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Ashley Rodriguez

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Exploring the Black Woman Experience Related to Sexual Practice, Sexual Identity, and Sexual Expression: A Qualitative Study

by

Ashley Rodriguez

MA, Northwestern University, 2020

BA, Saint Leo University, 2017

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

November 2026

Abstract

This study revealed the complex interplay between personal identities and social constructs, focusing on Black-identifying women and their lived experiences with sex, sexuality, and sexual expression. Over centuries, societal influences depicted Black women as hypersexual, simultaneously exposing them to criticism, shame, and judgment for their sexual expression and meaning-making related to sex and sexuality. Consequently, Black women remain a high-risk demographic for unsafe sexual practices and sexually transmitted infections. Using intersectionality theory and Black feminist theory, this study explored how Black-identifying women give meaning to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression as they shape the Black feminine experience. I sought to explore how Black-identifying women construct and interpret the meaning of sex, sexuality, and sexual expression within their lives, emphasizing the impact of sociocultural and socioeconomic factors on their understanding of these concepts. Employing a hermeneutical phenomenological approach, this study recruited 10 Black-identifying women, aged between 20 and 45, via social media channels. The research design included semi-structured interviews conducted via the Zoom platform. Data were analyzed using thematic coding and hermeneutic interpretation, which illuminated four central themes: sexuality as self-authored liberation, the disruption of generational silence, embodiment as resistance, and the integration of spiritual dimensions of sexual identity. Challenging the psychologically harmful narratives through expanded research and open dialogue may contribute to fostering a society that fully recognizes and respects the complexity and dignity of the Black woman experience, thus contributing to positive social change.

Exploring the Black Woman Experience Related to Sexual Practice, Sexual Identity, and Sexual Expression: A Qualitative Study

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my ancestors who fought, toiled, and sacrificed so that I have the scholarship platform to advocate for the powerful magic of the Black woman experience. This work represents the voices of the Black feminist advocates, activists, and trailblazers tirelessly fighting for the complete freedom and liberation of Black women. This work fervently inherits the academic mantle of Dr. Inez Prosser, the first African American woman to successfully obtain a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Psychology in the United States. This work is also dedicated to the many voices of Black women fighting silent wars that the world continuously ignores. Finally, this work is dedicated to the little girl inside me who always dared to dream and soar past the sky. May these pages speak about life where silence once stood. May this work be a balm, a blaze, a blueprint. To the ones who lived unlived truths- I write this with you, for you, as you.

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Recognizing that I stand on the shoulders of ancestral excellence, I first acknowledge myself. I have proven, time and again, that I can do anything I set my mind to—honoring the strength and resilience rooted in those who came before me.

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This work is a living testament to the love, support, and faith poured into me. I carry it with me, always.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Human sexuality, a multidimensional construct related to human experience, has a vast capacity and aptitude for a deeper understanding of interpersonal connection, self-expression, and community empowerment (Bragazzi et al., 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexuality as a central aspect of being human throughout life, encompassing sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction (Bragazzi et al., 2023; World Health Organization, n.d.). Sexuality also includes developmental aspects, including sex assignment at birth, as well as sexual identity, sexual orientation, sexual behavior/activity, and perceived sexual roles (Bragazzi et al., 2023). Darko et al. (2024) asserted that sexual health transcends the lack or absence of disease or health outcomes, encompassing the possibility of pleasurable, comfortable, and safe sexual experiences. Bragazzi et al. (2023) postulated that humans experience and express sexuality through various means, ranging from dreams and fantasies to practices and relationships. Bragazzi et al. further presupposed the intersection of several factors influencing sexuality, including biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors.

Throughout multiple feminist movements, White-identifying women received greater access to platforms and resources, supporting their ability to advocate for their sexual rights, expressions, and freedoms (Borah et al., 2023). While the first feminist movement emphasized suffrage and equal rights, the second feminist wave expanded to

center on reproductive rights and sexual liberation, explicitly emphasizing the lived experiences of White women and excluding Black women's narratives (Davis, 1981; Mohajan, 2022). Although the third and fourth feminist wave movements shifted toward intersectionality, mainstream feminism continuously neglected to address sexually related challenges impacting Black women (Mohajan, 2022). Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholars continue to criticize feminist movements for persistently failing to include issues concerning race, class, and intersectional identities, which negatively impact the experiences of other demographics, such as the Black woman subpopulation (Borah, 2023). Furthermore, such an elimination leads to an overall mainstreaming of Western feminism, perpetuating systemic barriers impeding access to platforms and environments that support the safe exploration and advocacy of sexual health, expression, and reproductive rights (Borah, 2023).

Despite increasing literature addressing intersectionality, the lives of Black women remain narrowly presented with negative discourse regarding sex, sexuality, and sexual behavior, leaving them less likely to comfortably discuss their sexual health with healthcare providers (Cohn, 2022; Hargons, 2020). Carney et al. (2023) asserted that Black women comprise approximately 13.6% of all women residing in the United States. With a significantly considerable population, Black women disproportionately experience adverse sexual experiences and sexually transmitted infections compared to other racial groups (Hill et al., 2024). Hill et al. (2024) found that in preceding years, Black women contracted chlamydia and gonorrhea at a rate seven times higher compared to women with White women. Regarding human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) incidence, Black-

identifying women contract HIV at a rate that is 20 times higher than White-identifying women (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2020).

Crooks et al. (2022) noted that psychological, sociological, and cultural factors shape sexuality. However, the Black community historically considers sex and sexuality as taboo topics, often leaving Black women uninformed, unprotected, and vulnerable to differing forms of sexual predation (Crooks et al., 2022). Moreover, preceding research provides a hyper-emphatic focus on Black women's individual risk, often overlooking nuanced sociocultural contexts faced by Black women regarding access to sexual health resources and services (Darko et al., 2024). Despite multiple feminist movements advancing women's rights and equality, scholarship frequently excluded the Black feminine experience, rendering these sub-demographic voiceless concerning phenomena related to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression (Cohn, 2022; Mohajan, 2022). The American Psychological Association (2020) postulated that Black women are commonly perceived as masculine, like their Black men counterparts, rather than seen as the "typical woman," leading to antiracist and feminist movements that fail to advocate for the equal rights of Black women appropriately.

This study explores the Black feminine lived experience regarding sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression, examining the racial, historical, and sociocultural factors presently shaping their sexual identities and behaviors. Additionally, by exploring the Black feminine lived experience concerning sex, sexuality, and sexual expression, this study aims to influence culturally competent clinical practice and research related to human sexuality and advocate for the reforming of legislative and

sexual health educational policies, providing a more comprehensive and contextual understanding on the ways that systemic prejudices and discrimination shape sexual health practices and expression. This chapter covers the following sections: study background, problem statement and purpose, proposed research question, study nature, concept and construct definitions, study assumptions, study scope and delimitations, study limitations, and study significance.

Background

Racism remains a prevalent contributing factor to sexual and reproductive health disparities faced by Black and African American women (Prather et al., 2018). Bond et al. (2021) noted that race-based sexual stereotypes characterize Black women's sexuality with a historical context that continuously reinvents itself in contemporary times, contributing to disproportionately high rates of adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, such as significantly prevalent rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Subsequent studies found that Black women also contracted chlamydia and gonorrhea five times more likely compared to White women (Wade et al., 2023). Bond et al. (2021) defined race-based sexual stereotypes as implicit beliefs and expectations of sexual encounters, dependent on the partner's race or ethnicity. Sexual stereotypes, distinguished from race-based sexual stereotypes, characterize socio-cognitive structures learned through cultural socialization that shape sexual practice (Bond et al., 2021). Race-based stereotypes historically affect the depictions of Black women, presenting them as either asexual, hypersexual, or sexually objectified (Bond et

al., 2021). Prather et al. (2018) asserted that the use of negative sexual stereotypes began to justify sexual enslavement and subsequent sexual violence.

Preceding research also demonstrates a significant correlation between the internalization of negative race-based stereotypes and engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors among the Black women demographic, further challenging their efforts to foster healthy relationships in their sexual and intimate relationships (Bond et al., 2021). Furthermore, the internalizing of negative social stereotypes and associating depictions may normalize sexual scripts, threatening sexual health decision-making (Bond et al., 2021). Although the pervasiveness of sexualization remains significantly prevalent in Western societies toward women regardless of racial or ethnic identity, predictors of sexualization among Black women remain understudied (Otto et al., 2022). Stanton (2022) noted that Black women navigate unique sexual objectification and body-related concerns because of experiencing race- and gender-based marginalization. Eshelman et al. (2024) further posited that Black women reported adult sexual assault (ASA) and sexual objectification at rates significantly higher than White-identifying women, serving as a stark reminder of the ways that society views the Black woman's body as a sexual object on existing racist and sexist ideologies. In their quantitative study assessing Black women's experiences of gendered racial and sexual objectification on their mental health, Eshelman et al. (2024) revealed frequent experiences of gendered racial and sexual objectification and higher stress appraisals related to these experiences to be significantly associated with more depressive symptoms.

Over the past several decades, music (specifically the Hip-Hop and Rap genres) and media platforms have entertained and perpetuated societal narratives that tremendously distort the Black feminine sexual experience, leading to innumerable consequences for Black women, including self-sexualization and self-objectification (Otto et al., 2022). In their study examining music's impact on the sexualization of Black bodies, Otto et al. (2022) noted that the origins of Hip Hop and Rap can be found in slave spirituals, blues, jazz, and soul music. Since its mainstream media emergence in the 1980s, Hip Hop artists have expressed a vast number of controversial messages concerning sex, substance abuse, materialism, and the sexualization and maltreatment of Black women (Otto et al., 2022). Due to Hip-Hop music's tendency to associate black masculinity, lyrics frequently depict Black women in derogatory and disparaging manners, victimizing them to stereotypes and portraying them as hypersexual or excessively materialistic (Otto et al., 2022). Within their study, Otto et al. also found a significant correlation between increased exposure to Hip Hop and Rap music, emphasizing this type of sexual content and an increase in women's sexual objectification, sexual permissiveness, and rape acceptance across racial groups, with Black women more frequently perceived in adverse ways.

Black churches and similar religious organizational institutions have traditionally supported Black and African American communities, providing educational, social welfare, economic, and health-related resources and services (Taylor et al., 2020). Although perceived as a staple of support, religiosity can also serve as a significant contributor to the sexual shaming and sexual restriction experienced by the Black women

(Woods, 2024). Furthermore, Thorpe et al. (2021) found that religious importance, combined with perceived pubertal timing, is significantly associated with sexual guilt, pleasure expectancies, and a delayed sexual debut. Thorpe et al. also argued that religions practiced by this demographic create a culture of silence, encouraging Black women to suppress their expression of deep intimacies and desires, simultaneously reducing their expectations of pleasure. Consequently, the "silent culture" produces feelings of discomfort and shame when discussing sexual practice and sexual desire.

Ranging literary pieces from authors such as Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*) to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*We Should All Be Feminists*) explicate themes related to the silent culture, actively influenced by colonialist and racist ideologies, that negatively impact the formulation of Black women's sexual development across the racial diaspora. Suppressing sexual development also denies Black women's intersections, denying vital components that contribute to their unique lived experience. Additionally, such silence may lead to the exacerbation of misinformation and exploitation, leading to an increase in adverse sexual health outcomes. Not only does the "silence" culture actively and subconsciously suppress Black women from expressing and developing their sexual identities, but it also reflects a broader sociopolitical and systemic issue: the active exclusion of Black women from the dominant feminist discussion.

Pippins and Pippins (2023) asserted that the Black feminine experience, identity, knowledge, and strength remain ignored despite Black women historically advocating for equal rights and opportunities. Black feminist scholar criticism also illuminates the disparities relative to the reality that race and gender remain inseparable for Black

women and women of color (Pippins & Pippins, 2023). Showunmi (2023) further posited that mainstream feminism excludes Black women due to their race, while simultaneously excluding them from black liberation movements due to their gender. Demonstrated systemic inequities leave the women to battle with double jeopardy continuously while fighting for access to comprehensive platforms to advocate for and address their intersecting identities that uniquely shape their experience related to the studied phenomenon.

The double jeopardy phenomenon, coined by Frances Beal in her 1969 essay, "Black Women's Manifesto; Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," describes individuals or groups of individuals possessing multiple vulnerable identities encountering more convoluted and profound negative experiences (Beal, 1969). Black women, or women of African Diasporic descent, experience marginalization at the intersection of racism and sexism, frequently finding themselves in settings where Eurocentric standards devalue their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Dickens et al., 2022). Succeeding Black Feminist scholars expounded on Beale's concept of double jeopardy, using it to expound on the nuanced experiences of Black sexual minority women (SMW) navigating the compounded marginalization of homophobia and racism. The compounded marginalization of double also impacts the way that Black women experience sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression, leading to hypervigilance in intimate relationships, internalized shame, and self-policing. Hodson et al. (2021) propounded that Black women and women of color facing the double jeopardy phenomenon experience sexual harassment at a rate significantly higher than their White

women and Black men peers. Double jeopardy also reinforces the urge for Black women to engage with their sexuality within the confines of respectability politics, suppressing aspects of their sexual agency to combat or eliminate their association with negative stereotypes.

In addition to ideological oppression, Black women also battle institutional oppression. Foregoing research indicates that race-based stereotypes that hypersexualize and stigmatize Black women also subject this demographic to increased criminalization, specifically within the realms of sex work and incarceration (Bond et al., 2021; Martín-Romo et al., 2023). According to the United Nations, a sizable number of sex workers, with approximately 90% identifying as a woman, come from low-income countries, with their primary destinations being Western Europe and North America (Martín-Romo et al., 2023). Martín-Romo et al. (2023) further noted that the sex industry generates approximately between $7 and $12 billion annually, making it the second most lucrative illegal business in the world after arms and drug trafficking. Kim and Peterson (2020) examined how incarcerated women's experience with sex work and low-wage care and service work affected health-related outcomes, finding that approximately 68.6% of their sample size identified as Black women, with 277 participants regularly engaging in sex work, care/serve work, or both. Kim and Peterson's quantitative study further highlights that Black women experience disproportionate incarceration resulting from systemic factors that criminalize conscious and intergenerational survivalist strategies.

The persistent and well-established history and legacy of racism and capitalism continue to reveal themselves through contemporary reproductive health disparities and

Black feminine hypersexualization in contemporary media (Bond et al., 2021; Sutton et al., 2021). This proposed study provided an additional literary medium advocating for the Black feminine experience, allowing this demographic to articulate their experiences concerning sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression. Furthermore, this research sought to challenge and disrupt systemic biases, promoting a more inclusive, feminist, liberating dialogue for Black women to reclaim and enhance their sexual health, sexual wellness, and sexual agency.

Problem Statement

The historical hypersexualization of Black feminine sexuality, rooted in racism, misogyny, and capitalist colonialism, continuously reinforces and perpetuates contemporary narratives that marginalize Black women's experience. Debnam et al. (2021) contended that historical racial and ethnic stereotypes produce reinforced roles, spreading throughout mainstream media, misrepresenting Black women, and negatively influencing their meaning-making pertaining to sexual practice, sexuality, and authentic sexual expression. Current research suggests that the *Jezebel* stereotype contributes to increased Black women's sexualization to a greater degree compared to Caucasian women (Leath et al., 2022). One specific example of hypersexualization affecting Black women is the controversial discourse surrounding the cultural movement of twerking. In 2015, the Oxford Dictionary added the term *twerk*, defined as a dance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low squatting stance (Halliday, 2020). Historical research traces the origins of the twerking dance to various African countries, with a combination of influences varying from *mapouka* (a

popular dance among women of the Ivory Coast region of West Africa) and *zouglou* (its revolutionary predecessor) (Johnson, 2024).

The twerking dance arrived in the United States over twenty years ago through the New Orleans bounce culture (Johnson, 2024; Silva & Medeiros, 2021). Silva and Medeiros (2021) noted that twerking gained mass media popularity following Pop singer Miley Cyrus's 2013 MTV Video Music Awards performance, twerking with a foam finger. Although Cyrus faced backlash for cultural appropriation, Black women became unintended targets due to the connection between twerking and the Black woman's body (Johnson, 2024). While non-Black people use African-influenced cultural dances to express sexual, artistic, and creative value, when performed by Black women, they are viewed as deviant, hypersexual, and inappropriate.

The mischaracterization of twerking as inherently sexual rather than a cultural form of collective self-expression underscores the persistent impact of race-based stereotypes that restrict and constrain Black women's sexual practice, sexuality, and the authentic range of sexual expression. Currently, no qualitative study exists exploring Black women's sexual health, specifically regarding internalized messages that frame experiences related to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression. Feminist scholarship frequently neglects Black women's voices, failing to capture the interpretations of social, historical, and racial factors that shape their experience. The nuanced intersection of Black women's sexual experience remains significantly underexplored, leaving a crucial void in conceptualizing the complexities that comprise the understanding of their sexual identity development.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women related to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression. This study employed an interpretive/constructivist and critical theory research paradigmatic approach to examine correlations between their understanding of race-based stereotypes and subjective accounts of current voluntary sexual practice. Bibi et al. (2022) stated that interpretive and critical research paradigms support qualitative researchers in studying human convictions and existences from their perspectives, relying on substantive qualitative data and avoiding statistical and numerical data. Often using a quantitative methodology, preceding research primarily investigates the Black feminine sexuality phenomenon through external stereotypes and existing healthcare disparities. This proposed study fills the scholarship gap by centering the Black feminine narrative, both heterosexual and sexual minority, providing a more holistic and comprehensive conceptualization of authentic Black women's sexual agency and further contributing to more inclusive research and clinical practice.

Research Question

RQ: What are the lived experiences of Black women regarding their understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual expression?

Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework for the Study

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminist theory (BFT) argues that traditional feminist theory lacks the necessary tenets and principles to address issues that impact Black women (Cabell,

2024). Integrating a comprehensive analysis of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, BFT emphasizes Black women's psychological well-being affected by societal pressures at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Cabell, 2024). Brantley (2023) further asserted that BFT allows Black women to individually and collectively explore their meaning as both Black and women. Amid the United States Congress passing the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, extending the legislative effect of discrimination laws to private institutions receiving federal funding, BFT grew and demanded strong theoretical frameworks that included first-hand experiences of Black women (Nichols, 2021). BFT also attests that Black American womanhood involves navigating a racist, sexist society, resulting in lived experiences distinct from men of their race group and White Americans of their sex category (Wade et al., 2021).

BFT acknowledges the intersecting systems of societal oppression that shape Black women's sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression (Junco & Limon, 2020). Furthermore, BFT historically and continuously argues that specific sexual stereotypes targeting Black women are used to justify and sustain interlocking systems of power (Cheeseborough et al., 2024). Race-based sexual stereotypes characterize Black women as sexually deviant beings, birthing children for personal economic gain, rationalizing sexual abuse, and strict reproductive regulations (Cheeseborough et al., 2024). With Black women less associated with the concept of the "typical woman," BFT disrupts and dismantles inaccurate and misleading societal dominant narratives perpetuating Black women's marginalization within the realms of sexuality and sexual wellness (American Psychological Association, 2020). BFT proved to be a vital theory for this proposed study

to support the comprehensive analysis of how Black women give meaning to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression, given existing race-based stereotypes.

Intersectionality Theory

Deriving from the works of Black feminist scholars, intersectionality theory argues that identities such as race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of difference intersect and reflect significant social structures of oppression and privilege, such as sexism, racism, and heteronormativity (Kelly et al., 2021). Intersectionality theory roots itself in the premise that multiple social positions actively influence human experience and cannot be understood by independently considering social positions (Kelly et al., 2021). With feminist and anti-racist intentions, *intersectionality* refers to simultaneous and interacting effects of multiple group categorization on individuals with minority status, leading to a public perception inconsistent with additive contributions (Bastia et al., 2022; Billups et al., 2022). Intersectionality theory additionally posits the disadvantages and limitations of considering a single axis of inequality, simultaneously advocating the advantages of considering multiple axes (Tinner et al., 2023). Intersectionality theory provides a significant perspective in conceptualizing the complex impact that race-based stereotypes have on the Black feminine experience.

Preceding research revealed that intersections of gender and racial/ethnic categories produce different stereotypic attributes in comparison to both racial/ethnic and gender categories (Cheeseborough et al., 2024). Cheeseborough et al. (2024) further noted growing research exploring and acknowledging unique intersecting gendered racist stereotypes that transcend the combination of racist stereotypes and sexist stereotypes. In

their thematic analytic study examining how Black and Latinx-identifying people residing in New York discuss similarities and differences in power and privilege related to their understanding of sexual stereotypes and associated consequences, Cheeseborough et al. found that intersectional sexual stereotypes related to sexual functioning and sexual behaviors may be historical or contemporary in nature, often perpetuated in the media. Intersectionality theory remains vital to this study's theoretical framework as it provides a framework to explore and analyze intersecting and overlapping oppressive systems that impact Black women's lived experience. Both BFT and intersectionality theory allow for a comprehensive conceptualization and in-depth analytical examination of the Black feminine experience and systemic, intersecting impacts on their understanding of sexual practice, sexuality, and authentic sexual expression.

Nature of the Study

This study employed the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, with the overarching goal of exploring the ways that Black women give meaning to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression, given existing race-based stereotypes. Phenomenological research emphasizes vivid experiences, perceived or interpreted by individuals, and aims to view and describe the world of their consciousness as the real world (Jang et al., 2022). The phenomenological approach allowed researchers to explore insights of others that were previously unlayered (Jang et al., 2022). Alsaigh and Coyne (2021) defined hermeneutics as the focus on the human experience as it is lived. The hermeneutics research methodology produced detailed textual descriptions of the experienced phenomena, where a deeper understanding of the meaning is sought through

progressively layered reflection while using rich descriptive language (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021).

This study also utilized an interpretive and constructivist research paradigm. Burns et al. (2022) posited that constructivist research methodologies are useful in discerning meanings of experience, subsequently informing and improving healthcare practice. Opara and Petrucka (2024) further noted that interpretive phenomenological research design allows researchers to capture and reveal unique meanings and interpretations of phenomena based on the intersubjective views of participants and researchers. This combined research paradigm encouraged an in-depth exploration of Black women's sexual narrative and sexual identity development.

This study's research tradition combined BFT and intersectionality theory. BFT grounds itself in a deep understanding of historical and gendered racial stereotypes (Lewis & Williams, 2023). It centers on Black women's voices and lived experiences and contributes to the oppression and marginalization of this studied demographic (Lewis & Williams, 2023). Intersectionality theory provides a scholarly language for examining interconnections and interdependencies between social categories and systems (Atewologun, 2018). Frequently associated with qualitative research methods, intersectionality theory provides a central voice to marginalized demographics, elicited through focus groups, narrative interviews, action research, and observations (Atewologun, 2018). The amalgamation of BFT and intersectionality theory provides an in-depth analysis required to deconstruct harmful race-based stereotypes that influence

their meaning-making related to the studied phenomenon and elevate accurate narratives that elevate healthy sexual autonomy among Black women.

Using purposive and targeted sampling, I, the primary researcher, recruited 10 Black-identifying women between the ages of 20 and 45 who have resided in the United States for a minimum of 15 years. I recruited prospective participants via social media platforms. I utilized an online screening questionnaire with the Microsoft Forms platform to ensure a thorough vetting process, reviewing all responses for study alignment before sending them an email invitation with instructions for subsequent steps. After reviewing the questionnaire responses and selecting participants, I contacted each participant, thanking them for their interest and willingness, and provided further steps for them to participate in the 60- to 90-minute semi-structured interview on Zoom at a time that works for both the researcher and participant.

I employed thematic data analysis, mostly aligning with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, to identify and analyze themes and patterns that emerge within the data set. I used a reflexive journal to increase rigor and trustworthiness throughout the data collection and analytical process. The approach and data analytical plan allow for a comprehensive examination of the meaning-making that Black women create regarding their studied lived experiences.

Definitions

This study utilized the following terms with accompanying definitions:

Sexual expression: Comprises various sexual and intimate behaviors, including but not limited to kissing, masturbation, orgasm, stimulation and arousal, erotic massage, and intercourse (Gianotten et al., 2021).

Sexual practice: Actions people define as sexual and their relationship to the architecture of society (Adriaenssens, 2020).

Sexuality: A central aspect of being human throughout one's life, and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. Experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles, and relationships (Macleod & McCabe, 2020).

Assumptions

This study assumed that each participant discusses current, voluntary sexual practices and experiences openly and honestly. This assumption cannot be proven, as participants may exaggerate, minimize, or withhold information due to experienced discomfort or social desirability bias. Considered one of the oldest forms of response bias, Teh et al. (2023) defined social desirability as the need to construct deceitful answers due to fear of perception or experienced discomfort related to their disclosure. This study also assumed that participants can recall present experiences related to the studied phenomenon with little to no difficulty. This assumption cannot be proven true due to memory fallibility. Howe and Knot (2015) describe that memory fallibility leads to participants omitting details, potentially causing data collection errors. This study assumed that both hermeneutic phenomenology and thematic analysis are the most

aligned methods to identify and examine themes and patterns that construct the meaning-making of each participant. This assumption cannot be impartially demonstrated due to the research approach's flexibility, allowing qualitative researchers to interpret the same data differently (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

Furthermore, the study assumed that BFT and intersectionality theory combined effectively conceptualize various sociocultural influences (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) that actively influence Black women's experience related to the studied phenomenon. This assumption cannot be proven as complete truth for every Black-identifying woman, as some may not personally identify or resonate with theoretical concepts due to significant variances in the Black woman's lived experience. Finally, this study assumed that the research sample size effectively achieves data saturation, providing abundance in diverse experiences. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) asserted that an approximate range of nine to seventeen interviews reaches saturation in qualitative research. This assumption cannot be proven due to increased interviews potentially leading to additional or conflicting information. The noted assumptions remain necessary to acknowledge for the following reasons: (1) eliminating the compromising of the study's validity, (2) ensures effective alignment between the participant's identified meaning-making processes and hermeneutical phenomenology, (3) solidifying the theoretical framework to support the interpretation of findings, and (4) ensures meaningful findings although from a small but diverse sample size of Black-identifying United States residing women.

Scope and Delimitations

This study explored the lived experiences of Black-identifying cisgender and LGBTQ+ women (ages 20-45) residing in the United States for a minimum of fifteen years, related to current voluntary sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression within historical, cultural, and systemic contexts. This study examined sociocultural influences (e.g., media, religion, cultural influences) that shape Black women's sexuality, potentially contributing to internalized shame, stunted sexual identity development, and established barriers restricting authentic sexual expression. This study employed a compound integration of BFT and intersectionality theory, effectively framing structural and identity-based influences on Black women's sexuality. Furthermore, using semi-structured interviews through the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, this study centered on Black women's personal narratives to uncover their in-depth meaning-making processes.

Preceding research reveals that Black women remain grossly underrepresented in sexuality and sexual health studies. Chandler et al. (2021) argued that Black women in the United States have historically been underrepresented in research and crucial societal discussions related to sexual and reproductive health. Building on this argument, Frederick et al. (2021) noted limited knowledge about Black college women's willingness to participate in sexual health research. Centering the Black woman's voice counteracts the long-standing dominant Eurocentric feminist perspective that often dismisses racialized and intersectional barriers impeding authentic sexual agency.

Black women within this age group represent critical development periods, where external sociocultural factors influence their understanding of sexual identity and sexual expression (Parmenter et al., 2022). Furthermore, the residency time requirement ensures that participants experience substantial exposure to U.S. sociocultural norms. This study explored Black monoracial identity within the studied phenomenon. Excluding biracial-identifying women removes added complex layers that may introduce confounding data. This study also excluded Transgender women due to their experiences significantly varying due to gender-related factors that exist outside of this study's scope, focusing on Black cisgender women. Finally, this study excluded women historically or currently engaging in a consensual or ethical non-monogamous (CNM/ENM) relationship due to the emergence of unique relational dynamics that necessitate separate exploration regarding sexual agency and relational structures.

Albeit briefly mentioned later, this proposed study did not employ sexual script theory as a theoretical framework component. While sexual script theory illuminates the social nature of sexual practices and identity construction, BFT and intersectionality theory more effectively explicate the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality (Cheesebrough et al., 2024; Healy-Cullen & Morison, 2024). This study excluded queer theory due to an integration in the selected sample size, and queer theory focuses on gender practices/identities and sexualities that exist outside of cisgender and heterosexual norms (Acadia, 2021). Finally, this study excluded attachment theory due to this study's emphasis on sociocultural influences impacting sexual identity and agency rather than relational and interpersonal psychology (Cherniak et al., 2021).

This study sought to achieve transferability rather than statistical generalizability by providing in-depth, substantive, and descriptive accounts of the Black woman experience related to the studied phenomenon, which may be transferable to Black women in an age range extending past this study's scope. The emerging themes related to insights and barriers may resonate with individuals of other racialized and marginalized groups experiencing similar gendered sexual oppression. Study findings may inform multiculturally competent policies and interventions uniquely suited for Black women and other women of color (WOC). Finally, this research may inform succeeding research examining sexuality in older Black women, LGBTQ+ sexuality studies, and Black women historically and currently engaging in CNM/ENM relational dynamics.

Limitations

Several notable limitations regarding research design and methodology appear evident when formulating this study. Although a phenomenological research approach allows participants to provide rich contextual insights into the studied phenomenon, findings may struggle to generalize to the larger Black population (Annisa, 2024). This study includes descriptive and detailed participant narratives to increase transferability. Furthermore, a small sample size ensures that only eligible participants contribute to the received data, providing accuracy and depth.

However, research affirmed that a significant limitation of a small sample size includes reducing the ability to generalize study findings to a broader population (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This study ensured rigorous participation selection and data saturation to strengthen validity. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, memory fallibility

may produce erroneous discrepancies, impacting the accuracy of responses when capturing participants' authentic lived experiences. Moreover, study findings may not apply to Black-identifying women outside of the selected age range, living outside of the United States, or engaging in consensual or ethical non-monogamous relationships. The primary researcher engaged in peer debriefing and maintained detailed audit trails to validate study findings.

Several potential biases may influence study outcomes when considering researcher positionality. As the primary researcher, I identify as a bisexual Black woman, currently married and working as a holistic trauma clinical practitioner. My intersections may subconsciously shape data interpretation. To effectively address these potential biases, I implemented bracketing, maintained a reflexivity journal, and consistently engaged in peer debriefing with my research committee, mentors studying Black feminist and sexuality research, and doctoral-level peers to challenge framed interpretations. Another potential bias involves social desirability, prompting participants to provide socially acceptable responses rather than genuine opinions or behaviors (Bispo Júnior, 2022). To address this potential bias, I conducted all interviews on the Zoom platform, allowing each participant to engage in their comfortable environment while building rapport using neutral and non-judgmental language. Finally, this study centered on the experiences of Black cisgender women, which does not capture the experiences of Trans and non-binary women or women engaging in consensual and ethical non-monogamy. Future studies can expand this study by examining broader gender and sexual identities within the Black diasporic community.

Significance

This study aimed to explore Black women's sexual practice, sexuality, and sexuality, an area of scholarship that remains underexplored (Friar, 2021). This study fills the necessary gaps that mainstream feminist scholarship fails to acknowledge concerning Black women's sexual agency. This study integrated BFT and intersectionality theory, theoretically framing the Black feminine sexual experience through an intersectional systemic lens and expounding upon current theoretical discourse. Additionally, this study examines the historical and contemporary influence of race-based sexual stereotypes impacting the sexual development of Black women. This study also scrutinized the role of media, Hip-Hop/Rap music, religion, respectability politics, and the silence culture plays in shaping Black women's sexual agency. Finally, this study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to center the Black woman's voice, focusing on their personal narratives that institute their meaning-making related to the studied phenomenon.

This proposed study offers in-depth multicultural insight for mental and sexual health practitioners. This study may also inform trauma-focused clinical practices by addressing internalized sexual shame, hypersexualization, and self-policing behaviors demonstrated by Black women. This study also supports sexual health educators in developing sex-based education tailored to Black women's sexual experiences. Furthermore, this study advocates for sexual education policy reformation to be more inclusive of Black women's experiences. This study also serves as a call to action for reproductive healthcare policymakers to consider racialized and systemic barriers

affecting the sexual health of Black women. Finally, this study spotlights the critical need for legal and policy reform addressing historical and contemporary media representation and sexual exploitation of Black women.

While challenging hypersexualized media portrayals and advocating for authentic Black feminine sexual expression, this study provides an increased representation of Black women's experiences in academic scholarship discourse related to sexuality studies. Ultimately, this study encourages open and stigma-free conversations about Black women's sexuality within the cultural community, empowering Black women to reclaim their sexual agency by challenging internalized stereotypes.

Summary

The historical hypersexualization of Black feminine sexuality continues to shape developed sexuality, marginalizing, exploiting, and erasing Black women's sexual expression. Race-based stereotypes (e.g., *Jezebel, Sapphire, Mammy*) continuously evolve, remaining embedded in media, policy, and social structures. This study magnified the Black woman's voice, centering their experiences related to the studied phenomenon. Additionally, this study acknowledged and addressed existing research gaps, ensuring the inclusion of Black women in discourse regarding sexuality and sexual health. The theoretical integration of BFT and intersectionality theory frames the analysis of how racism, sexism, and systemic oppression influence the shaping of their sexual identity development.

This study investigated the role of religion, respectability politics, and silence culture in the shaping of Black women's sexual agency by integrating media

representations. This study used the hermeneutical phenomenological approach to explore the meaning-making processes of the selected demographic through semi-structured interviews. The primary researcher utilized thematic analysis during data collection to identify emerging patterns related to sexual expression, repression, and resilience. The study's findings aim to inform mental health providers, sexual health educators, and reproductive health policymakers. Finally, this study reclaims Black women's sexual agency, challenging inaccurate and oppressive narratives and fostering empowerment and liberation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Race and gender intersections shape sexual identity and sexual practice among Black women, with race- and gender-based discrimination potentially leading to lower levels of self-worth and self-esteem due to pressures causing inhibitions in sexual expression (Bowleg et al., 2022). Crooks et al. (2019) asserted that historically rooted images (e.g., Jezebel, hypersexual slave) may contribute to increased sexual risk behaviors among Black girls, with little known about how girls interpret media messages and media, protect themselves from sexual risk, and consider their sexuality. Sexual risk behaviors include behavioral (e.g., sexual intercourse without contraception, sex work, and sexual partner violence) and affective subtypes (e.g., sexuality-related feelings of guilt/shame, relationship impairments), leading to psychosocial and health-related consequences (Jepsen et al., 2024). Hargons et al. (2021) found that Black-identifying women are hyper-visible through media representation, pornography, and sex work. Representations of Black-identifying women continue to evolve, oscillating between glorification and objectification, reflecting broader societal struggles within the race and gender intersection, directly influencing Black women's perspectives of their sexual identity and authentically expressed sexual practices (Eddington, 2020). Regardless of depictions related to Black women's hypersexuality, research describes this demographic as void of sexual pleasure and satisfaction, reflecting limited expectations of sexual satisfaction (Hargons et al., 2021).

Since the emergence of Hip-Hop, Black women's sexuality and subsequent correlation to their search for self-identity and self-control remain at the forefront of genre discourse (White, 2013). White (2013) also noted an emphatic focus on women artists' physical appearance and sexuality more than their talent and abilities. Veteran Black women rap artists initiated vital conversations concerning sexual pleasure, with contemporary Black women artists continuing to challenge societal norms and redefine Black women's sexuality (Lewis, 2024).

Through their unique use of musical lyrics and fashion aesthetics, contemporary Black women mainstream artists, such as Nicki Minaj and Missy Elliott, challenge stereotypical sexualized images that limit the sexual spectrum of the Black woman experience (Lewis, 2024). Elliott and Minaj demonstrate that sexual expression influences the way that young Black women experience sexuality and sexual expression. Furthermore, the influencing and shaping of young Black women's perceptions related to sexual agency may impact their levels of resilience and response to sexual assault and exploitation.

This chapter presents a thorough, exhaustive review of the literature relevant to this study. It commences with an outline of the search strategies used to synthesize the literature review. Subsequently, this chapter describes the theoretical framework that builds the study. The remainder of this chapter extensively discusses the following components: (a) sexual identity, (b) Black women's sexual practices, (c) Black women's sexual expression, and (d) sociocultural influences. The primary components are divided into subcomponents for maximum clarity and logical progression.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted an exhaustive, comprehensive review using the following databases and websites: Walden Library, Google Scholar, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis, Wiley, Sage Journals, and EBSCO. Search terms used with each database included the following: *Black women AND sexuality, Black women AND sexual health, Black women AND sexual expression, Black women AND race-based stereotypes, Black women AND sexual trauma, Black women AND sexual violence, LGBTQ+ discrimination, Black women AND sexual risk-taking behaviors, sexology AND sexual studies, Black women AND sexual identity development.* I used peer-reviewed and date filters between 2019 and 2024 when searching for articles using these keywords. I reviewed and organized articles using a reference manager software program. Afterward, I conducted a comprehensive literature analysis using the findings from this literature search.

Theoretical Foundation

This study grounds its framework on BFT and intersectionality theory. BFT emphasizes the unique experiences of Black women and how they collectively define Blackness and womanhood while navigating multisystemic factors of oppression (Brantley, 2023; Wade et al., 2022). Intersectionality theory expands this framework by examining the influential intersections of different social categories (e.g., race, sex). By combining and integrating both theories, this study aimed to explore the varying forms of marginalization impacting the lives of African American or Black-identifying women.

Black Feminist Theory

BFT examines interlocking oppressive factors that contribute to a unique lived experience, distinct from Black men and White women (Wade et al., 2022). In 1833, Maria W. Stewart, considered America's first Black Feminist, addressed the African Masonic Hall, identifying the causal relationship between poverty, race, class, and gender oppression and challenging Black women to reject the negative portrayal of Black womanhood (Cabell, 2024). Stewart further conceptualized the slavery and oppression of Black women committed by the U.S. systemic slavery and oppression into three components: (a) the exploitation of Black women's labor as necessary for U.S. capitalism, (b) the denial of Black women's rights and privileges and (c) the controlled narratives of Black women as breeders, jezebels, and mammies (Cabell, 2024). Stewart also argued that these dimensions created a system of social control intended to perpetuate the oppression of Black women, suppress their ideas, inhibit their intellect, and protect the worldview and interests of the White elite (Cabell, 2024). BFT rejects the common assertion of capitalism as the "natural" order, crucial to the elevation of White men (Zee Xaymaca, 2022).

Black Feminist Theory Origin

The origins of BFT trace back to the era of slavery. In her book *Women, Race, and Class: Institutionalized Slave Norms*, Angela Davis described the ways that the implementation of institutionalized slavery created deeply rooted racial and gendered norms characterizing Black women as hypersexual and subjugated (Davis, 1981). Davis

(1981) noted that the slave system defined Black people as chattel, with Black women increasingly appraised for their fertility or lack thereof.

Considered breeders with monetary value based on their ability to reproduce, the status of enslaved Black women increased their risk of exposure to sexual coercion (Conway, 2021; Davis, 1981). Enslavers used sexual coercion and rape as weapons of repression and domination, with the covert intent of extinguishing slave women's will to resist (Davis, 1981, p. 23). If enslaved women resisted, they were frequently thrown into prison, where they experienced further victimization (Davis, 1981, p.90). Sexual victimization by law enforcement officials continued with sexual attacks on Black women during the Memphis Riots in 1866 and well into the 1970s decade (Avalos, 2023; Davis, 1981, p. 176). Viewed as "loose women" and "whores," Black women's cries and reports of rape lacked legitimacy, with Black women rape victims finding little, if any, sympathy from the judiciary and law enforcement officials (Davis, 1981, p. 173).

Davis (1981) also noted that, during the first wave of the suffrage movement, White women joined the abolitionist movement due to outrage at the sexual assaults inflicted on Black women yet often failed to grasp the complexity of the slave woman's condition. Feminist slave abolitionists assumed that the absolution of slavery automatically elevated Black people to a position in the United States comparable to that of middle-class White women (Davis, 1981). When considering the passing and ratification of the 19th Amendment, convention leaders discounted, muted, and ignored the voices of Black women in debates, decisions, and deliberations (Conway, 2021). During the 1899 National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA), suffragists

invoked the felt duty to the women of owned territories (Guam, Philippines, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico) (Davis, 1980). However, they omitted the Black woman's appeal for a Jim Crow resolution (Davis, 1980).

Black Feminist Theory & Second-Wave Feminism

From the Reconstruction Era, Davis (1980) established a historical pattern of Black women household workers that considered sexual abuse perpetrated by the "man of the house" as one of their significant occupational hazards, forced to choose between sexual submission and devastating poverty for themselves and their family (p. 91). The second wave of the feminist movement began in the late 1960s, gaining momentum throughout the decade (Marino & Ware, 2022). Contrary to the common belief that the second-wave feminist movement targeted all women, aiming to eradicate inequality and discrimination, many minority groups were excluded, including women of color, immigrant women, and lesbian-identifying women (Reicher, 2023). Reicher (2023) further argued that the second-wave feminist movement held racist ideologies, as it spearheaded and mainstreamed White women due to its structural code of hegemonic feminism. Ideas related to the interconnection of personal feelings with the political sphere began with the slogan, "The personal is political," initially coined by Carol Hanisch's literary work *The Personal is Political* in 1970 (Reicher, 2023, p. 1).

Hanisch's coined slogan emphasized the daily experiences of gender discrimination intrinsically linked to societal nature (Reicher, 2023). In 1974, Barbra Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier founded the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a radical Black Queer feminist organization aimed at combatting the

omnipresence of capitalist, heterosexist patriarchal white supremacists in society by establishing a socialist agenda that effectively conveys the unique oppressive experiences faced by Black women (Gnassi, 2019). Active in Boston, Massachusetts, from 1974-1980, the CRC began as a Black feminist organization influential in institutionalizing black feminism and marked the ideological distinguishment between black and white feminism (Brewer, 2020). The CRC Statement, released in 1977, argued that the liberation and freedom of Black women necessitates destroying all oppressive systems (Gnassi, 2019). In their statement, the CRC coined the term "identity politics," referring to politics based on categories rooted in religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, gender, and sexuality in contrast to class-based movements (Sinha, 2022). Although BFT contains an extensive history associated with anti-racist feminist activity, Black feminist scholars introduced an intellectual framework during the third-wave feminist movement tied to social justice and advocacy that accounted for how power systems intersect to produce inequality.

Black Feminism and Third-Wave Feminism

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black feminism emerged as a response to the idiosyncratic experiences of Black women within American society and, to a lesser degree, other nations (Garcia, 2023). The term "black feminism" emerged in the late 1960s amid various social identity movements of the era (Garcia, 2023). *Intersectionality* remains a central concept within this theoretical realm (Garcia, 2023). Garcia (2023) further asserted that this term acknowledges that power, privilege, and oppression flow in multiple directions, often based on a combination of variables (e.g., class and sexuality).

The third-wave feminist paradigm arose to address the inadequacies of the preceding feminist waves (Finneman & Volz, 2020). The cornerstone of third-wave feminism posited that gender roles are socially constructed, and both men and women possess significant diversity based on multiple variables, thus consisting of "multiple femininities" or "multiple masculinities" (Garcia, 2023).

Finneman and Volz (2020) characterized this feminist wave as a rebellion against second-wave mothers, representing an ideological contrast from the women's liberation movement that peaked in the 1960s but declined in the early 1980s. The foundational framing of the third-wave feminist movement began with Anita Hill's 1991 testimony to the Supreme Court regarding sexual harassment accusations against then-Supreme Court Justice nominee Clarence Thomas, giving the moment significant momentum (Finneman & Volz, 2020). By testifying during Justice Thomas's confirmation hearing about the sexual harassment endured, Hill shifted societal understandings of sexual violence (Buisker, 2024). Buisker (2024) further argued that contemporary coverage of Hill's account conveniently constructs these event memories through a lens that upholds White Supremacy, further rendering her racial intersection absent. Expressing anger at Justice Thomas's victory and men's sexual harassment and treatment of women, Yale student Rebecca Walker coined the term "third wave" in her 1992 essay *Becoming the Third Wave* (Finneman & Volz, 2020).

Third-wave feminism also encouraged women to rethink gendered topics (e.g., multicultural, queer, and transgender rights; Kark & Buengeler, 2024). The third-wave feminist perspective aimed to dismantle the social system of dichotomous categorization,

implementing fluid, non-gendered social order as an inclusive alternative (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). Kark and Buengeler (2024) further suggested that gender rebellion expands one's thinking by emphasizing the intersecting sources of oppression and inequality, transcending the dichotomous binary of "male" and "female". Emerging within the last decade, fourth-wave feminism emphasizes online feminism, sexual violence and rape against women, and more complex aspects of intersectionality (Kark & Buengeler, 2024).

Black Feminism and Fourth-Wave Feminism

The fourth-wave feminist movement, popularly termed "hashtag feminism," materialized as a reaction to the discrimination and aggression against women and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Strauss, 2023). Fourth-wave feminism also grew as a response to anti-emancipatory discourses and social practices in various countries worldwide (Strauss, 2023). Given technological advancements, fourth-wave feminism, with its focus on intersectionality and diversity, became adept at creating solidarity among women and with people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Strauss, 2023). Although the boundaries concerning fourth-wave feminism remain fluid, Gardiner et al. (2019) identified three distinguishing features highlighting a significant misalignment between institutional policies and contemporary feminist policies: (a) increasing public discourse on feminist issues to challenge sexism and misogyny, (b) advancing broad-based collective activism through digital media, and (c) attending to diverse contexts and intersectional differences. Expanding upon preceding feminist waves, the fourth wave creates a bridge between theory and practice, allowing for

collective action established in the second wave while building upon insights gained from the third wave (Gardiner et al., 2019). Therefore, fourth-wave feminism creates contemporary discourse influenced by various diverse perspectives and viewpoints, cognizant of local and global injustices (Gardiner et al., 2019).

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Social media amplifies women's voices, serving as an innovative means of organizing campaigns against issues concerning inequality and social justice (Amanova, 2021). Based on "call-out culture", fourth-wave feminism encourages the radical questioning of misogynist and sexist culture, pervading public communication and the microphysics of interpersonal relationships with political language immediately recognizable by the general population (Peroni et al., 2020). Fourth-wave feminism, integrating intersectional, intergenerational, and transnational attitudes, institutes a new way of questioning the relationship between law, state, and citizenship rights (Peroni et al., 2020). With the fourth-wave feminist focus including intersectionality and inclusivity on a global level, Black Feminist Theory delves deeper into the systematic challenges that create nuanced experiences faced by Black women, offering a more specified insight and a crucial lens through which to conceptualize the interconnection of race, sex, class, and other intersecting identities within both historical and contemporary contexts.

Black Feminist Theory and Contemporary Considerations

Several contemporary issues remain prevalent related to BFT, leading to the increased need to address social intersections, creating isolated oppressive experiences for Black/African American women sub-demographics. Relevant issues include the continuous navigation of disparities within healthcare and the under- and misrepresentation in media and pop culture. Chinn et al. (2021) argue that existing health disparities largely reflect inequalities experienced by Black women on varying social and economic measures. Chinn et al. further propounded that Black women remain the center of public health emergencies, resulting from the historical accumulation of disadvantages

spread across generations. Preceding research demonstrates the effects of racial, gender, and socioeconomic stratification as nonadditive, resulting in the most significant racial inequalities in health among women and those with higher levels of socioeconomic status (Homan et al., 2021). These factors compound each other rather than operate exclusively, creating nuanced experiments for Black/African American women to navigate.

Another prevalent concern pertains to the under- and misrepresentation of Black women in media and pop culture. Eurocentric ideologies perpetuate misrepresentations of women of color, making racial and ethnic differences more accepted in a hostile societal environment (Schutte, 2023). Schutte (2023) further contended that false stereotypes of women of color in commodified images give the perception that non-White women possess an insatiable sexual appetite, exhibit primitive behaviors, and acquire less societal value compared to their White counterparts. Prior research evinced that the stereotypical portrayal of Black women leads to consequences of lower self-esteem and a negative perception of gender and sexual and interpersonal relationships (Jean et al., 2022). When assessing media use, Jean et al. (2022) noted that Black Americans used media more frequently than their White counterparts, even after controlling for socioeconomic status. In their quantitative study examining the relationship between exposure to stereotypical media images and appraisal, Jean et al. (2022) found a significant positive correlation between frequent exposure to stereotypical images and appraisal.

The race-based sexual stereotypes addressed in this study include the following: the *Jezebel,* the *Mammy,* the *Sapphire,* the *Matriarch,* and the *Welfare Queen*. Bond et al.

(2021) asserted that early American society created a devalued, diminished perception of Black women with the creation of race-based stereotypes. Melson-Silimon (2024) argued that American society created race-based stereotypes to reinforce and uphold oppressive societal and capitalist systems. The *Jezebel* archetype, one of the most prominent race-based, sexualized stereotypes negatively impacting the Black woman experience, revolves around Black women often portrayed as innately promiscuous and predatory (Bond et al., 2021). Bond et al. (2021) also noted the contemporary reference for the *Jezebel* trope as "thot*."* Contrarily, the *Mammy* stereotype describes an overweight Black woman appearing as a selfless, loyal, asexual, and servile maternal figure, commonly depicted in a kitchen or nursery (Nanda, 2019). In their research reframing Black women's sexuality from the "Mammy/Hottentot" bind, Nanda (2019) argued that both contradictory stereotypes serve three primary purposes: (a) mask the truth about racial, economic, and sexual exploitation of Black women in the ante- and post-antebellum American society, (b) maintain Black women subjugation, and (c) further oppress and restrict Black women of available growth opportunities.

Salisu (2021) defined *Black matriarchy* as the tenacity of Black women to occupy a centralized role in their families. American society also portrayed the Black matriarch as sexually aggressive and controlling, also deemed antithetical to the white male interest (Salisu, 2021). Although the Black matriarch was not an invention of the dominant group, it was an attempt to diminish the reality of the Black women's status by diluting their image with historical and semantic inaccuracies (Salisu, 2021). In their phenomenological study exploring how single and older Black women understand their

sexuality in the context of their matriarchal role, Salisu (2021) argued that the Black matriarch paradox exemplified their struggle as they attempt to balance expectations of occupied societal roles and their own identity as a sexual being.

Moran (2020) defined the perception of the *welfare queen* as a breeder of children immersed in an impoverished culture, disinterested in their children's well-being. The *welfare queen* stereotype satirically ridiculed the unbridled sexuality of single and unmarried Black women with multiple children, deriding them for depending on the welfare state and affirmative action for upkeep (Nanda, 2019). During Ronald Regan's 1976 bid for the Republican presidential nomination, the *welfare queen* stereotype provided a narrative of racialized mothering that became the national story of public and government dependence (Kim, 2021, p. 1). The narrative of dependence, formally characterized by political slogans, such as President George H.W. Bush's "cross-generational dependency," "the commonly invoked welfare as a way of life," and President Clinton's administration slogan of "end of welfare as we know it," vitally shaped societal divestment with persisting social inequality (Kim, 2021, p. 1). The *welfare queen* stereotype continuously impacts the sexual experience of Black women by perpetuating harmful societal narratives, leading to further ingrained stigma and internalized shame.

These implications address the effects of harmful media exposure and other race-related stressors on Black women's mental health and well-being. In their study examining the social determinants of Black American women's success in health promotion programs, Wade et al. (2022) asserted that intersecting oppressive outcomes

create chronic psychological stress relating to adverse health outcomes such as depression and anxiety symptoms. By examining the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class, the Black feminist theory approach promotes the psychological well-being of Black women, further fostering liberation, empowerment, and healing (Cabell, 2024).

Intersectionality Theory

Over the past twenty years, intersectionality theory has served as a foundational praxis between law and social science (Al-Faham et al., 2019). Initially coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality theory describes the convergence and overlapping of individual characteristics, such as race, class, and gender (Carbado & Harris, 2019). intersectionality theory also posits that social positions on a hierarchy of social power are not independent but jointly shape the human experience (Bauer et al., 2021). Bauer et al. (2021) further postulated that as social positions intersect at the individual level (e.g., race and gender), larger interpersonal and structural systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, influence those experiences.

Intersectionality Theory Origin and Evolution

The origins of intersectionality theory date back to the early movement of Black feminism, preluded by Sojourner Truth's speech, "*Ain't I a Woman,"* delivered in 1851 (Elaine Muirhead et al., 2020). In Truth's speech, she used her experience and identity as a Black woman to deconstruct the idea that gender, race and ethnicity, class, and sexuality are mutually exclusive (Muirhead et al., 2020).

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) also proved to be a significant influence on establishing and implementing intersectionality theory. In their 1982 statement, the CRC argued that sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia were interlocking systems of oppression requiring interwoven solutions to dismantle each structure (Muirhead et al., 2020). Intersectionality theory describes elements associated with privilege and hierarchy, with women of color experiencing interlocking forms of oppression due to their simultaneous memberships in minority gender, race, and ethnic groups (Muirhead et al., 2020). Intersectionality theory also explicitly acknowledges power, oppression, inequality, and social exclusion, with meaning and significance varying across space and time, varying in social contexts, cultures, and historical periods (Muirhead et al., 2020). Adopting a nonadditive and nonmultiplicative approach, intersectionality theory conceptualizes the connection of micro and macro-level oppressions, consequently producing health inequalities with Black women.

Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality theory* to highlight the uniqueness of the Black woman experience, rendering them unprotected by the law (Stanton et al., 2022). Crenshaw coined the term, influenced by the case *Moore v. Hughes Helicopters* (Carbado & Crenshaw, 2019). In this case, both the district and appellate courts rejected Moore's attempt to certify a class of plaintiffs that included a White woman because the Black woman plaintiff never claimed discrimination as a woman but only as a *Black* woman (Carbado & Crenshaw, 2019). The evolution of intersectionality theory includes three primary assumptions: (a) recognizing that individuals possess simultaneous characterizations based on their membership in multiple social categories,

(b) dynamics related to power and power interrelations are embedded within each social category, and (c) all social categories possess individual and contextual facets (Arnoud et al., 2023). Despite the extensive history of intersectionality in women and gender studies, Kelly et al. (2021) noted that current health research lacks substantial focus on intersectionality theory, increasing the challenge of integrating this theoretical concept across many health disciplines. Research describes intersectionality theory as an essential theoretical framework that addresses health issues and their impact on vulnerable populations (Tinner et al., 2023). Vohra-Gupta et al. (2023) posited that people with multiple disadvantaged statuses experience poorer health outcomes than those with a single disadvantaged status. Increasingly employed within the public and mental health arenas, intersectionality offers excellent potential to combat health inequalities that vulnerable demographics face (Holman et al., 2021). Although aimed to combat the exclusion experienced in the second wave of feminism, intersectionality theory research presently adapts to consider multiple "axes" of power and difference that influence the positionalities of individuals within this sub-demographic (Rice et al., 2019).

Intersectionality Theory and Contemporary Considerations

Contemporary dilemmas related to intersectionality theory continue to reflect evolving and continuous challenges addressing multiple and overlapping forms of systemic subjugation. Said contemporary dilemmas include the legal acknowledgment of intersectional discrimination, the intersectional influence of LGBTQ+ rights, and unequal disparities faced in healthcare. Tinner and Curbelo (2024) noted that previous research evinced that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and those experiencing

poverty have an increased likelihood of mental health difficulties. Within this context, discrimination refers to the prejudiced treatment of individuals or groups solely based on membership in a subordinated social group arising from struggles of power and privilege (Tinner & Curbelo, 2024). Tinner and Curbelo further postulated that discriminatory experiences related to one's gender may operate as a potential contributor to psychological or emotional challenges in girls.

Intersectionality also provides a salient framework to conceptualize the unique discrimination faced by Black women who also identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. In their study evaluating discrimination and violence faced by homeless LGBTQ+ youth, Côté et al. (2024) noted that discriminatory behaviors stem from systems of oppression, such as biphobia, sexism, and racism. Some members of the LGBTQ+ community also experience isolation and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community based on the same oppressive systems (Parmenter et al., 2021). Parmenter et al. (2021) further asserted that emerging LGBTQ+ adults may experience higher rates of strained identity development due to experiences of victimization, social isolation, harassment from social support, and greater systems of oppression within the hetero-dominant culture, subsequently increasing their risk for adverse mental health outcomes.

Although scant literature exists analyzing the varying risks of suicidality by gender, age, and race/ethnicity, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals experience elevated suicide risk (Ramchand et al., 2022). In their study examining past-year suicide thoughts, plans, and attempts among adult respondents to the 2015-2019 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health, Ramchand et al. (2022) found suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts

more common among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in almost every race/ethnicity and age category relative to corresponding heterosexual adults. Study results further found that bisexual women are more likely to report suicidal thoughts compared to lesbian and gay women (Ramchand et al., 2022). In a later study, Enno et al. (2022) argued that identity development theories unsuccessfully capture the experiences of ethnic and sexual minorities, particularly when measuring intersectional identity development of ethnically diverse sexual minorities.

Lastly, intersectionality theory examines unequal healthcare disparities, underscoring factors such as race, sexual identity, and socioeconomic status, creating unique challenges for individuals of marginalized communities. Constante et al. (2020) posited that while research on healthcare inequalities focuses on whether marginalized groups are granted equitable access to care, limited research emphasizes the intersections of race and other social statuses that shape the difficulty in accessing health services. Significant health inequalities also exist between men and women, with women experiencing higher rates of morbidity (Bambra, 2022). Complementing this study and further confirming the persisting health disparities in and among countries, Borras (2021) found that in the United States, the Black-White life expectancy gap for males/women was 7.5/5.6 years between 2014-2016. Present-day research demonstrates the crucial need for further nuanced research addressing the amalgamated effects of race, gender, sexual identity, and socioeconomic status as they pertain to health outcomes, further exemplifying how systemic inequalities persist across varying aspects of healthcare access and delivery.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

A combination of historical, cultural, and scientific frameworks has extensively influenced human sexuality exploration. With the implementation of organizations such as the Kinsey Institute, the conceptualization of human sexual behavior significantly advanced from its conception point. Scholars initially defined the term *sexuality* as the quality of being sexual, related to the masculine and feminine (Dau, 2019). Navarro-Prado et al. (2023) affirmed that sexuality is experienced and lived individually, predicated on numerous aspects, including biological, economic, cultural, and religious factors. Although multiculturalism has advanced the realm of sexuality studies, research continuously fails to capture the intersectional convergence of Black women, contributing to their experienced oppression (Hargons et al., 2021). While existing literature focuses on either race or sex, Bisexual Black women remain underrepresented.

History of Sexology and Sexual Science

Although ancient Greek philosophers acquired vast information about human sexual behavior, they lacked a term to conceptualize the referenced behavior (Clarke, 2021). In the late 18th century and early 19th century, Western European sexual scientists established the concept of sexual instinct as an evolutionary force, serving a reproductive purpose and impacting human societal, social, moral, and cultural development (Fisher & Funke, 2023). In the establishment of sexology and sexuality studies, sexual scientists perceived human sexuality as shaped by powerful sexual instinct or impulse (Fisher & Funke, 2023). The history of sexology and sexuality studies begins in the 1840s with Richard von Krafft-Ebing's and Sigmund Freud's works (Fisher & Funke, 2023). Krafft-

Ebing's book *Psychopathia Sexualis* established the framework for the scientific study of human sexuality by inventing words like "bisexuality," "exhibitionism," and "sadism," with the latter of the three terms currently used in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Von Krafft-Ebing further theorized sexual impulse or instinct as the most vital driver of moral development, allowing humanity to maintain its "highest virtues" (Fisher & Funke, 2023). Following von Krafft-Ebing's work, Freud acknowledged that the drive for pleasure can be void of purpose or goal (Fisher & Funke, 2023). However, when faced with the diversity of individualistic expressions of sexual desire, sexual scientists struggled to maintain taxonomic schemes that allowed them to classify behaviors as healthy or pathological (Fisher & Funke, 2023). Fisher and Funke (2023) postulated that early engagement with sexual instinct demonstrates centrality to the emergence of the sexology field.

Aiming to uncover and assess the mysteries of the human condition through the law of erotic life, Sexology scholars such as Karl-Maria Kertbeny, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Karl Ulrichs established terms such as "heterosexuality," "homosexuality," and "bisexuality," currently and widely used to identify sexual categorization (Dau, 2019). Jannsen (2021) noted the earliest use of the terms "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" in a letter draft to Karl Ulrichs Kertbeny. In two anonymous 1869 pamphlets, Kertbeny used the terms *normalsexualismus* and *normalsexualität* to distinguish homosexuality and heterosexuality (Jannsen, 2021). In early sexology and adjacent fields, scholars widely debated whether sexuality was inborn,

thus unchangeable, or shaped by external influences (Beccalossi et al., 2023). Eager to explore causative factors, Freud included family dynamics and exposure to “obscene” literature and art (Beccalossi et al., 2023).

Freud theorized that sexual nonconformity was the product of individuals being “held back” in their sexual development (Beccalossi et al., 2023). Similarly, Ellis theoretically associated homosexuality with “arrested development” and a “primitive ancestral phase” (Beccalossi et al., 2023). Freud further emphasized the significance of sexual desire in driving human behavior, believing that repressed sexual desires universally lead to psychological distress (Beccalossi et al., 2023). Despite the initial success of psychoanalysis, Freud received tremendous criticism, with detractors accusing him of an overemphasized focus on sex (Beccalossi et al., 2023). Further criticism of Freud’s theories, such as the Oedipal Complex and the Tripartite Theory, argued the lack of generalizability and reinforcing gender stereotypes and heteronormativity (Beccalossi et al., 2023). Freud held a bias against women, which remained pronounced in his psychoanalytic theories and clinical findings.

In his Penis Envy theory, one component of the Freudian Psychosexual Development Theory, Freud concluded that girls, already believing themselves to be castrated, lack the same incentives as their male peers to achieve morality, consequently seeking love and restored self-esteem through a man’s love and procreating children (Schafer, 2019). Freud’s perspective directly ties to the 19th-century pathologization of women, specifically concerning the hysteria diagnosis (Mancini et al., 2022). Freud further believed that women developed hysteria to recognize and overcome *the castration*

complex (Mancini et al., 2022). However, Mancini et al. (2022) asserted that hysteria became a way to mentally pathologize everything that men deemed mysterious and unmanageable in women. These notions positioned women as internally deficient, perpetuating biases that influenced psychoanalytic theory and cultural perceptions of gender. While Freudian practitioners believed in the connection between repressed sexual desires and experienced psychological distress, Jungian psychologists argued that sexual desire was one component of a broader human desire called "Life Energy" (Beccalossi et al., 2023).

The works of Elizabeth Osgood and Goodrich Willard popularized the term *sexology* in the United States (Kahan, 2020). American Phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler coined *sexual science* in 1852 (Kahan, 2020). Kahan (2020) further annotated that before the Kinsey period, archives of American sexology received scant attention. During the late 1940s, as the United States quickly became the center of each prominent field within modern human sciences, Alfred Kinsey became synonymously associated with the North American brand of sexual research (Sutton, 2020). Kinsey's most well-known publications, "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" and "Sexual Behavior in the Human Female," published respectively in 1948 and 1953, built upon prevalent 1940s research that focused on marital sexuality and included research on homosexuality, masturbation, extramarital activity, exhibitionism, incest, public sex, and bestiality (Brickell, 2020, p. 281).

In his published posthumous essay, Kinsey argued that science obliged sexology researchers to study human sexuality in ways that rejected all forms of moralism

(Brickell, 2020, p. 282). Unlike their German-based sexologist counterparts, American-based sexologists primarily focused on reproduction and enhancing marital sexual relations (Leng & Sutton, 2021). American Sexologist Benjamin Kahan argued that American sexologists were among the first to develop modern scientific theories of gender norms (Leng & Sutton, 2021; Kahan, 2020). The late 1960s brought a transformative shift in perspective related to sex, family, relationships, and gender roles (Benadusi, 2020; Lorenzo, 2020). A new American consensus emerged focusing on two points: (a) women's sexual lives remained important past their youth, and (b) women's sexual pleasure increased in their middle age (Paris, 2020).

By the early 1970s, sexologists and sociologists reported a significant shift in the sexual attitudes and practices of young people, leading to extended foreplay, a greater variety of sexual positions, and the use of marijuana in the context of sexual activity (Paris, 2020). Paris (2020) also noted that LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to express their sexuality in the wake of the social movement. Experiencing their sexual revolution, middle-aged and older Americans increasingly challenged the misconstrued notion that age equated to asexuality, with scholars further suggesting that the act of sex was physically and emotionally rejuvenating (Paris, 2020).

As sexual attitudes and practices continued to shift throughout the 1960s and 1970s, research discerned the influence of racial and cultural backgrounds on the development of sexual behaviors and experiences. The multicultural movement in sexual science gained propulsion following significant landmark events, such as the Stonewall Riots. In 1969, LGBTQ+ members fought against the frequent law enforcement raids,

marking the transition from homophile activism to gay liberation (Rupp et al., 2023). Prior to the Stonewall Riots, police brutally raided gay bars due to systematic discrimination, and during this period, the American Psychiatric Association continued to deem homosexuality a mental illness (Kapetanakes, 2024; Varga et al., 2019). The pathologization of sexuality reinforced stigmatic and marginalized practices within the LGBTQ+ community, causing field activists such as Charles Silverstein to challenge societal norms and current scientific frameworks (Kapetanakes, 2024). Amid societal shifts, feminist and social activist scholars such as Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Collins described the nuanced discrimination experienced by Black women, battling homophobia and navigating systemic racism within the LGBTQ+ community and society at large.

Sexual Science and Multiculturalism

Although the Stonewall Riot events and subsequent LGBTQ+ activism highlighted the pervasive issues of sexual freedom and liberation, these occurrences simultaneously acknowledged the specific need for a more refined understanding of how the intersections of race, class, and gender influence the daily lived experiences of Black women. In the second edition of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Collins (1999), Collins argued that the perception of heterosexuality as dominant not only harms Bisexual and Lesbian identifying Black women but also justifies the subjugation of Black women's sexuality. Collins's framework underscored the challenges Black women experience in feminist and

LGBTQ+ spaces, contributing to them remaining overlooked and requiring more inclusive approaches.

Soled et al. (2022) described the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality as multidimensional concepts often conflated, misunderstood, and politicized. Several considerations remain applicable when conceptualizing LGBTQ+ identities. Firstly, identities remain fluid, potentially changing throughout one's lifetime (Soled et al., 2022). Secondly, identities are not singular, but individuals may simultaneously have multiple sexual and gender identities (Soled et al., 2022). Lastly, self-reported identification defines identities (Soled et al., 2022). *LGB* terminology gained traction in the 1980s, with research increasing in prevalence in the 1990s (Thelwall et al., 2023).

The term "LGBTQ+," used in the United States, describes the identities of individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (Cooper et al., 2020). The LGBTQ+ acronym comprises three dimensions: sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual development, with wide variations and diversity of expression (Ceatha et al., 2021). Sexual orientation encompasses identification, behavior, and attraction (Ceatha et al., 2021). Gender identity refers to one's internal sense of gender as male, female, or non-binary, which may not align with their assigned sex at birth (Ceatha et al., 2021). Sexual development describes a spectrum of variations occurring within humanity (Ceatha et al., 2021). The primary gender and sexual identities include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (Cooper et al., 2020; Coyt, 2020).

Tara Coyt defined the term *lesbian* as a homosexual girl or woman who is solely sexually, emotionally, and romantically attracted to people of the same sex (Coyt, 2020).

The term *gay* refers to males and women who are sexually, emotionally and romantically attracted to people of the same sex (Coyt, 2020). The term *bisexual* refers to an individual with the capacity to be sexually, romantically, and emotionally attracted to both sexes (Coyt, 2020). The term *transgender* describes an individual's gender identity rather than their sexuality or sexual orientation, referring to a gender identity opposite to the gender that society expects them to exhibit (Coyt, 2020). Finally, the term *queer* or *questioning* may refer to a person's sexual or gender identity, depending on context (Coyt, 2020).

Coyt (2020) noted that, within the context of *questioning*, the *Q* refers to an individual attempting to ascertain a label best describing their sexual or gender identity. Beginning in the 1980s, some members of the LGB community reclaimed the term *queer*, making it a symbol of rebellion and a celebration of sexual diversity (Worthen, 2023). The term *queer* has also become synonymously associated with social justice activism (Worthen, 2023). Holding a political rather than academic meaning, *queer* became used in activist circles to describe a collective group that confronted the prejudices implied in the term's pejorative use (Goldberg et al., 2020).

Goldberg et al. (2020) further noted that the roots of the term *queer* have evolved from its original meaning. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, people used this term in a pejorative manner to describe persons engaging in same-sex relationships or holding those desires (Goldberg et al., 2020). Within contexts of academic and social communities, *queer* surfaced as a social and personal identity, defined by the rejection of binary categories of sexuality and gender (Goldberg et al., 2020). The "+" sign acknowledges the inclusion of other gender identities and sexual orientations.

Approximately 25% of Black women residing in the United States identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (Page et al., 2022). In their study exploring the identity-related experiences of biracial and multiracial adults within the context of health and well-being, Williams et al. (2022) argued that existing racial/ethnic minority research often excludes bisexual experience, with limited research taking a monolithic approach. Furthermore, preceding research failed to conceptualize and address the unique experiences and nuanced needs of bisexual individuals (Williams et al., 2022). Page et al. (2022) argued that research on Black sexual-minority women (SMW) demonstrates ongoing exclusions and marginalizations experienced in sexual- and gender-diverse (SGD) communities due to the long-standing tradition of centering the needs and experiences of White gay men. Moreover, Page et al. (2022) asserted that both Black women and sexual-minority women (SMW) generally experience poorer psychological health than their White and heterosexual counterparts.

Considered the largest racial group in the sexual minority community, Black SMWs frequently report high psychological distress, lower psychological health, and less social well-being (Thorpe et al., 2022). Compared to White SMW and Black heterosexual women, Black SMW experience increased risk for substance abuse, further holding significant psychological and health implications (Matsuzaka et al., 2023). Matsuzaka et al. (2023) attributed the increased risk to Black SMW coping with minority stress at the center of racism, sexism, and heroism. Matsuzaka et al. (2023) further asserted that Black SMW contend with distal stressors, facing heterosexist and racist victimization that may result in internalizing stigma or disparaging attitudes and beliefs related to their racial and

sexual identities. In addition to the continuous research exclusions and marginalization noted by Page et al. (2022), psychology research also lacks focus on social well-being, including investigations of risk factors and facilitators of social well-being and mental health (Thorpe et al., 2022). Despite research advancements, there remains a notable gap in conceptualizing how intersectional factors, such as race, sex, and gender identity, uniquely influence the psychological and social well-being of Black SMWs.

The Black Woman Experience

Although intersectionality and Black feminist ideologies gained traction in psychological and sexual science research, Cerezo et al. (2020) noted the existing gap related to the influence of intersectionality on identity formation for individuals with multiple minority statuses, specifically among Women of Latinx and African American descent. Thorpe et al. (2022) asserted that research focusing on social well-being continuously overlooks Black SMW, leading to higher reports of life stressors, poorer psychological health, and less social well-being. Research estimated that almost seven percent identify as sexually diverse, with approximately 25% of Black cisgender women residing in the United States identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (Soled et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2022). Three types of minority stress experienced by Black SMWs include internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and prejudiced events, which carry more immense health burdens than daily life stressors (Thorpe et al., 2022).

Heterosexism further compounds and exacerbates these issues experienced by Black SMWs by reinforcing societal structures that marginalize non-heteronormative identities and ideologies. In the seminal literary text *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia

Collins (2004) contended that heterosexism, with its ideas about what constitutes normal and deviant sexuality, holds sway to the point where significant gaps exist in literature concerning human sexuality. Jun (2024) defined *heterosexism* as the system granting implicit or explicit advantages (e.g., power, privilege, control) to those identifying as heterosexual than those who identify as non-heterosexual. Collins (2022) further conceptualized heterosexism as a broad form of prejudice and ideology, referring to the belief of heterosexuality as not only the ideal sexuality but also the norm or default, consequently denoting alternate sexualities as inferior or abnormal. Given the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and stigmas by heterosexist systems, Black SMWs become more significantly vulnerable to internalized heterosexism, leading to self-directed stigma and shame. Conceptualized as a lifelong stressor, Kulda et al. (2024) defined the internalized heterosexism phenomenon as an individual's harmful self-beliefs and self-identities based on negative external connotations, related to their sexual orientation (Kulda et al., 2024). Collins and Levitt posited that, although all SMWs experience heterosexism, individuals differ in the way they respond to it and the psychological distress experienced (Collins & Levitt, 2021).

Internalized heterosexism may negatively impact how this demographic fully expresses their sexuality and sexual practices, further creating societal barriers impeding healthy self-expression and interpersonal relationships. Unlike Caucasian-identifying LGBTQ+ individuals, Black SMWs navigate a societal *double-bind*, facing judgment as "outsiders" within their racial community while navigating racism and sexism within other LGBTQ+ spaces and environments. Expounding on Frances Beale's concept of

double jeopardy, Beverly Greene introduced the concept of *triple jeopardy*, describing the challenges faced by Black lesbians living in a society that devalues women, people of color, and sexual minorities (Cerezo et al., 2020). Fears of further discrimination or marginalization may delay or altogether prevent individuals of this demographic from "coming out" or safely revealing their sexual orientation due to the risk of losing social and familial support systems.

Compounded forms of marginalization not only inhibit Black SMWs from fully demonstrating sexual expression but also underscore the pervasive deficiency of diverse, affirmative, and inclusive spaces where they can safely navigate their sexual and racial identities. The absence of this type of space highlights the importance of addressing intersectional factors that shape and challenge societal structures that perpetuate these barriers. Without safe, inclusive spaces, Black SMWs face increasing mental health challenges, decreased self-worth, and a continuous lack of community support. This study addresses the following factors due to the central role they play in Black SMWs navigating their sexual experience: religion, respectability politics, stereotypes, and hyper-sexualization.

Religion, a principal component shaping Black women's sexuality, has been linked to guilt and shame among Black women (Hargons et al., 2020). Hargons et al. (2021) posited that approximately 21.5 million Black-identifying women embodied varying ethnic, religious, and spiritual identities. Within this study, religion and spirituality are not considered interchangeable. With more than thirteen conceptual definitions, spirituality describes a connection to God, nature, others, and surroundings

associated with quality and life meaning (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2019). Hope et al. (2024) delineated spirituality as a significant cultural strength and resource for emerging Black-identifying adults. Spirituality may be informed by religious traditions, teachings, and values or by sources that lack explicit connection to a particular belief system (Hope et al., 2024). On the other hand, religion describes a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2019). Paul Victor and Treschuk (2019) further described religion as guided by tradition, rules, and culture. Abrahamic monotheistic religious teachings, such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, have historically structured the ways that women experience sexuality by sustaining narratives enforcing guilt and shame on women who diverge from accustomed norms related to modesty and celibacy (Rahman, 2024). Like Islam, Christianity, the predominant Abrahamic faith tradition for the African American community, condemns homosexuality, with sacred texts used to oppress LGBTQ+ individuals throughout the centuries (Rahman, 2024). Collins (2004) asserted that the Christian church historically played the most critical role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable. According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, approximately 30% of Black adults believed that Black churches have influenced Black Americans' ability to gain equality in the United States (Hope, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2021). Religion, providing the underpinning to respectability politics, establishes guidelines for the behaviors of Black women who deserve dignity and respect (Hargons et al., 2020). Feelings of guilt and shame, driven by religiosity and respectability politics, deter Black women from proactively exploring their desires that

directly shape their sexual experiences, pleasure, and overall satisfaction (Hargons et al., 2020). Respectability politics, a conservative racial uplift strategy spearheaded by Black women church members, exemplified the influence of religious values on political ideology formation and conservatism in the Black community (Stewart & Scott, 2024). Thorpe et al. (2022) identified internalized homophobia as the intersecting production of religious rhetoric and sexual stereotypes. Furthermore, preceding research calls for a further scholarly examination of the intersecting impact of religiosity and spirituality on Black women's sexualities (Hope, 2024; Hargons et al., 2020).

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In their study explicating the differences in ways that Western cultures understand and interpret sexualities and genders, Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2021) argued that discourse related to same-sex relationships began in Westernized cultures, ignoring the African approach to sexuality based on indigenous beliefs and practices. Despite ubiquitous stereotypes, early sexuality often varies among African cultures, with some cultures endorsing varied pre-marital sexual exploration among adolescents, emphasizing initiation practices that shape youth into gendered adults (Felber-Seligma, 2024). Sexuality held importance in African cosmology regarding well-being, healing, and power (Felber-Seligma, 2024). Onojieruo (2024) identified Eurocentric colonialization as the most significant factor in rejecting inclusive views of sexuality, leading to a disconnect with the genuine African spirit of inclusion and non-gender discrimination.

Within the Black women Caribbean sub-demographic, specifically in the Jamaican region, Rastafarianism remains an influential practice that influences women sexuality development and expression (Tchatchoua, 2023). Considered a religious and social movement, Rastafarianism originated in the 20th century among Black Jamaicans, centering on Rastafari spirituality and conscious development from a psychological perspective (Tchatchoua, 2023). Later, the Rastafari movement spread throughout and beyond the Caribbean (Tchatchoua, 2023). Like the early Christian and 20th-century Iranian Muslim churches, North American Rastafari adopted colonist savior complexes for modesty, reinforcing Western social hierarchies and colonial power dominance (Tchatchoua, 2023). Ultimately, while religious and spiritual practices provide support

for Black women, they may also restrict sexual development and expression, negatively impacting how Black women experience this phenomenon.

During the 20th century, Black women challenged the societal stereotypes of the *welfare queen* by mobilizing and employing strategic forms of conservative self-representation to assimilate within White middle-class heteronormative gender and sexual codes, a process initially coined "politics of respectability" by Evelyn Higginbotham in 1993 (Menzies & Ryalls, 2019). Middle-class Black women, especially those in the Black Baptist Church and the Black Women's Club Movement, refuted controlling images of *Jezebel* by advocating "politics of respectability," characterized by cleanliness, temperance, polite manners, and sexual purity (Collins, 2004, p. 71). The concept of "respectability of politics" describes social behaviors and practices adopted by Black women to safeguard themselves from negative racial bias and gendered racialized harm, such as experiencing sexual assault or the presumption of hypersexuality (Latimer et al., 2024). Promoting respectability behaviors and values in and beyond religious settings emphasized morality and civility to equally access secure social acceptance, political equality, and safety in predominantly white spaces (Latimer et al., 2024; Menzies & Ryalls, 2019). Claiming respectability allowed poor and working-class Black women to define themselves outside of the parameters of prevailing racist discourse (Collins, 2004, p. 71). However, achieving respectability pivoted to the adherence to White femininity inherited from Southern tradition (Collins, 2004, p. 72).

The historical foundations of respectability politics continue to shape contemporary cultural and familial messages Black SMWs receive. Latimer et al. (2024)

argued that respectability politics continues to inform societal messages Black women receive from family members, ranging from body expectations to dating and marriage. In her literary work, Patricia Collins argued that Black mothers teach their daughters survival skills to navigate racism and sexism while rejecting internalized messages rooted in gendered racism (Cerezo et al., 2020). In their study exploring college women's perspectives on the types of respectability messages received from family support throughout childhood through emerging adulthood, they identified four themes: (a) perpetuating gendered racialized scripts, (b) policing appropriate appearance, (c) protecting virtue in a patriarchal society, and (d) promoting a "lifting as we climb" mentality (Latimer et al., 2024). Study findings further indicated that family members attempted to prepare Black women for gendered racial stereotypes and oppression by tasking them with behavior modification beginning in childhood (Latimer et al., 2024).

Hypersexualized stereotypes dehumanize and marginalize the sexual attitudes of Black women, creating additional systemic barriers to authentically expressing their sexual identity and contributing to internalized stigma and externalized discrimination. In addition to experiencing anti-LBGTQ+ attitudes and rhetoric from society overall and within Black spaces, Black SMWs experience racist beliefs and ideologies from LGBTQ+ spaces influenced by Black sexual stereotypes, depicting them as deviant, intolerable, and abnormal (Thorpe et al., 2022). Bond et al. (2021) defined race-based sexual stereotypes as implicit beliefs and expectations of sexual encounters primarily dependent on the partner's race or ethnicity. Examining the historical and cultural

underpinnings of these stereotypes remains vital in thoroughly conceptualizing the lived experiences of Black heterosexual and sexual minority women sub-demographics.

The aforementioned racialized sexual stereotypes contribute to the dehumanization and marginalization of Black women's experience and collectively reinforce broader negative hypersexualized patterns. The current scholarship study fails to address any overlap between race-based sexual stereotypes impacting Black women's experiences. However, this study argues that they can overlap, creating a collectively reinforced pattern of systemic oppression by restricting Black women to damaging societal archetypes. The origin of the term *hyper-sexualization* developed from two approaches.

The approach that frames this study, developed by Black and intersectional feminists, describes the stigmatization of sexual manifestations of the masculinities and femininities of ethnic minorities or racialized groups, perceived as excessive and used as justification for social group subordination (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2023). Preceding research demonstrates the intersectional nature of race and gender identities influencing awareness of sexual scripts impacting Black women (Leath et al., 2021). In their study assessing the role of gendered racial identity beliefs on the relationship between *Jezebel* stereotype awareness and Black women's sexual behaviors, Leath et al. (2021) found an increase in awareness of the racial stereotype associated with higher sexual guilt and attachment avoidance.

Race-based stereotypes also negatively shape the sexual scripts of Black women. Introduced in 1973 by sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon, the sexual script

theory illustrates ways that sexual socialization, messages, and meanings are internalized and manifested through sexual scripts (Bond et al., 2021). Luz et al. (2023) defined sexual scripts as mental representations that operate on cultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels to guide expectations related to sexual behavior, allowing anticipation of the sequence of predictable behaviors. The internalization of racialized sexual scripts may frequently lead to emotional and relational difficulties, preventing Black women from thoroughly and authentically expressing their sexual desires, autonomy, and agency. Conceptualizing racialized sexual scripts highlights how racialized sexual identities are constructed and resisted within a Black woman's sexual expression, further enhancing impediments to authentic sexual identity in interpersonal and societal contexts.

Black Women Marital/Relational Satisfaction

In 2021, data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicated that approximately 49.9% of the United States population over 15 were married (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022). However, significant differences appeared when the statistics were broken down by race (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022). Approximately 28% of married women identified as Black, compared to 52.4% of women who identified as White (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022). Additionally, more than 48% of Black women reported never being married (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2022). Several themes related to intersectionality, systemic inequalities, and sociocultural dynamics remain contemporarily prevalent and impact the marital and relational satisfaction experienced by Black women.

One specific theme, sexual sanctification, may serve as both a source of empowerment and an impediment to authentic sexual expression and fulfillment. Moore et al. (2024) defined *sexual sanctification* as the belief that one's sexual relationship is sacred and infused with a deeper meaning and purpose. Foundational research demonstrated that approximately 90% of couples who expressed a sacred connection to their spouse or partner also believed that being with their partner was a profound spiritual experience associated with greater marital, relational, and sexual satisfaction (Moore et al., 2024). Although previous research established the correlational significance of religiosity influencing various aspects of romantic relationships among Black couples, Moore et al. (2024) asserted that no existing study assessed the role of sexual sanctification on relational satisfaction in Black heterosexual couples. In their study examining sexual relationship sanctification and relationship satisfaction among Black heterosexual married and cohabitating couples, Moore et al. (2024) found higher levels of satisfaction to be associated with higher levels of sexual sanctification, with sexual sanctification operating as a protective factor (Moore et al., 2024).

However, not all experiences of sexual sanctification led to positive and profound experiences. Research also acknowledged the rise of expectations induced by sexual and relational sanctification (Moore et al., 2024). Earlier studies highlighted intense feelings of loss and desecration experienced when elevated unions failed to achieve desired expectations (Moore et al., 2024). Furthermore, Black women engaging in religious practices may experience greater levels of guilt, decreased sexual activity, increased

sexual anxiety before and during marriage, and repressed sexual feelings or urges (Moore et al., 2024).

Preceding research also neglects to effectively examine how often Black women initiate sexual intercourse in their intimate relationships (Thorpe et al., 2021). In their quantitative study examining the association between relationship- and partner-specific factors (e.g., relationship satisfaction, egalitarianism, partner's age) with the sexual experiences of 216 Black heterosexual women from Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent to Adult Health, study results found that relationship- and partner-specific factors were significantly associated with initiating sexual intercourse and orgasm frequency (Thorpe et al., 2021). While Thorpe et al. (2021) argue that understanding how relationship- and partner-specific factors (e.g., orgasm frequency, sex initiation) of Black heterosexual women proves essential in advancing Black sexology utilizing an intimate justice framework, they do not account for the experiences of Black SMWs. Building on the Thorpe et al. (2021) study, this study argues for including Black SMWs in scholarly analyses, recognizing that their sexual and relational experiences are equally indispensable to understanding the complexity and breadth of the Black woman's sexuality phenomenon. Integrating these additional perspectives in an intimate justice framework expands the scope of Black women's sexology and provides a more thorough conceptualization of Black women's sexual expression.

Common Themes and Subthemes Among Sexual Orientation

Concerning Black Heterosexual and SMW women, research underscored several themes reflecting their intersecting identities and nuanced living experiences, providing a

comprehensive framework to understand Black women's sexuality across diversified sexual orientations. The first theme involved identity formation and self-acceptance, including the subthemes of their coming out experiences or choosing not to, navigating dual or multiple identities, and internalized heterosexism. This theme and subtheme prove relevant as they emphasize how one understands and embraces one's sexual orientation within societal and cultural constraints. The second theme found involved relational dynamics and intimate partner experiences, which include the subthemes of role expectations with heterosexual and non-heterosexual dynamics and sex initiation and satisfaction linked to societally influenced power dynamics. This theme and subthemes prove relevant as relational factors influence intimate relationships for Black heterosexual and SMW women.

The third theme involved cultural and religious influences, which include subthemes of religion's role in shaping sexual guilt and authentic expression, societal and familial expectations related to relationships and marriage, and respectability politics' influence on sexual orientation. This theme and subthemes prove relevant as they analyze the impact of cultural norms and religious teachings on sexual identity development and relational satisfaction. The fourth theme involved stereotypes and sexual agency, which include subthemes of combating hyper-sexualization, resistance to de-sexualization, and healthy assertions of sexual autonomy. This theme and subthemes prove relevant as they convey how Black women navigate societal stereotypes to reclaim their unique sexual narratives successfully. The fifth theme involved intersectionality and minority stress, including the subthemes of racism and heterosexism in LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces,

marginalization with the Black community, and successful coping mechanisms for systemic oppression.

This theme and subthemes prove relevant as they foreground systemic pressures experienced by Black Heterosexual and SMW women and develop strategies to foster resilience effectively. The sixth theme involved sexual health and well-being, including the subthemes of access to inclusive and affirming sexual health resources, the impact of stigma related to help-seeking behavior, and education and awareness on sexual health risks. This theme and subtheme prove relevant as they explore the intersection of sexual orientation with health behaviors and outcomes, offering critical insight into barriers impeding quality care and areas for improvement.

Summary and Conclusions

This study expands upon the mounting evidentiary research exploring the intersectional challenges of Black women's demographics. Preceding contemporary research demonstrated various ways that race-based stereotypes, hyper-sexualization, and compounded stressors by heterosexism marginalized Black heterosexual and SMW women, impeding their ability to express their sexual range authentically. Scholarly research evinces various critical themes, including racialized sexual scripts, Black women's hyper-sexualization, respectability politics' influence, and the intersectional experiences of Black woman SMW, that actively shape Black women's sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual expression. Literature also featured the role of race-based stereotypes in the ways that Black women engage in sexual identity development, authentic sexual expression, and intimate relationship satisfaction. Research also underscored complex

psychological distress caused by the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation, with Black Heterosexual and SMW women navigating compounded forms of systemic marginalization hindering authentic expression of their sexual desires.

What is Known and Unknown

Research emphasized and acknowledged the race- and gender-based challenges faced by Black women, specifically concerning racial stereotypes and sexual scripts that actively shape their sexual experiences. Preceding research also extensively conceptualized the negative impact of hypersexualized stereotypes, internalized heterosexism, and the marginalization of Black women in both heteronormative and LGBTQ+ environments. However, research failed to conceptualize the ways that these systemic forces influence sexual practices, intimate relationship satisfaction, and sexual identity development. Despite a capacious focus on race and sexual orientation independent of one another, the intersecting influence of these factors remains significantly underexplored, specifically in terms of Black women SMWs navigating nuanced experiences of racialized and sexualized expectations.

Gap Filled by the Study

In addition to focusing on Black heterosexual women, this study emphasizes the sexual experiences of Black SMW women, who are frequently excluded from contemporary human sexuality research, addressing a significant gap in Black feminist research. By integrating the sexual script theory contextual lens, this study explores how Black women navigate sexual and relational scripts negatively influenced by systemic oppression. This study also aims to increase the current understanding of how

internalized racial stereotypes, internalized heterosexism, and the lack of safe, inclusive environments contribute to the ways that Black women experience sexual health, intimate relationship satisfaction, and sexual identity formation. Ultimately, this study contributes to clinical psychology by exploring insights into how Black woman resists, shape, or adhere to sexual scripts, adding enhanced in-depth dialogue on Black women's intersectionality and sexuality.

The identified gaps in the current research highlight the need for a qualitative study to thoroughly examine the lived experiences of Black heterosexual and SMW women within the context of sexual expression, sexual identity development, and sexual satisfaction in their intimate relationships. Chapter 3 substantially outlines methods designed to address identified gaps, including the phenomenological approach to data collection. Using the phenomenological approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of Black heterosexual and SMW women's experiences, providing critical insights into how racial, gender, and sexual orientation shape sexual practices and satisfaction in intimate relationships. Finally, this study aims to uncover the psychological, emotional, and cultural factors contributing to Black heterosexual and SMW women's sexual identity formation and intimate relational dynamics.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This study utilized a semi-structured interview convention to examine participants' perceptions, further understanding their lived experience related to the phenomenon of interest. This chapter covers research design and rationale, researcher role, chosen research methodology, trustworthiness issues, and ethical considerations concerning this study. Expanding upon the included theoretical foundations and identified gaps, the research design and rationale delineated in succeeding sections exemplify how this study's methodology is uniquely suited to capture the breadth, depth, and complexity of the Black woman experience concerning sexual practice, sexual identity, and sexual expression.

Research Design and Rationale

Utilizing a phenomenological research design, I sought to explore the lived experience of Black women concerning sexual practice, sexual identity, and sexual expression. The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the lived experiences of Black women regarding their understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual expression? The primary objective behind the selected research design lies in exploring how Black women understand the phenomena of interest, given the influence of systemic and subcultural factors. The tradition of qualitative research explores and provides enhanced insight into real-world concerns by obtaining data pertaining to participant experiences, perceptions, and behavior (Tenny et al., 2022). The qualitative research

tradition permits flexibility when exploring the complex and nuanced experiences of Black women.

Quantitative research appeared ineffective for this study, given the goal of quantifying data and generalizing the findings of a study sample with varied perspectives (Ghanad, 2023). Ghanad (2023) further noted that quantitative research requires collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantifiable data to prove a specified hypothesis. This eliminates the opportunity to understand the differences in experiences' perspectives that provide further ideas and hypotheses. Consequently, the qualitative research approach is the most effective to achieve this study's objective of understanding how Black women experienced the phenomenon of interest.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher, the primary instrument, actively engages with study participants to access and conceptualize their experiences, perceptions, and behaviors concerning the phenomenon of interest (Tenny et al., 2022). My role as the researcher was to serve as the primary instrument, which involved developing and administering open-ended interview questions and analyzing and interpreting collected data. As an independently licensed mental health practitioner, I may have professional and collegiate affiliations with participants with similar credentials and academic backgrounds. Given my active involvement as a clinical supervisor, I did not recruit my supervisees as study participants to eliminate potential conflict of interest and reduce the power differential between researcher and participant. In qualitative research, bias describes an inclination or prejudice for or against someone or something (Wa-Mbaleka,

2020). Identifying as an Afro-Caribbean, married, and Bisexual woman, I have a personal connection to the proposed study. My intersecting identities and my educational and academic backgrounds may contribute to perceived preconceptions concerning the proposed study and components prioritized for investigation.

As an Afro-Caribbean LGBTQ+ trauma-focused mental health practitioner, my intersecting identities allow me to empathize with participants as they share their experiences and create an open environment that facilitates inclusivity, diversity, and safety. Furthermore, my professional background equips me with the clinical skills required to facilitate in-depth dialogue that accurately interprets the participants' experiences with clinical multicultural sensitivity and scholarly rigor. Considering the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical codes (American Psychological Association, 2017), I utilized and maintained a reflexivity journal, employed bracketing to identify any assumptions, and actively engaged in peer debriefing with a fellow Walden University Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) Clinical Psychology student. These strategies allowed me to objectively and authentically engage with the obtained data while eliminating the possibility of personal bias influence.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women give meaning to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression due to existing systemic and sociocultural influences. This hermeneutical phenomenological study explores the lived experience of Black women concerning this phenomenon with a targeted and purposive sample among Black-identifying women between the ages of 20 and 45 currently residing in the United States

for at least 15 years. After approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I conducted comprehensive, semi-structured interviews, allowing study participants to share their experiences regarding current and voluntary sexual relationships, sexual health practices, and internalized beliefs concerning sex, sexuality, and sexual expression. This section reviews participant selection logic, instrumentation, recruitment and participation procedures, data collection and analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and procedures for ethical considerations.

Participant Selection Logic

This study's target population included Black-identifying women between the ages of 20 and 45 currently residing in the United States. I chose this population to study due to their reported nuanced position at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, which remains underexplored within the context of human sexuality. Furthermore, this age gap covers three generations (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z), allowing the primary researcher to analyze influential intersections of various sociocultural conditions on mental and sexual health across generations of Black women (Crooks et al., 2022). Researching this population addresses crucial literature gaps, providing a scholarly platform for marginalized individuals to describe and narrate their lived experiences. This population aligns with the primary theoretical framework, exploring the Black woman's lived experience while addressing intersectional lenses of oppression concerning race, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, this population effectively complemented the hermeneutical phenomenological framework by aiming to examine and conceptualize a

deeper understanding of their lived experiences actively impacted by systemic and sociocultural factors.

This study utilized a targeted and purposive sampling strategy to recruit qualified participants who could provide a detailed account of their lived experiences concerning the studied phenomenon. The rationale for these approaches accomplishes the objective of exploring how Black women give meaning to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression based on systemic and sociocultural factors. Researchers use purposive sampling in qualitative studies to identify and select information-rich cases to effectively use limited resources (Campbell et al., 2020). In this study, purposive sampling allows me to choose participants based on relevant criteria for the studied phenomenon. Targeted sampling, a subset of purposive sampling, ensures that selected participants possess the unique knowledge and experience necessary to increase critical theoretical and conceptual understanding of systemic and sociocultural influences as outlined in the theoretical framework. Furthermore, this strategy effectively aligned with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, emphasizing the depth and abundance of the Black woman's narrative rather than interpreting it from a generalizing standpoint.

To be eligible for the study, participants must be 20 years old at the time of participation and identify as biological women. They must also identify as Black, excluding biracial-identifying women. Participants must have also resided in the United States for at least 15 years. This study excluded Bi-racial identifying women, transgender-identifying women (male to female), and women with active CNM or ENM relationships due to efforts to exercise variable control.

Using Microsoft Forms, I constructed and adopted an online pre-screening questionnaire to verify eligibility based on the selected criteria. The questionnaire included questions verifying the requirements for accurately selecting study participants. As the researcher, I reviewed all responses to confirm their alignment with the inclusion and exclusion criteria before formally inviting them to participate. To mitigate bias and maintain APA ethical standards, I included a synoptic paragraph informing all respondents of the study's focus and reasoning behind the selected criteria. I addressed any ambiguous or unclear responses to the screening questionnaire via follow-up contact via phone or email.

The study included 10 Black female participants. The sample size is justified by the need to achieve data saturation. Saturation refers to data collection when no additional issues or insights are identified, and further collected data begins to repeat, signifying redundancy (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Conducting a systematic review assessing saturation in qualitative research to determine sample sizes for saturation, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found a narrow range of interviews (between nine and seventeen), depending on phenomenon complexity and obtained data richness, with relatively homogeneous study populations to achieve the saturation objective. Rahimi and Khatooni (2024) noted that while a larger sample size helps to effectively identify patterns and themes by increasing the diversity of perspectives, it can create potential issues, barring ethical concerns (i.e., wasting time, wasting funds, and burdening participants).

Furthermore, Rahimi and Khatooni (2024) propounded that sensitive phenomenon (i.e., sexuality, sexual practices) disclosures may pose challenges to participation

willingness. This may require the researcher to conduct more interviews to establish an open, trustworthy environment to obtain richer information (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Using purposive and targeted sampling, carefully choosing a sample size of 10 diverse participants within the selected criteria is expected to provide sufficient diversity and experience depth to effectively address the proposed research question. This sample size balances the integrity of the phenomenological research design and allows the researcher to explore the diversity and uniqueness of their lived experiences thoroughly.

I contacted and recruited prospective participants through networking groups dedicated explicitly to Black women on social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Before engaging with group members, I sent a private message informing the group moderators of the study and seeking permission to solicit participation. In those social networking groups, I provided a brief synoptic introduction and a link to complete the online prescreening questionnaire for the study to gauge participation interest. I also encouraged existing study participants to share the questionnaire link with people they know who may successfully meet the criteria.

Upon receiving the questionnaire responses, I reviewed the results to identify participants who successfully aligned with the specified study criteria. I contacted individuals who met the study criteria via email to thank them for their interest and invite them to participate in a 60-90-minute virtual interview on the Zoom platform. I scheduled all interviews on dates and times that best accommodate the schedule of the researcher and the participant. Conversely, I emailed the individuals who did not meet the criteria or

were not selected due to data saturation limits to express gratitude for their participation interest, informing them of their non-selection and the rationale behind the choice.

Instrumentation

This study utilized two primary instruments for data collection: a researcher-produced self-reported demographic questionnaire created on Microsoft Forms and a researcher-produced semi-structured interview protocol. The researcher-produced demographic questionnaire screened prospective participants who did not qualify to complete the study. The self-reported questionnaire contained uniquely tailored questions relevant to the study objectives and most effectively aligned with this study's purposive sampling strategy. This step proves crucial to ensuring the selection of qualified participants who will share their relevant life experiences, while filtering out non-qualified participants. Microsoft Forms was the chosen medium for delivering the questionnaire as the platform remains secure and easy to use (Mohanty et al., 2020).

The composition of the researcher-constructed semi-structured interview protocol explored the meaning that Black-identifying women give to the studied phenomenon due to existing systemic and oppressive factors continuously shaping their lived experience. The researcher conducted all interviews on the Zoom platform. Study participants frequently consider Zoom a proper interviewing method compared to in-person and telephonic methods or other videoconferencing platforms (Archibald et al., 2019).

The researcher-constructed semi-structured interview protocol contains ten open-ended questions designed to explore Black women's current and voluntary sexual practices, sexual identity, and sexual expression, with their understanding of systemic and

sociocultural influential factors (Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol). Continuously reviewed, reformulated, and revised in a qualitative study, open-ended questions elicit description rather than relating to variables or comparing groups (Barroga & Matanguihan, 2022). Hansen and Świderska (2024) asserted that the main benefit of using open-ended questions is that the participant freely constructs their responses, rather than being influenced by the suggestions provided by the researcher, generating further data that may not be possible to obtain from theory and the researcher's reasoning. The interview protocol followed a consistent structure, allowing participants to comfortably disclose information regarding current sexual practices, sexual identity, and sexual expression. The interview's introduction included a brief informative synopsis of the study's purpose and ethical considerations, and encouraged each participant to only truthfully disclose what they feel comfortable sharing. After obtaining verbal consent from the participant, I asked 10 open-ended questions exploring the participant's lived experiences regarding the studied phenomenon, potentially asking follow-up questions to elaborate on initially given responses.

The Zoom platform allows the researcher to capture verbal and nonverbal responses, providing contextual information accurately. Research demonstrates that the Zoom platform provides simplicity and user-friendliness to participants, which may facilitate increasing engagement and a stronger rapport between participant and researcher (Archibald et al., 2019). Furthermore, research findings also suggest significant viability of the Zoom platform as a technological tool for collecting qualitative data due to its cost-effectiveness, data management features, and security options

(Archibald et al., 2019). While ensuring data accuracy, Zoom also offers privacy and comfort to the participant as they disclose personal information regarding their current, voluntary sexual practices.

The study also utilized the researcher's reflexivity journal as the primary instrument. The researcher-produced reflexivity journal encourages the researcher to document relevant thoughts and feelings regarding the study process. Dodgson (2019) postulated that reflexivity encourages researchers to shift the research lens inward to recognize and account for one's situatedness within the research and the potential effect on the study participants, research questions, and data collection and interpretation. A reflexivity journal also ensures the acknowledgement of any researcher bias, reinforcing authentic data interpretation (Dodgson, 2019). This research affirms the use of the reflexive journal for maintaining credibility and trustworthiness.

Researcher-Developed Instruments

I developed the self-reported demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol, aligning with the literature review's theoretical concepts and preceding research findings. I tested content validity by asking a Black woman colleague specializing in sexuality studies and my committee chair to review all constructed instruments and provide feedback regarding relevancy, sensitivity, multicultural appropriateness, and clarity. The feedback confirmed data collection sufficiency to effectively address the study's research question.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

To facilitate participation in this study, exploring current and voluntary sexual practices for Black women, I constructed a self-reported demographic questionnaire using Microsoft Forms. The self-reported demographic questionnaire also included extensive informed consent and confidentiality information relevant to this study. Eligible participants must identify as cisgender Black women between the ages of 20 and 45 and reside in the United States for a minimum of fifteen years. One specific recruitment challenge that may arise pertains to accessing this sub-demographic. I used multiple social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn) to target my selected demographic (refer to Appendix A: Social Media Invitation). The goal was to recruit ten participants, a sample size that effectively aligns with achieving data saturation in qualitative research. In their systematic review of empirical tests, Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) findings confirm that qualitative studies can reach data saturation with relatively small sample sizes.

Upon reviewing and completing the informed consent and self-reported demographic questionnaire, the researcher contacted the eligible participant via email, inviting them to participate in a 60–90-minute semi-structured interview on Zoom at a time that works best for the participant and the researcher (refer to Appendix B: Email Invitation and Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Invitation). This mitigates the potential limitation of time constraints due to differing responsibilities. The researcher determined the final data sample size, ensuring the achievement of methodological rigor

(Ahmed, 2025). However, it also ensured that a participant would not introduce new themes, patterns, or insights that may alter the study's questions or overarching direction (Ahmed, 2025).

Participation

This study limited participation to individuals who identify as cisgender female, Black, and between the ages of twenty and forty-five at the time of participation. These limitations ensured variable containment and captured a crucial developmental period where individuals explore, implement, and express their sexual identity. Research demonstrates significant differences in black woman sexual development compared to peers of a different race (Crooks et al., 2021). Furthermore, Lazzara (2020) noted that women often become more sexually responsive throughout their 20s and 30s, potentially experiencing their sexual peak in their late 30s and early 40s.

To mitigate potential biases, I did not include women whom I have supervised or currently supervise under my clinical trauma private practice. Study participation was completely voluntary, and prospective participants completed the self-reported demographic questionnaire prior to me contacting them to schedule the semi-structured virtual interview. In addition to demographic questions, each participant answered a scale question assessing their level of comfort while discussing information related to their current voluntary sexual practices. This minimizes the likelihood of social desirability bias. Bispo Júnior (2022) described social desirability bias as a systematic research error where participants present answers that appear more socially acceptable than their authentic opinions and behaviors. Vetting participant comfort level also aligns with the

Belmont Report, ethically mandating researchers to assess the appropriateness of placing further burdens on already burdened individuals (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1979).

At the beginning of the interview, the primary researcher revisited pertinent information (e.g., study purpose, risks), also informing the participant that they were allowed to skip any questions or discontinue at any point in the process. The primary researcher also assured each participant that they did not have to disclose any information that they did not feel comfortable sharing. This decreases the likelihood of memory fallibility. Howe and Knot (2015) defined memory fallibility as the omission of details from the original experience, extending to errors of commission, including the creation of memory illusions. To preserve anonymity, the researcher did not store information recorded on the self-reported demographic questionnaire. After the semi-structured interview, the researcher debriefed with each participant, assessing for any feelings of distress or discomfort, and providing mental health resources for additional support, if necessary.

Data Analysis Plan

I preserved consistency with each voluntary participant during the study's data collection phase. In the first stage of the study, I posted the social media invitation and questionnaire link on social media platforms. The self-reported demographic questionnaire aligned with the research question, ensuring the selection aligns with the study's target demographic. Furthermore, the self-reported demographic questionnaire excluded those ineligible to participate (e.g., consensual or ethnic non-monogamous

relationships), which remains crucial in eliminating the introduction of confounding variables, allowing for a stringent examination of the studied phenomenon. I contacted eligible participants via email to extend an invitation to participate in a 60-90-minute Zoom interview.

If they agreed to proceed with the study's next phase, I sent the informed consent documents and scheduled an interview once they had signed and returned the required informed consent forms. I contacted ineligible participants via email, thanking them for their interest and informing them of the rationale behind the denial. All interviews followed a semi-structured format, with approximately 10 to 12 questions lasting 60-90 minutes. I audio- and video-recorded all interviews to ensure the collection of participants' exact verbal and nonverbal responses.

I utilized an interview protocol that outlines the study's purpose, clarifies the use of audio and video recordings, and explains how their responses impact the study's conclusion (appearing in Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol). After completing all interview questions, I stopped recording and debriefed with each participant. Participation debriefing included assessing any experienced distress or discomfort and providing resources to connect with local mental health providers in their local areas, as provided in the debriefing form (Appendix D: Post-Interview Debriefing Questions Form). Toward the end of the interview, I informed all participants that I may contact them to confirm the accuracy of the interpretation of the details provided.

I employed thematic analysis to capture each participant's disclosed experience, mostly aligning with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach. As a research

method, thematic analysis identifies and interprets patterns or themes in a data set, offering new insights and enhanced understanding (Naeem et al., 2023). I chose thematic analysis because research consistently supports this coding approach as an appropriate analytical method to understand experiences, thoughts, and behaviors across a dataset (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). I manually hand-coded to eliminate software licensure costs and the opportunity to reduce software complexities, often impeding research progress (Isangula et al., 2024). In this study, I achieved the following thematic analytical steps, ensuring thorough, systematic rigor of each participant's narrative:

Step One: Data Familiarization

Step Two: Generating codes through keyword selection

Step Three: Probing and discerning key central themes

Step Four: Reviewing and finalizing found themes

Step Five: Conceptualizing codes and themes through interpretation

By utilizing thematic analysis, supported and aligned with hermeneutic phenomenology, this study explored how Black women give meaning to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression by capturing their uniquely complex narratives. This enhances comprehension and understanding of how Black women construct these internalized messages. Research asserts that a comprehensive qualitative study identifies recurrent thematic patterns and accounts for discrepant cases (LaDonna & Balmer, 2021). Although excluding them from the study results, I identified and analyzed discrepant cases to maintain rigor, trustworthiness, and credibility.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research validity and reliability prove crucial in establishing credibility, potentially informing legislative policy, and improving service provisions in various fields (Ahmed, 2024). Given the difficulty of verifying study findings, Adler (2022) acknowledged the necessity of qualitative researchers exhibiting transparency concerning the methods they utilize. To properly establish trustworthiness, this section addresses the following elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility (Internal Validity)

I used Microsoft Word to manually document codes, categories, and themes to establish credibility. Additionally, I initially employed a data triangulation strategy. Data triangulation is one of the typical standards of rigor applied within qualitative research (Johnson et al., 2020). It avoids or minimizes error and bias, optimizing data collection accuracy and analytical processes (Johnson et al., 2020). I used data triangulation to identify the convergence of obtained data through multiple data sources (e.g., relevant literature and interview transcripts) by comparing emerging interview themes with theories comprising the selected theoretical framework (Johnson et al., 2020).

I interviewed approximately 10 eligible participants to achieve data saturation, ensuring no new themes and concepts emerge. I also asked 10 open-ended questions, ensuring detailed, thorough responses that uncover themes related to their current voluntary sexual practices. To achieve and maintain researcher reflexivity, I consistently documented any personal biases, assumptions, and influential reflections about my

personal and professional background in my reflexivity journal. After initial coding, I shared key findings and themes with my second committee member and a PhD clinical psychology academic peer.

Transferability

I constructed 10 open-ended questions to evoke a detailed narrative of each participant's experiences to achieve a thick description. Each question addressed themes related to cultural and familial influences, societal and systemic pressures, and their understanding of sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression. In the final coding phase, I incorporated direct quotations to amplify participant experiences, ensuring readers connect with the data more profoundly. Finally, selected participants from diverse backgrounds allow for a focus on variations between geographical location, religious background, sexual orientation, and marital status, ensuring a comprehensive capture of a broader understanding concerning the studied phenomenon.

Dependability

Dependability is considered the reliability of qualitative research, which describes the researcher's inquiry to document procedures for generating and analyzing results (Riazi et al., 2023). To ensure dependability, I conducted an audit trail, reviewing all annotations in my reflexivity journal and recording any adjustments to the research design or interview protocol. Data source triangulation supports dependability by ensuring a rigorous, systematic process.

Confirmability

To achieve confirmability, I followed steps similar to those for achieving transferability and credibility. As mentioned above, I maintained a reflexivity journal to increase transparency on how personal perspectives may influence data interpretation. Conducting an audit trail also complements reflexivity by adding enhanced transparency and accountability. Finally, peer and committee debriefing ensured that all findings remain rooted in each participant's experiences.

Ethical Considerations and Procedures

Section Four: Privacy and Confidentiality of the American Psychological Association requires psychologists to take reasonable cautions to protect participants' confidential information, minimizing privacy intrusions, and disclosing any foreseeable limitations that inform risk to privacy and limit confidentiality (American Psychological Association, 2017). I contemplated several ethical considerations to ensure the safeguarding of participant confidentiality and privacy. I posted the social media invitation (Appendix A: Social Media Invitation) on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), providing a concise and comprehensive description of the conducted study. This allowed prospective participants to make a well-informed decision on whether to participate.

Additionally, I used the anonymous option provided by Microsoft Forms, allowing prospective participants to submit their information confidentially. Furthermore, prospective clients completing the demographic questionnaire did not have to comment on the social media invitation to express interest publicly. Instead, they can access and

complete the questionnaire, safeguarding their privacy and confidentiality. I stored all collected recruitment data on my Walden University OneDrive account, which remains password-protected.

In addition to confidentiality and privacy ethical concerns, this study required participants to disclose sensitive information, which may produce feelings of distress and discomfort despite the research focus concerning current and voluntary sexual practices. Furthermore, the exclusion criteria may create unnecessary psychological disturbance for interested participants who desire to participate. To address these ethical concerns, I allotted time for debriefing (see Appendix D: Post-Interview Debriefing Questions). For excluded participants, I respectfully and thoroughly explained the rationale behind the exclusion, which maintains the study scope without judging any demographic.

The social media invitation, demographic questionnaire, and interview concisely and comprehensively described the study's purpose. To successfully submit the demographic questionnaire, all prospective participants must check the box at the bottom, signifying their consent to participate and requesting that the primary researcher contact them for subsequent components of the study process. After contacting each selected participant and scheduling an interview, I emailed them the informed consent document, requesting that they sign and return it via email before their scheduled interview. The informed consent form contained summarized bullet points describing the study purpose, potential risks, and rights and limits of confidentiality, ensuring that all participants understand important details relevant to them. I also provided selected participants with

pertinent contact information to discuss any questions or concerns they have about the study process.

Ethical considerations during the data collection process included the study topic's nature sensitivity, participant privacy and potential data breach possibilities, and potential power dynamics. To ensure that each participant understood the content of this study, each invitation, email, informed consent document, and interview protocol included a description of the study, which included informing the client of the topics we would discuss. As the primary researcher in contact with participants, I attended to verbal and nonverbal cues indicating the presence of experienced discomfort and distress. Concerning participant privacy and confidentiality, I conducted all interviews on the Zoom platform in a secure, privacy-protected session. I downloaded and stored all recorded interviews in my Walden University OneDrive account, which is only accessible to my research committee and me. Once the interview ended and was transcribed, I immediately removed all personally identifiable information (PII), replacing it with unique participant identifiers (UPI), further preserving the privacy and confidentiality of all participants. I securely deleted all data after the required retention period, as mandated by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Due to my licensed mental health practitioner role, participants may perceive differing power dynamics. To prevent the possibility of a conflict of interest or power imbalances, I excluded any current and former clinical supervisees. Throughout the process, I assured each participant that their participation was voluntary and unrelated to any personal or professional relationship with the primary researcher. I also assured

participants that they can decline to answer any question or withdraw from the process at any point without consequence or retaliation.

Summary

This hermeneutical phenomenological study explored the lived experience of Black women related to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression. It employed a researcher-constructed semi-structured interview to gain deeper and enhanced insight into the lived experience of Black women concerning the studied phenomenon. The selected research design and rationale focus on the Black woman experience and how they navigates and understands the phenomena of interest, given existing systemic and subcultural factors. Several strategies used included maintaining a reflexivity journal, conducting audit trials, and peer debriefing to ensure study validity and reliability, securing the study's overall trustworthiness and credibility. Participation selection utilized a targeted and purposive sampling method, targeting 10 Black-identifying women between the ages of 20 and 45 currently residing in the United States. After participants completed the demographic questionnaire and were selected by the primary researcher, all interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform, audio- and video-recorded, and transcribed for data collection accuracy. Data analysis procedures relied on thematic analysis to identify and explore key concepts and themes of the participants' experiences relevant to the studied phenomenon. Ethical considerations included potential privacy breaches, confidentiality risks, and participants' potential distress or discomfort throughout the process. The stated ethical procedures upheld the compliance of ethical codes and principles, honoring the integrity of the study. By exploring the Black woman experience related to sex, sexuality,

and sexual expression, this study contributes by offering intricate insight into the interplaying connection of systemic, cultural, and societal factors that actively shape their sexual identity and inform their sexual practice.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the conducted hermeneutic phenomenological study exploring the lived experience of Black women navigating sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression, given existing race-based stereotypes impacting these phenomena. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women related to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression. Employing an interpretive/constructivist and critical theory research paradigmatic approach, this study assessed correlations between their understanding of race-based stereotypes and subjective accounts of current voluntary sexual practice. This chapter comprehensively describes emergent themes elucidating participants' daedalian narratives of sexual development, agency, silence, suppression, and liberation, guided by the following research question: What are the lived experiences of Black women regarding their understanding of sex, sexuality, and sexual expression?

This chapter is formulated into five sections. The first section describes the setting, providing appropriate context for each participant's engagement in the study. The second section outlines relevant demographic characteristics of participants, whose narratives shaped study findings. The third section explicates procedures for gathering and interpreting data, ensuring methodological rigor and transparency. The fourth section addresses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The final section introduces relevant thematic findings, supported by participant narratives, with connections drawn to the proposed research question.

Setting

All interviews were conducted via Zoom in private, secure environments, ensuring confidentiality and participant comfort. The virtual format accommodated geographic flexibility and accessibility, given the diverse locations of each participant. No known personal or organizational conditions (e.g., personnel changes, budget cuts, other trauma) occurred during the data collection period that would significantly influence participant engagement or the interpretation of study results. The consistency of interview settings across the participants contributed to a stable and equitable environment for data collection. Furthermore, the virtual format fostered increased openness and anonymity when discussing sensitive topics such as the studied phenomenon.

Demographics

The study included 10 self-identified Black women between 31 and 45. Sixty percent of participants were between the ages of 36 and 40, with additional age representation from the 31-35 age range and 41-45 age range. While participants ranged in age, no individuals from the younger age brackets (18-30) and the older age brackets (45-54) were represented in the final sample. Participants held diversified educational and professional backgrounds, with several working in career fields related to education, healthcare, or community-related work. Sexual orientation significantly varied, ranging from heterosexual to queer identities. Reported relationship statuses varied, including married, divorced, and partnered individuals. While some participants were parents, others were not, composing an amalgamation of perspectives related to familial,

reproductive, and relational influences. Spiritual and religious influences varied from Christianity to African Traditional Religions (ATR) and broader, non-institutional spiritual beliefs. The demographic distribution, spanning various stages and regions- including metropolitan hubs, suburban areas, and small urban locations- provided an expansive foundation for investigating the labyrinthine intersections of race, gender, and sexuality within the participants' lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected from 10 identified Black women participants, each completing individual semi-structured interviews scheduled for approximately 60-90 minutes. Most interviews conducted lasted 30-60 minutes, with the shortest interviews lasting 18 minutes. Interviews ranged in duration, based on the depth and pacing of participant responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, then manually transcribed using Microsoft Word's transcription feature. Participants completed the demographic and informed consent forms via Microsoft Forms rather than Survey Monkey to ensure accessibility without obtaining financial cost. No external data management software was used. Instead, the researcher independently conducted all coding and thematic analysis through a manual, hermeneutic phenomenological process -- an approach supporting immersive engagement with the collected data in alignment with the interpretive/constructivist and theoretical paradigms supporting this study. No substantial deviations were noted from the data collection procedures outlined in Chapter 3, excluding the decision not to use NVivo for qualitative coding and organization. No unusual circumstances occurred during the data collection process, outside of one brief

technological interruption experienced by a participant, which was quickly resolved without any adverse impact on the interview's integrity or participant engagement.

Data Analysis

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Black women related to their navigating of sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression amidst the weight of pervasive sociocultural and racialized stereotypes. Analysis followed a manual process consistent with the interpretive/constructivist and critical theoretical paradigm, focusing on immersion, reflexivity, and scholarship depth. This section details the analytical approach to transition from raw transcripts to emergent codes, subthemes, and final thematic representations. Initial engagement with participant narratives ensured that study findings reflected authentic shared experience and disparate idiosyncratic meanings embedded within each shared account.

The data analytical process began with manual transcription using Microsoft Word's transcription feature. A line-by-line coding process generated 188 first-round descriptive codes reflecting nuanced participant key experiential expressions, phrases, and meaning pattern units. These codes were then refined and subsumed into 183 second-round codes through constant comparison, memoing, and iterative review. Second-round codes were clustered into subthemes and organized into broader themes, aligning with the research question. Study findings preserved convergent and idiosyncratic elements; while identified themes reflected shared narrative patterns across participants, unique codes were retained to reflect individuated meaning essential to the phenomenological whole.

Codes/Categories/Themes

A comprehensive hermeneutic phenomenological analysis was conducted to illuminate the lived experiences of Black women navigating sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression. This process yielded stratified, interpretive findings, rooted in participant narrative. Conducted analysis engendered seven primary or core themes, each encompassing one or more subthemes, reflecting the study's compounded and layered experiences of Black women. The themes included the following: *Affirmation/Community/Expression, Sexual agency and embodied boundaries, sexual socialization through omission and control, intersectional disempowerment and structural steering, reclaiming sexual freedom and pleasure, movement as embodied healing and pleasure,* and *navigating sexual identity across cultural constraints*. These thematic representations, serving as interpretive anchors, reflect the multidimensionality of each concept, offering broader insight into the phenomenon under investigation. Each theme, detailed in subsequent sections, is supported by participant quotations to descriptively elevate depth, convergence, and distinct nuance.

Theme 1: Affirmation/Community/Expression

This theme illuminated how participants experienced affirmation and belonging through shared community, cultural expression, and spaces honoring their whole, authentic selves. Subthemes included affirmation through representation, community as a healing container, and sexual expression as freedom work. The following codes informed this theme: *representation matters, safe spaces, being seen, dancing with freedom, sharing stories,* and *sisterhood*. One participant contemplated the criticality of communal

affirming, stating: “When I was in that space with other Black women, I did not have to explain my body or my desire. It was just... known” (P031). These shared accounts embody how cultural witnessing and communal mirroring foster sexual affirmation, identity validation, and reclaimed sexual expression.

Theme 2: Sexual Agency and Embodied Boundaries

This theme explored how participants defined and effectuated their sexual agency, frequently through reclamation and enforcement of embodied boundaries. Subthemes included redefining consent and bodily ownership, navigating power within sexual dynamics, and resisting external expectations through self-attunement. The following codes informed this theme: *saying no without guilt, honoring the body, feeling into safety, boundary lessons,* and control vs. surrender. One participant reflected on her evolving relationship with her bodily autonomy: “I used to think that I had to go along with it. Now I actually ask myself, do I actually want this- not just mentally, but in my body?” (P09). Another positioned her reclamation of sexual control within a spiritual framework, stating: “When I started setting sexual boundaries, it was not just about sex. It was about reclaiming space in my life that was not mine before” (P08). Participant 031 emphasized that her understanding of sexual agency was not through education but forged through contrast and survival: “No one taught me how to say no and mean it. I had to figure that out after too many yeses that never felt true.” These shared narratives underscore how Black women cultivate sexual agency through embodied confrontation, intuitive boundary work, and radical self-permission as opposed to passive awareness.

Theme 3: Sexual Socialization Through Omission and Control

This theme encapsulated how participants navigated early sexual socialization through culturally and systemically imposed silences, omissions, and controlling narratives. Participants described environments and situational encounters where sexual practice was entirely omitted from conversation or framed through shame, danger, and moral control, principally for Black girls. Subthemes included silence as a disciplinary tool, control through fear-based messaging, and internalizing restrictive sexual norms. Codes informing this theme included: i*nherited intergenerational silence, miseducation, fear-based control,* and *respectability messaging*. Participant 031 recalled: "Sex was a no. It was a 'do not do that'. And when you do it, you are bad. There was no room for curiosity or identity - just silence" (P031). Participant 08 similarly reflected, "There was no conversation around what was pleasurable, what was consensual...the whole conversation was always about being respectable, not getting pregnant, or being seen as fast" (P08). In a kindred manner, Participant 09 disclosed: "I never knew I could want something. It was always about what was okay for others- what they expected. My body was not mine" (P09). These descriptions illustrate how omission and control coalesced to suppress curiosity, fracture autonomy, and delay the development of sexual agency in the lives of Black women.

Theme 4: Intersectional Disempowerment and Structural Steering

This theme illuminated participants' experienced disempowerment constructed by intersecting forces of race, gender, religion, and sociocultural formations systemically influencing their sexual identity and practices. Participants expounded on early

experiences of race, gender, and class oppression manifesting through covert and apparent steering, encouraging them toward predetermined roles and away from sexual autonomy. Subthemes included economic limitations, gendered role expectations, and cultural misalignment with White/Western normative ideals of femininity and desirability. Codes informing this study included: *racial-sexual disempowerment, socioeconomic constraints, cultural displacement*, and *psychological silencing*. Participant 018 described growing up in an environment where "Black girls were hypersexualized", recalling how she was taught to suppress her bodily presence through rules such as "close your legs, cross your legs, sit a certain way" and how these rule-based expectations directly correlated to obtaining the perception of inviting attention, albeit unwanted. This participant additionally noted: "It was not really about the satisfaction of the woman. It was like being with this guy. Kind of in and out, doing whatever he was going to do. And it gave me a lot of confusing messages" (P018). This early social messaging undermined this participant's sense of sexual agency, simultaneously structuring her early relationship expectations with gendered labor and emotional silence.

Echoing these dynamics, Participant 021 disclosed similar statements detailing expectations placed on her to uphold respectability while maintaining resilience when facing multisystemic barriers. She remarked, "As a Black girl, I always had to be strong, not emotional. That translated into how I approached sex, too, like I was never supposed to need, ask, or expect pleasure. I was supposed to handle things" (P021). Her narrative reflection encapsulated how tropes such as the "Strong Black Woman" muted

vulnerability and her right to sexual desire, steering her operational identity into a framework of responsibility rather than personal fulfillment. In conjunction, their shared narratives elevate how Black girls are commonly channeled, structurally and psychologically, into constrained sexual identities influenced by race, class, and gendered expectations. This form of steering both erases pleasure and choice from early development and delays recognition of sexual autonomy as a right and not an inherent risk.

Theme 5: Reclaiming Sexual Freedom and Pleasure

This theme centered participants' intentional efforts to deconstruct internalized shame, reclaim body autonomy, and prioritize personal pleasure in sexual experiences, often in direct resistance to early social messaging that pathologized, oppressed, or invalidated their sexuality. Reclamation emerged as a cognitive shift and as an embodied process of healing, self-exploration, and liberation. Subthemes included spiritual reclamation, embodied pleasure, and resistance to patriarchal-influenced sexual conditioning. Codes supporting this theme include: *bodily sovereignty, pleasure-centered practice, sacred sexuality,* and *sexual unlearning*. Participant 08 offered a particularly introspective account of her transition from fear-based internalizing to self-directed healing. She reflected: "I feel like I was much more in service in sex. Now, I center my pleasure in sex, and I am no longer solely concerned about somebody else. I wanted my relationship with sex and my body to be my relationship and not all of the fear tactics that have been thrust upon me my entire life" (P08). Her script narrated a deliberate deconstruction of inherited sexual scripts, replacing shame with self-awareness and

sensual sovereignty. She further described practices such as meditation, masturbation, and pelvic floor work used as tools integral to her reclamation journey.

Participant 01 echoed similar advancement of unlearning and transformation, revealing the following: “I had to unlearn the idea that sex was only for men’s pleasure...it took me years to realize that I could be the one to initiate, to say what I wanted, even to enjoy it without guilt” (P01). This participant’s statements illustrate surfacing liberation shaped through resisting heteronormative and patriarchal sexual scripts, once rendered a passive contributor in her sexual narrative. Integrating sexual and spiritual identity, Participant 018 disclosed, “I had to heal the parts of me that believe that I did not deserve good sex. That I could not say yes or no without it being a risk. I connected pleasure with prayer and spirit, like it was right to feel good in my body” (P018). Her narrative reframes pleasure as both resistance and reverence, affirming sexuality to be sacred and autonomous. Her narrative further asserts that embodied joy is not only valid but venerated. Collectively, these accounts foreground Black women’s reclamation of sexual freedom as a radical act of self-definition and healing.

Theme 6: Movement as Embodied Healing and Pleasure

This theme explored how participants reclaimed agency, pleasure, and presence through intentional movement practices, particularly those rooted in somatic connection and ancestral or cultural rhythm. Movement was not merely physical but served as a spiritual symbolic and therapeutic act of returning to the body following chronic experiences of shame, trauma, and disembodiment. Subthemes included dancing as ritualistic freedom, stretching as somatic reconnection, and authentic, non-performative

personification. Codes supporting this theme included: *movement as medicine, body listening, dance as joy*, and *embodied sovereignty*. Participant 08 described dance as a sacred return to self: “Dancing was my way of coming back into my body...like reclaiming it. I did not have to explain anything to anyone. I could just feel good and free. That was enough” (P08). For her, dance became an expressive release, where words failed, serving as a sanctuary and liberation. Rather than performing for the gaze and approval of others, she guides her movements by internal knowing and somatic desire.

Similarly, Participant 01 reported physical stretching and nonsexual touch as daily rituals of embodied care: “Just stretching, moving without any goal, started to help me listen to my body differently. Not in a performative way, but like...actually feeling it, being in it” (P01). Her narrative reframed movement as less of a utility-based productivity and more of a radical re-attunement, honoring internal cues of safety, pleasure, and presence. These collective portrayals foreground movement as a vital source for Black women’s healing, joy, and pleasure, resisting disembodiment and reclaiming bodily autonomy on their terms.

Theme 7: Navigating Sexual Identity Across Cultural Constraints

This theme illustrated how participants navigated the complexity of sexual identity while contending with intersecting cultural, familial, and societal expectations. These narratives revealed ongoing tensions between internal truths and external constraints, emphasizing the emotional cost and resilience required to define themselves on their terms. Subthemes included identity masking, cultural negotiation, and evolving definitions of desire and self.

Participant 01 recounted the burden of situating her sexuality within the rigid confines of respectability politics, stating: “It is like... I had to water down who I was. Be desirable but not too sexual. Be wanted but not in a way that made me look fast” (“01). Her account highlights the pressure to embody socially sanctioned versions of womanhood—expectations that frequently exclude authentic sexual expression.

Similarly, Participant 07 shared how silence and assumed heterosexuality shaped her early understanding of sexual identity: “Nobody ever asked who I liked. It was just assumed that I would follow the script. Anything else was invisible” (P07). Her experience illustrates how erasure and assumption can function as covert forms of control, leaving minimal space for exploration or affirmation outside the perceived norm.

Participant 038 described living a split life, balancing familial loyalty with personal truth: “I used to live two lives. The daughter they wanted, and the person I was figuring out how to be” (P038). Her story captured the exhausting labor of code-switching between sociocultural expectations and embodied authenticity.

Together, these narratives reveal the layered, nonlinear process of navigating sexual identity for Black women, particularly when that identity collides with deeply ingrained cultural norms. The path to self-recognition often involves unlearning, deconstruction, and the courageous act of claiming one’s narrative.

Discrepant Cases

While most participant narratives fortified emergent themes related to sexual socialization, disempowerment, reclamation, and identity negotiation, the dataset also provided nuanced discrepancies, offering valuable depth to data analysis. One participant,

for instance, described her early sexual experiences as largely positive and self-directed, influenced more by affirming peer-based discourse rather than familial silence or fear-based messaging. Participant 08, a heterosexual Afro-Caribbean woman in her forties, who resides in New York, described her journey with sexual identity and sexual expression, shaped by both her diasporic cultural background and lived experiences in an urban environment, compared to other participants who grew up in Southern suburban or rural upbringings. While other participants described navigating sexual identity in spaces with limited cultural diversity, Participant 08's metropolitan geographical contexts provided significantly greater exposure to varying sexual norms and communities, though still traversing the residual impact of patriarchal and colonized sexual scripts. Her shared reflections elevated how cultural heritage and geographical location intersected, shaped her sexual self-concept, and employed strategies to assert agency within sexually intimate relationships.

While this initially appeared to diverge from themes related to themes of omission and control, her account still revealed subtle forms of inherited shame and internal conflict, suggesting that even in the evident absence of overt repression, social scripts still shape perception. Rather than excluding the case as an outlier, the data was used to complicate and refine existing themes, further reinforcing the assertion that liberation and constraint coexist in fluid and evolving ways. The outlier case affirmed the methodological commitment to honoring multicultural complexity, ensuring that the final analysis facilitated variation across Black women's self-concept and lived realities.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To establish credibility, this study employed multiple strategies outlined in Chapter Three, including prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, and member checking. The manual hermeneutic analysis process involved sustained immersion with each transcript, accommodating deep familiarity with participant narratives beyond surface-level interpretation. Reflexivity was maintained through ongoing analytic memoing, journaling insights, and acknowledging researcher bias. Member checking was periodically conducted by providing participants with narrative summaries and emergent interpretations for feedback and validation. No significant adjustments to credibility strategies were required, reflecting alignment with proposed methodology and emergent data landscape, though the iterative nature of theme development enables space for nuanced meaning to organically surface. Direct quotations and thematic triangulation between codes, subthemes, and final themes further reinforced internal validity.

Transferability

This study prioritized abundant description and contextual depth to support transferability, permitting readers to establish and determine finding relevance within other settings or populations. Participant narratives were richly detailed and situated within comprehensively diverse life experiences, including variations in age, sexual orientation, relationship status, religion, spiritual belief systems, and professional backgrounds. These factors, outlined in Chapter 3 and expounded upon in this chapter's

demographic section, fostered a textured and diverse participant sample. Each participant's lived experience, grounded in individual and cultural realities, provides insight into compounded intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. No significant modifications to transferability were required, as the semi-structured interview format elicited comprehensive depth and contextual specificity across disclosed narratives. This study ensured that future clinical practitioners, educators, and research scholars can access relevant and resonant findings within their contextual interests by maintaining methodological transparency and providing direct quotations to illuminate emergent themes.

Dependability

This study maintained dependability through clear documentation of the research process, consistent application of the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, and sustained alignment with the interpretive/constructivist and critical theoretical paradigms detailed in Chapter Three. An intricate audit trail was preserved through the research process, including reflexive memos, coding records, and analytic decision-making journal logs. This ensured transparency and consistency in collecting, interpreting, and synthesizing data. The manual, iterative process, conducted without external qualitative software, was consistently applied across all participant transcripts, maintaining methodological integrity and uniformity. Reflexivity was additionally used as a stabilization tool, guiding the research process to ensure consistency in how meanings were interpreted, and themes were developed. No substantial changes were made to dependability strategies outlined in the research design, affirming alignment with

proposed and executed procedures. These strategies collectively contributed to a research process that was both traceable and consistent across the study trajectory.

Confirmability

Confirmability was ensured through sustained reflexive engagement, transparent documentation, and methodological fidelity to the interpretive/constructivist and critical theoretical paradigms articulated in Chapter Three. The researcher employed reflexive journaling and analytic memoing throughout the research process to effectively acknowledge positionality, challenge present assumptions, and bracket personal biases. Such reflexive practice ensured that meaning units, codes, and themes were grounded in participant narratives rather than shaped by researcher projection. Combined with an audit-trail- comprising comprehensive coding records, theme trackers, and decision-making logs-was maintained to demonstrate transparency in how analytic conclusions were derived directly from the data. Member checking and peer debriefing additionally supported the confirmability of findings by validating interpretations and minimizing the influence of researcher subjectivity. No significant adjustments to confirmability strategies were required, as the study design deliberately integrated transparency and reflexivity from study onset. These combined efforts ensured that study findings reflect participant meaning, not researcher agenda, thus honoring study commitment to uplifting participants' voices, integrity, and epistemic responsibility.

Results

The collected narratives shared by participants revealed a multilayered, intersectional landscape wherein Black women navigate, negotiate, and ultimately

reclaim their sexual identity and authentic sexual expression. Rather than describing a monolithic, linear sexual experience, participants recounted a fluid, evolving journey marked by suppression, silence, miseducation, sociocultural contradiction, reclamation, and joy. Their shared narratives illuminated persistent tension between internal truths and external expectations, wherein participants initially encountered desire through omission, agency forged in resistance, and pleasure redefined as sacred and self-directed. Experiences were profoundly shaped by systemic forces-racism, patriarchy, respectability politics, and economic precarity- all of which imposed early sexual scripts through silence, fear, or rigid control. Despite these barriers, these participants engaged in critical acts of deconstruction, unlearning, and reclamation. They described movement, community, spirituality, and somatic awareness as tools to reattune their bodies, decenter performance, and prioritize self-defined pleasure. Across all interviews, sexuality was not limited to physical manifestation. Rather, it emerged as an embodied spiritual and political phenomenon, deeply anchored to ancestral memory and individual sovereignty. Participants' understandings of sexual practice and sexual expression did not exist in isolation but as a broader, ongoing effort to reclaim rightful ownership of their bodies, desires, and narratives. For some, such reclamation manifested as ritual; others enacted this through boundary work, nonconformity, or spiritual integration. Despite nuanced positions in lived experiences, a collective theme appeared unmistakable: Black women's sexuality, historically distorted, manipulated, and surveilled, remains a vital source of resistance, healing, and power when defined on its terms. As shown in Table 1,

participants represented a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds. Table 2 provides demographic information about participants.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Affirmation/Community/Expression	• Affirmation through representation • Community as a healing container • Sexual expression as freedom work
Sexual Agency and Embodied Boundaries	• Redefining consent and bodily ownership • Navigating power within sexual dynamics • Resisting external expectations through self-attunement
Sexual Socialization Through Omission and Control	• Silence as a disciplinary tool • Control through fear-based messaging • Internalizing restrictive sexual norms
Intersectional Disempowerment and Structural Steering	• Economic limitations • Gendered role expectations • Cultural misalignment with White/Western normative ideals of femininity and desirability
Reclaiming Sexual Freedom and Pleasure	• Spiritual reclamation • Embodied pleasure • Resistance to patriarchal-influenced sexual conditioning
Movement as Embodied Healing and Pleasure	• Dancing as ritualistic freedom • Stretching as somatic reconnection • Authentic, non-performative personification
Navigating Sexual Identity Across Cultural Constraints	• Included identity masking • Cultural negotiation

	• Evolving definitions of desire and self

Table 2

Patient Demographics Table

Demographics	Description	Count/percentage
Educational background	Associates, bachelors, masters, postgraduate studies, etc.	• 1Postgraduate Studies • 4 Unknown • 5 Masters
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, queer, asexual, etc.	• 1 Queer • 2 Bisexual • 7 Heterosexual
Relationship status	Single, married, domestic partnership, divorced, etc.	• 1 Married • 2 Divorced • 7 Unknown
Parental status	Having or not having any children	• 5 Having Children • 5 Unknown

Note: Data collected by the researcher via a Qualtrics survey and participant interview logs. All participant information has been de-identified for confidentiality.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the findings exploring the lived experiences of Black women navigating sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression within the context of their understanding related to race-based stereotypes and sociocultural constraints. The shared narratives of 10 participants, addressing the focal research question, challenged monolithic representations of Black womanhood, offering multidimensional revelations into sexual agency, resistance, and reclamation. Findings uncovered that participants' understandings of sexuality were not static or purely

physical; instead, they emerged as evolving, intersectional phenomena influenced by silence, control, sociocultural norms, and inherited scripts. Despite early experiences of disempowerment, shaped by racism, patriarchy, and respectability politics, participants cultivated agency through embodied boundary work, spiritual integration, community affirmation, and pleasure-centered practices. Seven core themes encapsulated the breadth and depth of these disclosed experiences: Affirmation/Community/Expression, Sexual Agency and Embodied Boundaries, Sexual Socialization Through Omission and Control, Intersectional Disempowerment and Structural Steering, Reclaiming Sexual Freedom and Pleasure, Movement as Embodied Healing and Pleasure, and Navigating Sexual Identity Across Sociocultural Constraints. These themes illustrated non-monolithic, sacred, subversive pathways through which Black women reclaim their sexual narratives and resist oppressive frameworks. Participant narratives were expressed declarations, echoing epitomized rebellion of choosing self-definition over imposed identity, of centering pleasure as power, and of embodying a sacred sexuality, politically and wholly self-authored.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the lived experiences of Black women navigating sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression through the intersecting lens of race, gender, class, and culture. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach grounded in Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality Theory, this research inquiry centered the narratives of ten Black-identifying women, whose stories revealed not only how varying sociocultural constraints influenced the development of their sexual identities, but how they were reclaimed-softly, boldly, sensually-through acts of embodiment, resistance, and self-definition. Participants described their sexuality not as undifferentiated or linear but as an evolving relationship with self, marked by moments of silence, shame, curiosity, pleasure, and healing. Findings, captured across seven core themes, illustrated how initial sexual socialization, often rooted in control, omission, and fear, was transmuted through embodied boundary work, spiritual integration, and pleasure-centered practices. Their shared narratives addressed not only the imprint of multisystemic oppression and the sacred art of reclamation. In varying respects, these findings evoke the scholarship vigor of Jesse Faucet, whose scholarship honored Black womanhood with dignity and complexity, and the unapologetic vulnerability of Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning literary Toni Morrison, who insisted on deep exploration into the interiors of Black people. Critically, this study also recognizes the sociopolitical undercurrents that have historically targeted Black woman sexual autonomy for regulation and erasure. The painful legacies of Margaret Sanger and the Negro Project,

the history of forced sterilization practices, and racist, misogynistic paternalism embedded within early reproductive "health" movements serve as stark reminders that the Black woman body has long been positioned as a battleground for control, submission, and silence (Maila et al., 2025; Whitmarsh, 2024; Kluchin, 2021). Even within the emergence of women's history as an academic discipline, pioneered by Gerda Lerner, the Black woman experience remained largely peripheral. This study directly counters this marginalization by centering the voices of a historically silenced demographic (Devrani, 2023; Scott et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, these participants demonstrate that reclamation is not a distant hope but a present, embodied act. Whether through dance, meditation, boundary-setting, or sensual rituals, they honor themselves beyond scripts written and disseminated without their consent. As this chapter progresses toward data interpretation and application of findings, it does so with unwavering fidelity to the voices who shaped the study process.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study confirm and extend existing literature on Black woman sexuality, particularly related to agency, resistance, and the complex process of self-definition. Consistent with prior research, participants echoed prior scholarship by describing early sexual socialization as a site marked by omission, surveillance, and control, confirming dominant themes within scholarship on respectability politics, gendered racial stereotypes, and intergenerational silence. However, this study moves beyond confirmation to an extended dialogue: participants not only detailed how they were shaped by multisystemic scripts, but also how they actively dismantled and re-

authored those scripts through embodied practices, including movement, sensual ritual, and spiritual reclamation. This extends and distinctly enriches the extant literature by centering pleasure, spirituality, and ancestral memory as legitimate loci of sexual autonomy. Through the integrated lens of Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory, data reaffirm the necessity of multidimensional analysis when evaluating the Black woman experience. Participants' narratives explicate that sexuality could not be disentangled from race, class, spirituality, and body politics. The expressions of sexual agency and pleasure emerged at the convergence of these identities, each one sharpened by the blades of structural oppression and personal reclamation. The choice to emphasize these superposed dynamics aligns with and elongates the foundational works of Crenshaw (1989) and Lorde (1984), situating Black women's erotic and sexual lives as composite sites of knowledge, not simply consequences. Notably, these findings echo literary and contemporary cultural traditions ranging from Percival Everett to Kendrick Lamar, figures who insisted on unearthing the sacred, wounded, and desirous interiors of Black life. Their collective scholarship and artistic works created intellectual and emotional templates for conceptualizing Black woman sexuality, not as pathology, but as political, poetic, and profoundly human. This study walks beside that heritage, illustrating how participants cultivated resistance, not only through rejection of external labels but through the intimate work of embodiment-redefining sexuality as both political and spiritual terrain. Furthermore, this study positions itself as a direct critique of the sociopolitical structures that have long sought to regulate and suppress Black woman sexuality. While prior literature has acknowledged the role of systemic racism and

patriarchy, present findings demand deeper interrogation of specific historical and institutional betrayals. The enduring legacy of forced sterilization and the ongoing reproductive injustices perpetuated under the guise of care position the Black woman body as a contested site (Kluckin, 2021). These findings not only acknowledge those histories-they resist them. Ultimately, narratives illustrate that reclamation is not a singular event but a continuous, nonlinear process. This study challenges heteronormative binaries of victims and survivors, instead offering a paradigm wherein sexual autonomy is forged through contradiction, softness, fire, and grace.

Limitations of the Study

Despite methodological integrity and study depth, certain limitations inevitably arose that may impact the trustworthiness of study findings. First, although recruited participants engaged with the study demographic and consent form via differing social media platforms, the resulting sample still reflected a degree of sociocultural commonality. Many participants reported similar or comparable educational, professional backgrounds and access to wellness-oriented spaces, which may have shaped their narratives around embodiment, boundary work, and sexual reclamation. As such, the full spectrum of Black woman sexual experience, particularly from individuals who may not have access or alignment with such communities and spaces, may not be fully captured. Secondly, the sample size (n=10), while effectively appropriate for hermeneutic phenomenological study, naturally minimizes the scope of generalizability. This study does not seek statistical representation; it seeks meaningful depth. However, broader geographic and socioeconomic variation may have introduced additional thematic

insights, particularly in how regional and cultural contexts shape sexual identity. Thirdly, as a Black/Afro-Caribbean scholar-practitioner deeply embedded in the communities reflected in this study, the researcher's positionality brings epistemic richness and interpretive tension. Reflexive journaling and analytic memoing were implemented to bracket personal assumptions and maintain methodological transparency, yet the interpretive process remains co-constructed. Lastly, despite a flexible semi-structured interview style, cultural stigma around sexuality may have influenced participant disclosure despite reported comfort. The weight of racialized and gendered narratives related to silence and shame cannot be underestimated, even within safe research spaces. As such, some participants may have consciously or subconsciously withheld aspects of their lived experience related to the studied phenomenon. These limitations do not undermine the study's trustworthiness but provide critical context. They serve as a guidepost for future research to expand cultural representation, deepen temporal engagement, and continue building professional and academic spaces where Black woman sexuality is explored, honored, and reclaimed without constraint.

Recommendations

The findings of this study call forward future research grounded not in deficit or pathology, but expansion, wholeness, and sacred reclamation. As Black women continue to anchor and embody their sexual identities on their terms, research must rise to meet the complexity of their authentic truths, without flattening, fetishizing, or fragmenting them. First, future studies should intentionally broaden the circle to include Black women across wider geographic regions and greater variations in class, spiritual, and educational

backgrounds. Many participants in this study had access to well-informed communities, which shaped their paths toward embodiment and reclamation. While study participants had access to well-informed communities that shaped their pathways toward embodiment and reclamation, countless others- those residing in rural areas, incarcerated systems, or constrained by socioeconomic limitations- remain unheard. Their untold truths are not void of power; they await witnessing. Secondly, research must comprehensively delve into the intersection of sexuality, neurodiversity, and age among Black women. The sacred does not retire, nor does the desire vanish with time, diagnosis, or shifting ability. There is personified brilliance and body wisdom in every life stage and every configuration of mind, and the scholarship must reflect that. Third, given the recurring spiritual undertones emerging across narratives, future research should explore the correlational relationship between spiritual African diasporic spiritual systems, such as Ifa, Hoodoo, and ancestor veneration, and the reclamation of sexual selfhood (Opara, 2025). For many, pleasure is more than political; it is ritual and memory (Opara, 2025). Although largely omitted from dominant Western-based frameworks, it remains the cultural and spiritual lexicon of Black woman sexuality. Finally, a critical opportunity exists in gating intergenerational sexual socialization: how shame, silence, and sovereignty are transmitted between Black mothers and daughters, chosen kin, and spiritual lineage.

Implications

This study contributes to positive social change by directly amplifying Black women’s voices and honoring their authentic lived experiences as valid, complex, and

necessary forms of knowledge. At the individual level, findings may inspire Black women to reengage with sexual practice and sexual identity as sacred, multidimensional, and self-defined, untethered from societal and sociocultural shame, pathologization, or patriarchal distortion. For participants and readers alike, witnessing these narratives invites introspective reflection and potential affirmation: pleasure, embodiment, and liberation are not indulgences; they are inherited birthrights. At the familial level, these findings unlock pathways to intergenerational healing and expansive dialogue around sexuality, particularly between Black mothers and daughters, chosen kin, and spiritual lineage. As silence is disrupted, new scripts may emerge-ones rooted in agency, truth-telling, and ancestral wisdom rather than shame, omission, and control. At the organizational level, primary care providers, mental health practitioners, and sexual health educators must examine and deconstruct their internalized assumptions and recalibrate care frameworks to center culturally relevant frameworks culturally relevant intersectional understandings of Black woman sexuality. Cultural humility within healthcare practice is not elective; it is essential. Clinical practitioners and educators must be effectively equipped to hold adequate space for Black women's sensual and spiritual realities without reaction, suspicion, or judgment. Trainings and supervision models must include intersectional, sexuality-affirming content, centering the voices of Black and Afro-diasporic women, recognizing collective trauma and joy that shape their sexual narratives. At the societal and policy level, this study critiques the ongoing impact of reproductive control, medical racism, and institutional betrayal and calls for the imminent need for policy reform and ethical accountability. The legacies of forced sterilization,

lack of consent-based reproductive care, and systemic silence must be addressed beyond academic and historical literature, but directly placed in clinical protocols, educational standards and benchmarks, and legislative frameworks. These findings highlight the need for policy that protects women's bodily autonomy, mandates trauma- and culture-informed educational resources, and actively dismantles the present surveillance of Black women bodies in medicine, law, and media. Methodologically, this study affirms the power and precision of qualitative, phenomenological research rooted in Black feminist thought. The use of embodied semi-structured interviews, reflexive journaling, and intersectional analysis demonstrates that research can be rigorous and relevant. Future research scholars are urged to approach methodology not as a neutral mechanism but as a central site of ethical and cultural responsibility. Theoretically, this study extends and fortifies Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality Theory by affirming their continued relevance in conceptualizing how race, gender, class, and sexuality converge to shape lived experience. Translationally, data findings suggest that integrating culture-specific healing modalities, including ancestral practices, somatic awareness, and boundary work, into psychological health and educational frameworks is beneficial and necessary. Finally, this study affirms what generations have liminally whispered in the margins of clinical and academic spaces: that Black women neither share a monolithic experience nor require rescuing from their felt desires-they require space to re-enter themselves, safely, freely, and without apology.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that Black women's sexuality is neither derivative nor peripheral-it is a central site for identity, agency, resistance, and self-authored liberation. Rooted in the lived narratives of ten Black women, this research reveals that sexuality is not solely shaped by sociocultural constraints but is actively redefined through embodied practice, spiritual reclamation, and ancestral memory. Participants illuminated how their sexual identities were forged, not in spite of but in direct response to, historical silencing and systemic regulation. As such, this study contributes to the increasing scholarship demand for research that intentionally positions Black women, not as passive subjects of pathology, but as epistemic agents- capable of articulating their truths, pleasures, and boundaries beyond the confines of colonial, patriarchal, and heteronormative frameworks. The core message of this inquiry is clear: Black women’s sexuality must be understood as sacred, multidimensional, and culturally situated, deserving of nuanced scholarship, ethical engagement, and transformative visibility. Future research, clinical practice, and policy must rise to meet this intricate complexity, not through fetishization, voyeurism, or impulsive correction, but through accountability, reverence, and reflective listening.

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Appendix A: Social Media Invitation

Caption:

This study explores how Black-identifying women give meaning to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression, given existing systemic race-based stereotypes impacting their lived experiences. For this study, you are invited to share your experiences regarding current voluntary sexual practices as a Black female. All information will be submitted anonymously through the Survey Monkey platform located here.

About the Study:

- One completed self-reported demographic questionnaire
- One signed informed consent
- One Zoom interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes that will be audio and video recorded

Participation Mandatory Requirements:

- Must identify as Black and cisgender female
- Must be between the ages of 20-45 at the time of participation
- Must reside in the United States for a minimum of 15 years

This interview is a part of the doctoral study for Ashley Rodriguez, Ph.D. candidate at Walden University. If selected, you will be contacted via email to schedule an interview time that works best for the researcher and the participant. If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the self-reported demographic questionnaire by using the provided link. To safeguard your confidentiality and privacy, please do **not** publicly respond to express interest. All information is kept confidential, only accessible to the primary researcher and research committee. All recruitment data will be stored on the primary researcher's Walden University One Drive account, which remains password protected. Please email ashley.rodriguez3@waldenu.edu to inform the researcher of any questions or concerns. You are also welcome to share this social media invitation or forward the link to the self-reported demographic questionnaire to anyone who meets the requirements and may be interested in participating.

Appendix B: Email Invitation

Subject Line:

Help Impact Research: Exploring how Black females give meaning to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression

Email Message:

Good (Morning, Afternoon, Evening),

You were selected to participate in the next step of this study. This study explores the ways that Black-identifying women give meaning to sex, sexuality, and sexual expression, given existing stereotypes impacting their lived experience. For this portion, you are invited to share your experiences regarding current voluntary sexual practices.

About the Study:

- One 60–90-minute Zoom interview that will be audio and video recorded
- To protect participant privacy, this study will not include any personally identifiable information

Participant Requirements:

- Must identify as Black and cisgender female
- Must be between the ages of 20 and 45 at the time of participation
- Must reside in the United States for a minimum of 15 years

The interview is a component of the doctoral study conducted by Ashley Rodriguez, a Walden University Doctoral Candidate. The researcher and participant will agree on a time for the interview. If you meet the above requirements, have completed the self-reported demographic questionnaire, and would like to continue participating in

the study, please email Ashley Rodriguez to include if you have any additional questions or concerns. If you know anyone who meets the requirements and may be interested in participating, please send them the self-reported demographic questionnaire link to complete.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Exploring the Black Female Experience Related to Sex, Sexuality, and Sexual Expression: A Qualitative Study

Principal Research Investigator: Ashley Rodriguez, Walden University PhD Candidate

Study Introduction: Thank you for your willingness to participate in this qualitative study. This study explores how Black women give meaning to sexual practice, sexuality, and sexual expression, given existing race-based stereotypes and systemic power dynamics that influence internalized messages regarding the perception and understanding of these phenomena. Your recorded responses contribute to the study conclusions, which aim to advocate for Black female mental and sexual health. This interview will last for 60-90 minutes, and I will record audio and video to ensure exact data collection. I encourage you to be honest and only disclose what you feel comfortable sharing. Please let me know if you need to pause during the interview.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we proceed?

Consent Form Signature Confirmed: ____ (Initial Here)

Interview Questions:

1. In your own words, how do you define sexuality?
2. What cultural and societal messages about sex and sexuality were you exposed to while growing up?
3. If any, what role did family, culture, or societal messages play in shaping your current attitude toward sex and sexuality growing up?

4. What aspects of sexual education did you find the most beneficial or detrimental in addressing your specific needs and experiences?
5. Have you faced challenges or discrimination related to your sexuality due to your race, gender, or other factors?
6. How do you approach your sexual health, and what influences that approach?
7. How comfortable do you feel discussing your sexuality and sexual practices with others (e.g., friends, partners, family members)
8. How have your views of sex, sexuality, and sexual expression evolved since your first sexual experience?
9. What experiences make you feel empowered or disempowered in your sexual identity and expression?
10. If applicable, how have your religious or spiritual practices influenced your current attitudes toward sex, sexuality, and sexual expression?
11. How have media or cultural representations of Black women influenced your understanding of your current sexual identity and sexual expression?
12. What practices or experiences have helped you heal from negative experiences or empowered you to embrace your current sexual identity?

Thank you again for contributing your time to this study. Before we end, do you have any final questions or concerns?

Appendix D: Post-Interview Debriefing Questions

Introduction: Thank you for completing this study. I want to briefly check in regarding your experience.

Questions:

1. How was your experience completing this study?
2. Do you feel any distress or discomfort related to any topics and themes discussed during this interview?
3. Would you like any resources to connect you with a licensed mental health provider in your local area?
4. Do you have any final questions, concerns, or feedback regarding the questions or the study?

Closing: Again, thank you for participating! If any questions or concerns arise, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.