

**“It’s like you’re trying to conquer me”: Black women account for their experiences
engaging with white and non-black men on online dating applications**

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to provide insight into the lived experiences of black women that engage with white and non-black men on online dating platforms through their own narratives. The posed research questions sought to understand two precise processes; firstly, how black women experience their interactions with white and non-black men online, paying close attention to instances of anti-blackness and secondly, how these women receive and respond to this. The motivation for incorporating the second research question precisely was to extend the positionality of black womanhood outside the confines of victimhood and demonstrate the agency they possess in constructing their own perceptions of certain experiences. Ten semi-structured, informal interviews were conducted with ten self-identifying black women that were in use or had been in use of online dating platforms in the preceding six months at the time of the interviews. Online dating applications were operationalized as dating platforms with locative sensibility, defined as applications that are user's location-aware and downloadable on a smartphone; examples included Tinder, OkCupid and Bumble. The interviews demonstrated a commitment to existential phenomenology and post-colonial feminist research in prioritizing the sentiments of the respondents and limiting the influences of the researcher. Experiences of racialized sexualization and subjugation emerged from the accounts provided by the respondents. In regards to racialized sexualization, the respondents problematized sexually-racialized comments and expressions guised as propositions and compliments, which made reference to their bodily features, ethnicity, and celibacy. In the context of subjugation, the respondents identified instances whereby the men they engaged with disputed their intellect, denied the respondent human complexity beyond their blackness and positioned them outside the realm of belonging both within a racial and national context. In experiencing both processes, respondents admitted to adopting avoidant coping mechanisms so as to curb the prospects of reoccurrence. Sentiments of mistrust towards white men accompanied with the gradual awareness of the problematization of race engendered the respondents' withdrawal. The polarization between black women and men they categorized as white and non-black was a consequence of this. Gender and race are inextricably linked to determine the experiences afforded to certain people and the manner in which those experiences are perceived.

Keywords: online dating platforms, racialized sexualization, subjugation, race, gender

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	6
1.1 Online Dating: Its Origins and New Platforms.....	6
1.2 Race and Online Dating.....	7
1.3 Research Questions.....	8
1.4 Research Expectations	9
1.5 Scientific & Social Relevance.....	9
1.6 Outline/Structure of the thesis.....	11
2. Theoretical Framework	12
2.1 The Myths of Black Womanhood.....	12
2.2 The White Male Gaze	14
2.3 The Dutch Context.....	15
2.4 The Online Realm.....	17
2.5 Racism in Online Dating.....	18
2.6 Responses to Racism Online.....	21
2.7 Conclusion	24
3. Methodological Framework.....	25
3.1 Methodological Approach	25
3.2 Participants.....	26
3.3 Data Collection	26
3.4 Data Analysis	31
3.5 Research Considerations	33
4. Results & Discussion	35
4.1 Racialized Sexualization.....	35
4.2 Subjugation & Performance.....	43
4.3 Polarization	50
5. Conclusion	57
5.1 Racialized Sexualization.....	58
5.2 Subjugation and Performance	59
5.3 Polarization	61
5.4 Limitations & Future Research.....	62
5.5 Theoretical and Societal Implications.....	64

References.....	65
Appendix.....	69
Appendix A – List of Participants.....	70
Appendix B – Coding Chart.....	72

1. Introduction

1.1 Online Dating: Its Origins and New Platforms

For many young singles, the internet posits itself as a medium for meeting and engaging with a potential significant other or sexual partner. The internet provides distinct opportunities for daters to engage with social contacts that transcend their immediate geographical boundaries. Taboos previously associated with online dating are gradually obfuscated with several daters opting to meet and engage with potential partners online (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). The number of websites dedicated to facilitating online partnerships has also seen a rise in recent years with several increasingly adapting to new technologies that aim for optimum results (Callander, Holt & Newman 2016). These adaptive technologies enable potential users to download online dating mediums directly on their mobile devices; making partner searching readily accessible and flexible (Hess & Flores, 2016). Locative sensibility accents traditional dating websites, transforming the technologies of digital dating into smartphone applications (Hess & Flores, 2016). This is therefore to indicate that the focus here is less on thoroughly manicured traditional dating websites but on location-aware mobile dating applications such as Tinder, OkCupid and Bumble. As location-aware programs, these online dating applications connect users within a particular radius, permitting daters to gradually or immediately extend their online interactions into offline settings, where they can engage and pursue intimate relationships with those they initiated conversations with online (Hess & Flores, 2016).

Initial self-presentation on these online dating applications is limited to a brief introductory biography accompanied by a handful of personal photographs. This courting system enables daters to swiftly discard or interact with certain profiles they deem of interest or attractive; deviating from a system established on conventional dating websites where daters would have to actively seek out potential partners and would only come to discard certain profiles once they had spent significant time seeking them out and engaging with them (Hess & Flores, 2016). For this reason, online dating applications of this nature have fundamentally altered the nature of digital dating and dating at large. It brings with it aspirations of limiting or expanding the pool of potential partners based on the criteria set forth by the dater. Furthermore, online partner seeking allows singles in search of either long term or short term companionship to express their romantic interests and to engage these with the interests and desires of others. In the context of online dating applications, initial romantic interest is conveyed by “swiping right” for profiles that elicit one’s attention while disinterest is communicated by “swiping left”. When daters “swipe right”, the possibility to initiate a conversation is made available to both parties; through

conversation, the interests and intentions of either dater become more known to the other. The manner in which this interest or disinterest is expressed is of paramount importance to this research.

1.2 Race and Online Dating

Despite the transnational facade exemplified by online dating applications, romantic online engagements remain heavily gendered and racialized. Standing myths surrounding the indiscriminate nature of the online realm position the web as a nonracial space where the archetypical web user is without a race (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). Online platforms are believed to be nonracial until they are racialized by the emergence of users of color (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). The problematization of identity markers such as race and gender within online spaces is particularly evident in the experiences afforded to black women on online dating platforms. Within the context of the Global North, black female daters encounter a higher probability of being disregarded by white and non-black groups when initiating conversation with them despite black women responding to these groups with the same frequency as they do men who fall outside of these categories. To be black on the dating market, particularly a black woman, means that one's propositions are more than likely to be disregarded (Lin & Lundquist, 2013). For this reason, black women place at the bottom of male dating hierarchies with many men demonstrating disinterest in engaging with black women or considering them as potential romantic partners; severely limiting the availability of choices for black women (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). The enduring historical and contemporary stereotypes of black women as sexually lascivious and economically dependent on the state persist in the Global North and continue to jeopardize their online partnership opportunities (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). This coupled with the glorification of White European beauty ideals exposes black women to race based rejection and fetishization often performed by white and non-black men. They continue to be targets of vitriol and abuse on online platforms roused by their gendered and racialized social identity (Moloney & Love, 2018).

This then reveals that race and racism endure online in forms that are both new and distinct to the internet, accompanied by remnants of centuries-old forms that resound both offline and online (Daniels, 2012). In reality, when individuals enter the online world, they carry along with them the principles they have acquired from their navigation and socialization in a racially hierarchical offline world (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). Race holds precedence in cyberspace precisely because those who navigate online spaces are already influenced by the ways in which race navigates in offline spaces, and are compelled to bring these experiences, perceptions and knowledge with them when they log into cyberspace (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). And so, to self-identify as a person of color within the online realm remains a significant act which exposes users of color to particular vulnerabilities (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). Despite these vulnerabilities, users of color remain largely unprotected with the online platforms that accommodate

potentially harmful content, often opting not to assume responsibility for the sentiments disseminated through their mediums (Lawson, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this research will be to account for (1) *the way black women living in the Netherlands experience their online interactions with white and non-black men on online dating applications* paying particular attention to instances of anti-blackness and fetishization. A second component to the research seeks to assess (2) *the way black women respond to the racism they experience online and how they challenge the anti-blackness and fetishization they encounter*.

1.3 Research Questions

As highlighted in the preceding paragraph, this research will pose two separate research questions. The first research question will read: *how do black female users of online dating applications experience their interactions with white or non-black users of online dating applications?* The aim of this question is to gauge how black women understand and interpret their interactions with white and non-black men in online settings, with the aim of uncovering the racialized experiences reported by black women.

Motivations for phrasing the research question as such are to avoid prescribing certain expectations to black women's experiences. The intention is for the accounts provided by black women to reveal the particularities of their experiences rather than to successfully align with the expectations ascribed to them. Furthermore, the aim is also to gauge an understanding of how black women perceive these interactions. For instance, fetishization or anti-blackness will be perceived differently by different black women. Each interpretation of such will be taken into account and validated based on the grounds that it constitutes a black woman's lived experience. The overall aim is to refrain from ascribing rigid definitions on certain phenomena and allowing the experiences of black women to define phenomena independently.

The second research question will read: *In what ways do black women respond to the fetishization and anti-blackness they encounter on online dating applications?* The aim of the research question is to analyze how black women make sense of the anti-blackness and fetishization they encounter on online dating applications and how they respond to these. Firstly, the question will seek to gauge an understanding of how black women receive the content they are met with in their interaction with white and non-black men online. This would look precisely at what sort of emotions they experience when they encounter content they categorize as anti-blackness, fetishization, or both. Secondly, the question then seeks to explore how black women respond to this content, focusing on whether they challenge these instances of anti-blackness and fetishization, avoid them or ascribe to them through internalizing the commentary.

1.4 Research Expectations

Based on existing literature which accounts for online abuse targeted towards women by men (Moloney & Love, 2018), I can hypothesize that due to their gendered social identities, black women will report that they have been recipients of online abuse and vitriol. Furthermore, I expect that some black women will interpret the racialized interactions they have with non-black men in online settings passively. Such was the case with Callander et al.'s study (2016) whereby gay men from minority ethnic backgrounds were requested to recount their experiences with interacting with white men on online dating forums. Most recipients admitted to being racially profiled and experiencing sexual racism, however, despite this admission, they continued to view racially charged disinterest as a measurement of preference rather than of prejudice. The research highlighted how those that experience racism online may come to view this as a standard process of engaging with online platforms. Finally, I expect that black women will have varying responses to the anti-blackness and fetishization that they experience online. I hypothesize that some women might retract and limit their use of online dating applications whilst others might combat aggressors and ensure that their frustrations are known. Victims of racist abuse often withdraw from racist spaces in order to mitigate the racist encounter whilst those that challenge racism do so without anticipating broader significant alterations (Callander et al., 2016). This form of coping can seem beneficial to those living in oppressive structures they deem unalterable, opting instead to protect themselves by avoiding contact (West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2009; Callander et al., 2016). This reality could potentially reflect on black women when responding to racist encounters online.

1.5 Scientific & Social Relevance

The scientific relevance of this research is grounded in its novelty. Dating applications have been studied extensively (Callander, et al., 2016; Sweeney & Borden, 2009), however the interplay between race dynamics and online dating applications is yet to be researched at an academic level. Existing research has primarily focused on the gendered and racialized encounters black women experience in offline settings (McPherson, 2019; Thompson, 2012). In addition to this, research that has narrowed its gaze on racism and its varying dimensions, have largely limited its study to that of the black man's experience with racism (Hondius, 2014), negating how black women experience and respond to the phenomena. Furthermore, research examining gender and sexism, restrict their bodies of work to the experiences of white women with sexism (Moloney & Love, 2017), once again disregarding the experiences of black women in relation to their gendered identities. There is a tendency within academia to study gender and race as two isolated constituents of identity, it is however necessary to examine how these facets of

identity interplay in the lives of women both gendered and racialized. Therefore, this research will prioritize both aspects of identity, taking both into account when examining how black women experience their navigation of online dating applications. More precisely, this research will serve the purpose of uncovering the dynamics of interracial communication between black female online dating application users and white or non-black online dating application users. The aim will be to reveal the prevalence of racism online as well as the distinct ways racism is expressed in online settings.

Beyond this, it will aim to position black women not solely as victims but subjects with the agency to combat racist ideologies. The secondary purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the measures taken by black female online dating application users to curtail or combat fetishization and vilification. Existing literature has primarily focused on the victimhood of black women in racialized and gendered settings, contributing minimally to uncovering how black women resolve and combat the vices performed against them (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013; Thompson, 2012). Narratives of sexual exploitation, physical abuse, exhibition and dissection have plagued the historic and contemporary academic representations of black women (Benard, 2016; Gammage, 2015; Hobson, 2003). Often times, these observations of black women are made without so much engaging with this group and gauging an understanding of how they experience and respond to their lived experiences (Cheers, 2017; Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013). For this reason, the social relevance of this research is grounded in its aim to dismantle the narrative of victimhood constructed around the experiences of black women.

Furthermore, the research aims to provide black women with the ownership over their narratives, which entails allowing them to speak for themselves and their experiences. The research is socially relevant given that gendered racism remains pervasive in online spheres; however it receives limited attention and condemnation. Extensive efforts have been made to restrain the prevalence of racially or ethnically charged actions in offline spaces. Legal policies have largely criminalized acts of this nature, with perpetrators liable for persecution (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Outside of the legal realm, mass public condemnation often invites a sense of accountability that censures potential perpetrators (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). However, given that conversations on online dating platforms largely remain private and geographically removed from one another, accountability is unlikely to be achieved unless victims directly confront abusers (Hess & Flores, 2016). For this reason, this research aims to bring to light the prevalence of gendered racism in online spheres, precisely online dating applications.

Furthermore, the negation of unequal race relations in the Netherlands obfuscates everyday occurrences of racism, enabling perpetrators to act without social reprimand (Balkenhol, 2016). A culture of color-blindness and smug defensiveness (Essed & Hoving, 2015), allows racism to fester unchallenged in the country. The country's intimate relationship with ignorance and denial foregrounds the Dutch tendency to disregard race as a means of acknowledging it (Essed & Hoving, 2015). These tropes are thus

central to a country where racism remains largely unchallenged, with its targets reluctant to voice their grievances in fear of condemnation (Hondius, 2014). Therefore, the research would serve the purpose of enlightening readers on the endurance of racism in supposedly post-racial societies, as well as equipping black women living in the Netherlands with a deeper understanding of the versatility of racism in online settings.

1.6 Outline/Structure of the thesis

In regards to structure, this thesis will be constructed around five separate chapters. The chapters will engage with the theoretical background of the research, the methods employed to collect and analyze the data, the results of the research and finally, the last chapter will be dedicated to concluding on and discussing the results. The theoretical framework will explore the extant academic literature surrounding the historic sexualization and subjugation of black women, also discussing how these are regurgitated in contemporary landscapes. Furthermore, several relevant concepts will be addressed in length, with intentions of revealing how an online climate of toxic masculinity has enabled the abuse of women and black women in particular. The methodological framework will detail the methods employed when collecting and analyzing the data necessary for this research, paying equal attention to the methodological justifications for using interviews as a method of research. Furthermore, the chapter will address the techniques used to analyze and segment the data collected from the interviews. The chapter dedicated to the results and discussion will detail and discuss the findings of the interviews conducted. The results will be accompanied by extracts from the interviews. The final and conclusive chapter will address the results observed in the previous chapter and draw conclusions based on the reports made by the research participants, also summarizing the progression of the research paper. Finally, suggestions for future research will be made.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Myths of Black Womanhood

In order to acquire an understanding of the origins of the anti-blackness and fetishization experienced by black women in online settings, it is necessary to uncover both the historical and contemporary stereotypes ascribed to black women that routinely work to reduce them to erratic fetishized objects.

According to Gammage (2015), the black woman bears the double burden of sexism and racism; historical representations of them as inherently hypersexual endure and cast doubts on their abilities as mother or wife. The author identifies the colonization and enslavement of black women as the catalyst for the objectification of this group; these years saw black women legally reduced to sexual reproductive objects at the hands of white European captors. These stereotypes persist in contemporary spaces as the media continues to co-opt and broadcast these colonized imageries of black women, minimizing their humanity and constructing society's perception of them (Gammage, 2015).

Similar accounts are provided by Cheers (2017) who argues that there exist two damning historical representations of black women which endure to date. There is the *sapphire* stereotype which posits black women as the archetypal 'angry black woman'; she is overbearing, difficult and loud. This version of a black woman is inviting of repulsion and abhorrence whilst the *jezebel* stereotype presents a sexually lascivious and aggressively promiscuous black woman that invites the male gaze (Cheers, 2017). In their work, Collins and Marrec (2016) contend that these stereotypes work to class black women as subjects that possess an unnatural sexuality. As a sapphire, a black woman is pocketed as grudgingly sexual, harboring traits of pseudo-masculinity, whilst a jezebel is predatorily carnal and immoral (Collins & Marrec, 2016). The extreme conceptualizations of either form of sexuality justify the abnormality of black female sexuality and works to further delegitimize the morality of black womanhood. In both instances, importance is placed rather on the perceived immorality of black women and their inability to attain morality than on the degree of their sexual encounters (Collins & Marrec, 2016). Black women are grouped as either sexually inadequate or sexually excessive irrespective of their actual sexual behavior.

The benefit of morality was and remains largely unavailable to black women and is predicated on the history of enslavement. As cited by Hobson (2003), from conquest to ethnographic exhibition, the black female body was labeled as 'grotesque', 'unfeminine', 'lascivious' and 'obscene'. The demonization of the black female body was primarily targeted towards the buttocks and genitalia, these parts were thought to be disruptive and so provided further justification for the devaluation and discrimination of black womanhood; working to deny them morality (Hobson 2003). A pertinent and historic example of such one case is provided by the author and manifests in the lived experiences of Sarah Baartman. The hapless life and death of Baartman began with her capture and exportation to

Europe by Dutch explorers. Upon sighting Baartman, explorers Hendrik Cesars and William Dunlop categorized her physique as aptly grotesque, circus-like given her protruding buttocks and elongated labia; a feature common and standard to women from Baartman's Southern Cape tribe (Hobson, 2003). Baartman's colonized body, particularly her buttocks, denounced in Europe as a medical condition of "steatopygia", equated her physicality to disease, warranting her exhibition in London and Paris and ultimately her post-mortem dissection by French anatomists. Hobson (2003) proceeds to contend that Baartman's presumed deviance extends beyond her buttocks and manifests also in her skin color, body shape and femaleness; with this deviance evolving her into a 'freak show' intended for European consumption. Furthermore, Baartman functions as the preeminent representation of racial and sexual othering because her stigmatized and pathologized buttocks and labia invited respective scrutiny, not solely in the form of her exhibition and dissection but in the stereotyping of black female sexuality that persists (Hobson, 2003). Baartman's capture and exhibition was engineered for the sole purpose of showcasing the grotesquerie in her physicality and the phenomenality in black womanhood to European audiences. This precise phenomenality ascribed to blackness is what continues to obfuscate the complexity in black womanhood by reducing black women to spectacles intended for consumption.

Morrison (2018) expands on this concept of *phenomenal blackness* and terms it as an occurrence which sees the black body reconfigured as a site of curiosity, objectification, criminalization and animalization. This reconfiguration welcomes either the subtle or conspicuous hailing and gawking of black people by white observers as they engage or encounter one another (Morrison, 2018). The author argues that black women precisely are afforded this phenomenality; in this process, they are positioned as materially available to satisfy the intrigue of white and non-black others. Similar accounts are provided by Benard (2010) whose article unequivocally puts forth that black women were and continue to be "defined by their sexuality and as their sexuality" (2010, p. 3). Collins (1991) extends on this logic and argues that the actualization of this narrative has positioned black women as the preeminent site of "pornographic subject" for white men in both pre-colonial and postcolonial spaces (1991, p. 234). The colonized imageries of black women are constructed to obscure and normalize the interplay between sexism and racism, positioning them as inevitable occurrences.

The aforementioned scholars successfully implicate historical and contemporary imaginations of black womanhood in the enduring hyper-sexualization and vilification of black women. Hobson (2003) in particular further deepens an understanding of this by providing historical accounts of the damnation of black womanhood through the lived experiences of Sarah Baartman; a figure believed to be the preeminent example of the alterity of black female physicality and sexuality. Likewise, the concept of phenomenal blackness as coined by Morrison (2018) is relevant in examining the notion surrounding the presumed peculiarity in blackness that warrants the othering of black female physicality and femininity.

Despite this, the works analyzed in this section focus extensively on the descriptions of the stereotypes, whilst negating their origins, those that design these narratives and how they benefit from them.

2.2 The White Male Gaze

Nevertheless, a number of scholarly articles identify the white European male as the producer and beneficiary of the colonized imaginaries ascribed to black women. Thompson (2012) asserts that the white male traveler's gaze was instrumental in the positioning of black women as predatorily promiscuous subjects. The article relies heavily on excerpts from European explorers' travel diaries; with many diary submissions describing black women not only as labor force commodities but also as playthings for white men. In his 17th century writings, French explorer Duquesne assessed that the African women he observed on the West African coast, demonstrated a desire for the caresses of white men (Thompson, 2012). The writings which were then published in Europe for the consumption of white European readers positioned black women as willful sexual commodities that yearned for intimacy from white men. The imaginaries designed by the explorers remain; constructing narratives that fault black women for their own sexual exploitation (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013).

Benard (2010) contributes further to this argument and asserts that the dual racialization and sexualization of black womanhood were not by-products of colonialism but rather foundational to it. This is to be understood as the colonization of the black female body; this process did not solely take place upon the fall of European imperialism but rather took place alongside the colonization of land and resources. The colonization of the black female body provided European captors and overseers access to black bodies, which they could pillage and plunder as they did with natural resources and land. The analogy of *who can bed and who can wed* was then birthed out of the actualization of colonialism and was fundamental in the shaping of the colony (Benard, 2010). According to the author (2010), the analogy stipulated that black female bodies were to be subjected to sexual exploitation in the forms of rape and concubinage while white women were to be married and to be reproduced with. In contemporary times, this exploitation comes into play in areas such as popular culture, media and politics but the burden of hypersexualization is deflected on black women who are perceived as having agency in the way they are depicted (Benard, 2010).

This persistent disregard for the sexual exploitation of black women and the reactive disdain for this group is what theorist Moya Bailey (2018) terms *misogynoir*. The author defines misogynoir as a form of misogyny deeply imbedded in anti-black racism that is directed at black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Misogynoir speaks to both the racialization and sexualization of black womanhood whereby anti-blackness and misogyny blend to vilify black women. The equal problematization of their womanhood and race speaks to the intersectionality that foregrounds black women's lived experiences. Here,

intersectionality addresses the marginalization of black women on grounds of their race and gender (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). The intersections between their gendered and racialized identities warrant their initial sexual exploitation and ultimately they are held accountable for the sexual abuse inflicted upon them. Their abusers are alleviated of blame and the conceptualization of their identities as black Venuses faults them as black female temptresses for having invited unwarranted male attention (Benard, 2010). Bailey and Trudy's (2018) and Carbado et al.'s (2013) articles serve to highlight the interplay between race and gender in the historic and contemporary subjugation of black women. The concept of misogynoir precisely is relevant for this study in examining how perceptions of black womanhood become grounds for the vilification experienced by black women.

Similar convictions are elicited by Benard (2010) who concludes that "gender must be discussed as racialized and race as gendered since these are two inextricable social constructs" (2010, p. 2). Bernard's (2010) arguments regurgitate the intersections of race and gender in the problematization of black women (Carbado et al. 2013). Benard (2010), Thomposon (2012), Dagbovie-Mullins (2013), and Bailey and Trudy (2018) succeed in providing nuanced accounts for the origins of the stereotypes ascribed to black women. In doing so, the literature identifies the functional sexual exploitation of black women by European colonizers as contributing to the proliferation of these stereotypes. The article by Bailey and Trudy (2018) provides the language to describe the basis for the mistreatment of black women; allowing for the decryption of the manner in which anti-blackness and misogyny merge to malign black womanhood. However, given the Dutch scope this thesis paper assumes, it is imperative to focus on the way misogynoir has historically come into play in a Dutch context; it is necessary to gauge an understanding of the representation and reception of black womanhood both in the Dutch racial archive as well as in the present day.

2.3 The Dutch Context

Essed (1991) provides vivid accounts for a shift in the foundations of racism in the Dutch context. The author contends that as with other colonial powers, the early foundations of Dutch racism were rooted in the assumed biological differences between the races (Essed, 1991). The black bodies both colonized and captured by the Dutch were viewed as inferior, animalistic, useful for either sexual or physical labor (Essed, 1991). As in other European colonies, the black female body evolved into a site of both intrigue and disgust; inviting of either attraction or rejection. This phenomenon is what Wekker (2014) terms *negrophobia*; the oscillation between a perverse attraction to black women and the rejection, objectification and inferiorization of black women. The author expands on this through claiming that negrophobia covertly manifests in the Dutch *double consciousness* whereby the Dutch fascination with the black female body is accompanied by a particular sense of Dutch whiteness, which establishes itself

by reanimating archaic and disparaging images about black women (Wekker, 2014). However, the convenient replacement of biological racism for cultural racism within the Dutch commentary on race obscures the racialization of black bodies and rather relies on cultural phobias to account for the othering of blackness; blurring the lived racialized experiences of black Dutch men and women. The presumed dissipation of biological racism is accompanied by false convictions of the inexistence of racism, engendering a culture of *smug ignorance*. Smug ignorance (Essed & Hoving, 2015) denotes a willful and fervent ignorance towards race and racism, and has encapsulated the Dutch consciousness on matters pertaining to race. Smug ignorance is supported by the adoption of a paternalistic model, which blurs racial inequalities and subdues race consciousness in the country.

Essed (1991) introduces and expands on the concept of the *paternalistic model* which speaks directly to the deliberate departure from biological racism as talk to cultural racism; the model entails the mystification of the Dutch colonizer. Concomitantly, the colonized black subject is subordinate; however given the obfuscation of white privilege and the conflation between race and culture, the colonized black subject is expected to accept their subordination (Essed, 1991; Trepagnier, 2001). The reluctance to acknowledge the active subordination of black women within the Dutch historical archive and presently extends to Dutch collective memory. According to Bijl (2012), “the victims of colonialism are not memorable within a national context and there is no language available to discuss them as part of Dutch history” (2012, p. 458). A lack of national engagement with the history of colonialism and its consequences normalizes the present sexualization of black women as well as the stereotypes ascribed to black female sexuality. The denial of historical and current wrongdoing leaves these processes unchallenged. The reluctance to acknowledge the existence of racism extends into the country’s legal negotiation with race, and is ingrained into the fabric of governing systems and functions.

In a later publication, Essed and Hoving (2015) term this systematic process of denial as a form of racism particular to the Netherlands. Dutch racism as the scholars term it is the deep-seated relationship between ignorance and denial. To ignore race and the prevalence of anti-black racism has become the nation’s prime strategy of engaging with it (Essed & Hoving, 2015). A presumed end to biological racism has further nourished pervasive denial. The Dutch progression towards anti-racism has remained stagnant with few adequate government policies put in place to combat the social relics of colonialism and slavery (Essed & Hoving, 2015). This exposes victims of both processes, precisely black women to anti-blackness manifested in damaging stereotypes and routine vilification.

The literature discussed in this section successfully accounts for the history of anti-black racism in both Dutch colonies and mainland Netherlands. Essed (1991) provides a nuanced account for the historic enslavement and colonization of black bodies within the Dutch context, including the ongoing subjugation of blackness, precisely black womanhood. Meanwhile, Wekker (2014), Essed and Hoving

(2015) and Bijl (2012) detail the way in which the nation's systematic denial of the existence of anti-black racism and an aversion towards engaging with race and its consequences have allowed for the normalization of anti-black racism, namely the misogynoir experienced by black women. However, the implications conscious collective forgetfulness and these imaginaries have had on the interactions black women have online with white and non-black men remain undiscussed.

2.4 The Online Realm

Moloney and Love (2018) however, explore the manner in which persistent gendered power dynamics account for the sexualisation and vilification of women by men in online settings. The authors introduce the concepts of *gendar trolling* and *virtual acts of manhood* (VAM) into the discussion. Virtual acts of manhood involve men showcasing optimum masculinity and problematizing groups of people that do not embody the characteristics of cis-straight white men. Men who engage in VAM employ visual and textual cues to convey a masculine persona in online settings. The intention is to enforce hegemonic gender norms and to maintain the subjugation of women in online spaces. This performance of manhood equips the actor with feelings of self-righteousness and dominance (Moloney & Love, 2018). Gendar trolling assumes a similar protocol and involves men in acts of virtual manhood targeting vitriol and online abuse at women. Abuse assumes the form of texts and images aimed at either scaring or disgusting the victim. The content targeted at female victims is intended to objectify them, stripping them of agency and reducing them to sexual commodities (Moloney & Love, 2018). The male abuser is able to establish dominance and uphold male normativity in their online interactions with women. However, Bliuc, Faulkner, Jakubowicz and McGarty (2018) widen the scope of this argument in asserting that the vitriol and abuse targeted at women in online spaces is not uniquely gendered but that these attacks can also be racially charged. As with Gammage (2015), the authors contend that women of color are exposed to both gendered and racialized abuse. White and non-black male abusers position black women as the other contrasting in both gender and race identifications. The aim is to hurt the other and as earlier mentioned by Moloney and Love (2013), to assert white male hegemony in online spaces. The maintenance of white male hegemony has been foundational to the conceptualization and birth of the internet.

In his writings, Daniels (2012) asserts that race and racism persist in online spaces in a manner unique to the Internet, however still reflective of the forms of racism that resound offline. The author contends that "race is built into the Internet industry. Many of the technological advances originally developed that gave rise to the Internet and Internet studies were created in Northern California, much of it in and around Palo Alto Research Center" (Daniels, 2012, p. 697). The tech industry in Northern California, spanning the Silicon Valley is characterized by racial inequalities as white employees, most of whom are men, largely oversee the firms within this industry. Menial tasks, however such as cleaning and

caretaking are relegated to employees of color, frequently women from the global south (Pitti, 2004). In both its regulation and use, the Internet is carved out as a space that serves white male hegemony. The adoption of its services by white supremacists groups as early as the mid-1990s speaks an element of truth to this claim (Lawson, 2018). It is then evident that race certainly comes to play in the inner workings of cyberspace because, as alluded to above, both regulators and users of the internet are formerly determined by the way in which race contributes to their offline experiences; these understandings and sentiments are then carried forth into online settings when both parties engage with it (Brown, 2009; Kettrey & Laster, 2014). It is then this aspect of the Internet that makes users of color particularly vulnerable to racially charged vitriol and abuse on online spaces. According to Lawson (2018), these vulnerabilities are particularly felt by black female internet users. Gendered racism and racialized sexism converge under the umbrella of misogynoir, rendering black women vulnerable to abuse online. This combined with the anonymity afforded to those who navigate online spaces, enables disseminators of misogynoir to express their views without receiving direct social disapproval for their actions (Bliuc et al. 2018). Lawson (2018) further argues that a tendency by online platforms to assume a role of neutrality provides a breeding ground for the dissemination of such sentiments and absolves them from the responsibility they share in the vitriol circulated via their platforms.

The preceding articles effectively account for the gendered and racialized abuse received by black women in online spaces. Both Maloney and Love (2018) and Gammage (2015) acknowledge that virtual spaces are a medium employed by certain male actors to assert and enforce white male dominance, contesting those that do not align with this group. The authors' claims are substantiated by Daniels (2012), whose piece provides a historical commentary on the racially exclusive origins of the Internet industry; drawing parallels between its white male leadership and the spread of unbounded anti-black rhetoric on its platforms, the author identifies the Internet as a space built by white men for white men. The articles serve as a reminder of the vulnerability experienced by Internet browsers of color, precisely black female browsers given the maintenance of white male hegemony and the reluctance by Internet platforms to curtail its consequences (Daniels, 2012). However, the scope of either research remains broad, with attention placed on online spaces in their entirety, ignoring how sentiments of anti-blackness can also be relayed on online dating applications.

2.5 Racism in Online Dating

Racial ideology, denoting one's perception of a racial group, influences dating patterns, determining who one wishes to date (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). According to Sweeney and Borden (2009), inherent prejudices and those of one's immediate social circle determine who one considers desirable to date. The authors shed light on the concept of racial profiling within the scope of online dating. Racial profiling

occurs when daters indicate that they wish to date only persons of certain races, basing their preference on the characteristics, values and culture associated with this race (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). However, what those that perform racial profiling fail to recognize is that their preferences are based on broader assumptions and damaging racial stereotypes. The prevalence of racial profiling places black women at the bottom of male dating hierarchies stemming from the damning stereotypes played on this group (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). And so, despite online dating's role in minimizing structural and geographical limitations, ideas about race continue to both limit the available dating choices for black women and expose them to racial fetishization and hyper-sexualisation. Childs (2005) expands on the specific perceptions of black womanhood that place this demographic at the bottom of male dating hierarchies. Through data gathered from interviews conducted with black women regarding their perceptions on interracial dating, the author contends that there is a routine perception of this group as far too confrontational, too loud and troublesome, which is accompanied with the idea that white women are subtle and easy to control (Childs, 2005). This is the dynamic that operates on dating platforms, ensuring that white women are preferred to black women as dating partners and that black women experience waning success online (Childs, 2005).

The racialization of black womanhood positions them in complete opposition to white women, with the latter perceived as the standard of femininity in relation to physical appearance but also in the characteristics they embody such as submissiveness (Childs, 2005). Stereotypes of blackness are constructed in relation to and constructive of representations of whiteness (Pickering, 1994). Discourses on blackness are neatly intertwined with discourses of whiteness, whereby the dominant is able to determine the other by constructing themselves in contrast to it (Pickering, 1994). Similar contentions are evoked by scholars, Lin and Lundquist (2013), whose arguments are grounded in the concept of *gendered racial formation theory*. According to the authors, gendered racial formation theory sees ideal femininity and ideal masculinity defined according to racial identity. It sees the conflation of black womanhood with masculinity and white womanhood with femininity, affecting the perceived attractiveness of black women (Lin & Lundquist, 2013). A woman's perceived attractiveness is crucial to being chosen as a partner online; however black women begin their navigation of these platforms at a disadvantage given that European standards of beauty continue to be revered as the ideal. Childs (2005), Sweeney and Borden (2009) and Lin and Lundquist's (2013) works identify Eurocentric standards of beauty as detrimental to the successes black women experience when dating. And so, despite the willingness of black women to engage with men outside of their race, they continue to experience resistance from white and non-black men to interact with them based on the racialized preconceptions they possess of this group (Childs, 2005; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Sweeney & Borden, 2009).

This essentialization of racial identities when dating is what Callander et al. (2016) term *sexual racism*. According to the scholars, sexual racism is a form of racism which replicates hierarchies of race, frequently under the guise of personal preference towards certain racial types. This process differs from racial profiling as previously stipulated by Sweeney and Borden (2009), seeing as it acts to reduce racial *groups* to dating *types*, absolving those that engage in sexual racism of their either conscious or subconscious racist motives (Callander et al., 2016). Sexual racism can be both exclusionary and inclusionary, with those revered as racially ideal encompassed at the center of desirability and those presumed as flawed positioned at the peripheries of desire. The process assumes that characteristics can be inferred from one's perceived racial identity. Those that engage in sexual racism rely on dangerous and disparaging imageries they possess to determine who are in and who are out (Callander et al., 2016). Given the upholding of Eurocentric beauty ideals, as highlighted in the article by Childs (2005), black women are often placed outside the spectrum of desirability; limiting this group's chances to find a partner within online spaces. However, black women can also be placed within the center of desirability, though, on the grounds of fetishization; an accompanying tactic of sexual racism (Mitchell & Wells, 2018).

In addition to the gendered racialization of femininity and masculinity, the perceived inferiority of blackness gravely impacts the manner in which those racialized as black, precisely black women; experience their interactions with white men. Although Mitchell and Wells (2018) provide similar accounts to those provided by Callander et al. (2016), they expand the scope of the argument to include the way in which the perceived inferiority of blackness in relation to intellect and general capabilities influence the discrimination of black women when dating. The authors introduce the concept of *white exclusionary dating*, which unlike sexual racism (Callander et al., 2016) and *racial profiling* (Sweeney & Borden, 2009) focuses exclusively on the way in which the perceived backwardness of blackness contrasted with the perceived superiority of whiteness determines the successes or lack thereof of black women when dating. The process assumes an approach heavily grounded in eugenics, with questions regarding the quality of offspring and the maintenance of a strong bloodline holding precedence over decisions to date within the white race (Mitchell & Wells, 2018). Once more, blackness is relegated below whiteness, in both the way in which racialized blackness is disdained and in the way that those that are racialized as black are expected to embody racialized white characteristics and physical attributes in order to be desired (Mitchell & Wells, 2018). The authors proceed to provide an example that precisely speaks to the experience of black women. The rule insists that in order to be desired by white men, black women must emulate racialized white womanhood, they must have long, straight hair to maximize their potential for beauty and speak and behave in a certain way to maximize their potential for intellect and general capabilities (Mitchell & Wells, 2018).

The articles discussed in this section each succeed in articulating the manner in which anti-blackness pervades both the online and offline dating worlds black people navigate, drawing focus on the way in which sexual racism, racial profiling, Eurocentric standards of beauty and white exclusionary dating merge to negatively impact the way in which black women experience both offline and online dating. These theories of anti-blackness will aid in the examination of the conflation between femininity and white womanhood, a dynamic that affords white women access to femininity and denies similar access to black women. The articles discussed in the preceding sections of this chapter provide both historical and contemporary accounts for the way in which the racialized and gendered identities ascribed to black women make this group particularly vulnerable to vitriol and abuse grounded in gendered anti-blackness or misogynoir. However, the articles focus almost entirely on how white and non-black men conduct the interaction between themselves and black women, largely neglecting how the victims of the aforementioned processes experience and respond to them. This acts to obscure the experiences of victims, prioritizing those of the perpetrators. Nonetheless, there is existent research within academia that focuses exclusively on the way in which marginalized identities respond to perceived racial discrimination. For purposes of this research project, it is relevant to examine the responses of minority identities to racism so as to dismantle tropes of victimhood constructed around black womanhood.

2.6 Responses to Racism Online

In their study on sexual racism on same-sex dating platforms, Callander et al. (2016) observed the way in which minority men responded to the sexual racism they encountered on a date and sex-seeking platform. The researchers identified three separate techniques assumed by their respondents when confronted with disparaging anti-ethnic rhetoric. The men either opted for *disconnection*, which concerned discontinuing interactions with the perpetrator of sexual racism, *adaptation* involved victims reconfiguring their own behavior to remain a part of online communities while lessening the severity of the racial prejudice encountered and finally, *confrontation* involved contesting or questioning what had been said (Callander et al., 2016). Most respondents confirmed that they relied on the disconnection technique as opposed to either adaptation or confrontation when confronted with racially charged abuse. In their conceptualization of this, the researchers cite Mellor's model of coping strategies which stipulates that victims of racially charged abuse remove themselves from racist spaces in which the potential for change appears bleak (Callander et al., 2016). Victims are likely to believe that too much energy would be required to prompt change or that challenging the vitriol would have more consequences than benefits (Callander et al., 2016). Callander et al.'s (2016) scholarly contribution serves to shed light on the way in which marginalized identities cope with the racist content they encounter online. The authors detail agency in

the variety of ways victims can elect to respond. However, the article falls short of elaborating on the black female experience and the way in which black women negotiate their responses to racist vitriol.

West, Donovan and Roemer (2009) expand on the concept of *disconnective* and *avoidant coping* however, in relation to the lived experiences of black women. As with Callander et al. (2016), the scholars define avoidant coping as a behavioral and cognitive coping mechanism which entails distancing oneself from a problematic and stress inducing situation (West et al., 2009). With evidence gathered from extant research, the researchers argue that black women prefer to rely on avoidant coping strategies when confronted with racist situations (West et al., 2009). Neal-Barnett (2003) suggests that certain elements of avoidant coping can be beneficial for black women. As with Callander et al. (2016), she theorizes that problem solving coping which involves confronting and challenging racist spaces might require far too much energy with few prospects of change in place (Neal-Barnett, 2003). As contended by Shorter-Gooden (2004), avoidant coping is particularly beneficial to black women namely those that navigate spaces with embedded oppressive structures that cannot be altered.

Similar coping strategies are assumed by black people within the Dutch context at large. According to Hondius (2014), the histories of racism, the slave trade and slavery accompanied with the long near absence of blackness in Europe are possible factors that contribute to the restraint and reserve displayed amongst the black Dutch when confronted with racist situations. Avoidant coping within this context is a strategy of conscious protection against the harmful power of racism; a phenomenon the black Dutch believe remains intensely present (Hondius, 2014). However, West et al. (2009) provide insight into the effects avoidant coping has had on the lived experiences of black women. The scholars contend that avoidant coping amongst black women confronted with racist situations has resulted in decreased life satisfaction and decreased self-esteem (West et al., 2009). The decision to disengage in racist situations ensures that black women do not have to exhaust energy on combating oppressive structures believed to be fixed. However, the choice not to engage or challenge racist vitriol results in long term psychological and cognitive effects on black women; affecting both their life satisfaction and self-esteem. Nevertheless, the psychological consequences of coping with racist situations extend beyond avoidant coping, encapsulating adaptive coping as well (West et al., 2009).

In a study of young, black college attending women, Scott (2013) explored the manner in which this group coped with attending predominantly white higher education institutions. The research uncovers that most respondents opted to acquire racialized white characteristics in order to adapt to the environment they navigated in (Scott, 2013). He contends that this adaptive measure is grounded in *co-cultural theory*. Co-cultural theory functions under the premise that to challenge oppressive dominant structures and to acquire any measures of success, co-cultural group members deliberately co-opt specific communication and performance behaviors when functioning within the confines of these dominant

spaces (Scott, 2013). As black women who routinely manoeuvre within predominantly white spaces, the respondents were aware of the stereotypes ascribed to black femininity and physicality. As a result, the respondents admitted to participating in two co-cultural practices including falsifying stereotypes and overcompensating to negotiate an identity of capability and validity; working to reconfigure the perceptions of black womanhood (Scott, 2013). The reward for their adaptive measures are not merely grounded in their personal successes of assimilating into a space previously reserved to the dominant cultural group but also, in their redefinition of black womanhood (Scott, 2013).

Fordham (1993) provides a dated perspective, although still relevant in revealing the motives behind the adoption of adaptive measures by black women. As argued in the publications analyzed in earlier parts of this paper, black womanhood is routinely portrayed as the antithesis of white womanhood (Fordham, 1993). The dichotomy crafted between the two experiences perpetuates and controls the image of the 'good woman' and by extension, 'the bad woman' (Fordham, 1993). The normalization of white middle-class women's lives urges black women to seek to appropriate this image and attempt to indulge in the lives of the preferred female 'other' (Fordham, 1993). Given the conflation between femaleness and white, middle-class womanhood, women that fail to ascribe to the cultural legacy of whiteness or middle classness are compelled to *gender passing* (Fordham, 1993). Gender passing is prompted by the inability of black women to access femininity, prompting them to forge the imaginaries crafted around the lives of white women. However, the demands of overcompensating feigned identities in order to adapt to the dominant environment are positively linked with life dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem. According to Everett, Hall and Hamilton-Mason (2010), black women find that they must invest emotional and mental energy in altering their behavior to cope within predominantly white structures. The policing of oneself consequently results in an obscured sense of self and decreased self-esteem amongst those that adopt these adaptive measures (Everett et al., 2010). Fordham (1993) successfully gauges an understanding of the adaptive measures black women adopt in order to cope in predominantly white spaces and with the racist situations that might arise within such environments.

As with the article by West et al. (2009), Everett et al. (2010) underlines the psychological effects experienced by black women that arise when they opt to cope with racist spaces rather than challenge them. Despite their nuanced provisions to the academic discussions surrounding the way minority identities respond to racism, the preceding articles largely fail to address the manner in which black women respond to racist vitriol online and if it at all differs to offline responses. Furthermore, there is minimal attention paid to how black women challenge racist and oppressive structures. It would be beneficial to provide accounts of them as active denouncers of racism and its accompaniments rather than complacent victims. This would then certainly be a guiding motive for this research.

2.7 Conclusion

With the aid of existing literature, this research will rely on five guiding concepts that will act to conceptualize and theorize the black woman's experience with anti-blackness and hyper-sexualisation on online dating platforms. The myths of *black womanhood* as theorized by Dagbovie-Mullins (2013) will be used to focus on the dichotomy in the historic and contemporary representations of black women. The sapphire and jezebel imaginaries are two separate stereotypes ascribed to black women; the relevance of this theory to the research would be to argue that depending on which stereotype is ascribed, the black woman will experience either repulsion or fetishization both in offline and online settings. In order to conceptualize the prevalence of female targeted vitriol online, this research will examine the concepts of *virtual acts of manhood* (VAM) and *gendar trolling* originally coined by Moloney and Love (2018). The relevance of VAM to this research is to support the notion that in the absence of a physical male body, men rely on abusive texts and messages aimed at women, to ensure hegemonic gender norms are maintained in online settings. *Sexual racism* as theorized by Callander et al., (2016) will serve the purpose of contending that the instances of racial profiling that occur on online dating platforms possess deep seated racial prejudices towards black people driven by both historical and contemporary representations of blackness; acting to expose black users to rejection and perverted desirability. In order to conceptualize the manner in which black women react and respond to vilification or hypersexualization, this research will focus on the *avoidant* and *adaptive coping strategies* adopted by black women in the studies conducted by West et al. (2009) and Scott (2013) respectively. When discussing adaptive strategies, frequent references will be made to the concept of co-cultural theory by Scott (2013) which looks into the way black women adapt to predominantly white environments in order to gain access and dispel fervent anti-black stereotypes. Accordingly, the aforementioned concepts will aim to support and provide nuance to the reports provided by black women interviewed for this study. In addition to presenting and discussing the extant stereotypes ascribed to black womanhood and their consequences in the interaction with white and non-black men, this research aims to provide black women with the agency to account for the way in which they receive and respond to the content they encounter in their online engagements with white and non-black men. As a researcher, I want to understand how the subject speaks for itself rather than others speaking for them. The techniques adopted to ensure that this was achieved are discussed at length in the methodological chapter that follows.

3. Methodological Framework

3.1 Methodological Approach

The collection and analysis of the data for this research aligns with postcolonial feminist and existential phenomenology research techniques. The motive for aligning with postcolonial feminist research is grounded in its commitment to conduct rigorous, politically conscious, considerate and socially committed research aimed at prioritizing the experiences of women of color (Sutton, 2011). Despite the theory's original focus on the lived experiences of women in postcolonial states, for purposes of this research, this theory is adopted to examine the experiences of postcolonial black women in the Western world. This form of research prompts researchers to consider power, inequality and diversity when collecting data, with the knowledge gathered aimed at challenging the subordination of women and the social injustices they encounter. Researchers are poised to be skeptical of their claims of objectivity and neutrality and to treat respondents as subjects with agency rather than simple objects of study (Sutton, 2011). Likewise, existential phenomenology relies primarily on descriptive methods such as interviews seeing as they enable women to speak on their lived experiences in their own voices (Garko, 1999). Existential phenomenology is particularly advantageous when examining novel and misinterpreted experiences given that its methods are aimed at understanding and describing phenomena rather than explaining experiences to predict and control them (Garko, 1999). In accordance with the tenets of both existential phenomenology and postcolonial feminist thought, interviews were conducted in English between me and each respondent with the aim of gauging an understanding of their lived experiences and by extension, prioritizing those accounts. Ten separate interviews were carried out over the course of a three-week period (see Appendix A). With each interview, I sought to uphold the agency of the subject and allow their accounts to speak for themselves. For this reason, the interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for the exchange between myself and the respective participants to mirror a dialogue. That is, both myself as the researcher and the agent of research functioned as dialogical collaborators linked both dialectically and intersubjectively. The actualization of this saw that both actors shifted between the roles of researcher and researched rather than functioning individualistically or mechanically (Garko, 1999). The intention of this was to deconstruct the often imbalanced power dynamics between researcher and research participant, enabling the research participants to speak openly of their experiences.

3.2 Participants

Those selected as respondents for this research, interchangeably referred to as agents of research throughout the remainder of this research paper, were individuals self-identifying as black women who had been in active use of online dating platforms (locative sensibility) in the preceding six months upon the start of the interviews. I gained access to this sample via criterion sampling, a sampling method which involves selecting a sample based on their fulfillment of certain prerequisites (Janssen & Verboord, 2018). In addition to this, the process involves identifying individuals who are particularly knowledgeable or well acquainted with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). Furthermore, the method considers the availability and willingness of the individual to participate as well as their ability to articulately communicate their experiences and opinions in a reflective and expressive manner (Palinkas et al., 2015). And so, in the context of this research, it was imperative that in addition to engaging in online dating platforms, potential respondents would have needed to have encountered and interacted with white and non-black men on online dating applications. Their availability and willingness to participate in the study also influenced their chances of selection. When recruiting respondents and identifying the research sample, I relied entirely on connections I had established prior to the start of the research. I sourced respondents from the Facebook group of the African Student Association at my alma mater. Over the course of the last year, I have been an active member of the association, attending events and workshops, enabling me to establish relatively close links between myself and the remaining members of the association. For this reason, I was already fairly acquainted with most of the women that would go on to be agents of this research. I placed a call for respondents on the association's Facebook page, indicating that I was in search for self-identifying black women that had interacted with white and non-black men on online dating platforms in the preceding six months. I encouraged those interested to express their desire to partake in the study via private message as so to maintain some level of anonymity given the sensitivity of the topic. I then continued my engagements with the prospective respondents privately online, subsequently arranging select times to conduct the respective interviews. The final sample then consisted of ten self-identifying black women with all but one, attending institutions of higher education in the South and North Holland region of the country. As earlier highlighted, the selection of the final group of respondents was largely dependent on their proximity to the phenomena as well as their immediate availability.

3.3 Data Collection

Upon completing the recruitment of the agents of research, ten face to face interviews were carried out over the span of a three week period. The decision to carry out face to face interviews in place of alternative interviewing styles was based on an understanding that face to face interviews would enable

me to take note of social cues such as intonation of voice and body language, which certainly would influence the meaning of the responses provided by respondents (Opdenakker, 2006). Given the prioritization of the respondents' lived experience vis a vis existential phenomenology, acknowledging their corporality and bodily reactions to the questions proved to be a vital contribution to their accounts. As earlier indicated, the interviews conducted followed a semi-structured sequence, however, despite its loose structure; I opted to identify a few central themes prior to the start of the interviews. The chosen themes were largely in accordance with the theories adopted for the research and sought to cover each aspect of the phenomena at hand, from encounter to perceptions and reactions. Four central themes guided the framework of the interviews, these included (1) the experiences the respondents had with white and non-black men online, (2) their experiences with offline racism and if it at all differed with the form of racism they encountered online, (3) their encounters with and perceptions of white exclusionary dating and finally, how (4) they reacted and responded to discriminatory dating patterns. The themes succeeded in maintaining the directional progression of the dialogue; however additional themes and patterns were identified throughout the course of the interviews through the accounts espoused by the respondents.

The average length of the interviews was approximately forty five to fifty minutes. I conducted a large number of the interviews at a local student community center reserved for university attending students. The decision to carry out the interviews in this space was motivated by its resemblance to a family room; it was furnished with a sofa, and equipped with a communal kitchen. This made for the relaxed ambience between myself and the agents of research; allowing the interaction to appear less like an interview but a dialogue free of conflicting power dynamics between the researcher and the researched (Garko, 1999; Opdenakker, 2006). With the interviews conducted outside of the local student community center, a relaxed ambience was equally prioritized. I recorded each interview on a tape recorder, however only after requesting consent from the respondents; to which all agreed. Prior to the start of each interview, I would engage each respondent in matters regarding our personal lives, such as school, extra-curricular activities and work. This was an opportunity for me to familiarize myself with the respondents I was not previously acquainted with and to catch up with those I was in regular contact with. This fed into the organic and relaxed nature of the dialogue, with the discussion surrounding the topic of research intended to be a continuation of the personalized conversation that we were previously engaging in rather than an interaction motivated solely by research. Furthermore, the decision to discuss aspects of my personal life worked to obfuscate the dichotomy between researcher and researched and provided the agents of research the agency to pose questions regarding my own experiences regarding the phenomena. In this instance, my position as a black female researcher was particularly advantageous to me seeing that

I was able to discuss my experiences with the phenomena and it ensured that my approach and interaction with the respective respondents was unmarred by unequal gendered and racialized power relations.

The discussion surrounding the topic of research opened with a playful card game aimed at gauging the respondents' lived bodily experiences. The playful card technique was originally employed by Sutton (2011) in her study of the bodily worlds of Argentinian women. Sutton (2011) describes bodily worlds as the 'varied, overlapping, and context-related bodily experiences – including both every day and extraordinary events – marked by the gamut of human emotions, and absorbing, expressing, and challenging multiple forms of social inequality' (p. 178). The premise to the discipline is that concerns such as social inequality are in essence related to the privileges and disadvantages ascribed to bodies deemed as belonging to a particular race, gender and class (Sutton, 2011). In her study, the researcher adopted a playful card technique to encourage women to speak on their more traumatic lived experiences attached to their corporeality. The technique aligns with the postcolonial feminist and existential phenomenology approach assumed in this research given that it encourages women to speak on the bodily themes most relevant in their lives; supporting a commitment to prioritizing the embodied experiences of women (Sutton, 2011). The technique involves the researcher drawing up a selection of cards and requesting the research participants to select those they consider most significant to their own bodily experiences. The cards contain a single word on them that are intended to prompt a response from the research participant; examples include skin color or pain. For this part of the discussion, I drew out five cards reading terms that all pertained to the bodily worlds of black women. The predefined cards read skin tone, hair, lips, nose, and physique/figure respectively. The decision to note down these terms in particular was based on the understanding of the racialization of these features on racialized black bodies. Extant research has explored and uncovered the way in which these bodily features racialized as black features, have been grounds for the otherization, sexualization and animalization of blackness (see Thompson, 2012). Namely the question of hair and physique are particular to the black female experience (Hobson, 2003; Morrison, 2018), it was imperative that the chosen terms not only spoke to the respondents' blackness but to their gendered identities as well.

The intersectionality of the respondents' bodily identities was readily acknowledged prior to the start of the research. It was crucial to prioritize their intersecting identities given that previous research treated matters of race and sex as distinct subjects with either centering around the lived experiences of black men and white women respectively (Maxwell, Abrams, Zungu, & Mosavel, 2015). This worked to marginalize the lived experiences of black women, a group harmed equally by systems of white supremacy and patriarchy (Maxwell et al., 2015). To acknowledge the intersectionality of their identities is to remedy the problem. Intersectionality as a framework of research locates black women at the center of their intersecting identities and regards their simultaneous experiences of oppression as distinct and

warranting of specialized consideration (Maxwell et al., 2015). Upon drawing the cards, I provided each respondent with the time to select the cards they felt were most relevant to their bodily world. I posed the request by asking each respondent which feature(s) they felt was(were) most engaged with during their interaction with white and non-black men on online dating applications. The respondents were free to select as many cards they felt were relevant to their bodily experience and to discard those they felt were not. Once they had selected the relevant cards, I would then ask them to elaborate on each, detailing why they chose each card, supporting their choice by providing examples. For the duration of this exchange, I would refrain from interfering in their decision making processes so as to not influence the respondents' accounts of their lived experiences. I did however clarify on certain terms if these were unclear to the respondent. However, despite my commitment to providing black women the space to speak for themselves, it proved to be a challenge on one occasion. During one interview, a visibly white man interrupted the discussion I was engaged in with a respondent to challenge her narrations of racialized fetishization. He out rightly disagreed with her accounts and proceeded to redefine fetishization, discrediting the connections the respondent made between fetishization and racialization. Simultaneously, the interjector disqualified white exclusionary dating as well as the psychological and social traumas of slavery and colonialism. I was compelled to end the interview as so to prioritize my respondents' emotions and to disengage with the man. I did not wish to accommodate the interjector's sentiments in this piece given its prioritization of the accounts and experiences of black women. However, the purpose of detailing this encounter is to reveal the manner in which the accounts and voices of black women continue to be routinely policed and stifled particularly by a group that has historically victimized them (see Thompson, 2012). This occurrence worked to further define the importance of providing black women the opportunity to narrate their own experiences, a privilege often not afforded to them. Except for this instance, this part of the discussion would last between ten to twenty minutes.

Following the selection of cards, I proceeded to the second step of the playful card game which entails offering blank cards to the research participants, allowing them to write words relevant to their own bodily experiences, which have not been already noted down (Sutton, 2011). Although the research technique initially appears to align with quantitative research by way of its reliance on the preconceived categorizations and concepts put forth by the researcher, this method starkly differs from quantitative methods like surveys in that respondents have the leeway to select, add or discard cards (Sutton, 2011). Once again, I provided each respondent with the time and space to think of and note down any additional terms they felt had been engaged with during their interaction with white and non-black men online. A number of the respondents were able to recollect their thoughts with ease while a few found this part of the exercise relatively challenging, with one respondent being unable to note any additional terms down. The option to not include additional terms was available to each respondent; this was another way of

prioritizing the respondents' agency and their version of accounts and not moulding their statements to fit my research agenda. Once each respondent had noted down their own additions, I again asked them to elaborate on each of them, detailing their motivations for noting the term down and supporting their account with an example. The accounts provided during the second part of the exercise appeared to be slightly more detailed than those provided during the first part of the exercise. This could be put down to the fact that with the second part of the exercise, respondents' accounts were not prompted by predetermined terms but rather by their own individual recollections of precise incidents that they had encountered in their interaction with white and non-black men online. I observed that a number of the respondents became quite impassioned when detailing their accounts; exercising excited body language and facial expressions. Unlike during the first part of the exercise, the respondents were able to recall particular occurrences they had encountered in detail. Through the course of the first part of the playful card game, the tendency was for respondents to provide largely generalized accounts of their experiences with white and non-black men online rather than recount specific incidents, however such was the case during the second part of the exercise. The technique was largely helpful in prompting the agents of research into divulging their experiences with interacting with white and non-black men online.

Furthermore, the playfulness of the game managed to ease the tension and distress associated with researching emotionally unnerving topics such as racism. The playful card game lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes with each respondent. Upon completing this section of the discussion, the proceeding questions were determined by the individual conclusions of the game. The sequence of the questions was neither fixed nor rigid and would be determined by the precise theme the respective respondent engaged me in. During this part of the discussion, I observed that I strengthened my level of personal engagement with each respondent. The reason for this was that during the playful card exercise, I made an effort to limit my own personal contributions so as not to influence or doctor the accounts provided by each respondent regarding their own bodily experiences. However, during this part of the discussion, I aimed to emulate the tenets of existential phenomenology in having the discussion mirror an equilibrated conversation (Garko, 1999). I was forthcoming with my own accounts and experiences regarding the phenomena, which worked to ease the timidity amongst the respondents when detailing their own experiences.

My openness as a researcher worked to influence their own openness as respondents, providing me access to more personal arenas of their lived experiences. This joint, collective engagement between researcher and researched is what feminist researcher, Pamela Cotterill (1992) terms the *participatory model*. The interviewing model seeks to create non-hierarchical, ingenuous research relationships which possess the likelihood of overcoming the dichotomy between the researcher and the researched. The model is well favored amongst feminist researchers, who argue that interviews need to be an immersive

and interactive experience in order to uncover the lived experiences of women (Cotterill, 1992). To survey through stories is to encourage respondent-generated accounts of their lived experiences.

Cotterill's (1992) claims mirror preeminent feminist sociologist Ann Oakley's (1981) sentiments, which argue that interviewers abiding by feminist thought should invest their own personal identity in the relationship they craft with the respondents, this is achieved through answering the respondents' questions, sharing personal experiences and providing support when necessary. In order to make the co-construction of meanings between myself and the agents of research visible and transparent, I included my own verbal statements in the results chapter (see below). This form of reciprocity invites intimacy and could potentially result in long-term friendships between the researcher and respondents (Cotterill, 1992). Through my adoption of the participatory model, I was able to achieve a sort of sisterly familiarity with the agents of research as the interviews progressed. Furthermore, as indicated briefly in earlier parts of this piece, my position as a female researcher enabled me to create closer bonds given that I could appeal to the female respondents through our common experiences, not only as women but as women self-identifying as black. However, this could have its own limitations given that my proximity could have engendered me to influence their responses. This part of the discussion would flow freely, occasionally interrupting its course with thematic questions when the conversation became slightly derailed.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analyses drawn from existing literature were integrated into the research with the aim of offering a theoretical background to the study and providing nuance to the reports provided by the research participants. Accordingly, certain literature was employed to account for and contextualize the black woman's experience, historically, contemporarily and that experience within the Dutch context as well (e.g. Essed, 1991; Wekker, 2014). The decision to complete this analysis in an inductive manner was primarily motivated by this research's commitment to allowing patterns to emerge from the content of the respondents' accounts rather than to testing preconceived hypotheses (Thomas, 2006). The experiences espoused from the respondents' accounts were the focus of study rather than my preconceptions of those experiences. Upon completing the interviews, I transcribed each verbatim. The transcriptions occurred simultaneously with the carrying out of the interviews so as to maximize on the time allocated for completing the research. And so, the interviews were transcribed over a two week period as well. Once the transcriptions were complete, I relied mainly on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) to identify, analyze and report patterned themes within the data. This involved categorizing recurring quotes or sentiments together, ensuring that all the data collected was regarded (Braun & Clarke, 2008). A successful execution of this would see content progress from descriptive statements summarized to demonstrate semantic patterns to interpreted statements whereby these patterns are substantiated by

theory (Braun & Clarke, 2008). The technique calls on the researcher to segment and reassemble data with the intention of transforming themes into findings (Boeije, 2010). In accordance with the tenets of thematic analysis, I completed open, axial and selective coding on the final transcripts of each interview in hopes of identifying findings (see Appendix B).

The first step towards identifying themes was completing open coding. Open coding is the first tier of coding and requires the researcher to segment the data made available on the transcript and attach codes to each fragment. This process includes labeling concepts and required me to thoroughly examine the transcripts, attaching themes at the end of each completed line. Each line of the data present on the transcripts was marked with appropriate labels or codes for purposes of identifying them for further analysis. Open-coding of this kind is referred to as line-by-line coding, although tedious, it ensures that each line is afforded equal scrutiny and analysis (Boeije, 2010). In addition to attaching codes to the end of each line, I was also diligent in taking note of the similarities and dissimilarities between the respective lines of data. Similarities would allow me to merge the themes into conceptual categories and dissimilarities prompted me to identify entirely new themes. The aim at the end of completing open coding, particularly line-by-line coding was to build an illustrative and intricate preliminary framework for later analysis.

Once I completed open coding, I proceeded to perform axial coding which required me to sift through the themes identified during open coding to determine which themes were more dominant; determining the core and axes of the data collected. Through axial coding, I was able to merge the themes previously identified, in an inductive and deductive manner based on how recurrent or infrequently they emerged. I observed that certain themes were more recurrent (e.g. mistrust) than others (e.g. pleasure) and so I identified the former as a dominant theme and placed that at the core of the data collected and those that emerged less frequently were placed at the axes of the data collected (see Appendix B). This stage of coding was perhaps the most insightful given that I was able to identify patterns in the data collected and identify the research's more commanding themes. I was able to pinpoint the direction the research paper would assume seeing as I was able to visually conceptualize some of my preliminary results.

The final step was to complete selective coding, with this, the aim was to examine the dominant themes and assess if any theoretical key concepts could be identified (Boeije, 2010). A prerequisite to complete the final step of coding was that I needed to have discovered the core themes (Boeije, 2010). I was then required to progress from open and axial coding and to delimit coding to only the themes that I had identified as significant core themes during axial coding. The procedure was complete once I was able to adequately elaborate and integrate the core themes, their properties and theoretical connections to the remaining relevant categories.

3.5 Research Considerations

However, given this research's commitment to postcolonial feminist thought and existential phenomenology, the priority was to reveal the experiences of the research participants through their own words, limiting the influence the preconceived beliefs of the researcher might have on the analysis of their experiences (Garko, 1999). For this reason, to minimize researcher bias and enhance the study's credibility (Boeije, 2010), I reflected on my own position as a black female researcher and combated my own presumptions before the research. As a self-identifying black woman interviewing other self-identifying black women, it was imperative not to define the respondents' experiences for them based on a presumption that we share an identical experience grounded in our black womanhood. Although challenging, I assumed this mindset when conducting the separate interviews, especially when engaging with respondents whose experiences with white and non-black men online differed from mine. I was certainly more forthcoming with my own accounts when engaging with those with similar experiences as a means of demonstrating commonalities despite my role as a researcher. However, with those with differing experiences, I sought not to sway their accounts towards my own based on presumptions of how black lived experiences should be.

Furthermore, for purposes of ensuring the validity (Boeije, 2010) of the results, I consulted researchers separate from this research to discuss the data collected to assess if the same findings were observed. I sought the assistance of a white male researcher specialized in Cultural Anthropology and a black female researcher specialized in Political Science. Motives for selecting these two researchers were grounded in their distance from the research as well as their distance from the field of media research. Therefore, I was confident that their observations were unlikely to be swayed by academically informed ideas of the social implications of the media. I did not have them attend the interview of course, seeing as this would have infringed on the confidentiality of the respondents' identities and accounts. However, I did ask them to analyze the final transcripts, with the names of the respondents omitted. I met with them collectively in person, on one occasion and discussed the final transcripts in relation to the themes that I had extracted from them. I had particular difficulty in naming some of the phenomena that were taking place and so the researchers provided me with the language to encapsulate the respondents' experiences. The researcher specialized in Cultural Anthropology observed that the transcripts were multilayered, revealing overlapping accounts as well as accounts that starkly differed from one another. Despite the diverse social backgrounds of the respondents, the researcher observed a similarity in the encounters the respondents had. He noted that the nature of the comments and propositions the respondents received from the white and non-black men they engaged with were nearly identical in their racialization of the respondents. The second researcher observed a variety in the themes extracted from the transcripts. She remarked that I was able to extract a fair amount of information from the respondents, while avoiding

coercing them into assuming certain beliefs. Most notably, she provided me with “performance” as the terminology to describe one of the experiences encountered by the respondents in their engagement with white and non-black men on online dating platforms.

In regards to ethics when conducting the research, the ethical implications of this study are grounded in the vulnerability of the research participants. The topic of research invited the respondents to recount their previous experiences involving the possible hyper-sexualisation and damnation they have faced on online dating platforms. These are certainly distressing and emotionally unnerving topics to speak on and so I relied on certain measures and techniques to alleviate the potential distress that could be experienced by the respondents during the interviews. Firstly, prior to the start of each interview, I would inform each respondent that their participation in the interview was voluntary and should they have wished to discontinue with the study, I informed them that they would be free to do so (Janssen & Verboord, 2018). These particularities were made known to the respondents via an oral formal consent agreement discussed prior to each interview. I informed them also of other minor details including the fact that the accounts they provided were confidential and were to be used solely for academic purposes. In addition to this, I offered each respondent the option to adopt a pseudonym, to which all agreed. And so for purposes of this research, the names of each respondent have been altered with the aim of safeguarding their anonymity, however, their individual accounts remain un-doctored and speak truth to their experiences. Finally, although intended to gauge an understanding of the respondents’ bodily worlds, the playful card game (Sutton, 2011) also worked to ease the respondents’ reservations towards engaging in a discussion that required them to elaborate on intimate concerns. At the end of each interview, I ensured each respondent that I would share the final research paper with them, this was crucial in maintaining the leveled relationship previously established during the interviews. I was committed to positioning the respondents not only as subjects of research but as deserving authors through their narration of their lived experiences.

4. Results & Discussion

In the pursuit of romantic or platonic partnerships, young black, single women engage with online dating applications for purposes of encountering and interacting with potential partners that extend beyond their immediate social circles. However, for many, this idealism is short lived when confronted with sexist and racialized sentiments which permeate the online dating realm (see Lawson, 2018). Narratives recounted by respondents account for the interplay between sexism and racism in the interactions these women have with white and non-black men online. However, extant research has limited the examination of online dating to other marginalized identities, negating the experiences of black women on similar dating applications (e.g. Callander et al., 2016). Likewise, studies on gendered racism have prioritized the experiences of black women in offline settings (e.g. Essed, 1991), providing little indication of how offline sentiments grounded in anti-blackness transcend into online settings, namely online dating applications. For these reasons, this empirical analysis seeks to reveal and analyse accounts provided by black women regarding the varying ways in which they experience their interactions with white and non-black men on online dating applications.

The discussion is organized around three main themes. The first theme will speak to the *sexualization* experienced by the respondents as black women; paying particular attention to the racialized nature of this sexualization. The second theme will surround the *subjugation of blackness as other*; this will look into how black women experience the essentialization and inferiorization of their blackness in their encounter with white and non-black men. In a similar strand, the theme will account for the way in which presumed otherness is performed by white and non-black men in their interaction with black women and the way in which black women similarly employ performance as a means of negotiating their position as ‘other’ during these interactions. The final theme will surround the *polarization between black women and white and non-black men online*. A consequence of the culmination of both racialized sexualization and subjugation, polarization is prompted by growing mistrust of white men by black women on online dating applications. Verbatim narratives from respondents will be frequently referenced with aims of illustrating their accounts.

4.1 Racialized Sexualization

In their accounts, a number of respondents inferred that they had engaged in conversations with white and non-black men whereby one or several features of their body had been attributed as a site of sexual desire. This was achieved through ascribing sexual innuendos on said features as a means of affirming the interlocutor’s sexual interest. Guised as passing compliments, the statements would be explicit in their description of the appearance of and emotions evoked by the precise body part. One particular account of

such an occurrence was provided by Angelique who detailed one of her several encounters with a white man online, wherein her lips were positioned as a site of sexual desire.

Angelique: I've been told that I have dick-sucking lips because my lips are full and black girls tend to have fuller lips. It was on Tinder, we were talking and he was like you know, if you ever want to come over, yeah you know- cause I feel like you have dick sucking lips basically.

In this instance, Angelique's lips acquire visibility and value in their presumed ability to satisfy the sexual inclinations of the interlocutor. This is a customary strategy for masculine personas to assert and maintain dominance, heterosexual power and sexual competence in their interactions with those gendered as women (Moloney & Love, 2018). In an online context, with the absence of a physical male body, men rely on textual and visual cues to signal a masculine self in order to assert hegemonic sexuality, subjugate women and enforce gender norms. The performance of virtual manhood acts ensures that patriarchy and male dominance extend into virtual spaces (Moloney & Love, 2018). Furthermore, reducing women to objects useful solely for sexual consumption denies them autonomy and human complexity (Moloney & Love, 2018). Simultaneously, sexualization as a performance of manhood, allows male actors to acquire the height of power in both their online and offline interactions (Moloney & Love, 2018). And so, in denying Angelique autonomy and human complexity, the interlocutor is afforded agency and individuality, positioning the former as an object of sexual desire and the latter as an agent with access.

However, to define this sexualized encounter as exclusively grounded in the respondent's gendered identity would be to ignore the complexities of the respondent's identity. The interlocutor's essentialization of black female physicality is indicative of the racialized overtones that influence the sexualized remarks conveyed to the respondent. The interplay between gender and race within the intersecting identities of black women exposes them, in equal measure, to the burden of racism and sexism (Gammage, 2015). To justify his sexual request on the grounds that black women possess the bodily features to enact precise sexual acts reveals that the interlocutor's sexualization of the respondent was grounded not only in her position as a woman but in his racialization of her as black. Here, through a process termed misogynoir, anti-blackness and misogyny merge to defame black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). It is equally important to acknowledge a pattern in the physical features subjected to sexualization and how this deliberate selectivity on the part of the respective interlocutors, is in itself indicative of the racial connotations that influence the sexualization experienced by the respondents.

Petra: I think they were a lot of reference to twerking and ass. I think it is rooted in some expectation that all black women can twerk or all black women have only that to offer.

In this instance, Petra reports that a number of interlocutors make reference to her backside, accompanying this with jesting remarks regarding her ability to gyrate it in a rapid and rhythmic movement. Again, the sexualization of the respondent's gendered body is at play here, she acquires visibility from the interlocutor through her presumed ability to possess an enlarged backside with which she can oscillate. However, the interlocutor's regard for this particular body feature and his presumptions of its purportedly deviant capabilities speaks to the historic and contemporary exceptionalization of the black woman's buttocks (Hobson, 2003). A history of enslavement and imperial conquest variously labeled the black female buttocks as "obscene", "lascivious" and "peculiar". The presumably disruptive nature of the black woman's backside nurtured further justification for the devaluation of black women (Hobson, 2003). The exceptionality ascribed to the black woman's buttocks positions the black female body as a spectacle reserved for the white male gaze. Here, black female bodies are afforded *phenomenal blackness*, an occurrence which invites incidences of hailing, as myths of black female bodies as curiosities and objects emerge in the backgrounds and forefronts of these interactions (Morrison, 2018). Petra's interlocutor's presumptions and intrigue reveal a desire to gain access to this spectacle, drawing upon a fundamental assumption: that black female bodies are materially accessible to satisfy the fascination of others (Morrison, 2018). It is therefore imperative to measure the sexualization experienced by black women as inextricably linked to both their gendered racialization and racialized gender.

Similar accounts are provided by Theresa who as with other respondents, detailed how as a result of her racialized features, namely her skin tone, was described in parallel to inanimate objects.

Theresa: Most of the time, they will say that my skin is so pretty, so dark, like chocolate.

Here, Theresa's interlocutors' objectification of the respondent as a tactic of sexualization acts to further racialize her. To equate the respondent to food that presumably resembles her skin tone not only rids her of human complexity, but also subordinates her blackness; reducing this aspect of her identity to a site of indulgence. The conflation between black womanhood and momentary indulgence is routinely expressed through equating black female corporeality to treats. As with treats, black female bodies are intended to be enjoyed briefly, purposely to alleviate persistent longing (Wilder, 2009). Associations to chocolate, defined as a treat with a vice-like repute, pockets black female bodies as treats to be avoided, or at least to be indulged in secrecy (Wilder, 2009). This position resonates with the historical double laden objectification of black women which saw them endure sexual abuse as enslaved black bodies in the privacy of their masters' properties (Thompson, 2012). Like chocolate, to justify their momentary exploitation, black women were posited as sexual vices responsible for enticing white men, causing the latter to stray from their matrimonial homes (Thompson, 2012). Furthermore, the marriage between black

womanhood and chocolate, an element to be enjoyed exclusively by the consumer, reiterates the notion of black female bodies existing to be enjoyed by white men. For this reason, the black female body continues to serve as the main site of pornographic material for white men; they are to be experienced but not to be courted and married (Benard, 2016). This dichotomy between who was worthy of long term commitment, who was not and the racialized overtones influencing this decision, was sprouted during several interviews.

Petra: They are people who will divulge on the sexual relations they've had with black women but also express disinterest in wanting to be with her long term.

Matilda: Some of them were intrigued but this did not change the fact that it was short term based on my racial background.

The quotations reveal encounters the respondents have engaged in whereby the prospects of reciprocated commitment were put into doubt given the respondents' racialization. In both instances, the interlocutors demonstrate an initial visual attraction to the respondents by way of engaging with them both communicatively and sexually, however, the extent of commitment is severed given the respondents' position as black women. The women's respective experiences share distinct commonalities, which draw links to historical constructs of 'who could bed and who could wed'. The construct of 'who could bed and who could wed' was fundamental to the creation and maintenance of the colony (Benard, 2016). The prelude to the notion saw black women positioned as overtly sexual and immoral, justifying their exploitation as objects of sexual pleasure. Concomitantly, the position of intimate life partner would be reserved to white women presumed to possess an untainted femininity (Thompson, 2012). The black woman was shaped into a sexual commodity and was no more valued as a wife than a white prostitute (Benard, 2016). Systems of rape and concubinage would then be used to both exploit and nurture myths surrounding the innate promiscuity and unchasteness of black women (Thompson, 2012). Denying black women chastity by way of systematic rape and abuse would work to create this dichotomy, positioning them as unwedtable playthings reserved solely to relieve the sexual urges of white men. The interplay between the racialized sexualization of black women as unwedtable playthings as well as the prioritization of white womanhood as the antithesis of black promiscuity may have harmed the chances the respondents had in finding long term relationships online.

Theresa: I just feel like white girls have a bigger chance to find actual love on dating apps

As demonstrated through this quote, racialized sexualization proves to be dynamic and multifaceted, it does not solely function to reduce black women to sexual commodities but to also position white femininity as superior and thus deserving of long term commitment. In her own accounts, Theresa laments that whiteness takes precedence over blackness on online dating platforms, enabling white women to find genuine romance that extends beyond the rudimentary and sexual interactions she has engaged in. The perceived prioritization of whiteness when dating, speaks to the tenacity of racial profiling on online dating platforms; an approach which gravely disadvantages black women. Racial profiling takes place when people convey a desire to exclusively date a certain race based on a preference for precise characteristics, values and culture. However, these decisions are largely influenced by prejudiced assumptions and racial stereotypes (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). Stereotypes surrounding the innate promiscuity of black women and the nurturing of these stereotypes by way of racial profiling places black women at the bottom of male dating hierarchies, limiting the available choices made to them (Sweeney & Borden, 2009). Beyond individual interactions, the respondents expressed that they encountered wavering success depending on the dating application they engaged with. Some respondents admitted to using several dating applications, with Tinder and OkCupid being the two most popular platforms amongst the respondents. Below, Nalah admits to encountering more success in the form of matches on Tinder than OkCupid:

Interviewer: But is OkCupid kind of more refined? So is it more intended to look for a partner?
And do you get reached out to there a lot?

Nalah: A lot less than Tinder definitely. I get a couple of matches; I would say two matches a day if I'm active but then I would have to make that effort to get the matches.

Interviewer: And so with Tinder and its culture of hooking up, do you think OkCupid differs in that people are seeking long term partners?

Nalah: Exactly! And this takes it back to the issue of objectification, is a black woman only attractive in her position as a hook up and not a long term partner?

The two dating applications have been afforded two notably distinct reputations. Tinder bears the notorious reputation for accommodating hypersexual and toxic masculine assertions (Hess & Flores, 2018). In the context of demographics, men outnumber women on the dating application, earning it the reputation as a male dominated domain where crude and lascivious intentions are regularly projected onto

female users (Hess & Flores, 2018). The predominance of men on the application has worked to prioritize their sexual needs over that of women, reducing the application to a site where casual rather than committed relationships are sought. “Hook-up culture” is particularly disadvantageous to women as it not only nurtures sexual double standards but also invites men to engage in active misogynistic acts when pursuing dates with female users (Hess & Flores, 2018). These acts of misogyny are often relayed through explicit displays of sexism. In contrast, OkCupid is still seen to mirror preeminent dating websites prominent prior to the mobile technology wave, where the intention to find long term relationships persists (Hess & Flores, 2018). Users are requested to provide information regarding their political and religious views, prerequisites which demonstrate a prioritization of characteristic compatibilities in place of exclusively ascribing value on physical attraction (Hess & Flores, 2018). Therefore, Nalah’s ready accommodation into a digital environment foregrounded by sexual explicitness combined with her waning success on a dating platform built on the premise of mediating long term relationships speaks to the racialized sexualization of black women. Nalah demonstrates her own awareness of this in claiming that dynamics of this nature regurgitate notions of black women as momentary sites of sexual indulgence; they are to be enjoyed briefly and not be committed to. Nevertheless, despite the presumed refinement ascribed to OkCupid, some respondents expressed that even on this precise platform, they continued to experience waning success in terms of finding partners interested in longer term commitments.

Interviewer: So do you then find it odd and peculiar that you still have people wanting to hook up on Okcupid even though it is this refined app?

Matilda: Yeah, to some extent yes.

Interviewer: Do you think they assumed you’re into hooking up based on what you’ve put on your profile or the fact that you appeared as a black woman?

Matilda: I think the latter unfortunately. I don’t fully fill out my profile because I feel like there should be some element of mystery at the end of the day, so I do feel yes, the latter, the fact that I am a black woman, it’s like oh well this is a flavor of ice cream I’ve not tried, why not go for that.

Here, the respondent details that in her interactions on OkCupid, she received propositions of a sexual nature despite the application’s presumed reputation as a site for long term relationships. Through her own accounts, the respondent demonstrates an awareness of the racialized sexualization that is taking

place. Despite the presumably cultured digital space she navigates, she carries the burden of being promiscuous, sexually deviant and therefore worthy only for momentary sexual satisfaction. White men have employed their power in the public realm to construct a private realm that enables them to satisfy their lust and their desire for black women (Collins & Marrec, 2016). To acknowledge black women openly would be to weaken the erroneous fabric of the race they need to continue to perform and exercise their power in the public realm (Collins & Marrec, 2016). For this reason, black women have been forged at the crossroads of public and private spheres; whereby they are to be visible for the white male gaze but their bodies are to be sexually benefited from in seclusion (Collins & Marrec, 2016). The imagery of the soiled Jezebel denies black women purity and chastity. These myths demonstrate minimal consideration for the actual sexual encounters black women engage in. And so, in instances where black women ascribe to chastity or abstinence, myths of sexual deviance continue to be ascribed to them. Such was the case with one respondent in particular:

Interviewer: And how does it come to play with your blackness do you think?

Denise: They are expecting...especially if I'm getting attention from a white man or a person that isn't black, then it's sort of, the heavens have sent me someone. It's disgusting and this is where you have this triple burden. As a black person, you're posited as a prude or a nun at this point. It's like I can't understand how you can be black and that too.

During the second part of the playful card game, when asked to note down facets of her bodily experiences that had been engaged with, the respondent detailed that her virginity was routinely a point of contention when seeking partners online. According to Denise, the white and non-black men she engaged with online demonstrated disbelief when she informed them of her virginity. Their incredulity may be grounded in their inability to separate black womanhood from notions of sexual promiscuity and lasciviousness. To question the validity of the respondent's virginity is to feed into a larger narrative that denies black women celibacy irrespective of their sexual encounters or lack thereof. Within this context, what is of relevance is not so much whether a woman is truly a virgin or not, but that she is able to position herself as a 'good' girl. However, when all black women are allocated to the category of 'bad' girls irrespective of their actual sexual behavior, the dichotomy between white as pure and black as not is greatly facilitated (Collins & Marrec, 2016). This position resonates with the process of *benevolent sexism* whereby women characterized as moral and pure are afforded male protection (McMahon & Kahn, 2017). This protection is reserved for women who abide by traditional gender roles of chastity and subservience, whereas those who reject these roles are defined as sexually manipulative, and are met with hostile

sexism (McMahon & Kahn, 2017). However, being white instead of black is sufficient to access greater benevolent sexism (McMahon & Kahn, 2017). Historically, white women have been afforded innate purity, positioning them as sacred vessels necessary to cultivate the white race. In this way, their protection at the expense of black women surrounds the defense not just of any cherished relation but also of the purity of whiteness on a larger scale (McMahon & Kahn, 2017). Furthermore, the respondents very presence on dating applications was cause to heighten the racialized sexualization they experienced, as evidenced below:

Petra: There is this stigma around black women that they are too aggressive, not feminine, too sexual and of course now she's on a dating app, it accelerates her sexuality.

Again, the respondents report assumptions made about their sexuality without regard for their actual sexual behavior. Firstly, by virtue of her blackness, Denise is not afforded the probability of chasteness. Secondly, Petra's engagement with a partner seeking platform positions her as a sexual body in the pursuit of rash sexual encounters; contesting the morality she might possess. This reiterates historic and contemporary notions of black women being predatorily sexual by nature (e.g. Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013), by their mere presence on these platforms, the respondents are pocketed as sexual predators on the prowl for their next prey. The respondents' collective position as black women appears to warrant the racialized sexualization they encounter. However, beyond this, some respondents indicated that their direct African background precisely, informed the interlocutor's perverse intrigue in them.

Petra: Cause there are other forms of blackness where there is proximity, or as someone else would say "the refinement", "they've been touched, they're not the raw". Like the moment I said Africa - I guess because from my photos you could assume that I was born and raised here, but when I said when I came straight from Africa, there was an immediate interest.

The respondent recounts that the white and non-black men she engaged with online demonstrated heightened intrigue when she informed them of being born and raised in Africa prior to her migration to the Netherlands. Her presumed cultural distance from the customary familiarity of white, western-European cultural values and mores positions the respondent as an exotic site of intrigue. The sexualization of African bodies throughout history is profound. In early, colonial depictions, Africans were presented as lustful, darkly enigmatic and as sexually intriguing (Tsri, 2016). Similar depictions persist in contemporary representations of Africanness, whereby Africanness continues to be depicted as backwardly and in need of exploration (Tsri, 2016). Blackness is therefore received differently and thus

experienced differently. The respondents might converge under the same identity markers as black women; however, it is necessary not to view their blackness as monolithic. To do so would be to erase the complexity of blackness, including the varying forms it presents itself in.

4.2 Subjugation & Performance

The perception of blackness as unitary is precisely what contributes to the essentialization of blackness; a process which works to reduce its complexities to a singular element. In their accounts, some respondents revealed that in their interactions with white and non-black men online, facets of their character were contended by the interlocutor because these attributes failed to align with the latter's presumptions of black womanhood. Nina, for instance, was informed that she did not exhibit the characteristics or behavior of a black woman:

Nina: I get the comment a lot that I don't act black or I don't act like a black woman.

Interviewer: Okay, tell me about that.

Nina: What you see in the media is not who I am.

Interviewer: Is that expressed as a compliment or as a disappointment?

Nina: I think if they have a lot of experience with black women and then I come along, they think of it as refreshing. But if they are not experienced with black women, they are disappointed because that is not what they thought it would be. They didn't sign up to be with this black woman.

Here, the respondent's position as a presumed outlier in her execution of black womanhood, invites both intrigue and dissatisfaction from her white and non-black interlocutors. The "sapphire" imagery of black womanhood pockets black women as loud, stubborn and overbearing (Cheers, 2017). The presumed emasculating capabilities of black women have their roots in the process of slavery and colonization whereby black women had to adopt masculine roles under enslavement to maximize production (hooks, 1982). Presently, the media has evolved into the primary venue through which myths of black womanhood are nurtured and transmitted to society (Gammage, 2015). These colonized imageries of black women see them televised as elaborately excessive, particularly in reality television and music videos where images of black women are most prominent (Dagbovie - Mullins, 2013). Negative images

of the sassy friend, fiery lover and loud mother subjugates black women as caricatures to be experienced or at least marveled at for comedic purposes (Gammage, 2015). Therefore, Nina's inability to exhibit the presumed peculiarities ascribed to black womanhood warrants either a desire to engage with her exceptionality or an aversion to it; reducing the respondent to her blackness and denying her of human complexity and dynamism. Similar accounts are relayed by Denise:

Denise: The way I think or experiences I've had or just the way I talk, it's sort of like we can handle this, it's not that big of a deal. So there are certain white men or other non-black ethnicities that have told me that we just appreciate you the way you are and I know they are just saying that, like you're so western even though you're African, there is that you can still hang with us type of situation-so I'm that exception.

In this instance, Denise's experiences favoritism given her presumed deviation from characteristics racialized as black. The respondent's deviance affords her an element of palatability whereby she is readily accommodated into white spaces despite the skin that racializes her. The idea of black women as too much trouble, more confrontational is coupled with the perception of white women as easy and therefore easy to control (Childs, 2005). And so, how closely black women are able to ascribe to racialized white characteristics, the more approval and praise they are set to receive (Childs, 2005). Through the respondent's accounts, two things are revealed. The interlocutors she has engaged with ascribe rigid connotations to black womanhood, which bear no consideration for the individual qualities of the respondent. Secondly, the interlocutors reveal a disdain for presumed blackness through hailing the respondent's inability to perform characteristics they racialize as black. Her acceptance is not so much grounded in her personal characteristics but rather in her success in deviating from presumed blackness and emulating racialized white characteristics. Here, whiteness is afforded complexity whereas notions of blackness remain monolithic; attached to negative stereotypes irrespective of individual properties. This dynamic works to inferiorize and subjugate blackness beneath whiteness; the latter acquires superiority through its position as complex and multifaceted and the latter inferiorized due to its simplicity. A presumed notion of the innate superiority of whiteness, grounded in the complexity it is afforded, extends into the field of intellect as well. Some respondents detailed how several interlocutors expressed dismay when informed of the respondent's learned educational backgrounds. Below, Matilda recounts one such instance:

Matilda: When I would say “Universiteit”, they would be surprised that I wasn’t placed at a lower schooling tier. So there is already a hierarchy that I feel predispositioned to beforehand that I’m not even aware of.

The interlocutor in question demonstrates reduced expectations of the respondent in regards to her intellectual capabilities. Prior to engaging with the respondent, he places her at lower educational level, denying her of any intellectual capabilities she might possess. The interlocutor’s position resonates with pre-colonial and colonial beliefs that white (European-derived) ways of life were much more refined and advanced than those of people racialized as black (Miller, 1995). As a result of early contact with the African continent, European imperialists, introduced to a way of life distinct to their own, associated blackness with heathenism, savagery and a greater failure to ascribe to European principles of civilization (Miller, 1995). This presumed cultural superiority encompassed educational and intellectual dimensions. People racialized as black were commonly regarded as not possessing as much instinctive physical capacity to acquire knowledge as those racialized as white (Miller, 1995). Later media representations of black people as infantile continue to uphold myths surrounding black stupidity and ineptitude (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013). In her interaction with the interlocutor, he affords the respondent physical attraction by way of engaging her in conversation, however, he limits her intrigue to this, dispossessing her of her achievements and contending her intellect. This regurgitates notions of black women exclusively being defined by and seen as their physicality (Benard, 2016). In addition to contending their educational backgrounds, some respondents experienced men offering to educate and enlighten them on certain topics unrequested.

Petra: Also they offered to teach me Dutch which pocketed me in an inferior position, sort of like teacher and student.

Upon learning that the respondent does not correspond in the Dutch language, the interlocutor offers to teach the respondent the language without her having initially requested the service. As detailed by the respondent, the proposition creates a hierarchical dynamic whereby she is pocketed into the position of a student in need of enlightenment and he as a teacher in possession of this knowledge. The interlocutor’s instinctive proposition to educate the respondent unrequested, mirrors the dynamics of *mansplaining*, which occurs when a man explains something to a woman often unwarranted and in a tone perceived as condescending (Bridges, 2017). Such instances are intended to discount a woman’s intelligence and are motivated by a man’s need to acquire expert status due to privilege and arrogance (Bridges, 2017). During these interactions, men police the contributions of women through regular interruptions, ensuring an unreciprocated exchange of knowledge and an assertion of male dominance (Bridges, 2017). Within the

context of the respondent's racialized identity, the male gaze, precisely the white male gaze functioned in pre-colonial writings to assert the white male as dominant and the black female as passive as a means to justify the subordination of the latter by the former (Thompson, 2012). Presently, young black women identifying as high-achievers, carry the burden of the negative stereotypes ascribed to black women into their interactions with white men, irrespective of how gifted or accomplished they are (Scott, 2013). Here, the contestation of the intelligence of black women imprints them as a group to be taught, not to teach.

In addition to contestations of intellect, questions regarding the nationality of the respondents were also present in the interactions between themselves and some white, and non-black men online. Through their accounts, some respondents detailed that they received persistent questions regarding their cultural backgrounds, often times after informing the interlocutor that they were Dutch.

Robyn: I get a lot of questions about my background and questions such as "Where are you from?", things like that, despite me being Dutch and speaking Dutch with that person if they are a Dutch person.

Here, Robyn laments that she receives regular questions regarding her national origins, often despite informing interlocutors of her Dutch nationality and corresponding with them in the Dutch language. Through these questions, the respective interlocutors otherize the respondent as not belonging; trivializing her "Dutchness" because they racialize her as black. Nationality and Ethnicity Talk (NET) is the discourse that either overtly or implicitly invokes or regards one's national or ethnic membership (Hua & Wei, 2016). It is largely observed through repeated and seemingly innocent questions; however intentions are often to discriminate against a given group (Hua & Wei, 2016). Questions and comments are intended to ascribe, establish, challenge, resist or deny one's nationality or ethnicity (Hua & Wei, 2016). The recurrence in the questions regarding the respondent's national origins demonstrates the interlocutors' dissatisfaction with her subscription to "Dutchness", and work to subjugate the respondent to a constant outsider. This reveals that the interlocutors' notions of Dutchness largely remain white and European descended. The question "Where are you from?" works to deny the respondent her identity as Dutch. And so, despite a growing acceptance of racial equality in larger parts of the western world, Nationality and Ethnicity Talk as that experienced by the respondent, reveals people's concealed and distorted theories on race, propagates discourses of banal racism and results in the exclusion and otherization of certain groups (Hua & Wei, 2016). NET is particular to the Dutch experience, a country with a lengthy colonial history. Afro-Dutch citizens find themselves to be erased from national discourse and this is reflected in the participants' conversations with white and non-black men online.

Denise: When I'm here [online dating platforms], I will never be Dutch enough, I might have the passport and what not, I will never be Dutch.

As with Robyn, Denise details how her Dutchness is contested by those she engages with on online dating platforms. The two instances largely speak to the conflation between whiteness and Dutchness and the rejection of those that are not racialized as white. The very structure of collective memory in the Netherlands negates colonial memories by dislocating them. Victims of enslavement and colonialism are not memorable within a national context and the language to discuss them as part of Dutch history is nonexistent (Bijl, 2012). The reality of the term 'allochtoon' translated to 'from another soil', further subordinates black people within Dutch society (Essed, 1991). Therefore, this tactic of distinction between who is from the land and who is not is a mechanism of domination intended to reinforce hierarchy and separation (Hua & Wei, 2016). Verbal and written cues then become influential agents in illustrating an imbalanced social relationship (Hua & Wei, 2016). And through language, the interlocutors locate the respondents outside the realms of belonging; situating them as the 'other'. For these reasons, some respondents admitted to performing alternative personas in order to negotiate their position as the 'other'. This involved assuming a personality they assume would be more palatable to the interlocutors they engaged with.

Angelique: I think I used to especially on Tinder. I think I tried to be a lot more, I don't know like "white girl quirky".

Interviewer: Okay, so explain that.

Angelique: "White girl quirky" is like you make jokes but they are not belly laughing jokes, you will make references to "Tame Impala" or something, almost alternative. I think I really tried to be that rather than my direct self. I tried to feed into a certain type of person that I am not really.

In this instance, the respondent admits to adopting characteristics racialized as white in a bid to challenge and deconstruct the presumptions the interlocutor might readily have of her as a black woman. When interactions take place between in-group and out-group members, perceptions and expectations assume a larger significance. For out-group members, to compensate for the perceptions ascribed to them, members will adapt their communication strategies when engaging with in-group members (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000). When an individual brings their racial identity into dialogical exchanges, presumed racial differences will influence the interpersonal skills used when interacting with members of a race that is not

their own. Stereotypes as well as attitudes towards the out-group, prompt users to purposely rely on verbal strategies when interracially dating. The racial identity of a possible romantic partner directly influences the verbal tactics an individual employs when proposing a date (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000). Angelique's aspiration to performative whiteness not only reveals her hopes of deconstructing the stereotypes she is predisposed to as a black woman but also speaks to a history of black women attempting to adopt and emulate whiteness in a bid to attain femininity. Black women are not seen as the quintessential embodiment of womanhood, as is the case for white women. Role ambiguity is something that has historically jeopardized the lived experiences of black women (hooks, 1982). The normalization of white middle-class women's lives forces black women to seek to co-opt the image and attempt to consume the way of life of white women (Fordham, 1993). For this reason, women that do not align to these racial, ethnic and cultural legacies are compelled to *gender passing*, a process which sees them adopt characteristics and mannerisms racialized as white (Fordham, 1993). Similar tactics of white performativity are also employed by Theresa in her interaction with white men online.

Theresa: When I was younger, I tried to be this polite black girl, wasn't really "hood" or whatever, just this basic black girl who could've been white. That was basically my personality then too but I got different responses back then, I noticed that white boys would message me earlier or quicker when I had this basic *ass* black girl picture on instead of my personality.

Interviewer: And why do you think white men responded more to this version of yourself?

Theresa: I think it felt like I was more in their reach because I looked more accessible in a way that they could relate to me more.

As with Angelique, Theresa admits to altering aspects of her personality to emulate racialized whiteness. In response to persistent subjugation, many black women encounter that they must dedicate significant thought, time and emotional energy to being mindful of every step they take, controlling a variety of feelings, and adjusting their behavior to cope with their oppression (Everett et al., 2010). These tactics align with the tenets of co-cultural theory; a notion which considers the communicative practices of those who are marginalized (Scott, 2013). The theory details two separate techniques that are assumed as part of co-cultural theory; the first involves dispelling stereotypes and the second involves overcompensating to negotiate an identity of worthiness—through this, performers also redefine black womanhood (Scott, 2013). Dispelling stereotypes entails discreetly constructing oneself as a positive example through deliberate actions and allowing dominant group members to witness the diversity within that precise

cultural group. Overcompensating is performed as so to construct an identity as worthy of being included into the dominant group (Scott, 2013). The reward for overcompensation manifests not only in the personal success of those who choose to perform, but also in their resistance in enacting stereotypes and their construction of alternative definitions of black womanhood (Scott, 2013). In addition to this, the respondent's reward lays in her presumed success in attracting the attention of potential romantic partners.

Concomitantly, as recounted by the respondents, the white and non-black men they engaged with adopted characteristics they racialized as black when interacting with the respondents. These tactics involved initiating conversation and corresponding with the respondents in language that mirrored African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) and deliberately expressing interests and preferences the respondents racialized as black. Matilda details the pattern below:

Matilda: Sometimes they'll start using African American slang, it's like I'm not the one.

Here, the respondent reveals a pattern in which some white and non-black men adopted African-American slang when corresponding with her. The interlocutors' deliberate alteration of their communicative strategies reveals their essentialization of blackness as exclusively existing within the confines of televised African American culture. Furthermore, the interlocutors' reliance on African American Vernacular English disputes the respondents' earlier efforts to redefine the preconceptions ascribed to black womanhood; this works to assert the respondents' position as the 'other' regardless of their performative efforts to negotiate this role. Here, whiteness functions discursively to levy power and establish elite status in communicative interactions with out-group members (Brown, 2009). It is a communicative practice that asserts power through identities constructed in daily communication (Brown, 2009). The deliberate use of language to perform the role of the 'other' in communicative practices is defined as *linguistic minstrelsy*. Linguistic minstrelsy is a sort of figurative blackface, in which white users of African American Vernacular English do not exactly darken their skin as was the case with the popularized minstrel shows of the 1900s, but instead essentially perform in blackface, relying on linguistic and other symbolic elements that represent racialized ideologies (Eberhardt, 2015). Those in high performance of language minstrelsy rely on amplified forms of language, which works to highlight ideological connections to precise social groups, often to exaggerate them (Eberhardt, 2015). In these contexts, performers are deliberately and actively constructing a persona that is not genuinely reflective of themselves; simultaneously, they are indicating a social identity and the awareness that it is not their own (Eberhardt, 2015). The inauthenticity of the communicative performance is revealed through its blatant disregard for the grammatical system that rules the language; with performances often tending to be

notably reduced from the larger linguistic system they represent (Eberhardt, 2015). Within this context, the respective interlocutors doctor their communicative strategies when corresponding with Matilda in hopes of acquiring proximity to her. Through this, they disregard the respondent's individual distinctions in assuming her into a cultural framework she does not pertain to. The interlocutors' performances of African-American cultural particularities extend into the realm of interests and preferences as well. Some respondents recount in detail how some white and non-black interlocutors would express interests in certain artefacts rooted in African American culture when engaging with them.

Denise: They'll ask me what type of music I listen to and then I'd be like, I listen to this and this person, and then they'll say theirs and if I say I don't listen to that and that rapper, they're like—then it becomes this awkward situation.

The interlocutor presumes the musical interests of the respondent given his racialization of her as black. Denise assumes that the interlocutor anticipates that she will engage with Hip-Hop and Rap music, however when the respondent communicates that she does in fact not listen to either genre, genres racialized as black music, the conversation discontinues. The conflation between blackness and Hip-Hop music is rooted in its early origins in black neighborhoods victim to urban decay across major cities in the United States (Harrison, 2008). The genre will later transcend into black diasporic communities and much later, into non-black ones (Harrison, 2008). Despite its co-option by non-black people, associations between hip-hop, urban decay and criminality persist, working to persecute black listeners more readily than non-black consumers of the genre (Harrison, 2008). Once again, in hopes of acquiring proximity to the respondent, the interlocutor performs tropes racialized as black. However, the respondent's refrain from Hip-Hop music signals the interlocutor's disengagement from the conversation. The interlocutor's performance of perceived blackness reduces blackness to a musical genre, carrying with it the negative connotations ascribed to black consumers of the genre. Therefore, by way of performative strategies, the interlocutors signal to the respondents their position as 'other' and affirm their positions as the 'dominant'. The binary between negotiating otherness and affirming otherness, combined with racialized sexualization serves to further alienate black women from white and non-black men. Factors such as trauma, suspicion, and gradual awareness prompt the polarization between the groups.

4.3 Polarization

The polarization between black women and white and non-black men occurs when black women refrain from pursuing romantic relationships with men pertaining to either group so as to limit their chances of

coming into contact with instances of racialized sexualization and subjugation. Through conducting the interviews, three main grounds for discontinuing correspondence with white and non-black men were revealed. The specific motivations include trauma, a consequence of a deeply disturbing experience with a white and non-black man online. The second motivation was suspicion, which entails a cautious distrust of the intentions of white and non-black men online. Finally, gradual awareness entails the acquisition of knowledge of what qualifies as subjugation and racialized sexualization. Below, Angelique details how a traumatic experience prompted her to disengage with white and non-black men.

Interviewer: So okay, he apologized for it but did you continue the conversation with him?

Angelique: No, no, no, I was definitely put off, I actually deleted Tinder after that.

Interviewer: Oh okay. Was this a frequent occurrence where someone mentioned your lips?

Angelique: It was the second time that it happened. Because I deleted Tinder the first time because of the physique comment, and then I thought to download it again, and that happened and then I thought no, this is it.

The respondent explains two particular situations that compelled her to discontinue using the dating application, Tinder. Both incidents involved white male interlocutors and their racialized sexualization of her bodily features. Having experienced racially sexualized comments directed at her lips, as indicated in earlier parts of this discussion, the respondent deleted the application only to re-download it at a later time. However, a second encounter involving the racialized sexualization of her physique prompted Angelique to entirely disengage with the application and the white and non-black men present on it. There is little doubt that racist encounters can inflict harm on those who are targeted by racially charged expressions. The pinch of racism, whether stemming from an isolated incident or the accumulation of racist microaggressions throughout an expansive period of time, can bear enduring effects on victims' psychological and physiological welfare (Lowe, Okubo, & Reily, 2012). Racist incidents can be conceptualized as trauma because they are a form of victimization inflicted and sustained by powerful others, which can propagate post-traumatic symptoms such as helplessness and fear (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2010). The trauma experienced by victims of racist abuse is analogous to trauma experienced by victims of other forms of abuse, causing victims to fear and stay clear of perpetrators (Helms et al., 2010). The respondent's decision to disengage with the dating application is a reaction to recurrent distressing

situations, where out of fear of future racialized sexualization, she discontinues correspondence with men pertaining to groups that have routinely victimized her. To cite Callander et al. (2016), victims of racism would remove themselves from racist spaces in which they observed no prospects for change, believing that the time and energy required to combat racism was far too great or that challenging abusers would be detrimental to their own personal well-being (Callander et al., 2016). Furthermore, for victims to acknowledge stressful experiences and directly address abusers could be counterproductive, hinder functioning and compel victims to deal with additional negative emotions (West et al, 2009). However, disengaging with abusers enables victims to avoid thinking about a distressing situation or problem (West et al., 2009). In that way, through her disengagement from the application, the respondent can keep from thinking of prospects of being racially sexualized and subjugated in her future experiences on online dating platforms. Similar accounts are provided by Theresa below:

Theresa: I'd rather not talk to a white guy. Last time I was on Tinder, which was last summer, I didn't even *swipe* for white guys anymore because I had maybe fifteen matches and all of them were black and the white guys, I just ignored. Sometimes I have this thing for white boys but that's really rare and if it's just a crush, I just leave it as such. I don't even talk to them, because I know it won't work out the way I want it to work out.

Like Angelique, Theresa relays her reluctance to correspond with white men, with her reasoning being grounded in the failures of her past experiences with this group. Given her past experiences, the respondent anticipates that should she continue engaging with white men online, they will subject her to racialized sexualization and subjugation. Specifically a lack of positive past experiences with out-group members generates pessimistic expectations regarding the course of interracial interactions (Plant & Devine, 2003). Theresa's actions not only demonstrate a choice to disengage with men she racializes as white but that she has also acquired a sense of antagonism towards men pertaining to this group, including those that she feels romantically and physically attracted to. As witnessed here, the trauma caused by routine maltreatment of this nature, elicits victims to demonstrate heightened hostility towards out-group members and a wish to avoid corresponding with those pertaining to this group (Plant & Devine, 2003). Traumatic experiences engender interracial anxiety whereby targets of racially charged abuse, grow to mistrust the intentions of those that belong to the same racial and cultural categories as their abusers. Suspicions of the dominant 'other' is not always founded on the premise of a precise traumatic event but can also be evoked by close proximity to that of a close relation. Some respondents expressed being suspicious of the white and non-black men they interacted with online, with suspicions being directly linked to the intentions of these men. At times, these suspicions were grounded in irrational

scares, and these irrationalities were at times known to the respondent. One such account was relayed by Giselle, as excerpted below:

Giselle: The experiences that I've had with white people messaging me were very desperate, in a sense like they are trying too hard and I don't know why and I don't feel comfortable with it. So then I just stop the conversation.

Interviewer: And so how do you sense they are trying too hard?

Giselle: Double or triple texting or-

Interviewer: -Okay so this eagerness...

Giselle: Yeah, asking two, three questions after each other, it sounds like you're trying too hard, and for me it's like maybe you're just being nice but also in my mind, it's like why, it sounds a little bit *sketchy*, it's like you're trying to conquer me.

Here, Giselle's suspicion of white men is provoked by the persistency they exhibit when initiating a conversation with her. She sees their insistent messaging as a sign of desperation; desperation she believes to be grounded in a need to experience or "conquer" her. She expresses the discomfort she experiences from the texts even though, admittedly, the interlocutors' messages do not necessarily show to be needs for concern. Giselle acknowledges the irrationality of her fears by claiming that the white men that reach out to her might innocently wish to engage with her and might not harbor distressing ulterior motives. Nevertheless, she retains her suspicions towards the intentions of men pertaining to this group. Giselle's reaction resonates with the features of *interracial anxiety*. Interracial anxiety occurs when certain group members experience feelings of tension and distress when interacting with a member of a different social group, particularly one that is positioned as socially dominant (Plant & Devine, 2003). *Cultural paranoia* accompanies interracial anxiety and prompts certain group members to protect the self by refraining from initiating contact with members of a different group (Combs et al., 2006; Callander et al., 2016). Cultural paranoia is experienced as a fairly sound mode of thinking that is characterized by heightened levels of suspiciousness, feelings of ill will or disdain, and beliefs in underlying influence and control (Combs, et al., 2006). Paranoia levels precisely, have been observed to be consistently heightened among black diasporic communities. These results speak largely to elevated levels of cultural paranoia, prompted by the experience of being a marginalized identity in a hostile environment marred by

normalized and daily events of racism (Combs et al., 2006). These inhibitions are largely expressed during social interactions. Giselle's incredulity towards the interlocutors' intentions also speaks to the consistent transformation of racism into varying, subtler forms, making it harder to detect. The obscurity of contemporary racism engenders potential victims of racist abuse to treat everything with caution, including expressions that would independently not warrant scrutiny (Trepagnier, 2001). Below, Nalah conveys her inability to distinguish between racially sexualized expressions and independent compliments. Her inability to discern between the two, prompts her to receive all expressions from white and non-black interlocutors with caution and restraint.

Interviewer: And so how can you distinguish between innocent compliments and those that are rooted in fetishization, so coming from a white man, how are you able to discern the two?

Nalah: Honestly, I don't. I have...when I hear something like this about my lips or hair, I immediately just protect myself, I don't engage in conversation.

The respondent's inability to recognize what qualifies as racist sentiments and what does not engenders her suspicion of all propositions and comments received from men pertaining to a group that is not her own. *Modern racism* alludes to the notion that overt forms of racism have transformed into subtler, inconspicuous forms since black diasporic communities were afforded legal rights in the concluding decades of the twentieth century (Trepagnier, 2001). Modern racism, also referred to as *silent racism* assumes two forms; stereotypical images and paternalistic assumptions (Trepagnier, 2001). Given its subtlety, the boundaries between racially weighted comments and independent compliments become blurred; making these distinctions indistinguishable for possible targets of racist abuse. For this reason, silent racism nurtures a culture of denial on the part of perpetrators and a culture of mistrust amongst potential targets (Trepagnier, 2001). Nalah's hesitations resound with a need to be safe than to be sorry coupled with a need to protect herself from presumed imminent harm. Here, perceived racism contributes to heightened cultural mistrust, which is foregrounded by the multifacetedness and elevated inconspicuity of racism (Combs et al., 2006). However, some respondents did report being well informed on when instances of racialized sexualization or subjugation were taking place. These women relayed their ability to distinguish between problematic statements and innocent isolated comments. They lauded their awareness in aiding them to identify problematic men and thus discontinue correspondence with them.

Angelique: But now I think because I have become conscious obviously through education and *stuff*, I am able to detect things that are problematic.

Here, Angelique awards her consciousness and awareness for her ability to discern between problematic and unproblematic content when engaging with white and non-black men online. Through her statements, the respondent reveals an acquired *race consciousness*. Race consciousness indicates a politicized, oppositional awareness of race and racism (Brush, 2001). Race consciousness refers to realizing the personal as political, how this is established as well as knowing the possibilities of one's existence and how these are entangled with social conditions (Brush, 2001). Furthermore, through race consciousness, race is viewed as a primary component of identity formation. That is, race becomes acknowledged as grounds for domination or privilege and that racism becomes a center of opposition (Brush, 2001). The assumption remains that black women are conscious of race from an early age by way of their navigation as minority identities in often hostile societal environments. Gender as an identity construct, unlike race has been problematized within academia, prompting extant research on how black women negotiate their blackness with their womanhood (Brush, 2001). However, because race is not problematized in the lives of black women, it remains unclear how and through which avenues black women become racially conscious (Brush, 2001). In this instance, encountering distressing comments that enunciate her race, prompts Angelique to enlighten herself on how her personal is politicized and problematized. Through this, she navigates these online platforms with an acquired awareness of how readily she can be racialized. Despite their gradual awareness, some respondents expressed hesitation to share their acquired consciousness with the white and non-black men they corresponded with. Reasons for refraining from educating perpetrators of racialized sexualization and subjugation were primarily grounded in the online nature of the interaction but also in a culture of white denial. One such account is provided by Theresa:

Interviewer: And at what point did you start understanding?

Theresa: When I started learning more about my history, and yeah, but that was maybe two to three years ago and now I really want...whenever a white boy comes to me, sexualizing me, I just want to give them this history lesson. Because I am so passionate, I take these things to heart so I know if I respond and keep going back and forth, it'll just ruin my energy for the rest of the day.

Theresa admits to not having been conscious of the historical sexualization of black women and how these tropes manifested in contemporary times. She accredits her gradual awareness to her engagement with historic scholarly artefacts in the last few years. Her awareness coupled with distressing past

experiences with white men on online dating platforms, prompted her alienation from this group on these applications. She expresses an initial desire to share her awareness with perpetrators of racialized sexualization and subjugation, however, she acknowledges that their potential defensiveness and denial of her claims will affect her overall well-being; so she refrains. *White denial* is a culture of refusing to accept the prevalence of racism and its symptoms, ascribed to by a vast majority of white people (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Perpetrators demonstrate emotional disconnect when people of color articulate their experience; making the task of spreading awareness a particularly exhaustive and tedious one for minority identities (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). The emotional disconnect demonstrated by those confronted with issues of racism is the culmination of leading a life oblivious to the normalization of whiteness and the problematization of the rest (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Therefore, the options available to those victimized by racism are: “speak your truth and face the reprisals, or bite your tongue and get ahead in life” (Eddo-Lodge, p. 8, 2017). The respondent opts for the latter so as to avoid the trivialization of her experiences and to ultimately safeguard her mental well-being.

Despite the particularities of each premise: trauma, mistrust and gradual awareness, it is still necessary to see these catalysts of polarization as occasionally interdependent. Trauma for instance could engender mistrust or a wish to become race conscious; concomitantly, suspicion and hostility can be unprovoked as highlighted earlier. However, what is clear is that each premise aligns with avoidant coping, whereby victims of racism and its varying dimensions avoid communication altogether with possible perpetrators. Facets of avoidant coping can be accommodative for black women (Neal-Barnett, 2003). To acknowledge stressful experiences is particularly disadvantageous to black women as it compels them to engage with combative defensiveness which can result in the rise of other negative feelings (Neal-Barnett, 2003). Therefore, the respondents’ decision to avoid interacting with men that ascribe to whiteness or non-blackness aligns with the existing pattern of black women resorting to avoidant coping when met with racist situations.

5. Conclusion

The breadth of this research paper has examined how black women experience their interactions with white and non-black men on online dating platforms. Through its progression, extant scholarly publications were employed to provide glimpses into the academic discussion surrounding the historic and contemporary sexualization of black women, the prevalence of online vitriol targeted towards women and how both merge to malign black women on online dating platforms. Precise and relevant theories were extracted from the scholarly works and used to give nuance to the accounts provided by the respondents. In addition to this, the methods employed when collecting data were intended to prioritize the lived experiences of black women. The choice to conduct interviews was deliberate. The research method aligned most closely with postcolonial feminist thought and existential phenomenology; methodological theories which combine to uphold and prioritize the experiences of post-colonized women. Black women from diverse backgrounds were then invited to narrate their own experiences regarding their interactions with white and non-black men on online dating applications. Prior to expanding on these narratives, it is paramount to determine the distinction between white and non-black men. White men are those exclusively pertaining to an indigenous European background, whilst non-black men are men ascribing to other racial categorizations that are neither white nor black (Smith, 2017). Through their accounts, it is revealed that most of the respondents' encounters involved white men. Non-black men came up on a few occasions but not to the extent that white men did. This could be governed by the fact that online dating applications remain predominantly white and male (Hess & Flores, 2016). The limitations of this demographic discrepancy will be discussed in later parts of this chapter.

The narratives expounded by the respondents constitute similar details regarding encounters with racialized sexualization and subjugation. These mutual experiences indicate the interplay between gender and race in the experiences afforded to the respondents. Their positions as black and as women are problematized through each process they are subjected to. Despite these likenesses, some particularities could be distinguished in the respective accounts provided by the respondents. Indications of this were seen in the precise sexualization of respondents of direct African descent or the respondent triply sexualized by virtue of her blackness, womanhood and celibacy.

Most respondents were exposed to both instances of racialized sexualization and subjugation, which speaks to the doubly perverse fascination with black female physicality and the inferiorization of all the other facets that constitute black women. This chapter will explore these separate experiences in detail, with intentions of answering the research questions that guided this work. The remaining subsections will examine the limitations of this research, paying close attention to the gaps within

research and will close off with a subsection dedicated to the theoretical and societal implications of this research.

5.1 Racialized Sexualization

Through their accounts, the respondents recounted that they experienced the regular sexualization of their bodily features in their engagements with white and non-black men on online dating platforms. Their interpretations of sexualization included interlocutors equating certain body parts to indulgences as well as making propositions that were sexually suggestive. Beyond this, the respondents perceived these comments to be accented by racial overtones. The respondents admitted to being particularly perturbed by white interlocutors' references to bodily features historically racialized as black. Comments referencing their lips, hair, buttocks, skin tone or physique were particularly unsettling to most respondents given the historical *otherization* and *fetishization* of these features on black women (e.g. Hobson, 2003). Most respondents were well-informed on these tropes surrounding black womanhood as well as their historic and contemporary impact. For this reason, comments of this nature were more salient to most respondents and alerted them to the possibility of being actively racially sexualized throughout their interactions with white and non-black men. Furthermore, most respondents admitted to being active on more than one online dating application. The two most popular platforms amongst the respondents were Tinder and OkCupid. Despite encountering racialized sexualization on Tinder, most respondents admitted to the pervasiveness of sexualization on the platform. According to most accounts, the sexualization experienced by black women on this particular application was part of a larger pattern of sexist vitriol projected onto women by male users on the platform. However, respondents in use of both Tinder and OkCupid disclosed that even through their navigation of the latter, a platform presumed to be far more refined than Tinder; they were still met with sexually suggestive propositions. Through this, the respondents were able to identify the pervasiveness of the sexualization afforded to black female physicality. These occurrences uphold a system which continues to define and see black women as their sexuality (Bernard, 2016). And so, their experience of racialized sexualization was one that transcended Tinder and emanated into other online dating applications. For some respondents, their racialized sexualization was amplified and justified through their very presence on online dating applications. What is notable is that these respondents expressed that in addition to their blackness and womanhood, their use of online dating applications invited propositions of a sexual nature. These respondents speculated that this was prompted by men positioning them as users exclusively in pursuit of sexual encounters. This plays on historic tropes of the black woman as sexually rabid and lascivious (e.g Gammage, 2015). Presumed sexual lasciviousness was also apparent in the respective interactions the respondents engaged in with white and non-black men. Most respondents recounted that they were presumed sexually experienced and versed despite no indication of this having been provided to the interlocutor. Historically

and presently, black women are brandished sexually lascivious, often with no consideration of their actual sexual behavior; they are precisely sexual because of their blackness (Collins & Marrec, 2016). These presumptions predisposed to the respondents at the onset of their interaction with white and non-black men alerted them to the racialized sexualization taking place.

Respondents of direct African descent; meaning respondents with one or both parents born in Africa, experienced the specific sexualization of their *Africanness*. These respondents identified certain comments, referencing the exoticness of their African heritage combined with a sudden perverse intrigue in them as indicative of this trend. The intrigue projected onto the respondents of direct African descent is largely a microcosm of the West's relationship with the continent; the latter is positioned as a site of intrigue to be abused as a means of conquer (Tsri, 2016). The respondents' admissions provide a specific dimension to racialized sexualization; it is varied and multifaceted. Altogether, the respondents experienced that in their sexualization, they were doubly racialized. The sexualization of women is not uncommon on online dating applications of this nature and so although distressing, such an occurrence would not transgress the general pattern (e.g. Hess & Flores, 2016). However, the respondents experienced that their blackness was heavily equated into the sexualization they encountered; making it distinct from larger notions of sexualization.

5.2 Subjugation and Performance

In addition to being racially sexualized, the respondents admitted to feeling subjugated by the white and non-black men they engaged with on online dating platforms. Through their accounts, the respondents detailed how on several occasions, their blackness was essentialized. They perceived this in a myriad of ways, including having their presumed blackness questioned and contested. Some respondents detailed how certain interlocutors commented on the respondent's embodiment of blackness or lack thereof. The assumptions of black womanhood are limited to two tropes; the sapphire or the jezebel (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013). According to them, the comments received hailed the respondents for not emulating either forms of perceived blackness. The respondents experienced this as the essentialization of their identity as black women given that the respective interlocutors presumed notions surrounding black womanhood, of which they readily assigned to the respondents they engaged with. The respondents experienced further subjugation vis-à-vis conversations surrounding their respective educational backgrounds. Some respondents disclosed that once they informed certain interlocutors that they were university educated, the interlocutors would communicate surprise and often inform the respondents that they had assumed they attended a lower schooling tier. Of these respondents, some admitted that they perceived this surprise as the interlocutors possessing lower expectations of them as black women in regards to intellect. The assumptions of black ineptitude and stupidity play on colonial analogies which

categorized black people as innately intellectually inferior to their white masters and overseers (Miller, 1995). An additional facet of subjugation met by the respondents was experiencing their positioning outside the confines of belonging. A common pattern was that respondents would be met with questions regarding their nationality and origins. Particularly respondents of Afro-Dutch descent felt that questions regarding their ancestry were unnecessary given their affirmation of their Dutchness and their fluency in the language (e.g Hondius, 2014). It is particularly notable that even despite claiming Dutchness, (some of) the participants mentioned that certain interlocutors were relentless in their interrogation. Sentiments of not belonging were roused by the questions for some respondents.

Feelings of subjugation were mitigated by the respondents through adopting personas that they perceived to deviate from presumed blackness or otherness. A number of respondents admitted to policing their own behavior and assuming characteristics and mannerisms racialized as white so as to detach themselves from the negative stereotypes ascribed to black womanhood. The respondents achieved this by feigning their appearance and interests as well as doctoring their personalities. According to their accounts, the rewards for their actions included being able to acquire proximity to white interlocutors that presumed their doctored personalities to be more approachable and relatable. This may be viewed as the respondents' negotiation of their position as the other (Fordham, 1993). Through emulating that which is not presumed other, the respondents might come closer into being accepted and subsumed into the dominant in-group (e.g West et al., 2009). Despite these efforts, most respondents addressed the fact that certain interlocutors would perform presumed blackness during their interactions, believing that this was done so as to acquire proximity to them. An indication of this was made aware to the respondents through the interlocutors' use of African American vernacular when corresponding with them. What respondents also noted is that these interlocutors would then express a keen interest in cultural artefacts rooted in African American culture, anticipating that the respondents would also share a similar keenness. The interlocutors' reliance on African American Vernacular when communicating with the respondents is an actualization of linguistic minstrelsy, a process of figurative blackface, where instead of donning black paint on their faces as was common in minstrel shows of the last decade, white communicators rely on linguistic codes to acquire proximity to racialized blackness (Eberhardt, 2015). This was particularly alarming to the respondents because they felt these expressions to be ingenuine and insincere; primarily because neither the respondents nor the interlocutors were African American. Furthermore, the respondents found the interlocutors to be excessive in their use of the vernacular. The respondents were confident in their belief that their blackness had warranted this form of correspondence.

In answering the first research question, the accounts provided by the agents of research spoke to their experiences of racialized sexualization and subjugation. Through their interaction with primarily white men on online dating applications, the respondents were subjected to the sexualization of their

bodily features, precise ethnic backgrounds and their presumed sexuality. The process was not limited to their position as women, but indications of racial overtones proved the problematization of their blackness as well. Concomitantly, the respondents were met with comments and remarks that they believed demonstrated the interlocutors' inferiorization of them. Questions regarding their ethnic origins and educational backgrounds were alarming to the respondents and made them feel predisposed to an inferior position even prior to the start of each interaction.

5.3 Polarization

In response to recurring instances of racialized sexualization and subjugation, most respondents admitted to avoiding white men on online dating platforms, or in extreme cases, avoiding online dating platforms entirely. This manifested in multiple ways, most respondents would not initiate contact with white men however, some would also disregard introductory messages sent by white men. The respondents' avoidant coping aligns with the hypothesis presented in the introductory chapter of this research paper, which argued that most victims of racist abuse would rather withdraw themselves from problematic situations, believing too much time would be required to change systems they deem unalterable (Callander et al., 2016). Their motivations for distancing themselves from white men on online dating platforms were foregrounded by either a traumatic experience, mistrust, gradual awareness, or all three simultaneously. Previously traumatic experiences involving white interlocutors on online dating platforms prompted some respondents to avoid engaging with white men on these platforms in fear of similar occurrences taking place. Mistrust of white men was an additional factor which prompted some respondents to disengage with white men on online dating applications. In a few cases, mistrust was unprovoked; meaning the respondents that detailed their mistrust for white men, often had not had a previously distressing encounter with one, at least online. Some respondents admitted to the irrationality of their suspicions, including problematizing each message received from an interlocutor believing that each bore ulterior motives. However, despite their awareness of these irrationalities, their suspicions persisted, justifying these as a need to protect themselves from presumed imminent harm. Beyond this, some respondents admitted to not being able to distinguish between racialized sexualization and well-intended compliments. Despite this uncertainty, these respondents still met each interaction with white men with suspicion, finding fault in each message the latter sent to them. The respondents' problematization of all content transmitted by white interlocutors speaks to the interracial anxiety they experience. Interracial anxiety entails deep mistrust towards a racial group that is not one's own and is accompanied by heightened hostility and suspicion towards members of that group (Plant & Devine, 2013). Finally, a gradual awareness of race issues and the historical sexualization and marginalization of black women prompted some respondents to disengage with white men on online dating platforms. The respondents accredited

their individual research for providing them with the knowledge to identify content that was indeed guilty of feeding into tropes of presumed black female promiscuity and inferiority. Some respondents admitted that prior to this awareness; they would normalize damaging presumptions ascribed onto them given that they were largely unaware of the harmful connotations intertwined with them. For this reason, these respondents assumed more caution when communicating with white men on online dating platforms, disengaging if they identified problematic propositions or expressions through their interactions. What is notable is that, at times, the three motivations for disengaging with white men on online dating platforms intersected. Some respondents exposed to a distressing experience with a white interlocutor, grew to mistrust other white men as a result. Similarly, some respondents subjected to traumatic experiences with white interlocutors on these platforms resorted to educating themselves on the histories behind the problematization of blackness, precisely black womanhood so as to mitigate the weight of the encounter. In answering the second research question, most respondents opted to avoid initiating contact with white men online in response to the earlier actualization and prospect of racialized sexualization and subjugation.

5.4 Limitations & Future Research

There are however, a number of limitations to this research. Firstly, the research sample was limited to black women residing in the Netherlands. Motivations for restricting this research to the Netherlands were mainly practical. I am based in the Netherlands and familiar with several black women here. Furthermore, there is a distinct and localized understanding of race and racism in this country (e.g. Essed, 2015). For this reason, the results gathered from this research could not be generalizable to other national contexts. To generalize these results and prescribe them to black women living outside the Dutch national context would be to see the navigation of blackness as monolithic and mono-dimensional. Despite this, qualitative research is largely not intended to be generalizable; rather the strength of this research lies in its depth instead. The novel insights provided through qualitative research reveal new opportunities for future research. Secondly, of the sample, all agents of research were university attending and exceptionally aware of race and its problematization within structural and societal contexts. They were aware of certain processes and terminologies driving conversations around race, which made for profound accounts. However, alternative accounts might have been provided had the sample been lower educated black women belonging to lower social classes. It regurgitates questions of intersectionality and the extent to which all intersecting factors of black women's identities can be acknowledged within research. This research had a heavy consideration of how race and gender intersects to determine the lived experiences of black women, however social class and the manner in which it not only affects lived experiences but the perceptions of them were largely passed over. Therefore, to limit intersectionality, a

framework which also vouches for the consideration of class, age, disability and sexual orientation to race and gender counters intersectionality in itself (Carbado et al., 2013).

It is equally important to reflect on the extent to which processes of essentialization were contested through this research. The research at hand largely emphasized the complexity of the respondents and black women in general, acknowledging their identity and positionality in society in regards to the intersection between their gender and race. Beyond this, enabling the respondents to narrate on their own experiences navigating spaces in which they find themselves to be vulnerable reveals more intricacies in their respective experiences, which works to further contest notions surrounding the uniformity of black women's lived experiences. In contrast, the same complexity was not afforded to the white men the respondents engaged with nor white men in general. The de-complexification of white men was equally apparent in the accounts provided by the respondents whereby many admitted to staying away from those they identified as fitting into the category of white male. In addition to this, the predominance of white men on online dating applications blurs claims made by the respondents that fault white men exclusively rather than the culture of online dating for the instances of anti-blackness they encounter online. And so, it is necessary to consider that the white men this research and the respondents' accounts speak of are not provided the ability to define and determine themselves to the extent to which the respondents are.

In the context of future research, it would be useful to engage with black women residing in different parts of the world so as to compare if the intensity of the content projected onto them online is similar or differs from country to country. It would be worthwhile to examine if similarities in the experiences of racism exist across countries based on social dimensions such as social class and gender or if national contexts hold precedence over these social dimensions. This study might be relevant at the European scale where discourses and histories of racism are fairly similar (Essed, 1991). To examine and understand gendered racism as unitary irrespective of national contexts would be to go past *methodological nationalism* which continues to position society within the confines of the nation-state, negating the increasing globalizing dynamics of the world (Beck, 2007). Furthermore, it would be useful to further examine the distinct experiences afforded to black African women. A separate study focused on how African bodies are received differently to Afro-diasporic bodies on online dating platforms would be novel and profound. Finally, if provided the time, I would be interested in examining if identical sentiments of anti-blackness are propagated by black men on online dating platforms.

5.5 Theoretical and Societal Implications

At the start of this thesis paper, the scientific and societal relevance of this research were argued. These included but were not limited to a need to reveal the distinct ways in which racism was expressed in online settings, to dismantle the narrative of victimhood constructed around the lived experiences of black women and to enlighten readers on the prevalence of racism in supposedly post-racial societies such as The Netherlands. In light of the findings, racism is expressed in two distinct ways through online dating. As stressed earlier, targets of racism experience it as racialized sexualization and subjugation. Given the culture of romantic pursuit that encapsulates online dating platforms, these are expressed as compliments, making these expressions distinct from the inflammatory and vilifying forms that characterize racism in offline spaces (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). A second societal implication of this research is providing black female respondents with the platform to account for their own experiences. Prior to commencing research, an aim of this study was to dismantle the tropes of victimhood surrounding black women. This was achieved by allowing the respondents to not only account for their own experiences engaging with white and non-black men on online dating applications but by also gauging an understanding of how they receive and respond to racialized sexualization and subjugation. As earlier indicated, the final aim of this research had been to enlighten readers on the endurance of racism in supposedly post-racial societies. In both national and global discourse, The Netherlands is often posited as a post-racial society that has achieved this status by largely ignoring race and racism (Essed & Hoving, 2015). However, in light of the respondent's experiences, race continues to be problematized in the country, at least in its digital spaces. The hope is that these revelations will engender awareness within academia and beyond of how race and other social dimensions cannot be studied independently from one another but rather how both merge to determine experiences and the perceptions of those experiences.

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Appendix

Appendix A – List of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Self-identified nationality	Self-identified ethnicity	Additional Remarks
Petra	23	Master's student (University)	Non-Dutch	African	The interview was conducted in her home. She had been active on "Tinder" in the preceding six months at the time of the interview.
Nalah	21	Bachelor's student (University)	Dutch	African	The interview was conducted in the local student community center. At the time of the interview, she was active on "Tinder" and "OkCupid".
Matilda	22	Bachelor's student (University)	Non-Dutch	African	The interview was conducted in the local community student center. She was active on "Tinder" and "OkCupid" at the time of the interview.
Denise	21	Bachelor's student (University)	Dutch	African	The interview was conducted in the local student community center. She was active on "Tinder" at the time of the interview.
Robyn	23	Master's student (University)	Dutch	Half-African and half-Caribbean	The interview was conducted on the main campus of the local university. At the time of the interview, she was active on "Tinder".
Giselle	21	Bachelor's student (University)	Dutch	Caribbean	The interview was conducted in the local student community center. At the time of the interview, she was active on "Tinder". The respondent admitted to mostly engaging with black men. Despite this, she was able to provide accounts detailing reasons for her dissonance towards white and non-black men.
Nina	21	Bachelor's student (University)	Dutch	Caribbean	The interview was conducted in the city of Leiden, at the campus

					where the respondent schooled. At the time of the interview, she was active on “Tinder” and “Bumble”.
Theresa	20	Bachelor's student (Art school)	Dutch	African	The interview was conducted at the main campus of the local university. She had been active on “Tinder” in the preceding six months at the time of the interview.
Angelique	21	Bachelor's student (University)	Non-Dutch	African	The interview was conducted in the main campus of the local university. The respondent had been active on “Tinder” in the preceding six months at the time of the interview.
Solana	23	Bachelor's student (University)	Dutch	African	The interview was conducted at the respondent's home. She had been active on “Tinder” in the preceding six months at the time of the interview.

Appendix B – Coding Chart

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Body features	Body Features	Racialized Sexualization
Ethnicity	Africanization	
OkCupid vs. Tinder	Are these bodies to be wed or to bed? – OkCupid vs. Tinder	
Presence on dating app justifies sexualization	Sexualization	
Expected to accept sexualization		
Not like other black girls	Essentialization	Subjugation
Food		
Animal	Otherization	
Where are you really from?		
Intellect	Intellect	
Language		Performance
“Act black”		
Persona		
Interests		
Suspicion	Suspicion/Mistrust	Polarization
Disinterest		
Short-lived conversations (nothing to talk about)	Disinterest	
Unfamiliarity (white woman as the known)		
Awareness	Gradual awareness	
The Netherlands as segregated	Alienated	