody took
time, and I have to, cause I'm married to a Black woman and I got four
daughters and you have to really treat them like your coach. Like you
really have to listen to what they saying, not how they saying it. Cause the
reason why they are so passionate about it cause they think you don't
understand them right now. And so and so once you repeat back to them
or really have a conversation, not cause if you match that, if you match
that, that um, now they think you mad cause they don't, they, you know
what I'm saying? It's not computing what you know, how passionate they
could be, they're like actually caring. Like I'm actually caring about your
dumb ass. That's why I'm actually saying it like this. And then if you, if
you take it in as such, I think they're the most passionate people and caring
people about their family, their friends, that that's how that comes out.
And it's been misconstrued tremendously.

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   I agree. Oh, they always mad, they always mad, they always mad, they
always mad - that's the portrayal and it's like no, it's not anger. It's like you
said, it's passion.

To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to consider

the ways in which Black men make meaning of media messages that characterize Black women

as angry. In the same manner, findings from conversations with Black men will be discussed to

better understand how media depictions of Black women as socially aggressive may complicate

their suitability for romantic partnership as received and interpreted by Black men. The findings

associated with the next research question will be discussed further through the themes:

Normalization, Internalization and Re-enactment of Socially Aggressive Behavior; and

Hypersexualization and Twerking Culture.

**RQ5: How does socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media complicate social
desirability for long-term romantic relationships among Black men?**

Normalization, Internalization and Re-enactment of Socially Aggressive Behavior.

One of the primary re-occurring themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus group conversations with Black men was categorized as "Normalization, Internalization and Re-enactment of Socially Aggressive Behavior" in response to the discussion of socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media. While Black men observe that anger as a human emotion is often wrongly associated and ascribed to Black women through media messaging, conversations with Black men reveal that media depictions of Black women exhibiting or acting out anger through socially aggressive behavior is a false and problematic narrative that is propagated by the media. Black men report that socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media, especially as portrayed in reality television programming, is grossly problematic and concerning. Black men also agree that socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media further perpetuate and exacerbate the trope of the angry Black woman which is not a reflection of their lived experiences with Black women in their lives. Conversations with Black men also reveal that due to the normalization and propagation of socially aggressive behavior in the media, they observe how some Black women consume socially aggressive media portrayals and enact the behavior which results in a lack of social desirability for long-term romantic relationship from Black men. Collectively Black men agree that the media perpetuates socially aggressive media depictions of "regular" or "average" Black women as "crazy as hell" and as a result some Black women replicate or emulate that behavior as what you're supposed to be and how you're supposed to act. Black men also acknowledge that as a result of media messages, it is often expected for Black women to behave irrationally and aggressively as Black women are often condemned for the expression of anger as a regular human emotion. According to Black men, no one wants to deal with socially aggressive behavior regardless of race and for some Black men, they internalize and perceive media depictions of socially aggressive Black women

as the type of women they want to stay away and guard themselves from. Black men also

acknowledge that there are conversations that take place among Black men who bash Black

women for socially aggressive behavior. The following are excerpts from the focus group

discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant M:
(Providence, RI)   Honestly, I feel like the media's portrayal of relationships right now is very poor. Actually like if my woman acts like any woman that I see on TV, I would definitely leave her. I feel like, like I feel like reality TV has definitely influenced our women a whole lot. Like the way they think and they way they move and act is definitely from that magic box. Right there. And as a cultured person who grew up in a, my parents are from the Islands, so they're old school and I don't see any women like fulfilling that those or filling those shoes are being in that type of environment nowadays. I feel like they are just out there right now according to media. I feel like exactly why I feel women are more influenced by media than men. Exactly. We're more physical we're more out there, more sports and things of that nature that we pick up. We do and we leave there. And once we leave that, all right, we're onto the next thing. But women carry these traits, these states of minds, they way they ask of us the way they speak, the way they move, how they want to dress, their makeup. Everything comes from like reality TV nowadays and it's a large percentage

Participant B:
(Columbia, MO)   And I also look at media, not necessarily as far as what I want to emulate, but what I want to stay away from. Sometimes the portrayals of Black women, which leads you to believe that that's all you're going to be get. Like if you, if you say you normalize the idea that Black women are coming out your neck all the time and yapping at you and you're like, I don't want that. That could influence, not not for me, but that could influence your decisions around who you date, you know.

Moderator:
(Providence, RI)   Does socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media make you feel that Black women are less desirable or less suitable for longterm relationships?

Group:
(Providence, RI)   Yes! Absolutely. Absolutely

Participant F:
(Providence, RI)   But I'm telling you, once you go through certain things, you, you get a little bit of a radar and you be like, yo, come on. We gotta be like this. This is what it's gotta be like? We got to break things. You gotta throw remotes at the TV?

Participant C:	
(Providence, RI)	You can't talk to me and have a civil conversation
Participant P:	
(Providence, RI)	I asked a girl one time when we were dating, you know, they switch up on you. They turn into a beast after a while with the honeymoon period was over when she started yelling at me in the car. So I pulled over on the highway in the breakdown lane and I says, when did I give you the authority to disrespect me like that? Get out. And I left her there and I drove off. I said, either you get out, I'm going to get you out my car because I don't get down like that. And I asked her, who broke your heart to make you think that I'm the one that did that? Like you should've known who did that to you? Yell at him like that. Not as me cause I'm new. You gotta you gotta put your foot down. I don't care if you're light skin, dark skin, Latino, Asian, you're not talking to me like that cause I will never talk to you like I got a respect for myself. I respect you. The minute you start talking to me, I told my wife I 23 years, I'm telling you, I said, when you ready to get down like that, my bags, I got up, I got a, what do you call it? Bug out bag and it's in my trunk cause I'm out. Because what you've, what you've done is you've taken that broken mentality and brought it into our relationship.
Participant B:	
(Providence, RI)	It's not as simple as, you know, Black men looking at the media and saying that's how Black women act. I think there's also a, another aspect to it where Black women look at the media and it normalizes that type of behavior.
Participant M:	
(Providence, RI)	Normalizing the behavior. So it's normal. So, so that's, that's the whole model that we've been talking about right here is that they see that as normal. So now it gives them license to act that way and now everybody didn't watch the TV associates, every Black woman in America or anywhere else for that matter is going to act like that. So who wants that?
Participant M:	
(Columbia, MO)	When you look at it in general, when you do see the regular Black woman, she acting crazy as hell. You know what I mean. She's the one like wildin out, busting your window, fucking your car up. You know what I mean? Like, like that's the only time you see a, a regular one and then she's not presented in a favorable light. So when, you're not being presented in a favorable light, you know, these other two, the, the exotic, these extremes or whatever, you know, they're in these roles or in these pictures to where you're looking at like, "Ooh wow" versus like, "Oh damn look at this crazy shit". Cause we do see a lot of Black women in media, but most of the time when we see just a regular Black woman, she's doing some crazy.

Participant N:
(Columbia, MO)   Some type of women, they inherit, like they see that like on TV and they inherit that like kind of lifestyle and whatnot. And then they see that and be like, Oh is that how it's supposed to be or you know.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I do think there are some Black women who consume these messages and then act like that and give you, and give you what you want. They act, they wild out. They cuss you out and stuff. And I don't think no one wants to deal with that not because they're Black, because none of them I want deal with that shit.

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   Yeah. It's true. Just don't want to do it

Participant R:
(Columbia, MO)   I don't like the Housewives of Atlanta. My wife knows I don't like it. I don't like it because of the constant fight and arguing that it presents. Like ya'll are not learning anything from this. You are, you are keeping feeding yourself with that anger, these women portray all the time. We love controversies as human beings. And so when we see controversy being portrayed on TV, we get excited. We want to see the next reaction, but at the same time, it's feeding into the ideology of angry Black woman and I don't like it. They are very beautiful woman. I don't like that show because of the anger they constantly portray. My wife is not angry. She's not an angry Black woman, so don't do it. My colleagues here at the university are not angry Black wome*n*.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)   It's not that that's not the norm. It's propagating a false narrative. It gives this false narrative like how they hypersexualize Black men, like somebody who's aggressive and dangerous and stuff or the Jezebel, the Black woman who's like, you know, hypersexual stuff or promiscuous and things like that. They hypersexualize her. The mammy the Black woman was is at home, the caretaker and stuff and subservient. Like all these ideas are just archetypes that stemmed from slavery and things along those lines. Especially if you're an American. So the idea there is all that stuff. First of all, it's antiquated and not loaded and it shouldn't be attended to, but it's a false narrative because that's not how we are. Like that's not all. It's not what we are.

Black men also speculate that for those Black men who exclusively date outside of their race, they may perceive other women are "less combative and more submissive" in comparison to Black women who are perceived as combative and less amicable. Black men agreed that socially aggressive media depictions of Black women may further exacerbate the resistance that

some Black men have towards being in long-term romantic relationship with Black women.

Some Black men argue that certain Black men will shy away from socially aggressive Black

women in order to avoid confrontation as a result of media depictions of Black women. As a

result, some Black men believe that men do not want to deal with confrontation and perceive

Black women as confrontational when in fact they know that Black women are simply passionate

in what they have to say. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that

captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant C: *(Boston, MA)*	I mean, honestly, I personally don't know anyone that said this, but I've seen it on TV and it's usually Black men will say, Oh, I don't never have any problems with my white women.
Participant A: *(Boston, MA)*	It's just that reality shows will promote that craziness and that impression of Black women.
Participant B: *(Boston, MA)*	You have dudes, Black dudes, that just don't see Black women attractive. They see the blonde hair, blue eyes, you know, maybe media does have a, a part in it because they show they showed the Farrah Faucets and the Rachel Welch's and all those chicks and you know, it was like, wow, they look fine. They got long hair and we got these sisters with these nappy heads and this and that.
Participant C: *(Boston, MA)*	But they usually never portray white women as being argumentative even though they are.
Participant A: *(Boston, MA)*	They portray them part of this argument in a different way. Like they portray Black women as volatile and like argumentative out of nowhere. Whereas a white woman is like "if you get me to a certain point. I'll finally speak up on this thing". Like, whereas Black women well she just wildin out out of nowhere, like damn. Like they just portray women in general as unstable.
Participant A: *(Boston, MA)*	We see a Black woman and it's sad because they make, you know, they always show the big Black woman very hardcore. Yeah. "Come On, put and stop all that crying" even in Tom and Jerry.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)   From what I've understand and gather from, um, guys that I've had these conversations with is, um, I really feel like its those women outside of our race that are probably, um, less combative, um, a little bit more submissive. Um, is is the main, the main things that, and those are stereotypical, um, answers I think. But, um, I think that, uh, you know, mostly that's the answers I get. It's less combative and more submissive.

Black men also perceive racial differences between the media depictions of socially aggressive behavior among Black women in comparison to their White female counterparts who are perceived as "easy to control". As a result, according to Black men, the social aggression of White women is protected due to White privilege and White women are portrayed as socially aggressive in a very different way from Black women. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant J:
(Columbia, MO)   Especially with like music videos and stuff. You don't hardly ever see any like white girls up there shaking and shaking their stuff. It's mostly all Black woman in music videos and that just portrays its own picture of like all Black girls aren't all just ratchet and, but we know that's not true

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   When you look at the, um, the women, it's getting better because now you see your portrayals of, you know, African American women being, you know, strong being, you know, successful, uh, and educated and things like that. Um, but still, it's more of, I guess the portrayal is that there's this hard edge to the sisters that they don't portray in media on the screen with white women or Asian or I'd say that the kind of do the same thing with, uh, Latino women too.

Participant L:
(Columbia, MO)   I think it's worse than white girls.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   But I think that, I think that when we do think of, if we hear the word ghetto, we go Black, right? If we hear angry woman, we go Black woman, we go mad when we go Black women, even when we say strong women, we don't think white women. We think of Black women.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO   Maybe those resistant guys, maybe they go out and they, they'll see and watch love and hip hop. I know how Black women act and maybe that's why they

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   And they think that that is how Black women act.

Collectively, Black men agreed that socially aggressive media depictions of Black women in reality television is negative, toxic and problematic for long-term romantic partnership. Even further, Black men agreed that socially aggressive media depictions of Black women create false and inaccurate depictions of Black women that are marketable and profitable for media stakeholders.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)   I just think like with the show that the shows they put out in the media like love and hip. It's a toxic, toxic way of portraying Black women and Black men as a whole, especially Black women. But it gets to click bait. It's controversy and controversy sells and negativity sells. And I just think the way they market the Black women to be aggressive. And so I don't agree with it. I don't, I don't watch TV. This is a reason why I don't watch TV because of that. Cause I can stream on stuff that I want to watch. And I don't think that represents Black women as a total whole because it's no different from when you see a white person doing the same thing. But it's just not magnified because no personality, I think Black women had that possess the it factor, just like Black men have the it factor. And it's easy to market the negativity because it's the gossip. The gossip will sell.

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)   I think that reality television is one of the pariahs of our society, but I know that, like you said, they're very popular and you know, they get, you know, made a lot of probably, uh, you know, TV executives rich, you know, but especially when you're portraying, you know, Black people in that environment that's just toxic. It's very toxic. It's just like saying, Hey, you know what, you're just going to reinforce those stereotypes, like just and yeah. It's, it's bad.

Hypersexualization and Twerking Culture. Based on their lived experiences, some Black men shared that the hypersexualized, twerking culture which has become popularized in recent years is a form of cultural appropriation and commercialization of something that Black women have been doing for years. As an example, for Black men who have experienced the culture of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) and living in the south, the existing media depictions of Black women "twerking" has been a cultural norm based on the

performance of Black culture of in South and HBCU's. The following is an excerpt from the

focus group discussions that captures this perspective as categorized under this theme:

Participant N:
(Columbia, MO)   That's how it is. That's like chilling. That's how they dance in school, right? That's how the bands dance. They put the instruments down and they finna get it. So it wasn't, it wasn't a, it wasn't a ratchet thing to me, it was more so that's Florida A & M you know or that's Bethune. You know so that part, I think I was lucky in that instance because that didn't make me so judgmental about African American women.

However, for other Black men, the hypersexualization of Black women in the media is

problematic in spite of the cultural norms that may have inspired the current trends that they

observe as now being marketed and commercialized by media stake holders. The following are

excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as

categorized under this theme:

Participant J:
(Providence, RI)   I also think the oversexualization of Black women has gone way too over board. Like in terms of aggression, media aggression is way too much sexualization of Black women in terms of like its now even translated to, you know, basically prostitution its basically prostitution at this point, but the whole twerking culture, I'm like, so I'm so done. I'm like, I've seen enough twerking videos. I don't want to see any more twerking videos. I'm done. Like meg the stallion annoys me now. Like certain certain Black images of Black women just, I just think the oversexualization is getting carried away and I think that hurts. I think that hurts Black women. Like there was a woman who was, who put a condom on a gas pump and she was like sucking it. They're like sucking cucumbers in the club.

Participant C:
(Providence, RI)   It's like, that's not what I want to see every day. I don't care for seeing the girl. I want to see a girl with some type of class and self-respect for herself. So I want to see a girl who can have a conversation with me without gossiping about something that has no relevance to life. You know what I'm saying? That's most female nowadays.

Participant M:
(Providence RI)   They have ADHD.

Participant C:
(Providence, RI)   Or they don't know how to talk, whether it's the way they talk, like a man, Or they, (speaking in a deep voice) "What's up yo, yea my nigga. Yeah

you bitch. Uh" Nah, don't talk to me like that. You know what I'm saying?
You're not going to get me to respect you by talking to me like that.

Overall, Black men agreed that media depictions of Black women as hypersexual are
problematic false narratives that Black men know not to be true based on their lived experiences
with Black women. To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to
consider the ways in which Black men make meaning of media depictions of Black woman as
socially aggressive. In the same manner, findings from conversations with Black men will be
discussed to better understand how media depictions of Black women may influence Black men
to be in relationship with women outside of their race. The findings associated with the next
research question will be discussed further through the themes: Normalization and
Internalization of the Strong Black Woman; Interracial Dating: A Complicating Compromise for
Pleasure and Play with Forbidden Fruit; White Women are Not the Trophy but a Danger to Black
Men; Messages from Our Mothers; and The Traumas of Colorism.

**RQ6: Do Black men believe media portrayals of Black women are part of the reason why
Black men pursue long-term romantic relationships with women outside of their race?**

According to narratives of Black men, there are deeply contextual factors that may
contribute to the reasons why Black men are increasingly more involved in long-term romantic
relationships with women outside of their race. However, two dominant factors emerged from
the focus group conversations with Black men. The first factor is related to the problematic trope
of the strong Black woman while the other is related to situational, circumstantial and
complicating reasons for being in relationship with White women. Both factors are discussed in
this section in order to better understand the reasons why some Black men pursue long-term
romantic relationships with women outside of their race.

Normalization and Internalization of the Strong Black Woman. One of the primary
re-occurring themes that emerged from focus group conversations with Black men was

categorized as the "Normalization and Internalization of the Strong Black Woman". Collectively, Black men agreed that the trope of the strong Black woman stems from the institution of slavery that relied upon gender oppression and normalized Black female slaves enacting and performing the same hard manual labor as Black male slaves (Collins, 2004). As a result, the Black slave woman was annulled of her womanhood and forced into equality with the Black man (Davis, 1972). As the performance of hard manual labor enacted by Black female slaves became normalized through chattel slavery, a disconnect between the Black man and the Black woman emerged that subsequently created an imbalance of gender roles based on the enactment of "strength" adopted, perpetuated and enacted upon Black women. Even further, the Black slave woman assumed the role of a fighter in spite of her body being used for the sexual conquest of her oppressor (Davis, 1972). As a result, the Black slave woman experienced an "intricate and savage web of oppression intruded at every moment of the Black woman's life during slavery", which further established her inhumanity (Davis, 1972, p. 11).

Research also suggests that chattel slavery upheld the idea of "weak man, strong woman" which resulted in the "irreparable damage" to the Black family and the inability of the Black man to establish patriarchy within his own home and communities. (Collins, 2004). Consistent with the "irreparable damage" claim from slavery, Black men report that "strength" was not only expected of and enacted upon Black women by White slave masters during chattel slavery but also contributed to the breakdown of the Black family resulting in the emasculation of Black men. According to Collins, "Black men were placed in the position of being unable to protect the women they loved from sexual assault. Because they failed to "fight fire with fire" by violently resisting the rapists of their daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, such men relinquished claims to hegemonic White masculinity and were relegated to a subordinated Black masculinity" (2004 p.64). Conversations with Black men reveal that the emasculation of Black men has since

become normalized and perpetuated within media messages thereby creating an imbalance among Black men and women. The following is an excerpt from the focus group discussions that captures this perspective as categorized under this theme:

Participant C:
(Providence, RI)   When slaves were women they used to take the men, the strongest men of the family so they can show that the man's not strong enough. He's never going to be there. That's why certain women act the way they act right now. And I, that's what I think. A woman without men trying to be the strong one in the in the relationship and then not understanding that, alright, there is strong Black men and for you to let the Black man thrive, you have to learn how to not per say put your pride down, but work with them. You know what I'm saying? There's nothing, not enough females working with the Black man, right now.

For some Black men, media representations of the past were once "pro the Black family" whereas, contemporary media messages promote and celebrate the independence of Black women from Black men , which further emasculates Black men. The following is excerpt from the focus group discussions that captures this perspective as categorized under this theme:

Participant M:
(Providence, RI)   The women's empowerment movement was started off as an all original movement like that, but they use it to, okay, you women want to be empowered. Well, I mean, let's, let's use this to infiltrate the Black families. Now let's, let's give the woman, let's make the woman feel like, Hey, you're independent. You don't, you don't need a man. I give you a home. If we can get as much money as a man, like if a man doesn't do this or that, you know what? You don't have to put up with it. Even if you make the money, that's what the man has to listen to you. Now you're the boss and give them that state of mind, that independent woman, which is a great thing in a sense, but they've used it too. Mess up the hierarchy of the Black family, especially the Black men and diminish the role of the Black man.

Black men observe that the contemporary landscape of media messages promote and celebrate depictions of Black women that are "typically successful" and/or "independent Black women" that perpetuates the idea Black women "don't need a man". According to conversations with Black men, not only is the trope of the strong Black woman privileged in the media they also depict Black women with a "hard-edge" who do not need a man in comparison to their female

counterparts and as a result Black men are trash and disposable. An example of these types of media messages are found in the lyrical content of the Grammy nominated and chart-topping female anthem, "Independent Women" by Destiny's Child. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   What you do see is some of these shows like I wouldn't date some of these broads. I mean just crazy. I mean just, just stereotypical. Even the successful, so called successful women, they're typically successful. You know like they don't need a man. I mean, you ain't got to have a man don't get me wrong, but it's nice to have one when you can get one, you know what I mean. But that's not what we're seeing anymore.

Participant A:
(Columbia, MO)   Shows like Being Mary Jane's mainly what's best for her not what's best for everybody. And if it's not good for her as a Black woman and then it's wrong, which is really going against what, you know, we've seen the 90s.

As an example, some focus group participants share their own experience with Black women being offended from their gestures of kindness as a result of the internalization of the trope of the strong Black woman.

Participant D:
(Columbia, MO)   When I look at the media specifically as portrays white relationships, I see the men opening the doors, you know, for their women and them getting in the cars. And I remember coming into this relationship, me being what media defines us gentlemen, right? Like the perfect gentleman. And so I remember opening doors and like these little things that I would do and I didn't realize that like my efforts were frustrating my fiance, because she comes from a family where women are independent, women are strong. And for her it was like, I'm not a kid. I'm not like, I don't need you opening the door for me. I don't need you to do these things. Like I got it on my own. And so I was like, Oh, okay, well this is weird or all right, whatever. You know. And so for me, I have to be mindful of the things that I do that it does not communicate to her that she's weak as a woman because she wants to be portrayed as being strong. And so that is sort of like an un-learning process for me.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)   One of my line brothers has a sister and she brings all her girlfriends with her and stuff. Right. And so we're all hanging out and everybody says they want to go hang out at a club and stuff like that and then the next thing is

figuring out who's driving cause it's snowing and so this girl that I've been talking to the whole time, fine, fine sister. She's like, Hey I'll drive you and a couple of my line brothers, cause my line brothers were talking to some of her girlfriends so I'll drive ya'll. So I was like, okay so I go get in her truck, I'm sitting in front, we're talking and stuff, I'm macking or whatever, right? We get there and we park and we parking about a block away and in Chicago, you got to pay for parking everywhere. So we get out of the car. And she goes over to the pay and I walk up and in my mind I'm not thinking about, again, I'm thinking about this on two levels. I'm thinking about I'm going to offer to pay for you for two purposes. And one, because it's how I was raised. Right? But two, this is a menial expense. It's like $3 and 50 cents. But on top of that, you offered to drive us here. Like I drove downtown, my car is still parked at the last location. I could have driven myself, but instead you offered to drive and you drove All my friends, people you don't even know, so I'm offering to pay for you. Right? So I pull out my card to pay and she's like, what are you doing? I was like, I'm about to pay. She's like, no, you're not and she slaps my hand away and so, and she got mad, right? And I'm like, alright. So I put my card back in my wallet and I'm cool, but I'm thinking about it and I'm like why would she react that way? Why would she get so upset about it and stuff? And so she talks to her friend, I'm hearing her talking to her friend about it? She's like, who does he think he is trying to pay for me? Blah, blah, blah. Like I just met him. I'm not His kid, blah blah, blah and I'm like, I was just trying to be nice.

Even further, Black men agreed that there are media depictions that cause some Black men to be intimidated by the perceived strength and success of the strong Black woman especially among those men who did not go to college despite the fact that they are characterized as "good, hard working, regular brothers". As a result, Black men argued that media depictions of the strong Black woman limit who some Black men believe they can pursue for long-term romantic relationship. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO) African American women, I think that's a bad rap, that they get in the media and that, you know, it's like, Hey, you know, they don't have nothing to do with just, you know, it's just a certain brother that's gotta, you know and that brother's got to be, you know, match me with the money he's gotta match me with, you know, the same, uh, aspirations drive and, you know, that kind of thing. And so I think that for like a lot of my friends and relatives that, you know, didn't go to college or basically just, you know, good, hardworking, regular brothers, you know, they just

	found that, I think that their pool was, you know, they couldn't really actually even get any looks from, you know, maybe the sisters at work.
Moderator: *(Columbia, MO)*	So they feel like media limited what they could do?
Participant T: *(Columbia, MO)*	Right. The media limited with what they could pursue.
Moderator: *(Columbia, MO)*	Because there's a strong, successful Black woman, I can't
Participant T: (Columbia, MO)	I can't compete with that. I can't compete with a brother who's wow, look at that, you know, whatever he's driving and he's riding, you know, that kind of thing. And it's, um, yeah, it's uh, and I just think that so both ends, I think the media portrayal I think does that on both ends on as well as on, you know, the sisters as well as the brothers. I think it kinda does that stereotyping.

Some Black men report that not only is the trope of the strong Black woman problematic, but the idea of Black women "doing it all" independent of a man at a practical level is also "unsustainable" and makes for a challenging and troublesome long-term romantic relationship. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that further elaborate on this idea as categorized under this theme:

Participant E: (Columbia, MO)	Like today at least I see like a Black woman is she's always supposed to be very strong. Right. And then she has it all together at work. She still, she still has the matriarchal roles in the house. She still does the cleaning and all of that. And then it also hypersexualized the Black woman, she's someone who is very sexually active throughout, right. The things that I see that the media portrays as somebody who the Black woman who like if a man or a Black man is looking for, that's the kind of woman he should look for. The woman who knows how to take care of everything in the home. She's still very like she's, she's a, she's also a mother, a very caring mother figure. And then she is a professional, yeah like a professional like all of these things together, which I think is very difficult for a long-term relationship because then I don't think the Black woman or women in general could even do it by themselves. Like it's very difficult for, for a Black woman to have that success all through. She's the one having it all together, but then that's, that's my view. Like that's what the media portrays.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO) The concept of a strong Black woman in and of itself is um, I think an unrealistic and very regressive way of framing women because like the expectations that like women be strong, shoot, we not strong half the time, you know, we have moments of like weakness and things where we're exhausted, tired. But women nowadays have to deal with Black Girl Magic but what if she doesn't feel like being magical? What if she just feels like being normal. She just wants to be herself today, you know, being chill. Um, and so like I guess we've come to a point in time where these like ideas and frames because you're not always aligned with what reality is or reality should be. And so we push this narrative of the strong Black woman, right? That's like that narrative is creating a false expectation. It's creating a false reality which then creates false expectations. And then you have young men going into relationships looking for women who are strong all the time but it's like, yeah, what does strong really mean?

According to narratives of heterosexual Black men, another factor that may contribute to the reasons why Black men are increasingly more involved in long-term romantic relationships with women outside of their race is related to deeply contextual, situational and circumstantial reasons. Focus group conversations revealed that for Black men, environment, geography, relatability, familiarity, and lived experiences are salient factors in their selection process of long-term romantic relationship partners. Most Black men believe that for Black men who are resistant to being in long-term relationship with Black women, those beliefs may also be rooted in their individual upbringing and traumas. For Black men who have been involved in relationships with women outside of their race, their narratives reveal that being with a White woman has its complications and burdens that they would much rather not have. These are complications and challenges that outsiders may not comprehend or perceive that often results in vacillation and discomfort at times. Black men also speculate that for Black men who are resistant to romantic relationships with Black women perhaps the false narratives of socially aggressive behavior as perpetuated in reality television programming also reinforce the idea that Black women are combative and this is how Black women act. Taken together, Black men speculate that factors related to the environment, lived experiences, accessibility and trauma may

all contribute to why certain Black men prefer to be in long-term romantic relationship with women outside of their race. While other factors emerged from conversations with Black men that illustrate the salience of lived experiences in their selection process and consideration of women for long-term romantic relationships, these factors were not explored more formally in the present study. However, the following themes provide a better understanding of the positionality of Black men in consideration of the reasons why some Black men may seek to be in relationship with women outside of their race as guided by the research questions for the present study.

Interracial Dating: A Complicating Compromise for Pleasure and Play with Forbidden Fruit. While conversations with Black men reveal that there are numerous situational, contextual and circumstantial reasons for Black men are exclusively involved in relationships with women outside of their race, narratives of Black men also reveal that being involved with White woman is also a complicating compromise for pleasure and play. Black men identify White women as the ones they can "play the field" with until they are ready to settle down and have something serious preferably with Black women. For some Black men, they are aware of the stereotype of White women as submissive and sexually free with a willingness to be dominated. For some Black men who have dated White women, those experiences were only for a time and not permanent because they knew that they would not bring a White woman home. For some Black men even though they may have dated a White woman, their ideal was always to marry a Black woman, have kids and live happily ever after. For some Black men, dating White women is just for fun because "it's easy", "doesn't require much work" on their part and it often fulfills a "fantasy" or "imagination". Conversations with Black men also reveal that some often experience being a fetish for White women who desire to "sample" what it is like to be with a Black man as a form of forbidden fruit. Black men also report having

an awareness of being fetishized by White women as well. Collectively, Black men agree that

dating White women is often "just to have fun". The following are excerpts from the focus group

discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant L:
(Columbia, MO)   I'm not dating a white girl, but I've heard like they like you got yes, men
and you got yes women. I heard they'll just do whatever you want them to
do and you not going to get a lot of opinion out of them. I think most
Black women are very opinionated. If you got a white girl, she's gonna do
whatever, say whatever, go with whatever.

Participant D:
(Columbia, MO)   You don't want no talk back.

Participant N:
(Columbia, MO)   I don't want no Backtalk you know what I'm saying? That's what I've
heard from teammates, friends I've had that dated white women. Oh yeah
she'll do whatever she don't got no problem. Whatever, you know, let them
cheat and all that. And I'm like wow, ain't nothing like that going down
with a Black girl.

Participant D:
(Columbia, MO)   I definitely heard that too.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   Yeah. I feel like I've heard that a thousand times. White women
they're gonna do whatever. I've been in arguments with Black women and
they're like, you think I'm some white girl? [Laughs] and I'm like where
did that come from

Participant B:
(Columbia, MO)   I think for most of the (white) girls that tried to get with me, it's the
experience of having a Black, a Black man, even though they know that
that's forbidden within their family or stuff like that. They just want a
sample or something.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   Sometimes we're the prize, it's like there's this like voyeurism
around it where it's, it's like it is the experience, but then it's also like we're
something that they want to not show off but try on when my class came
in, we had a large number of Black men coming in. So there, I mean just
across the board, it wasn't even just a white women, it was like all upper
class women and everything and they were like, Oh man, it's like these
Black men coming to this school. So there was a lot of interest. But I think
when it came to like interracial dating, there was something about like us
being some sort of prize and it wasn't, mt wasn't spoken. It was kind of

like this unspoken spoken narrative of like, Hmm, what is it like to be with a Black guy?

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)

A lot of my best friends when I was growing up, I'm starting to talk so much, but a lot of my best friends when I was growing up, they were dating exclusively white women. Right. And they were fetishized, you know, the idea of dating a white woman and stuff. Like uh no, I like Black girls are too Ghetto or Black girls aren't attractive and I'm like, what? You know, like how does that even make any sense? But I mean, again, it was just the difference in how we were raised and lived experiences.

Participant R:
(Columbia, MO)

As an international Black man, my perspective growing up we also have the idea and defined beauty based on the color of the skin. And so we see Black and white women or she's beautiful. We were raised with that colonial mentality that white is better than Black. Right? And so when we get the opportunity to come to the U S or go to Europe, um, mostly, um, the uneducated or not so much educated are attracted to white? Because, Oh no, she's beautiful. Even the baby dolls that we have back in our home countries were, you know, white skin. Right. And so we tend to, like you said, fetischize, whatever that word is, the white, the white skin. Right. And then the idea of when I have a child with a white woman, my children are gonna look more beautiful because of their mixed race. And so all of these, um, factors also play to why Black men would tend to date white women.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)

I think there's a lot of it. And for me as an athlete, dating a white girl before and having fun, I'd look at it. It was like more of an imagination. It was like fantasy almost like it's easy. I didn't really have to work hard. I was athletic and they was more surprised about my appearance and what I could do. My attributes.

Participant E:
(Providence, RI)

As far as like, you know, if you're dating, the sister it's going to be serious or, or she at least wants it to be serious. Whereas, I would say media and in general, just from experience, you're like, if I'm just playing the field, I'm gonna explore everything and maybe I'm like, all right, at the end of the day I'll settle down with the sister, you know? But if I, if it's just like, Hey, it's just hooking up, let's be 100 I'm just trying to see what I, as much as I could smash out there, you know, I'm not necessarily going to limit my options to, you know a sister. So I'm like, like you said, swiping on everything, you know, and you know and Black women might be like, well, you know, I'm not trying to be that, you know and I, and I definitely think media portrays white women in particular as being, you know, freer sexually.

White Women are Not the Trophy but a Danger to Black Men. When asked whether

or not being with a White woman is a trophy for Black men, conversations with Black men

revealed that White women are not a trophy for Black men. For some Black men involved in

interracial relationships, they do not perceive their partner as a prize as a result of race given the

burdens and stigmas associated with being in an interracial relationship. Even further, those

involved in interracial relationships also share that there are challenges that may come along with

being in an interracial relationship including but not limited to the bigotry and criticism of others.

Conversations also revealed that in consideration of Black men who choose to be with White

women exclusively, it is plausible that the White woman is a trophy and a manifestation or form

of self-hate. However, Black men agreed that White women are not the trophy or ideal for long-

term romantic relationship for Black men due to the incessant burden of race. The following are

excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as

categorized under this theme:

Participant V:
(Columbia, MO)   I'm engaged now and my fiancé is actually white and I never look at her
based on her race as a prize. You know, it's, it's to me it's further from a
prize to be in an interracial relationship. You know, because of all the stuff
that actually comes with it. To me, I've never looked at it like " If I can
just give me somebody you know"

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I never saw that as a prize. I actually saw it as more of a burden like my
brother, my older, but my oldest brother, he always dates outside of our
race and I see how he gets looks and people treat him and all that stuff. I
got a couple of cousins that are like white passing so they like look
straight white. And so when I'm with them people will look at us. I'm like
this my cousin like relax. But like even the way that some people engage
with us or like I walk past the mall and I heard [Black] people sucking
their teeth, you know what I mean? And I'm just like, I couldn't go through
that stuff everyday.

Participant B:
(Boston, MA)   Back then? Yeah. You know, back then if you are successful, the OJ
Simpson, in the past, yeah. They were Black dudes that got successful and
they feel that they made trophy. It was, you know, the man goal is to get a

white girl or, well, sometimes in the sense of vengeance, that's one, that's one factor because white men held back the Black man for so long, here's my chance to get the white woman. That's one factor. The other factor is just appearance. Like you say exotic. "I Got the white woman" and they just disregard the Black. And that's just a case of self-hatred, you know.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO) Like if you have somebody who is resistance in their dealing with Black women. I think a lot of that goes into lived experiences, internalized trauma, self-hate or things along those lines. I mean, and that's just like, it was a very small category or, or explanation for why they may be resistant to that Black woman, but I couldn't relate.

Conversations with Black men reveal that for some there is a level a fear associated with dating White women and being sent to jail based on either direct or indirect experiences with White women. According to Black men this messaging is not only received "everywhere" but is also reinforced by media messages from prominent Black male figures being incarcerated and the history of Black men being lynched as a result of White women. This messaging also begins at an early age as a warning and, as a result, Black men are mindful of their interactions with White women so as to not get "caught up". Even further, for some Black men who have been involved with White women, they are aware and have experienced that once you "cross the line of being with White women", there's no turning back or "undoing" of it. As one participant states, "once you go white, you try to talk to sisters and it's not right". Collectively, for some Black men, being with a White woman is more burdensome as a result of race, unfamiliarity, cultural differences and not speaking the same language. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures the idea that for some Black men there are dangers associated with being in relationship with White women:

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO) Especially with athletics, it was like white women will get you caught up quick. So I ain't gone lie. I was scared as shit. That was my main driver. Like I'm not going, no, no, no, no. You ain't locking me up [Laughs] I was, I was genuinely scared. So like, and then, and then there was a certain level of like not only was I scared, it's like, I don't know if I speak your language. Like you ask me, I'm bill Bellamy how to be a player,

100000%, got all the game, put me in front of a white girl. I'm like, "Hey there." [Laughs]

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)

It's just weird. Like there's been times in my professional life, most of my colleagues of course are white. So if I'm out at and about a conference or something like that and I'm out with one of my female colleagues and we'll go to dinner and everything. It's weird. I start looking around. If I see sisters, they gonna think I'm that I'm out here with her [laughs] And you know and you see the looks as soon as you walk in and sit down and it's like this is my colleague. And I'm like, what the fuck, I shouldn't even feel like this. [Laughs] I'm my own man, I should be able to do whatever I want to. It's weird because you start automatically going on the offensive and I don't know if it's, cause you don't want other sisters to, to think that's just another brother who won't date us. You know That's not even the case. It's like date, whoever you want. But I'm just out with her right now and I ain't even out with her romantically.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)

Like my experience was different thinking about coming here around rich white people. I had never been around rich white people before. So, the only thing I knew about white women was that they will send your ass to jail. Like that's the only thing that I know on TV, media. Even when Kobe [Bryant] white girl trying to send him to jail, a rapper, white woman about to send them to jail, this disrespected white woman, you're screwed.

Participant J:
(Columbia, MO

That's the one thing that when I came here, because I know it's like predominantly white. That's why I told myself, I was like I can't mess with no white girl. Cause that's an easy charge and, and it's well known that, and even, even some of some of the students that I work with, I'm like be careful out here.

Moderator:

And where do you feel like you got those messages from?

Group:
(Columbia, MO)

Everywhere.

Participant T:
(Columbia, MO)

I got that message when I was basically the first girl that I dated in uh, junior high, which was eighth grade was a white girl. It was like five of my friends, basketball on the team. We all had white girlfriends. And I remember a teacher sitting down, sitting us down after school and just talking to us and he was on the level. He said, Hey you guys, I'm going to tell you, be very, very careful. He says, I see all of y'all with the white girls. He said, be very careful. Getting that message from him when I was

like, you know, 14, 13,14 years old, you know, be careful. Never said that about, you know, be with, you know, sisters.

Messages from Our Mothers. Another secondary theme that revealed itself from focus group conversations with Black men was categorized as "Messages from Our Mothers" which reflects the significance of messaging that Black men receive growing up as sons of Black women. Research related to the Black mother's influence on their sons' marital relationships suggests that Black mothers play a significant role in the development of manhood and masculinity of Black boys while consciously and subconsciously influencing mate selection more than their fathers (Lawson, 2004; Law, 2010). According to scholar Sharelle Law, the influence of Black mothers on their sons "have a great influence in the development of their sons growth into a man, this could directly affect the relationships he will have with other people, especially his future wife" (2010, p. 130). Consistent with this research, narratives of some Black men reveal that they were raised by Black mothers that were explicit in telling them not to bring anything but a Black woman home. Some participants fondly remember being told the popular phrase by their mothers, "if she can't use your comb, don't bring her home". As a result, for some Black men, "it was always understood" that they would not bring any other color to their home when dating anyone outside of their race. The way in which Black men interpret messages from their mothers also illustrates the referential mode of reception although not a form of media, Black men describe consciously referring to information received from their mothers in their selection of a long-term romantic relationship partner as suggested by prior research (Michelle, 2009). While, some Black men share that they had lived experiences with family members who were the products of interracial couplings resulting in less pressure to only bring a Black woman home, collectively Black men agree that the explicit messages from their mothers were clear and understood. As a result, for those Black men any relationship with a White

woman was temporal and not permanent. The following are excerpts from the focus group

discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant L:
(Columbia, MO)   The pressure comes from like my family too like cause I couldn't like I
                          ain't gonna lie. Like now still to this day I can't bring home like a white
                          woman.

Group:
(Columbia, MO)   She can't use the comb, don't being her home [Laughs]

Participant L:
(Columbia, MO)   That's it exactly because I couldn't just bring home like a different, like a
                          Hispanic woman. I couldn't do that. Like when I went off to college, I
                          went to my first school SIU, my mom had told me, boy, don't bring no
                          white women home. She ain't coming to my house. Like, like real deal,
                          like my uncle, I think he a little racist and stuff like that. But like I'm
                          scared to even bring like a, a white woman home like and they're like
                          scaring me still to this day. That's why like shit, if I get a white woman, I
                          just have sex with her. I just leave her alone.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   My mom is probably like the nicest person in the world if you meet her.
                          But she used to say all the time, don't you bring that in my house. And she
                          was serious about that and I know that resonated with me.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   We're, we're speaking of a dynamic of Black mothers you know
                          with their boys particularly. My mom sang same chord exactly when I left
                          to go away and go to school. Cause she knew me. I was cool, I was
                          popular. I was going to hang out with anybody. And she's like make sure
                          you they can use our comb. I get it, Mom. Same thing with my wife. I got
                          a 21-year old son. My wife's like, you know he can date whoever he wants
                          but man I really prefer that he date a Black woman just because of all the
                          other stuff that goes along with it. I think when for a lot of Black mothers,
                          for their son to date a white woman, they see it more of a repudiation of
                          them. I don't think any boy thinks that way. Come on, honestly. Mom, she
                          was just giving me sum. That's what it boiled down to sometimes. You
                          know and otherwise yeah, she was just cool. I wasn't judging her through
                          you at all. Never even making that connection, you know. But I think for
                          her as a mother who's raised this boy her entire life, man, he doesn't date a
                          Black woman. She's going, man - is it me? I don't think, I don't know that
                          I've ever met any dude who has ever thought, yeah ma, you messed up.

Participant N:
(Columbia, MO)   It was already understood that I wasn't gonna bring no other color in the
                          house. And though I, I dated, um, one other white woman. It was, I knew
                          that wasn't what I was going to marry and that was unfortunate for her

because she was like, she was thinking, Hey, we finna get, Hey this the one and I'm thinking, Hey this for a time cause you ain't finna come to crib at all. So, so that was, um, you know, it was to marry a Black woman, have a family and then ya'll how to live happily ever after with kids. Your mom probably don't live with you things of that nature.

The Traumas of Colorism. Another secondary theme that emerged from the focus group conversations with Black men was categorized as "Traumas of Colorism" which reflects that unless Black men have experienced trauma related to colorism, the selection of a long-term romantic partner based on skin tone is only in an effort to prevent their own children from having the same experience. Narratives of Black men revealed that Black men often envision their partner as it relates to their children if they have lived experiences of trauma due to colorism. For some Black men, in addition to the incessant systematic racism and oppression they face daily, there are some who experienced bullying in their childhood due to their skin tone and do not want the same experiences for their children. As form of protection for their unborn children, some Black men envision long-term romantic partnership with a partner of a lighter skin complexion. However, this consideration as part of their long-term romantic partnership selection process is often fleeting as those participants in this study ended up in long-term relationships with Black women regardless of skin tone or complexion. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant P:
(Boston, MA)   The media can do whatever it wants to do. It's the individual. It has to be able to soak that up and take it as positive or negative. So yeah, the media does influence everything you're talking about. So I'm calling my mom and said, mom, could you believe I'm here in this school, all these white folks. And everybody showed me love. I went over to Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan to hang out with some of the guys that says, let's go and hang out. And everybody, people complaining about my complexion, my accent is a problem for them. And I'm like, you gotta be kidding me. And then it's the same. It was the same issue with the girls. The Italian girls was showing me mad love. Oh believe me there was a lot of love going on. Then I get over here and the sisters, I was too dark. So if I'm to

internalize that, again, it goes back to see you gotta know yourself. If I'm to internalize that. I remember it. I came from a Black nation, Black governor, Black senators, Black, everything. So I knew my Blackness. So I didn't let that bother me. But I also didn't want to hear it when I was walking down the street with this Italian girl. Because when you, when I was trying to get play from y'all, you didn't give me no play. So you need to leave me alone when I'm downtown Boston with my Italian chic.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)

Like I'm dark-skinned. I have a [wife], she ain't light but she like middle brown, you know, and I've gotten shit for that. Like why, why didn't you marry nobody dark skin and I'm like damn I mean I just think it's, it's just complex in general, right? Cause even when we think back to those old relationships nineties movies and stuff we seen, it was either a dark dude and a light lady or a dark lady with a light dude, you know so colorism ran deep. You know what I mean? And that, I mean, I don't know about ya'll, but growing up be it back when Blackity Black jokes was the funniest thing when you got on the bus. Like you Black, as hell like, growing up through that mentality, like it almost trains you to be like, man, I don't want my, I want my kids to be Black but not as dark as me. You know what I mean? Like that, that was a real mentality I had at a young age that I had a kid. You know? I was like I love dark women, you know? But even going up to talk to a dark, dark woman who had like been socialized in the same way, but how you just too dark to me though.

Participant N:
(Columbia, MO)

I have a close friend, he said, I don't want Black kids. And I'm like, what? You know, I don't want Black kids. I said, why? Because they're killing them. I don't want to have a kid. And they die because they're Black. And although it's not a movie, you know what I mean? I mean like Fruitville station, it's not a movie. He's consuming this media every day saying, you know, Black kid killed by police or Black kid gets disrespected by a teacher. Right. Or a Black kid can't graduate because he has, he has locks. I remember me even growing up being dark skin in a time where light skin was everything, right? Light skin was everything very your skin, the better. Like the lighter you are the righter you are right. And I was like, man, I don't want dark skinned kids. I remember telling my mom mad like I love chocolate women, but I was like, I don't want dark skin kids. And my mom is dark skinned and she's looking at me like that hurt and she was like, why? I was like, I don't want them to have to go through what I'm going through. I don't want you to go through the ridicule and all the dark skin jokes and the Black jokes and, and you know, I used to try to be funny off the strength of either I'm going to be funny or I'm going to fight cause I'm done with y'all talking about me like this. Right. And then media wise, it was like, man, the dark dude on TV was always ignorant. He was the janitor, he was the goofy guy. He was, he was this, he was that. Right? And so I think about some resistance being, uh, a coping technique. Like I'll get with someone white so my kids fair are better than me.

Participant M: (Columbia, MO)	I've got a friend and he's like I am Black and I don't want anybody Blacker than me and what I've been through as a Black man. I do not want my kids to go through. And yeah cause his mom, she's pissed like what the hell happened?
Participant O: (Columbia, MO)	But see he got something going on up there, his own traumas.
Participant D: (Columbia, MO)	It's deeply contextual. I remember growing up as a kid and going to school, my dad is like super Black. He looks purple, right? And my mom is super light and then, but me and my three brothers, we took over my dad's complexion and I remember us going to school and like me specifically being bullied because I was so dark. Like, Oh, like you're Black and you tar baby and like all this stuff. Right? And so I remember growing up and I was like, ah, when I have kids, I don't want my kids to be dark, you know, I don't want them to be Black. And so I had a fetish, like I just loved light women. Like, I love white women mixed with the brazilian women, whatever it was. I said I want to be with like a light skinned person that we can have that mixed babies. My kids don't have to go through like what I experienced type of thing. I also remember growing up and being like always super quiet and soft spoken and proper. And I felt that the Black women that I would have talked to like, cause you know, you, you build relationships with people like friendships and then you're like, Oh, I can see myself talking to this person, but I never felt like I was hard enough or a hood enough or whatever. And so my mom and other family members were like oh he's going to end up with a white girl, like he's going to be with somebody who's white. And I believed that for such a long time. Cause I was like, well, obviously I'm not, the Black girl's type.

To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to consider the ways in which media depictions of Black women may influence Black men to be in relationship with women outside of their race. Taken together, findings from conversations with Black men will be discussed to better understand how Black men make sense of media depictions of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black women. The findings associated with the next research question will be discussed further through the theme: Black Men are Not a Monolith.

RQ7: How do Black men make sense of prominent Black men in relationships with non-Black women in making their own decisions to be in long-term romantic relationships?

Based on the data analysis of focus group conversations, narratives of heterosexual Black men reveal that they do not believe they are influenced or informed by media depictions or portrayals of romantic partnership in the same way as women. As a result, when asked their thoughts or opinions about prominent Black men involved in relationships with non-Black women, collectively Black men agreed that Black men are not a monolith and there is an over-representation of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black women in the media that inaccurately creates false assumptions of Black men.

Black Men are Not a Monolith. According to conversations with Black men, there is a misconception that Black men have lighter skinned preferences based on the over-representation of such in the media. While the majority of Black men applaud and salute prominent Black male figures based on their success and accomplishments, they do not internalize their mate selection for long-term romantic relationship. Collectively, Black men agree that Black men are raised very differently and as a result have different experiences that are not represented in the larger discourses related to Black men. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant G:
(Providence, RI)   I'm minding my business trying to get, you know what I mean? Live my life, whatever my situation is. It is, you know, I'm trying my best. That's it.

Participant J:
(Providence, RI)   A woman will look at Jay Z and Beyonce and they look at that as one. I want a Jay Z Beyonce relationship. A man will look at that and be like, yo, I want Jay Z money. And whoever's by my side, whoever I could get by my side could be by my side. I don't look at it like I want to be Jay Z and Beyonce chicks look at it like I want to be Beyonce. I don't really look at it media to like really, again, like as a measuring stick in terms of who I like or who I use as a partner.

Participant B:
(Boston, MA)   You know, media only can show you the fantasy of ....when you watch television oh I want to be like the Obamas. I don't want to be like the Obamas. I want to be like Bey and Jay. I don't want to be like, you know,

bill Cosby and Camille, you know, I wanna I want something not even like Denzel. And that was a good brother and his wife is a wonderful woman. I want go further than that. I want to be better than that. I want to build something more cultural than that. These are just Hollywood. You know what I'm saying? This is just, just politicians with the Obamas. I wanna I to expand that to a better cultural relationship where we have love for our people. I love my Black women and there's nothing you can do about it. You know? Of course we're going to have our ups and downs. Of course we have a little bit of differences here and there, but that's any relationship, you know. But I love my Black women. Plain and simple.

Participant K:
(Columbia, MO)   How do I react to when I see a Black woman with a white man, honestly, because if we're honest, it's probably easier for a Black man to get with a white woman than it is the other way. A white man, getting with a Black woman. So if I see a white man and Black woman, I'm like [claps] I know when he act, I know he had to pull some hard game to get with that sister and that sister must've really liked him, you know what I'm saying? To get with him because it just is, it's a totally different dynamic for a white man, a Black female, you know. So to him I'm like [clap]s whatever you had to do bro, you know, congratulations. We don't take it to heart like the women do like we don't feel less of a man.

Participant B:
(Providence, RI)   One thing I would also, you know, share with Black women in general is there's no monolithic Black man. Like you had a bad experience with one Black man. And on top of that, relationships are just hard. You know, the divorce rate, Black people are 12% of the population, we don't make up that 50% divorce rate. Relationships are hard. So you're going to date a lot of people that things don't work out with. It doesn't mean that Black men don't love Black women. Like at the end of the day, relationships are just hard. The media exacerbates that for sure. There are a lot of things that some of us as Black men need to, you know, unlearn for sure. But at the end of the day, I don't think you can put that on Black men to say that the reason that there aren't more strong Black relationships 'cause Black men don't love Black women.

Conversations with Black men also reveal that there are false assumptions and misconceptions that Black men have lighter skinned preferences based on the over-representation of prominent Black men in the media with White or racially ambiguous women. Black men refute these misconceptions and argue that media portrayals of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black or racially ambiguous women are not internalized or influence their mate selection process. Collectively Black men share in the feelings that they do not

internalize interracial relationships or media depictions of Black men with non-Black women in the same way that some Black women do. While some Black men applaud and salute prominent Black males figures who choose to be in relationship with White or racially ambiguous women they do not internalize their mate selection. When asked why they believe that some Black men are resistant to being in relationship with Black women in comparison to non-Black women, study participants argue that those Black men in particular are foregoing the opportunity to be with Black women as the most suitable for Black men and as, one participant describes those Black men are simply, "missing out". The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that capture their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant K:
(Columbia, MO)   If you think about it like this, think about like Michael Jordan when we were growing up we were like, I want to be like Mike. Mike's first wife was Latina, his wife now is white ain't a bunch of dudes walking around in J's you know and dating a whole bunch of white women.

Group:
(Columbia, MO)   [Laughs]

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   I get the question because you do see a lot of successful or popular Black men, who don't have Black spouses partners, but that ain't never been something that I've internalize or I know anybody who internalize that like that's what I need to do. It's like that's what that dude is vibing on, let him do him.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   I've never met anybody that's like, yo, my idol married a white girl. So that's what I'm about to do too.

Participant B:
(Columbia, MO)   In regards to that I think maybe like one in every 10 Black men, may date somebody white, but then we blew up to say that all the Black professional or successful Black men pick somebody white.

Participant W:
(Columbia, MO)   Nah. I'd be like, bro, you're missing out dog. I see that and I'm like, there are just too many fish in the sea to starve and there are so many sisters in this sea. It's just like to me personally, I'm like, that don't make no sense. You know, like you have all this money and power and access. It's like

you could be sharing now for so many Black people. And its just like, to me personally, I'm like that sometimes it doesn't register, but at the same time it's like, I mean shoot you're happy do you're thang brother. But it couldn't be me.

To investigate the research question as mentioned above, it was important to consider how Black men make sense of media depictions of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black women. Taken together with the findings from the primary, secondary and unexpected themes that emerged from conversations with Black men, the next section will discuss the overarching research question of the present study in order to better understand how media portrayals of Black women are received, interpreted and inform their suitability as long-term romantic relationship partners with Black men.

DO BLACK MEN REALLY LOVE BLACK WOMEN?

Based on the narratives of heterosexual Black men, it is now of importance to consider the overall implications of their readings of media messages as it pertains to their consideration of Black women for long-term romantic partnership. Conversations with Black men reveal not only how they receive and interpret media messages of Black women but also how they interpret and read media messages of themselves as suitable long-term partners. As a result, it is now of importance to consider the implications of their interpretations on long term romantic relationships outcomes with Black women as guided by the overarching research question, do Black men really love Black women?

Black Women Most Ideal Long-term Romantic Partners for Black Men.
Conversations with Black men reveal that Black men love and advocate for long-term romantic relationship with Black women who they collectively agree are the ideal romantic partner for Black men. Black men report that Black women are the ideal long-term relationship partners as a result of the incessant and persistent systematic racism and oppression they face on a daily basis

and the cultural relatability and familiarity that Black men and women share. Conversations with

Black men reveal a desire to be with Black women who understand their experiences from a

place of race. Black men report that the grossly overwhelming pressures of being a Black man in

the world necessitates being with a Black woman in order to survive and get through life itself.

Black men agree that with a Black woman by their side, they also experience being challenged

from a place of love and passion from a Black woman who often provides them with a "wake-up

call" given the oppression and systematic racism faced by Black men on a regular basis. Even for

Black men, who self-identify as biracial and have experienced failed marriages with someone

outside of their race, they too also recognize a need to be in long-term romantic relationship with

Black women as someone who can understand and fit into the Black culture. For long-term

romantic partnership, Black women are at the top of the list for Black men. Black men report that

having to explain and articulate their lived experiences of incessant oppression and systematic

racism to a partner outside of their race is often burdensome. The following are excerpts from the

focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this

theme:

Participant B:	
(Boston, MA)	I want that woman that understands that we're in the situation that we as Black people need to build and just keep going and then leave a legacy for our children.
Participant A:	
(Boston, MA)	Culture plays a big part, but that's like the baseline like Black woman check. Like a woman who has like done the work to figure out what womanhood means for her because I've interacted with a lot of women on a romantic level who still define their womanhood based on what society tells them. And so because of that they tried to find my manhood based on what society tells me when I'm more so looking for a woman who like knows what it means to be a woman for herself and allows me to be a man in my own way.
Participant S:	
(Columbia, MO)	I think deep down, you're better off staying with a Black woman for as a Black man just for mental purposes. Just in this world especially, I mean, not just today, just even from what our father and grandfather and his great grandfathers all went through. And not just on a racist level, just on every

day I gotta get up and go get it and bring something back home or that she's going out to go get it. And she coming along with it like, just to have that you know, that kind of similarity of just, I know what your family going through during this time and I can understand that

Participant L:
(Columbia, MO)

You don't have to explain your experience at all.

Participant G:
(Columbia,MO)

They don't understand the experience as opposed to trying to get somebody to feel some type of way. They just might not and you can't force them to feel it or understand it. You can try to explain it and articulate it in the best way possible. Just like we can't understand a lot of other people's situations. It's just, you know, there's that barrier that's going to always be there. So I feel like if you have that out of your life, I mean I feel like that's already just like another 200 pounds off your neck.

Participant C:
(Columbia, MO)

I think that with also the culture shift of women being like at the forefront and I think Black women are really like somewhere right now in terms of being go get as being independent. I think that for me that makes Black women very attractive as a longterm partners. One because like as a Black man you, you got to take on a lot on a day to day basis. And if you got someone who is also also going to put in the same amount of work and is going to bring the same effort or same energy and like y'all can build something great like, I mean, to me that shit's attractive. Like, you know, realize that I don't have to just shoulder this by myself I think like the, the images that we see may not necessarily speak to that, but like this, there's this new culture shift where, you know, women are really like doing the damn thing and like, I want to be a part of that. And I think like that's just the, that's just the image that I want to be able to pass down to my kids and pass down the next generation is to like, like, yo, you can, you can do your thing. Your wife can do her thing too. And like, y'all can do something great together, you know, build something that's going on that's going to last. I think there's this new shifts of light, generational wealth that I feel like we're all buying into. And having a Black man, a Black woman, being able to carry that forward is, is like critical.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)

The pressure of being "on" all the damn time. Once you get in the door, leave your house is real. Once you in, you're into your career. When people are watching every step, you take every move you make, every word you say and it can impact your career prospects. So you've got to portray a certain thing. Every time you walk in the door, every time you're in a meeting with somebody and somebody say some foul shit, to you and you can't blow up because you don't want to be angry Black man. So to be able to come home and have that spouse there where you ain't gotta explain that shit too. She gets it, as soon as you walk in the door and she can look at my face, like you want? Yup it's just one of them days One

day, I ain't got to explain it. So yeah, you do, you want the prospects of having a longterm relationship with a Black woman. Yeah, cause she, she knows that pressure. She, even if she ain't going through it herself, she knows that when you walked out the house, you got to put on your world suit. And then when you came home you took that shit back off and you could be you. I'm never me when I walk out the house cause you can't be but in front of my wife. She sees me a whole different way. However, she will never know what it's like to have the pressures of being a Black man and understanding that you can't explain it to her, you know? And to some extent you can't even explain all of it to a Black woman. But she gets it. She like, you ain't really got to explain it all to me babe, I get it. You know, so that's a certain something nice to have.

Participant P:
(Columbia, MO)

My thing was always to have a Black woman in my household. Even with the media portrayals just because my mother's Black, my grandmother is Black. So that's all I seen and I would like to have conversations with my partner about things that's going on, like say we are oppressed and those situations, like Black women was the least favorite person on this earth at one point. So for me to date outside was more of a thing of just, Oh okay let me just try and see what it look like. Have fun. And if it don't work it ain't work. Just like what he said, I couldn't bring a white woman home to my house cause the conversation you would have to deal with my mother of what she would say to you. And then if you felt uncomfortable you would check me about the situation. And I'm like, well this is how we talk. This is how we.... I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but this is the norm and if you can't take this from her, then you ain't going to make it. It's no way we going...It's going to work. We can make babies but it ain't gonna work cause the baby's going to classified as Black period. So for me, when I look in the media, I always wanted to, I always seem like the Cosby show mother-father Black mom, Black father. And I wanted that for myself because I seen how powerful that that was and that unite that community, that United togetherness. So for me it was always looking at positive Black shows.

Participant J:
(Columbia, MO)

I hardly ever brought any females to my mom's house. And so, but mama was white and, and so just to even consider bringing somebody like that was a big step. And even, cause my ex wife, she's Columbian from South America. And so I've known for awhile that that wasn't going to work. Cause like my mom and my brothers, whenever I told my brother that we were going to get married and he was like, I'll give it two years, two years came by and we ain't together no more, and so it was just like, maybe it's to the point, like I tell people all the time, it's like jokingly, like oh no I need to go back to my roots, but like I'm dead ass. It's like I like, I need to be with a, a person that's gonna fit in my culture and what I'm trying to accomplish as a minority, as a Black man because in the field that I'm

getting into higher ed, it's a rarity to have a Black man. So I need somebody that's actually going to be in my corner. Um, and, and just so I can go home and just decompress. Um, and because it is, we say racial battle fatigue, like that's a real thing. And to have a partner that's going to be there with you through all that.

Participant S:
(Columbia, MO)   Just to have that strong Black woman by your side and challenge you at every, every move that you make because we're, we're out here, system's against us, being oppressed you, you need somebody that gives you that wake up call. Like, Hey, get it together.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)   Because for me, I can never see myself being with someone that's not Black. Because of the things you go through because of a Black person, you know what I mean? Like as a Black man, we deal with like racism every day, every single day, some form of oppression every single day. Like micro-aggressions every single day and to have to have to make sense of that all the time. How could I do that with someone who doesn't understand like especially a white woman who doesn't know racism, like you don't know racism cause you're in the country where you win. You know what I mean? Even if you're losing, you win. And so for me, like the media never really swayed my thought of what that would look like. I think if anything, it kind of reinforced and maybe it's just because of a structures that I went through throughout time that changed, right? Like when I was in poverty, the what would be deemed as ratchet, the ride or die was what I needed because the ride or die was getting harassed by the police just like I was. And then, you know, as media has evolved, I've actually been fortunate enough to evolve and go to college and like do all these different things. And so then I see these strong Black woman and I'm like, yo, that's dope because I'm involved in it too. And so the media is representing that. So I guess now since we all believe like, okay, regardless of what the media has to say, we we, you know, we see Black women in this positive light. We can see them as super life partners.

Conversations with Black men also reveal that they often experience a shift in the dynamics of being with Black women when they leave their neighborhood and venture into White spaces such college and predominantly White institutions where Black women are under-represented. When placed in environments where there are only a small number of Black women such as predominantly White institutions, Black men often prefer to "protect Black women" as opposed to "playing the field" with them. As a result of the lack of representation of Black women at predominantly White institutions, Black men prefer "not to play around" with Black

women as a result of the respect and high regard in which they have for this group. Black men report not wanting to disrupt or disturb the harmony and group dynamic of Black women at PWI's as a result of not wanting to be generalized or labeled as being "that Black guy" among the smaller population or dating pool of Black women. Even further, Black men report that when some experience an upward shift or change in socio-economic status, the less likely Black men are exposed to Black women as they move up in class. For Black men who identify as professionals or athletes they report that Black women become more and more inaccessible for long-term romantic relationship although the ideal for romantic partnership. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant K:
(Columbia, MO)   Like literally they were like five Black females on campus, you know. And I was cool with and of course all the Black on the Blacks were friendly with each other. And so now you ain't trying to mess up that dynamic, you know what I mean? If you date one break up and then you know, the group splits and so basically it was just, you know the white women, like the white students, you know, left and I was on the track team too. And so, you know, all my track teammates, all the females on the track team were white.

Participant J:
(Columbia, MO)   I was super thankful that I was already in a longterm relationship cause it's coming into this space and seeing all the white women and all the, well the small number of Black women, I just imagined this being a tough place to be single as a Black man. If I'm looking to date Black women. Cause the first one that I date, fuck I done messed up the whole pot now. If I mess this up now I can't. They all know each other [Laughs] I think about the proximity being a piece. Like who you are and who you have access to in that space kind of plays a role in how you approach the dating pool.

Participant G:
(Columbia, MO)

    Coming back to grad school is when I started to see the significance of it and the importance of, you know, representation for women, Black women on these campuses because being here as a student athlete in my mind I'm getting ready to go to one of the bars and they letting us all in for free. Just having that pool of, you know, Black women being around to me there was, there was Mizzou and there was Black Mizzou, which was

- 127 -

cool, but when you got the Black Mizzou you can't mess up Black Mizzou. We already low in numbers and in my mind at that point I was just being being a dog. Doing what I was doing. [Laughs] But I never wanted to do that with Black women, like I never had, that never filled me in to do that Black women.

Moderator:
(Columbia, MO)   So you did that with other races?

Participant G:
(Columbia, MO)   Yeah, that was very, I don't know, that sounds weird, but it was like always like my thing. I was like, no, I can't do you like that?

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   Why not?

Participant G:
(Columbia, MO)   I don't know.

Participant O:
(Columbia, MO)   It seems like a level. Like you a respect level there.

Participant G:
(Columbia, MO)   It was. It's like there's only but so many. I can't just be a dog and dog ya.

Narratives of Black men also reveal that Black men hold a level of respect, high regard and value for Black women that is often considered when Black men find themselves in situations to "play the field". Black men believe that they have more options when it comes to just "playing the field" regardless of race and as a result until they are ready to settle down, Black men will play the field with all available options which typically includes White women. Black men report an awareness that Black women are less likely to subject themselves to promiscuous behavior in comparison to White women. As a result, Black men identify White women as the ones they can "play the field" with until they are ready to settle down and have something serious with Black women. In comparison to White women, Black men reveal that Black women are a source of stability especially when it is time to for them to consider settling down. Black men also report having a preference to be with a Black woman with a level of substance as part of their romantic relationship goals. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant S: *(Columbia, MO)*	Just to have that strong Black woman by your side and challenge you at every, every move that you make because we're, we're out here, system's against us, being oppressed you, you need somebody that gives you that wake up call. Like, Hey, get it together.
Moderator: *(Columbia, MO)*	When y'all think about y'all personal ideas, does the Black woman come to mind as a suitable life partner?
Group: *(Columbia, MO)*	Absolutely. Yeah.
Participant J: *(Columbia, MO)*	When it comes to longterm and a Black woman stability and in my own experiences and others around me and whatever the, the media portrays its like once you are ready to settle and stop living the fast life or whatever you want to call it, you've got to go home. And when it comes comes time to having a family, whatever, a Black woman sitting at home waiting for you. So just whenever you, that that time comes, like I said, for stability, that's you. You have to be in your roots.
Participant S: *(Columbia, MO)*	For long term I see Black women, cause if you look at slavery back in the day, Black women used to, you know, watch white kids breastfeed him, care for him. So I think it always starts, especially for me, Black women has always been the top of the list for me personally. And I mean as you can see Black women are to me in my opinion are the strongest human beings because they have went through so much and went through so much and I think they the only other for Black man in my opinion that's compatible for a Black man because they know the struggle. They go through a struggle every day.

As it pertains to how Black men make meaning and interpret media messages of Black women, some Black men recall media portrayals of couplings such as Martin and Gina *(Martin),* Dwayne and Whitley *(A Different World)*, and Uncle Phil and Aunt Viv *(Fresh Prince of Bel-Air)* as positive and important representations of Black love and being with someone relatable and familiar based on race. Black men report that media messages from popular television sitcoms of the 90's, made it clear to them that being with a Black woman was the only way. The only factor that caused a deviation from the ideal romantic partner as seen on *The Cosby Show* or *Fresh Prince of Bel-air* was whether or not Black men were being raised in a single parent

household. However, Black men agree that there is also an absence of positive representations of

Black love in contemporary media programming in comparison to media portrayals of the past.

Black men also share a desire to see counter-narratives that positively depict of Black love and

mature relationships. The following are excerpts from the focus group discussions that captures

their voices and perspectives as categorized under this theme:

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO) So like for me, for example, like I consume a lot of, I consume a lot of Black media, right? Man, all across the spectrum. And for me, that really influenced me to thinking that Black women were the only way, right. Whether it was like a hood movie, like a Menace to Society or something like that. Um, or like funny, like Friday, um, or you know, even the Cosby show, I know, you know, even The Cosby Show, I always saw like Black women or even like the original Fresh Prince of Bel-Air with Aunt Viv was dark skin. You know and like I always saw a Black woman, always on the side of a Black man, so for me...

Participant A:
(Boston, MO) The majority of the media that I've been consuming media, most recently is that bottom of media, the media that's coming from the voices that are like typically not listened to. So it's been a lot of like, yo, I came out of toxic relationships and from those toxic relationships I've learned this. It's been a lot of folks that have like come from toxicity and unlearn some shit and are now creating media, try and educate folks and like send that shit up to that middle was never going to reach the top cause they ain't trying to hear what we got to say.

Participant M:
(Columbia, MO)
I really know. But like I see things like the movie, like the photograph, one of the biggest praise from the Black community he got was this is the nontoxic relationship love story. We've been waiting to see, you know what I mean? And so I wonder like, okay, is the, is the narrative changing in that Black relationships aren't toxic or is it still gonna be that.

For Black men, regardless of media messages Black women are the most suitable life

partners based on race, culture, relatability, how they grew up and their lived experiences even

for those Black men who were once in relationship with women outside of their race. Even

further, in response to the the popular Kanye West lyric, "and when you get on, he'll leave yo' ass

for a white girl" from the song, "Gold Digger", Black men report that regardless of the success

they may attain similar to prominent athletes like to LeBron James and Shaquille O'Neal, they find it most important to be with someone who is familiar to them. A romantic partner who understands where they come from is "needed" and necessary. Conversations with Black men also reveal a level of admiration of Black women who are becoming more and more successful in various endeavors and a desire among Black men to actively participate alongside Black women to do so - *together*. Some Black men also report that they see the value in the advancement of the Black family and being with a Black woman as necessary in order to advance the Black race.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Do Black men really love Black women? In consideration of the overarching research question, how do Black men make meaning of and/or interpret media portrayals of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships? It was important to consider the overall implications of how Black men read, interpret and make meaning of media messages of Black women for long-term romantic relationship outcomes. To date, media research has neglected to situate the voices of Black men as a marginalized group and as a result, less is known about how Black men interpret media messages and how depictions of Black women inform their perceptions. Beyond research on misogyny, seldom are Black male voices used to discuss their interpretations of media messages of Black women with the outcomes of the long-term romantic relationships in mind.

As a result, it was the intention of the present study to seek a better understanding of how Black men receive, interpret and make meaning of media messages of Black women in their consideration of suitable partners for long-term romantic relationship through the theoretical framework of audience reception. It is through the multidimensional model of audience reception as posited by Carolyn Michelle and the resistant position as posited by Stuart Hall, this study sought to understand the positionality of Black men and how they interpret media messages of Whiteness as the ideal and stereotypes of Black women in the media in their consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationship (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017).

In this chapter, I will summarize the results of the present study and suggest theoretical, practical and methodological implications of the conversations with Black men as guided by the research questions in order to answer whether or not Black men really love Black women and how the media informs their selection of Black women for long-term romantic partnership. Next,

limitations and future directions will be discussed and finally, I will conclude with the overall significance of the present study.

Mediated and Transparent Modes of Interpretation

The present study draws upon the systematic framework of audience reception theory as posited by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as extended by media scholar Carolyn Michelle's multidimensional model of audience reception (Schroder, 2000; Granelli & Zenor 2016). The systematic framework categorizes the dominant modes of audience reception into four different modes of audience reception known as transparent, referential, mediated and discursive which form the composite multidimensional model of audience reception (2007).

According to Michelle (2009), the first mode of audience engagement is transparent where audiences read the "text as life" (p.141). The individual is transported in the text and may get "lost" in the fictional world of the text. As a result, the individual may experience a strong immersion into the text and feel strong emotion toward characters and themes. Based on the analysis of the dominant, secondary and unexpected themes of the present study, Black men read, internalize and refer to gender roles of Black women from the transparent mode in their consideration of long-term romantic relationship partners. In consideration of the research question, how do heterosexual Black men make meaning of or interpret media portrayals of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships? Black men often refer to gender roles as depicted in the popular television shows of the 90's such as *The Cosby Show, Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Martin*, and messages from films and popular music. Even further, the reading and interpretation of gender roles by Black men from the transparent mode of reception suggests that their internalization of such media messages may conflict with the internalization of the strong Black woman as re-enacted by Black women when in relationships with Black men.

Results of the present study suggests that the internalization of gender roles of Black women as portrayed in the media by Black men may also challenge the trope of the strong Black woman resulting in a lack of harmony between Black men and women as illustrated in the conceptual triad of media messages.

According to Michelle (2009), the third mode of audience engagement is described as mediated. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as a production" and interprets a text based upon its aesthetics and his or her capacity to understand the process of media production and media literacy by engaging the themes and messages of the text (p.141). Conversations with Black men reveal that to a significant degree they are able to distinguish and discern the constructed and fictional nature of media production which results in their ability to compartmentalize or adopt a mediated mode of reception in their interpretation of media messages. Based on dominant, secondary and unexpected themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, the majority of study participants interpret media messages from the mediated mode of reception where they are able to compartmentalize or distinguish between media messages as a form of constructed "show business" while opposing to the false narratives that are created for entertainment purposes (Michelle, 2009). Results of the present study illustrate that Black men read and interpret media messages altogether from the mediated mode of audience reception based on their demonstrated media literacy skills and their sophisticated level of critical thinking towards media messages. These readings also contrast from Black women whom they believe read or interpret media messages from the transparent mode of reception where media messages are interpreted and internalized as a mirror of reality (Michelle, 2009).

Referential Mode of Interpretation

According to Michelle (2009), the second mode of audience engagement is referential. In this mode, an individual reads the "text as like life" (p.141). In assessing the meaning of the text, the individual moves outside of the text itself and compares it to his or her own real life experiences for interpretation. Based on the dominant, secondary and unexpected themes that emerged from their narratives, Black men interpret and read media messages of Black women from the referential mode of audience reception as a result on their own lived experiences with Black women while other media messages are interpreted and read from the discursive mode of audience reception respectively (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). The referential mode of audience reception refers to a process by which the receiver of the text observes and reads the message in relation to their own knowledge, understanding and lived experiences from the real world. During this process, the audience makes comparisons based on their own knowledge and familiarity with the subject of the text in order to infer the appropriate meaning based on their own version of reality (Michelle et al., 2012). As it relates to Black men as audience members, the results of this study demonstrate that Black men often read and observe media messages of Black women based on their lived experiences with Black women. Given this reading of media messages, Black men demonstrate the ability to compartmentalize media messages which they interpret as "false narratives" based on their knowledge of Black women.

Of the media messages that are read and interpreted by Black men from a referential mode of audience reception are those that often perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black women such as the tropes of the angry Black woman, strong Black women, and media depictions of socially aggressive behavior. An example of this types of interpretation is found within the dominant theme of "Anger as a Human Emotion Ascribed and Associated Only with Blackness". In consideration of the research question, how do Black men make sense of media depictions of

Black women as socially aggressive as characterized by the trope of the "angry Black woman"? Collectively, Black men agree that Black women are condemned for exhibiting anger as a human emotion. Based on their lived experiences with Black women, Black men inherently know and recognize that Black women speak and articulate themselves from a place of passion and concern as opposed to the media messages that perpetuate Black women as full of rage. Even further, Black men recognize that while Black women are condemned and vilified in the media for exhibiting behavior that is deemed as angry, the anger of White women is privileged and profitable. Black men agree that due to White privilege, White women are able to position themselves in such a way that their anger is profitable in the media as depicted in reality television shows or Youtube while the anger of the Black woman is condemned. As an example, one participant gave an account of the rise and fame of Internet personality, Danielle Bregoli professionally known as "Bhad Bhabie" who made her first appearance on Dr. Phil as a troubled teenager by stating, "That's an angry White girl. Right? But because we ascribe them to a higher level, they don't get that stigma attached. It's like they got that status shield. They're protected" (Stubblebine, 2017).

Interpretations and readings of the angry Black woman, the strong Black woman and depictions of socially aggressive behavior by Black men is representative of the referential mode of audience reception whereby Black men read media messages of Black women and compare them to their own lived experiences for interpretation (Michelle, 2009). According to Michelle (2012), when an audience members reads a text or message from the referential mode, "viewers perceive the text as standing alongside the real world, and often make comparisons and analogies between that depicted reality and the world as they see it" (p.111). In consideration of the research question, how does socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media complicate social desirability for long-term romantic relationships among Black men? Results of

this study demonstrate that as part of their reading of media messages of Black women, Black

men exhibit the ability to compartmentalize media messages while assessing the accuracy of the

media depictions in comparison to what they know to be true of Black women.

Discursive Mode of Interpretation

According to Michelle (2009), the final mode of audience engagement is described as

discursive. In the discursive mode, an individual reads the "text as a message" and analyzes the

intended meaning of the text (p.141). As a result, the individual adopts an ideological position or

interpretation of the message, by making a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of it

(Michelle, 2007). In the process of decoding media messages this can also be described as a

resistant or oppositional readings as posited by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model in which

the "audience member decodes the message in the opposite way as was intended by the

producer" (Shaw, 2017 p. 593).

Although Black men interpret and observe negative stereotypical depictions of Black

women from the referential mode of audience reception as informed by their lived experiences,

results of this study also demonstrate that Black men read media messages that contain societal

ideologies and connotations through the discursive mode of audience reception (Hall, 1991;

Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). The discursive mode of audience reception as posited by Michelle,

refers to a process by which the receiver of the text reads the "text as a message" and analyzes

the underlying intent or meaning of the text based on the sender's "perceived attempt to

communicate a particular message about the wider social world" (Michelle et al., 2012, p.112).

As a result, the individual adopts an ideological position or interpretation of the message, by

making a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of it (Michelle, 2007). As it relates to

Black men, results of this study demonstrate that as they receive media messages they are also

actively engaged in the decoding process which can result in negotiated or resistant readings as theorized by scholar Stuart Hall (1991; Shaw, 2017).

As an example, results of the present study demonstrate that Black men often adopt a resistant and oppositional reading of media messages that perpetuate White male patriarchy, Whiteness as a form or extension of the White male gaze and the trope of the angry Black woman as an extension of White supremacy and colorism. These discursive and oppositional readings of media messages revealed themselves in response to research questions of the present study asking, in what ways might Black men perceive their physical attraction to Black women to be informed by media? And how do Black men make sense of media portrayals of Whiteness and attractiveness? Conversations with Black men suggests that they are cognizant and mindful of media messages that attempt to further what they describe as the agenda of White supremacy and the agenda setting of larger societal institutions through the use of media messages.

As another example, in consideration of the research question, how do Black men make sense of prominent Black men in relationships with non-Black women in making their own decisions to be in long-term romantic relationships? Results of the present study reveal that Black men read and interpret media depictions of Black men in relationship with non-Black women from the discursive mode of reception to the same effect. Black men report that they observe an overrepresentation of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black women in the media that inaccurately creates false assumptions of Black men. These findings further corroborate existing research that argues there is an overrepresentation of interracial relationships in the media, in comparison to intra-racial or same race relationships among Blacks (Onyejiaka, 2019; Allen 2016).
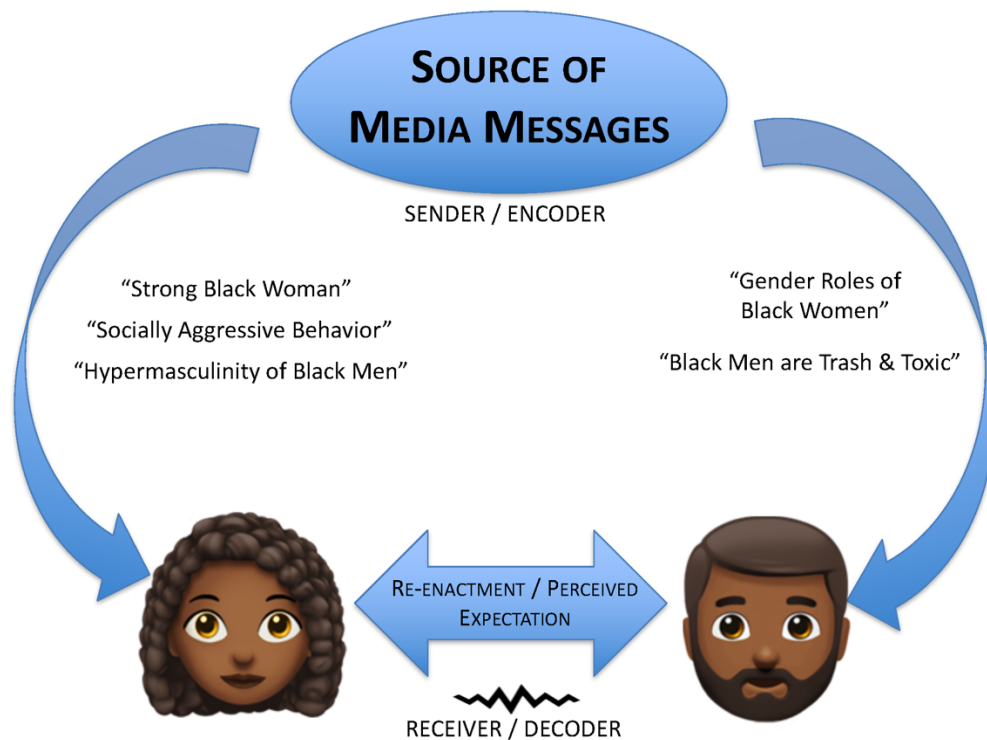
Collectively, Black men also agree that the trope of the angry Black woman is a byproduct of White supremacy not only for Black women but for Black men as well. As a result,

Black men read and interpret media depictions of prominent Black men in relationship with non-Black women, the trope of the angry Black woman and dominant media messages of Whiteness from a discursive position and subsequently resist those messages while applying an oppositional reading them (Hall, 1991; Michelle, 2009; Shaw, 2017). Conversations with Black men demonstrate that as part of their discursive reading of media messages of Black women, Black men exhibit the ability to adopt an oppositional reading of media messages while assessing the intention, underlying message and agenda of media institutions producing the overall media messages.

Triad of Media Messages

The conceptual triad of media messages as conceived for the purpose of interpreting the findings of the present study, allows for a better understanding of how media messages are both directly and indirectly received by Black men as well as how Black men believe media messages inform their own suitability as partners for long-term relationships with Black women. As illustrated in Figure 5, through the lens of the triad of media messages, results of the present study demonstrate that Black men indirectly experience Black women internalizing dominant media messages of the strong Black woman, socially aggressive behavior and hyper masculinity as they are re-enacted upon them. Results of the present study demonstrate, the re-enactment of the strong Black woman, socially aggressive behavior and the expectations of hyper-masculinity by Black women upon Black men are most problematic to long-term romantic relationship outcomes.

SOURCE OF MEDIA MESSAGES

SENDER / ENCODER

"Strong Black Woman"

"Socially Aggressive Behavior"

"Hypermasculinity of Black Men"

"Gender Roles of Black Women"

"Black Men are Trash & Toxic"

RE-ENACTMENT / PERCEIVED EXPECTATION

RECEIVER / DECODER

Figure 5. Triad of Media Messages as proposed by Valerius, D (2021).

Conversations with Black men reveal that the media messages that are most problematic in their consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationship are the those that perpetuate the normalization and re-enactment of the trope of the strong Black woman, socially aggressive behavior and the internalization of hyper masculinity. As Black men interpret and read media messages of Black women from a referential mode of audience reception, these readings also challenge what they know to be true of Black women based on their own lived experiences. Even further, the triad of media messages also illuminates the ways in which Black men read and interpret negative media messages of themselves and their perceived expectations of Black women, subsequently informing their understanding of their own suitability for long-term romantic relationship with Black women. However, according to conversations with Black men in spite of the normalization and re-enactment of the strong Black woman, socially aggressive behavior, the internalization of hyper masculinity as perpetuated by the media and perceived expectations of Black women, Black men agree that Black women are

most suitable and ideal for long-term romantic relationship as guided by the research questions of the present study.

Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study have several theoretical implications. First the conceptual triad of media messages as created and applied to the data analysis of focus group conversations with Black men provides an extension of traditional models of communication that can be applied to interpersonal romantic relationships. The conceptual triad of media messages as adapted from the transactional model of communication that demonstrates the ongoing, circular process of sending, receiving, encoding, decoding and interpreting information adds a relational component to the framework of audience reception theory and the understanding of how media messages are read, interpreted and received by audiences (Barnlund, 2008; Michelle, 2009). By applying the conceptual triad of media messages to audience reception theory, the model could add more depth into our understanding of romantic relationships and how they are informed and influenced by the reading and reception of media messages by audiences. Even furthermore, the conceptual triad of media messages can be applied by scholars in different contexts as the model is not limited or exclusive to Black men and women. Future studies can apply the triad of media messages to better understand the influence of media on the interpersonal romantic relationships of other marginalized groups of different racial, ethnic, cultural backgrounds and interracial relationships. Taken together with the framework of audience reception theory, the conceptual triad of media messages goes beyond merely our understanding of how media messages are interpreted and read but also broadens our understanding of how readings of media messages are internalized and re-enacted within the context of interpersonal romantic relationships.

Second, the results of the present study demonstrate that of the media messages that inform the suitability of Black women for long-term romantic relationship with Black men, the

trope of the strong Black woman as enacted upon and experienced by Black men may be a contributing factor to the chronic singleness that Black women experience within their lifetime in comparison to their other female counterparts. These findings also broaden our understanding of the negative outcomes of the normalization and re-enactment of the trope of the strong Black woman as perpetuated by media messages. Conversations with Black men further illuminate not only does the trope of the strong Black woman continue to produce negative effects on health and wellness outcomes as prior research suggests, but it also problematizes the fostering of long-term romantic relationship with Black men (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

Although Black feminist scholars continue to theorize the strong Black woman, research traces the earliest image of the strong Black woman to Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech where Black womanhood became associated with struggle and survival (Painter, 1996). According to some feminist scholars the strong Black woman "prioritizes others' needs over her own and remains emotionally resilient in the face of adversity, all while managing responsibilities from all of life's domains" (Jerald et al., 2017, p. 611). She is characterized as being smart, dependable, successful and resilient in the face of adversity while placing the needs of other before her own. Behind a façade of strength, she is perceived as one who has all her "ducks in a row" while experiencing difficulty with either admitting to difficulties and/or asking for more support (Hall & Witherspoon, 2015). She often experiences the fear of failure or confirming negative stereotypes of Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Researchers have also found that the façade of the strength often serves to mask underlying weaknesses and human emotions such as anger, fear, shame, pride and loneliness. The façade of strength also results in her inability to express vulnerability, emotional avoidance along with detrimental psychological and emotional outcomes (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008; Hall & Witherspoon, 2015).

While the stereotype of the strong Black woman encompasses an image of strength and resiliency that is perceived as a positive counter to the negative stereotypes of Black women, it is also reinforced and propagated in contemporary and popular media messages. However, findings of the present study reveal that the endorsement and normalization of the strong Black woman not only has detrimental consequences for Black women's health as found in prior research but also limits her ability to embrace the support and companionship of Black men. Conversations with Black men reveal that the enactment of the strong Black woman and the façade of strength adopted by Black women as perpetuated in the media also intimidates and pushes away Black men who are eager to be in relationship with Black women. Together, the findings of the present study provide strong evidence for the negative influence of the trope of the strong Black woman not only on her overall health and well-being but as it relates to long-term romantic relationships with Black men. Suffice it to say, the façade of strength is hurting Black women, not helping them.

Third, the results of the present study counters and challenges interracial relationship research that overwhelmingly privileges the voices of White women in relationship with Black men and perpetuates the idea that Black women are angry as a contributing factor. In response to the overrepresentation of White female voices in interracial relationship research, the narratives of Black men in the present study reveal that for Black men often their involvement in relationship with White women is far more complicating and compromised for the purpose of play and feeding into their temporal fantasies and imaginations of White women. Even further, results of the present study reveal that Black men and White women often fetishize one another, which challenges the narratives of interracial relationship research and counters the assumptions that Black women are angry as a contributing factor. The narratives of Black men also broaden our understanding of the situational and contextual factors that may lead Black men to be in

relationship with White woman that is often underrepresented in the data that reports that Black men are more involved in relationships with women outside of their race than any other racial group.

The present study also builds upon the research of scholar Emily Chito Childs (2005) conversations with Black women as a counter to the narratives of interracial relationship research by contributing the voices, perspectives and lived experiences of Black men that are seemingly left out of research concerning interracial couplings. Suffice it to say, there is an erasure and underrepresentation of the narratives and lived experiences of Black men as it relates to their relationships with White women. The present study offers a fuller picture and the situational context by which Black men find themselves in relationship with White women that is underrepresented in the scholarship of interracial relationships.

Methodological Implications

The results of this study also have methodological implications that demonstrate the need for qualitative research to be inclusive of marginalized voices. The present study concerned itself with coming to know the beliefs, attitudes, experiences, knowledge, opinions and viewpoints of Black men as told through their personal accounts and narratives (Wilkinson, 1998). As a result, participants of the focus group discussions overwhelmingly experienced valuable and meaningful conversations and the building of community with one another resulting in a desire to continue the dialogue. For example, one participant described his experience as one that was "cathartic" and allowed him to get a few things off his chest. Data analysis of the focus group conversations also revealed moments among the participants that were characterized as therapeutic. As a result, the present study demonstrates the necessity to unearth the lived experiences, beliefs and viewpoints of marginalized voices. The present study also demonstrates the importance of accounting for the voices of historically marginalized groups within academic

research beyond gathering numerical measurements, probability information and making quantitative speculations of marginalized groups, especially as it relates to media representations and depictions of themselves.

Even further, the design of the study was significant and reflects the importance of not disrupting the building of community that was fostered by the focus group conversations among Black men. Given that Black men in the real world tend to abide by the "guy code" and have conversations among themselves in "packs" or within private spaces away from women like the proverbial "man cave" conducting focus group discussions allowed for the present study to simulate natural and organic social behavior of Black men. As I identify as female, it was important that my presence was decentered in order to provide an atmosphere that would allow the focus group participants to recreate their lived experiences and allow for natural discussions to emerge in order to better understand the perspectives of Black men from the group dynamic. As a result, the focus group conversations as moderated by another Black male rather than myself produced a meaningful collection of rich data that could have been altered or less honest if the focus group conversations were not moderated by a Black male.

Future studies should allow Black women the opportunity to replicate the experience of listening to the narratives of Black men as part of the focus group conversations of the present study in order to ascertain their thoughts and reactions while further exploring the outcomes and unexpected themes that emerged. Future studies that apply focus groups as a methodology should also allow for the video recording of each session for the purpose of making it easier to identify each focus group participant during the transcription process and to allow for the reading and interpretation of participant body language.

Practical Implications

Necessary Unlearning of the Strong Black Woman. Black women are socialized to "appear strong, tough, resilient and self-sufficient" (Thomas, Hacker & Hoxha, 2011, p. 532). However, conversations with Black men as part of this study reveal that the facade of strength internalized by Black women as perpetuated in media messages and subsequently enacted upon Black men results in a lack of suitability for long-term romantic relationship. Examples of the narratives of "strength" and "independence" that are adopted by Black women are also found in popular music as authored and performed by Black women like, "No Scrubs" by TLC, "Tyrone" by Erykah Badu, "Irreplaceable" by Beyoncé and "Independent Women" by Destiny's Child – all of which are Grammy and chart topping female anthems.

Conversations with Black men reveal that the internalization of the rhetoric that Black men are trash and disposable as found in the lyrical content of these popular female anthems are problematic for the long-term relationship with Black women. Even further, for Black women who desire to be in long-term romantic relationship with Black men, it is necessary to abandon the messages of "strength" and "independence" as performed within these songs when in fact artists like Beyoncé and Kelly Rowland of Destiny's Child are happily married in real life, which contradicts the rhetoric of disposability of Black men. Results of the present study suggests that there is a necessity for the "unlearning" of the trope of the strong Black woman that is essential for both Black men and women who desire to be in a long-term romantic relationship with one another. While Black men recognize that the trope of the strong Black woman in the media is misguiding and the Black woman's expression of passion is misinterpreted and perpetuated by the media as anger, there is a need for a better mutual understanding of the tension that lies between both Black men and women. Even furthermore, the present study suggests that one way to ease and better understand those tensions lie in communicating with one another from a place

of honesty, transparency and vulnerability in a way that strengthens and respects both the Black male and female psyche. Taken together, results of the present study reveal that in spite of the re-enactment of the strong Black woman trope as perpetuated by media messages, Black men do in fact find Black women to be most suitable and ideal for long-term romantic relationship however, the façade of strength will continue to push him away.

Necessary Media Representations of Multidimensional Black men. Conversations with Black men reveal that they often experience the expectation of hypermasculinity from Black women, which often results in their own rejection as suitable long-term relationship partners. According to conversations with Black men, some have experienced being dismissed and/or rejected by Black women as a result of not having the physical appearance, characteristics, or disposition of hypermasculinity as perpetuated and internalized from media messages. As a result of the perceived internalization of hypermasculinity by Black women, the present study suggests that there is a need for media representations of Black men as multidimensional human beings. The present research finds that the history of Black men from chattel slavery has been redistributed through media messages of Black men as aggressive, brute and violent. According to Collins, during the time of colonialism and chattel slavery, Black men were perceived to be unruly, threatening and violent in comparison to Black women, resulting in a need for Black men to be trained, disciplined and controlled (2004). "White elites apparently found men of African descent to be more threatening than women because they believed that Black men were naturally violent. Men allegedly possessed the wildness attributed to Blacks as a race, but they carried the additional characteristic of being prone to violence" (Collins, 2004, p. 56). As a result, media messages continue to propagate Black men as aggressive and criminal within popular music, television and news programs (Dixon, 2008). The results of the present study suggest that media representations of Black men as multidimensional human beings are

necessary to counteract and combat dominant media portrayals and narratives of Black men as aggressive, hard and violent that Black men describe are subsequently being internalized and expected when in romantic relationship Black women.

Limitations

One primary limitation of the present study is related to the fact that the size of focus groups were uneven given the challenges of getting willing Black male participants which contributed to an overall inconsistency of the number of participants within each focus group. During the recruitment process, there was either a reluctance among Black men to willingly participate within the focus group conversations and/or the availability of Black men to participate within the timeframe in which the focus group conversations were taking place were limited. As a result, these limitations contributed to the size inconsistency of the focus groups. But while the size of the focus groups were inconsistent, there were advantages of the different sizes of focus groups that added a layer of analysis. The focus group conversations between the larger groups in comparison to the smaller group conversations contributed to different types of conversations which represents the differences among the attitudes or perceptions Black men given that Black men are not a monolith.

Another limitation of the present study was the geographical limitations of the focus group conversations. Although conversations with Black men reveal that environment and geographic location are salient factors in the selection process of long-term romantic relationship partners, participants of this study only represented two major urban cities while the majority of the focus group participants represented the Mid-west region of the country. While it was the intent of the researcher to conduct multiple focus groups in various cities, resources to effectively do so were limited. Future studies should be inclusive of Black men from multiple

cities and regions of the country given that environment and accessibility to Black women is salient to Black men in their consideration of Black women for long-term romantic relationship.

Another limitation of the present study was the sample did not include any Black men who were explicit in their resistance to being in relationship with Black women. Given that the majority of Black men who participated in the study had a preference to be in relationship with Black women, they could only speculate on behalf of the Black men who are resistant to being in romantic relationship with Black women. Future studies should include conversations with Black men who are explicit in their resistance to be with romantic relationship with Black women in order to provide greater insight into how media depictions of Black women may mitigate or complicate their resistance to be in relationship with Black women.

Future Directions

Exploration of Unexpected Themes. Conversations with Black men as part of this study demonstrate that Black men as a marginalized group have perspectives and a point of view that is often unaccounted for in media research and discourses. While the present study was centered and focused on media depictions of Black women and the complications associated with romantic relationship with Black men as a result, data analysis of the transcripts revealed a need for Black men to also share and disclose their own perspectives and point of view. As a result, Black men experience generalizations and stereotyping that often lead to false assumptions about Black men. As an example, Black men report being wrongly accused of having a preference to be in romantic relationships with women of lighter skin tones, which for the participants of the present study are not true. Even further, results of the present study reveal that Black men do not apply the lens of colorism in their selection of long-term romantic relationship partners. These results are also supported by numerous scientific research studies that have measured gender differences in how males and females, "see, perceive and talk about color" (Fider & Komarova,

2019, p.2). A large number of physiological, psychological and linguistic studies have demonstrated that perceptual differences exist between males and females in relation to aspects of color vision. Even further, research studies have found that females have a vast vocabulary to define colors and a "much richer repertory of color words" and "fancy color names" in comparison to men who used more basic terminology to describe color (Griber et al, 2017; Fider & Komorova, 2019, p.2). As a result, conversations with Black men as part of the present study suggests that perhaps colorism may be a gendered issue and most salient amongst Black women given how sexes are biologically wired to see, perceive and talk about color. It is also suggested from the results of the present study that colorism may be more of an intrapersonal issue and dialogue most salient and central to Black women as opposed to an interpersonal tension keeping them from being in long-term romantic relationship with Black men as a result of their skin tone. For Black men, colorism is a cultural construct most central to Black women inaccurately reading or perceiving how Black men select partners for long-term romantic relationships. Black men argue that they do not subscribe nor adopt colorism in their selection of a mate and vehemently reject the assumption that colorism is applied to their choice of a long-term romantic partner. It is also worth considering whether or not Black men perceive colorism as a form of racism and/or racism within itself given their collective objection to the adoption or application of colorism in their selection of a long-term romantic partner. As a result, colorism as examined in the present study proves to be a more complex issue. Future studies should explore the possibilities of colorism as not a monolithic issue but rather a gendered issue within the Black community.

Another example of assumptions that Black men experience as a result of media messages is the fact that their selection of a long-term romantic partner is informed or influenced by media depictions. Contrary to those assumptions, results of the present study reveal that the

personal preferences of Black men take precedence over media messages of White heteronormative standards of beauty and physical attractiveness. Results of the present study suggests that it is also of importance for Black women to unlearn and guard themselves from the internalization of constructed media messages of beauty and physical attractiveness given that Black men have personal preferences that are not informed by the media. Future studies should also explore the unexpected themes that emerged from this study including but not limited to how Black men experience rejection, the over-representation of hypermasculinity in the media, readings of media messages that imply Black men are trash, toxic and not good enough for strong Black women and how Black men experience rejection from Black men being in relationship with White men.

The Emergence of Super Dark as Beautiful. Narratives of Black men as a part of the present study reveal that Black men distinguish between "dark skinned" Black women and those whom they describe as "super dark". Super dark is a term that emerged from the focus group conversations to describe Black women of a darker skin tone that are also exoticized in the media and perceived as an anomaly and novelty according to the White male gaze. As a result, Black men perceive "super dark" Black women as marketable and profitable for media stakeholders which also distinguishes them from "average or regular" and "dark skinned" Black women. Even further, while Black men argue that media messages of beauty ideals do not inform or influence their perception of physical attractiveness, the present study argues that actress Lupita N'yongo's Oscar win validated her beauty as an example of a "super dark" Black woman. As a result, the present study argues that the distinction between "dark skinned" and "super dark" is evidence of media influence on Black men. Future studies should explore these distinctions further.

Triad of Media Messages as Model for Long-term Relationship Outcomes. As part of the present study, the conceptual triad of media messages was created and applied to the

interpretations of the most problematic media messages and themes that emerged from the focus group conversations that illuminate how media messages complicate long-term relationship outcomes for Black men and women. This conceptual model was also applied to better understand the overall experience of Black men with negative media messages and how their reception of these messages informs their consideration of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships. As a result, the present study suggests the use of this model as a framework to better understand long-term romantic relationship outcomes among men and women in general, how they experience media messages and subsequently relate to one another as a result. The triad of media messages can be used to analyze other relationship couplings that seek to better understand how media messages inform long-term relationship outcomes. Future studies can apply the triad to other relationship couplings of other races and interracial relationships.

Conclusion

 Counter Narrative Depictions of Black Love are Welcome. As a conceptual term, counter-narrative has been defined in various ways, but in general it refers to the ways in which narratives are used to oppose or resist socially and culturally informed master narratives or larger discourses by members of marginalized populations. "Counter-narrative refers to the narratives that arise from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized. The idea of "counter" itself implies a space of resistance against traditional domination. A counter-narrative goes beyond the notion that those in relative positions of power can just tell the stories of those in the margins. Instead, these must come from the margins, from the perspectives and voices of those individuals" (Mora, 2014, p.1).

 As a result, counter-narratives goes beyond the telling of stories that take place in the margins but also have the ability to empower and give agency to the voices of those who have

been marginalized within those communities or groups. These counter narratives also work to counteract harmful narratives (Andrews, 2004; Gabriel, 2016; Johansen, 2016). Scholars have made use of counter-narrative to describe how oppressed people use stories to establish their own understandings of themselves and their history in a way that runs counter to the traditional historical narrative, as well as how narratives can oppress marginalized populations. Accordingly, counter-narratives refer to "the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives" (Andrews, 2004, p. 1). Counter narratives are also a means by which to undo the damage that cultivation theory suggests has been done.

Given the historical and contemporary media depictions of Black women, it was important for the present study to consider how media representations of this group informs or complicates the suitability of Black women for long-term romantic relationships. However, results of this study demonstrate that not only are Black women underrepresented and trivialized within the media but Black men also perceive the underrepresentation of healthy Black romantic relationships in the media as problematic for positive long-term relationship outcomes. Conversations with Black men reveal that not only are there differences between the media of the 90's era in comparison to contemporary media messages but early influences of media during childhood and adolescence inform their romantic relationship ideals such as gender roles that are held up as a standard in their adulthood. Even furthermore, Black men reveal that for some they do not know what a positive or healthy Black relationship looks like and collectively, Black men agree that there is a systematic erasure and "blotting out" of Black culture within contemporary media messages. As a result of this systematic erasure when it comes of the ideals of beauty and what it means to be a wife or long-term romantic partner, Black men agree that Black women are not visibly seen in the same way as White women.

Given the symbolic annihilation of Black women in the media, Black men find value in counter-narrative content that allows for both Black men and women to begin the process of "unlearning" in order to relate to one another in a positive and healthy manner for the sake of long-term romantic relationships with one another. Even further, Black men welcome counter-narrative depictions and share a desire to see positive representations of Black love and mature relationships in media messages. Black men also welcome media depictions of Black women that portray them as well-rounded and passionate human beings, the ones that they have come to love and appreciate from their own personal lived experiences with Black women.

References

Abdullah, S. (1998). Mammyism: A diagnosis of psychological misorientation for women of

      African descent. Journal of Black Psychology, 24, 196-210.

Allen, M. (2016). Where Have All the Black TV Couples Gone? *Ebony*. Retrieved from

      https://www.ebony.com/entertainment/where-is-the-Black-love-on-tv/

American Advertising Foundation. (2016). *Reality TV: Entertaining, But No Laughing Matter*

[White Paper]. Retrieved from

      http://www.aaf.org/_PDF/AAF%20Website%20Content/000_Research/Research_Whitep

      aper_WatchParty.pdf

Andrews, M. (2004). Counter-narratives and the power to oppose. In M. Bamberg, &

      M. Andrews (Eds.), *Considering counter-narratives. Narrating, resisting, making sense*

      (pp. 1-6). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Baker-Sperry, L., & Grauerholz, L. (2003). The pervasiveness and persistence of the feminine

      beauty ideal in children's fairy tales. Gender and Society, 17, 711–726.

Bagnoli, A. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based

      methods. Qualitative Research, 9(5), 547–570.

      https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109343625

Balkin, J., & Levinson, S. (2012). The Dangerous Thirteenth Amendment. Columbia Law

      Review, 112(7), 1459-1499. Retrieved April 8, 2020, from

      www.jstor.org/stable/41708156

Barnlund, D. C. (2008). *A transactional model of communication*. In. C. D. Mortensen (Eds.),

      Communication theory (2nd Ed), pp. 47–57. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2007). You have to show strength an exploration of gender, race, and

      depression. Gender & Society, 21, 28-51.

Behm-Morawitz, E. & Lewallen, J. & Miller, B. (2015). Real Mean Girls? Reality Television

  Viewing, Social Aggression, and Gender-Related Beliefs Among Female Emerging

  Adults. Psychology of Popular Media Culture. doi:10.1037/ppm0000074

bell hooks. (1992). Black Looks: Race and Representation (1st Edition edition).

  Boston, MA: South End Press.

bell hooks. (1999). "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Women Spectators." Black Looks: Race

  and Representation. Boston: South End Press, pg. 61-77.

Blankestijn, L. (2015). From Snow White to Pitch Black: Gender and Racial stereotyping of the

  Disney Princesses. Retrieved from:

  https://theses.ubn.ru.nl/handle/123456789/3641?locale-attribute=en

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research

  in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

Breaux, R. (2010). After 75 Years of Magic: Disney Answers Its Critics, Rewrites African

  American History, and Cashes In on Its Racist Past. Journal of African American

  Studies, 14(4), 398-416. Retrieved January 9, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/41819263

Brooks, D. E., & Hebert, L. P. (2006). Gender, race, and media representation. In B. J. Dow & J.

  T.Wood (Eds.), The Sage handbook of gender and communication (pp. 297317). Thousand

  Oaks, CA: Sage

Bobo, J. (1988). The Color Purple: Black women as cultural readers. In E. D. Pribram (Ed.),

  Female spectators: Looking at film and television (pp. 90–109). London: Verso.

Bobo, J. (1989). Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading The Color Purple. Callaloo, (39),

  332-342. doi:10.2307/2931568

Bobo, J. (1995). Black women as cultural readers. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bobo, J., & Seiter, E. (1991). Black feminism and media criticism: The Women of Brewster

Place. Screen, 32(3), 286–302.

Bowleg, L., Teti, M., Massie, J. S., Patel, A., Malebranche, D. J., & Tschann, J. M. (2011). 'What does it take to be a man? What is a real man?': ideologies of masculinity and HIV sexual risk among Black heterosexual men. Culture, health & sexuality, 13(5), 545–559. doi:10.1080/13691058.2011.556201

Burke, M., 2008. Colorism. In: Darity Jr.,W. (Ed.), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, vol. II. Thomson Gale, Detroit, pp. 17–18.

Campbell, B. M. (1992). Learning To Live with Jungle Fever. *South Florida Sentinel*. Retrieved from https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1992-11-01-9202270009-story.html

Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film. (2017). Boxed In Report. Retrieved from https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2016-17_Boxed_In_Report.pdf

Childs, Erica Chito. 2005. "Looking Behind the Stereotypes of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Black Woman's Responses to Interracial Relationships." Gender and Society

Collins, P. H. (2004). Black sexual politics : African Americans, gender, and the new racism. New York : Routledge, 2004.

Collins, P. H. (2000). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. New York: Routledge.

Coyne, S. M. (2016). Effects of Viewing Relational Aggression on Television on Aggressive Behavior in Adolescents: A Three-Year Longitudinal Study. Developmental Psychology, 52(2), 284-295.

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., Kendall Thomas, K., 1995. Critical Race Theory: The

Key Writings That Formed the Movement. The Free Press, NewYork.

Dam, R. L. (2014). Fairy Tale Femininities: A Discourse Analysis of Snow White Films 1916-

2012. *Victoria University of Wellington*. Retrieved from

https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/handle/10063/3696

Davis, A. (1972). Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves. The

Massachusetts Review, 13(1/2), 81-100. Retrieved April 22, 2020, from

www.jstor.org/stable/25088201

Davis, J. A., &. Smith, T. 1991. General social surveys, 1972-1990. Chicago: National Opinion

Research Center.

Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components.

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56(1), 5-18.

Dion, K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. (1972). What is beautiful is good. Journal of Personality

and Social Psychology, 24, 285-290.

Dixon, T. L. (2008). Crime news and racialized beliefs: Understanding the relationship between

local news viewing and perceptions of African Americans and crime. Journal of

Communication, 58(1), 106-125. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00376.x

Epstein, R., Blake, J. J., & Gonzalez, T. (2017). Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of

Black girls' childhood. Washington, DC: Georgetown Law Center.

Ferguson, C. J., Salmond, K., & Modi, K. (2013). Original Article: Reality Television Predicts

Both Positive and Negative Outcomes for Adolescent Girls. The Journal Of Pediatrics,

1621175-1180. doi:10.1016/j.jpeds.2012.11.067

Fider, N.A., Komarova, N.L. (2019). Differences in color categorization manifested by males

and females: a quantitative World Color Survey study. *Palgrave Commun* 5**,** 142 (2019).

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. Handbook of qualitative research, 2(6), 645-672.

Gabriel, Y. (2016). Narrative ecologies and the role of counter-narratives: The case of nostalgic stories and conspiracy theories. In S. Frandsen, T. Kuhn, & M.W. Lundholt (Eds.), *Counter-narrative and organizations* (pp. 208-225). London: Routledge.

Galen, B. R., & Underwood, M. K. (1997). A developmental investigation of social aggression among children. Developmental Psychology, 33(4), 589-600.

Gauntlett, D. (2007) Creative Explorations. New Approaches to Identities and Audiences. London: Routledge.

Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 172-194. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01397.x

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Signorielli, N. & Morgan, M. (1980). Aging with television: Image on television drama and conceptions of social reality. *Journal of Communication*, *30*, 37-47. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1980.tb01766.x

Giggey, L. N. (2017). Producing Reality Stardom: Constructing, Programming, and Branding Celebrity on Reality Television. *UCLA*. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3wk3b1gs

Gilmore, S. DeLamater, J. & Wagstaff, D. (1996) Sexual decision making by inner city Black adolescent males: A focus group study, The Journal of Sex Research, 33:4, 363-371, DOI: 10.1080/00224499609551854

Goldsmith, A.H., Hamilton, D., Darity W.Jr., 2007. From dark to light: skin color and wages among African Americans. Journal of Human Resources 42, 701–738.

Granelli, S., & Zenor, J. (2016). Decoding "The Code": Reception Theory and Moral Judgment

of Dexter. International Journal Of Communication, 10, 23. Retrieved from

https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4433

Greene, B. (1994). African American women. In L. Comas-Diaz & B. Greene (Eds.),Women of

color: Integrating ethnic and gender identities in psychotherapy (pp. 10-29). New York:

Guilford.

Griber YA, Paramei GV, Mylonas D (2017). Gender differences in Russian colour naming. In:

Lee Y, Hwang J, Suk HJ, Park YK (eds) Proceedings of the 13th congress of the

International Colour Association (AIC 2017): being color with health, Jeju, Korea, pp

0S05-04

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An

Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. Field Methods, 18(1), 59–82.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Hall, R. 1992. Bias among African-Americans regarding skin color: Implications for social

work practice. Research on Social Work Practice 2:479-86.

Hall, R. (1995). The Bleaching Syndrome: African Americans' Response to Cultural

Domination Vis-à-vis Skin Color, Journal of Black Studies, 26, pp. 172–84.

Hall, E. M., & Witherspoon, K. M. (2015). How Adopting Stereotypical Roles May Impact

Sexual Risk Behavior among African American College Women. Journal of Black

Sexuality and Relationships, 1(4), 1-22.

Hamilton, D., Goldsmith, A., Darity, W. (2009). Shedding "light" on marriage: The influence of

skin shade on marriage for Black females. *Journal of Economic Behavior and

Organization*. 72(1):30-50. doi: 10.1016/j.jebo.2009.05.024

Harris, C.I., 1993. Whiteness as property. Harvard Law Review 106, 1707–1791.

Herndon, J. (2020). Issa Rae Embraces Her Role as a Hollywood Trailblazer: "You Can't Be

Polite or Modest". *Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from

https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/issa-rae-embraces-her-role-as-a-hollywood-

trailblazer-you-cant-be-polite-or-modest

Hunter, M. (2007) The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality.

Sociology Compass. Pp. 237–254, 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00006.x

Hughes, M., & Bradley, H. 1990. The significance of color remains: A study of life

chances, mate selection, and ethnic consciousness among Black Americans. Social

Forces 68 (4): 1105-1120.

Jakobsen, H. (2012) "Focus Groups and Methodological Rigor Outside the Minority World:

Making the Method Work to Its Strength in Tanzania," *Qualitative Research*, 12 111

Jankowski, G., Tshuma, S., Tshuma, S., & Hylton, M. (2017) Light except Lupita: The

representation of Black women in magazines. Psychology of Women Section Review.

ISSN 1466-3724

Jerald, M. C., Ward, L. M., Moss, L., Thomas, K., & Fletcher, K. D. (2017). Subordinates, Sex

Objects, or Sapphires? Investigating Contributions of Media Use to Black Students'

Femininity Ideologies and Stereotypes About Black Women. Journal of Black

Psychology, 43(6), 608–635. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798416665967

Johansen, T.S. (2016). Countering the "natural" organizational self on social media.

In S. Frandsen, T. Kuhn, & M.W. Lundholt (Eds.), *Counter-narrative and organizations*

(pp. 64-82). London: Routledge.

Kent, M. (2010). Most Americans Marry Within Their Race. Population Reference Bureau

Retrieved from https://www.prb.org/usintermarriage/

Klein, H., & Shiffman, K. S. (2009). Underrepresentation and Symbolic Annihilation of Socially

Disenfranchised Groups ("Out Groups") in Animated Cartoons. Howard Journal Of

    Communications, 20(1), 55-72. doi:10.1080/10646170802665208

Kouri, K.M. & Lasswell, M. (1993). Black-White marriages: Social change and

    intergenerational mobility. Marriage and Family Review, 19(3-4), 241-255.

Law, S. (2010). African American Mother-Son Dynamics and their Effect on the African

    American Marital Relationship. The University of Maryland McNair Scholars

    Undergraduate Research Journal, 2, (2010): 125-138.

Lawson Bush, V. (2004). How Black mothers participate in the development of

    manhood and masculinity: what do we know about Black mothers and their sons? The

    Journal of Negro Education. 73, 381-391.

Lewis, M. B. (2011). Who is the fairest of them all? Race, attractiveness and skin color sexual

    dimorphism. Personality and Individual Differences, 50(2), 159–162. https://doi-

    org.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/10.1016/j.paid.2010.09.018

Livingston, G. & Brown, A. (2017). Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends (2017,

    May). Trends and Patterns in Intermarriage. Retrieved from

    https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/

Livingstone, S., and Das, R. (2013) Interpretation/Reception. In P. Moy (Ed.), Oxford

    Bibliographies Online: Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:

    10.1093/obo/9780199756841-0134.

Louie P., (2012). Not so Happily Ever After? The Grimm Truth about Gender Representations in

    Fairytales. IGNITE UBC Women's and Gender Studies Undergraduate Journal. 4 (1),

    pp.74 – 82 Available online at:

    http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/ignite/article/download/182478/182493

Neikirk A., (2009). "Happily Ever After" (or What Fairytales Teach Girls About Being Women).

Hohonu Journal of Academic Writing. Vol. 7 (Anthropology Essay), pp.38 – 42

Retrieved from: http://hilo.hawaii.edu/academics/hohonu/Volume_7.php

Martin, J. (2007). "Audiences and Reception Theory." Julie Martin. Retrieved from

http://www.sociologymadesimple.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/juliemartin-audiencesreception.pdf

McClinton, D. (2019). Why dark-skinned Black girls like me aren't getting married. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/apr/08/dark-skinned-Black-girls-dont-get-married

McNamara, Robert P., Maria Tempenis, and BethWalton. 1999. Crossing the line: Interracial couples in the South. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Mediamark Research & Intelligence. (2015). Gfk MRI Doublebase 2014 Study.

Mendelsohn, G. A., Shaw Taylor, L., Fiore, A. T., & Cheshire, C. (2014). Black/White dating online: Interracial courtship in the 21st century. Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 3(1), 2–18. https://doi-org.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/10.1037/a0035357

Merskin, D. (1998). Sending up signals: A survey of Native American media use and representation in the mass media. Howard Journal of Communications, 9, 333–345.

Michelle, C. (2007). Modes of reception: A consolidated analytical framework. The Communication Review, 10(3), 181–222.

Michelle, C. (2009). (Re)Contextualizing audience receptions of reality TV. Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, 6(1), 137–170.

Michelle, C., Davis, D.H, & Vladica, F. (2012) Understanding Variation in Audience

Engagement and Response: An Application of the Composite Model to Receptions

of *Avatar* (2009), The Communication Review, 15:2, 106-

143, DOI: 10.1080/10714421.2012.674467

Mitchell, A., & Herring, K. (1998). What the blues is: Black women overcoming stress and

depression. New York: Perigee.

Mora, A.R. (2014). Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Key Concepts in Intercultural

Dialogue. Retrieved from:

https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/key-concept-counter-

narrative.pdf

Mustakeem, S. M. (2016). Slavery at sea : terror, sex, and sickness in the Middle Passage.

Urbana : University of Illinois Press, [2016].

Nabi, R. L. and Prestin, A. (2017). Social Learning Theory and Social Cognitive Theory. In

The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects (eds P. Rössler, C. A. Hoffner and L.

Zoonen). doi:10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0073

Nielsen Media Research. (2017). African American Diverse Intelligence Report. Retrieved from

http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2017

reports/nielsen-african-american-diverse-intelligence-report-2017.pdf

Onyejiaka, T. (2019). Why is TV so afraid to show Black people loving Black people? *Race

Baitr.* Retrieved from https://racebaitr.com/2019/02/26/why-is-tv-so-afraid-to-show-

Black-people-loving-Black-people/

Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. Quarterly journal of

Speech, 70(3), 274-287.

Painter, N. I. (1996). Sojourner truth: A life, a symbol. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Qian, Z., 1997. Breaking the racial barriers: variations in interracial marriage between 1980–

1990. Demography 34, 263–276.

Rosenblatt, Paul C., Teri Karis, and Richard D. Powell. 1995. Multiracial couples: Black&White voices. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Russell, K., and Wilson, M. 1996. *Divided sisters: Bridging the gap between Black women and White women*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.

Schroder, K. C. (2000). Making sense of audience discourses: Towards a multidimensional model of mass media reception. European Journal of Cultural Studies, 3(2), 233–258. https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940000300205

Seiler, N., 2003. Identifying racial privilege: lessons from critical race theory and the law. American Journal of Bioethics 3, 24–25.

Settles, I.H., Pratt-Hyatt, J.S., & Buchanan, N.T. (2008). Through the lens of race: Black and White women's perceptions of womanhood. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 32, 454-468.

Shaw, A. (2017). Encoding and decoding affordances: Stuart Hall and interactive media technologies. Media, Culture & Society, 39(4), 592–602. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717692741

Shrum, L.J. (2004). The cognitive processes underlying cultivation effects are a function of whether the judgments are on-line or memory based. Communications, 29, 327-344.

Spickard, Paul. 1989. Mixed blood: Intermarriage and ethnic identity in twentieth century America. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Steiner, L. (2016) "Wrestling with the Angels": Stuart Hall's Theory and Method, Howard Journal of Communications, 27:2, 102-111, DOI:10.1080/10646175.2016.1148649

Stubblebine, A. (2017). A Timeline of Danielle Bregoli's (a.k.a. the 'Cash Me Outside' Girl) Rise to Celebrity. *Billboard*. Retrieved from https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-

hop/7968844/danielle-bregolis-cash-me-outside-girl-timeline

Tia Tyree (2011) African American Stereotypes in Reality Television, Howard Journal of

Communications, 22:4, 394-413, DOI: 10.1080/10646175.2011.617217

Tapp, T. (2021). Black Females More Likely Than White Females To Be Portrayed As "Smart"

In Film & TV, But "Colorism" Persists Around Skin Tone, Says Study. *Deadline*.

Retrieved from https://deadline.com/2021/03/black-women-smart-film-tv-colorism-

study-1234705233/

Thomas, A.J., Hacker, J.D. & Hoxha, D. Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women. Sex

Roles 64, 530–542 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9939-y

Todd, Judith, Jeanice L. Mckinney, Raymond Harris, Ryan Chadderton, and Leslie Small. 1992.

Attitudes toward interracial dating: Effects of age, sex and race. Journal of Multicultural

Counseling and Development 20 (October): 202-208.

UCLA College. (2018). 2018 annual Hollywood Diversity Report. Retrieved from

https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-

Report-2018-2-27-18.pdf

Walker, Alice. (1983). *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*: Womanist Prose. New York:

Harcourt Inc.

Wang, W. (2012). Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends (2012, Feb). The Rise of

Intermarriage Rates, Characteristics Vary by Race and Gender. Retrieved from

http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/16/the-rise-of-intermarriage/8/

Watson, S., Thornton, C. & Engelland, B. (2010). Skin color shades in advertising to ethnic

audiences: The case of African Americans, Journal of Marketing Communications,

16(4),pp. 185-201, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527260802707585

Weiten, W. (2002). PSYK.TREK 2.0: A multimedia introduction to psychology. New York, NY:

Wadsworth.

West, C. "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and

Their Implications for Psychotherapy." Psychotherapy 32 (1995): 458–66. [Willey-Jean,

2009]

West, R. L., & Turner, L. H. (2010). Introducing communication theory: Analysis and

application. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Wilkinson, S. (1998) Focus group methodology: a review, International Journal of Social

Research Methodology, 1:3 (1998), 181-203, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.1998.10846874

Williams, E., 1944. Capitalism and Slavery. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Yancey, G. (2002). Who dates interracially: An examination of the characteristics of those who

have dated interracially. Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 33, 179-190.

Yancey, G. (2009). Crossracial differences in the racial preferences of potential dating partners:

A test of the alienation of African Americans and social dominance orientation. The

Sociological Quarterly, 50, 121-143.

Yancey, G. & Yancey, S. (1998). Interracial Dating: evidence from personal advertisements.

Journal of Family Issues, 19, 334-349.

Appendix A

<div align="center">

Do Black men *really* love Black women?

A qualitative study of the role of media pertaining to Black men's perception of media portrayals of Black women for long-term romantic partnership

</div>

Protocol
- *Focus Group Prep:* Valerius to debrief moderator on nature of project and provide training and instructions per Focus Group protocol
- Warm-up/Introduction
- Participants introduce themselves
- Designated moderator to describe nature of the project
- Proceed with primary interview questions below
- Cool Down – Thank participants and inform them of next steps

---

<div align="center">

Guiding Research Questions

</div>

RQ1: How do heterosexual Black men make meaning of or interpret media portrayals of Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships?

RQ2: How do Black men make sense of media portrayals of Whiteness and attractiveness?

RQ3: In what ways might Black men perceive their physical attraction to Black women to be informed by media?

RQ4: How do Black men make sense of media depictions of Black women as socially aggressive as characterized by the trope of the "angry Black woman"?

RQ5: How does socially aggressive behavior of Black women in the media complicate social desirability for long-term romantic relationships among Black men?

RQ6: Do Black men believe media portrayals of Black women are part of the reason why Black men pursue long-term romantic relationships with women outside of their race?

RQ7: How do Black men make sense of prominent Black men in relationships with non-Black women in making their own decisions to be in long-term romantic relationships?

Focus Group Questions:

1. [RQ6] Some Black men date outside of their race. What do you think is the single most defining factor that is leading Black men to have long-term romantic relationships with women outside of their race?

2. [R6] In what ways, if any, have you observed media messages to have an influence on your judgement or understanding of an ideal long-term partner?

3. [RQ3 & 6] What do you think media messages say about what the ideal long-term romantic partner should look like for the Black man?

    a. Follow-up: [RQ2] Do media messages of what is "pretty and physically attractive" also include Black women? In other words, what types of women are "pretty and physically attractive" according to media messages?
    b. Are Black women included in your understanding of what is "pretty and physically attractive"?

4. [RQ1/3]: What are your thoughts or opinions about Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships?

    a. Follow-up: To what extent do you think those thoughts are influenced by the media?
    b. Follow-up: When it comes to your personal ideas about relationship goals, do Black women come to mind? Why or why not?
    c. Follow up question: What does she look like? White? Black? Light skin or dark skin? Or Other?

5. [RQ6] Why might some Black men may be resistant to being in long-term relationship with Black women?

    a. Follow-up: In what ways does the same apply to light skin Black women or White women?

6. [RQ4] Evidence shows that there are some media representations of Black women as socially aggressive. What do you think about media representations of Black women as socially aggressive (argumentative, confrontational, angry)?

7. [RQ5] In your opinion, what implications could you perceive this to have for their suitability in long-term relationship?

    a. Follow-up: How might, or might not, socially aggressive behavior of Black women in media influence the trend of Black men being in long-term relationship with women outside of their race?

8. [RQ5] Based on your experiences, is the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype more of a real phenomenon or fictional media portrayal?

    a. Follow-up: If it's more realistic, do you think the media make it worse?

9. [RQ6] Apart from reality television, what media could be contributing to the trend of Black men being in long-term relationships with women outside their race, and how?

10. [RQ7] When considering prominent Black men that have White or racially ambiguous wives or girlfriends – do you perceive these couples to be informing your decision to be in relationship with Black women or not?

11. [RQ7] Between Black women, White women, and racially ambiguous women (unable to pinpoint one's racial background just by looking at them) who is seen as more of the ideal trophy for Black men and why?

Participant Demographic Information – *To be Collected*

Age:

Relationship Status:

Have you ever been involved in a romantic relationship with a woman who is White or racially ambiguous in appearance?

Are you currently involved in a relationship with a woman who is White or racially ambiguous in appearance?

Please choose one - Do you have a preference to be in romantic relationship with someone:

☐   Within your race

☐   Outside of your race

☐   No Preference.

Appendix B

<div align="center">

Do Black men *really* love Black women?

A qualitative study of the role of media pertaining to Black men's perception of media portrayals of Black women for long-term romantic partnership

</div>

Focus Group Prep: Valerius to debrief moderator on nature of project and provide training and instructions per Focus Group protocol

Day of Focus Group Discussion Moderator to do the following:
- Warm-up/Introduction
- Participants introduce themselves
- Moderator to describe nature of the project
- Proceed with primary interview questions below
- Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested
- Monitor time and use limited time effectively
- Use prompts and probes to stimulate and guide discussion
- Use the focus group guide effectively to ensure all questions are covered
- Politely and diplomatically enforce ground rules:
   - Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable
   - Limit side conversations
   - Encourage one person to speak at a time
- Be prepared to explain or restate questions
- Cool Down – Thank participants and inform them of next steps

---

<div align="center">

<u>Warm-up/Introduction Script</u>

</div>

"Thank you for being here to participate in today's focus group. My name is _____ and I will be the moderator for today's conversation centered around "Relationship Goals". The purpose of this research is to learn about audiences' reactions to the media portrayals of Black women.

This research explores how Black men interpret and respond to media depictions of Black women and refer to those interpretations in order to determine whether or not Black women are suitable for long-term romantic relationships.

As a participant of today's focus group, we are inviting you to share your thoughts and opinions about romantic relationships with Black women, media depictions of Black women, colorism and interracial relationships all of which will only be audio-recorded.

There are also no right or wrong answers. We are just looking for your honest opinions. So let's get started with getting your consent to participate in this study."

<u>Next Step</u> – Moderator to obtain consent from participants by reading the first page of the consent form as provided by the researcher.

Step by Step Guide for Focus Group Moderator

Obtain verbal consent
Read the IRB approved verbal consent form provided from the primary researcher. Make sure participants understand their rights, and ensure them that their identities will not be revealed in any publications/reports.

Establish rapport
Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is helpful for the moderator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome.

Follow the Focus Group Protocol
The focus group protocol provides a framework for the moderator to explore, probe, and ask questions. It is helpful to follow the focus group guide as much as possible when facilitating the focus group, to increase the credibility of the research results. Using the guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient.

If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the moderator can probe for fuller, clearer responses. Some good examples of probes used to help clarify what a participant has said include:

- "Please tell me (more) about that…"
- "Could you explain what you mean by…"
- "Can you tell me something else about…"
- Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions – they provoke more detailed information
- Use neutral comments – "Anything else?"

Revising Focus Group Questions
Straying from the focus group guide ***is strongly DIScouraged*** because the questions on the guide are essential in order to gather the data that is needed for this study.

Minimize Pressure to Conform to a Dominant View Point
When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a dominant viewpoint has occurred. To minimize this group dynamic, the moderator should probe for alternative views.

For example, the moderator can redirect the discussion by stating, "*We have had an interesting discussion, but let's explore other ideas or points of view. Has anyone had a different experience that they wish to share?*"

Other Tips for Guiding the Discussion
In focus groups, it is not uncommon for a few individuals to dominate the discussion. To balance participation, and ensure that every participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, you might consider the following strategies:
- Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk

- Give nonverbal cues
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion

Record the discussion
The focus group discussions should be audio-recorded through voice memos app available on the iphone. The primary researcher will provide you with the iphone device that should be used for the purpose of this study.

_____

Focus Group Questions:

12. What do you think is the most defining factor that is leading Black men to have long-term romantic relationships with women outside of their race?

13. In what ways, if any, have you observed media messages to have an influence on your judgement or understanding of an ideal long-term partner?

14. What do you think media messages say about what the ideal long-term romantic partner should physically look like for the Black man?

    a. Follow-up: Do media messages of what is "pretty and physically attractive" also include Black women? In other words, what types of women are "pretty and physically attractive" according to media messages?
    b. Are Black women included in your understanding of what is "pretty and physically attractive"?

15. What are your thoughts or opinions about what the media says regarding Black women as suitable partners for long-term romantic relationships?

    a. Follow-up: When it comes to your personal ideas about relationship goals, do Black women come to mind? Why or why not?
    b. Follow up question: What does she look like? White? Black? Light skin or dark skin? Or Other?

16. Why might some Black men may be resistant to being in long-term relationship with Black women?

    a. Follow-up: In what ways does the same apply to light skin Black women or White women?

17. What are your thoughts about media representations of Black women as socially aggressive (argumentative, confrontational, angry)?

18. Are there any implications of socially aggressive behavior of Black women on their suitability for long-term relationship?

      a. Follow-up: How might, or might not, socially aggressive behavior of Black women in media influence the trend of Black men being in long-term relationship with women outside of their race?

19. Based on your experiences, is the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype more of a real phenomenon or fictional media portrayal?

      a. Follow-up: If it's more realistic, do you think the media make it worse?

20. Apart from reality television, what media could be contributing to the trend of Black men being in long-term relationships with women outside their race, and how?

21. When considering prominent Black men that have White or racially ambiguous wives or girlfriends – do you perceive these couples to be informing your decision to be in relationship with Black women or not?

22. Between Black women, White women, and racially ambiguous who is seen as more of the ideal trophy for Black men and why?

Appendix C

<u>CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY</u>

STUDY TITLE: Relationship Goals. A study on media depictions of Black women as suitable for long-term partners

STUDY SUMMARY
We invite you to take part in this research study. You are free to say yes or no. You decide if you want to take part, and you can stop taking part at any time. You will not be penalized in any way if you choose not to take part in this study. Please take as much time as you need to read this consent form. If there is anything you do not understand, please ask us to explain.

The purpose of this research is to learn about audiences' reactions to the media portrayals of Black women. This research explores how Black men interpret and respond to media depictions of Black women and refer to those interpretations in order to determine whether or not Black women are suitable for long-term romantic relationships. We are inviting you to take part in this study because you are at least 21 years of age and identify as a Black heterosexual male willing discuss romantic relationships with Black women.

What Am I Being Asked To Do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a focus group conversation with other Black men about the topics of colorism and interracial relationships. You will then be asked questions about your opinions that will be audio-recorded.

There are no right or wrong answers; we are just looking for your honest opinions. You will also complete a short survey that will ask you demographic questions and your own dating preferences. Your participation is voluntary, and you may quit at any time. **<u>No identifying information will be collected in this study.</u>** In total, your participation will take between 60-90 minutes.

Are There Any Risks to Taking Part in This Study?
There are no known risks to taking part in this study.

Are There Any Benefits to Me From Taking Part In This Study?
There are no known benefits to taking part in this study.

What Are My Rights as a Study Participant?
Taking part in this study is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you have the right to change your mind and drop out of the study at any time. Whatever your decision, there will be no penalty to you. If you have more questions about this study at any time, you may contact the primary researcher Daphne Valerius at Daphne.Valerius@mail.missouri.edu. You may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) 573-882-3181 if you have questions about your rights as a study participant or want to report any problems or complaint.

Participant Demographic Information

Age:

Relationship Status:

Have you ever been involved in a romantic relationship with a woman who is White or racially ambiguous in appearance?

Are you currently involved in a relationship with a woman who is White or racially ambiguous in appearance?

Please choose one - Do you have a preference to be in romantic relationship with someone:

☐　　　　Within your race

☐　　　　Outside of your race

☐　　　　No Preference.

Thank you for your participation!

VITA

Born in Brooklyn, New York and raised in the suburbs of Rhode Island as the eldest of three, Daphne Sabrina Valerius graduated from high school knowing that pursuing an education at any cost was the *only* way to redefine her life as she knew it. In 2003, Valerius completed her undergraduate studies in Mass Communications at St. John's University and continued her graduate studies at Emerson College. By the age of 25, Valerius had completed her Master's degree in Broadcast Journalism, received the distinguished Associated Press Award for Public Affairs and produced her award-winning documentary, ***The Souls of Black Girls***. The production of *The Souls of Black Girls*, which she also wrote, narrated, edited and produced marked a beginning for her *and* for women and girls of color to better understand the impact of media images on their self-image, self-esteem and self-confidence. A member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Valerius completed her Doctoral degree in Communication at the University of Missouri in 2021. Valerius' area of research is primarily concerned with the media representation and misrepresentation of Black women and girls. An accomplished Director, Producer, Journalist, Speaker and Entrepreneur, Valerius hopes to continue to inspire, encourage, and empower women and girls through her research, media projects and through her entrepreneurial endeavors.