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**THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE BLACK GAY MEN WHO USE  
DATING AND HOOKUP APPS WHILE ATTENDING A PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE INSTITUTION**

by

Tevis Denzell Bryant

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Dissertation Advisor: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

Committee Members:

Dan Strasser, Ph.D.

Shawn M. Hoke, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to everyone who believed that I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. I was raised in a household where I was always put down emotionally, psychologically, and even endured physical abuse because of my sexual orientation. It was not until I became a student at Rowan University that I truly found refuge and I was able to become the person that I am today. I have learned in my life that we all have a “story”, but that does not define who we are, but it merely helps us write the next chapter, much like this dissertation process. In addition to my loved ones this dissertation is dedicated to all the little gay Black boys around the world who feel like they are not good enough or that they will never be accepted.

I hope my research and experiences empower you all to know that you are not only good enough, but you are loved and you have the potential to be what everyone said you couldn't, so keep pushing and persisting. I lastly want to dedicate this dissertation to my 14-year-old self. It was the first time I ran away from home after being beaten for doing something that was “too gay” and I remember thinking that I would never get out of that situation, here I am 30 years old eyes filled with tears knowing that I made it and that I survived. Believe in yourselves and believe things will get better regardless of your race, sexual orientation, gender, or whatever you think makes you different. Those differences are the things that make each of us special and they will help us to navigate this thing called life.

## Acknowledgements

As I have gotten older, I have become more connected to spirituality, so I would like to thank the higher power for waking me up every day. I want to thank my committee members Daniel Strasser and Shawn Hoke for guiding me through this process. You have both been amazing role models in my personal and professional life and I would not want to have this moment without each of you. I want to especially thank my chair, MaryBeth Walpole. Dr. Walpole, you took a chance on me when I received what felt like hundreds of “no’s”. I am beyond grateful for your support and constant encouragement. You pushed me not only to be better, but to be exceptional and that is why I will appreciate you for the rest of my days. I also want to acknowledge my cohort members that helped me through my process, Dana Weiss and The Flossee Posse (DeLithea Davis & Latoya Bond). You all helped me so much and kept my spirits up when I just wanted to quit. I could not have gotten through my journey alone, so I thank you so much. I also want to acknowledge my friends and family members who supported me over the years and throughout my doctoral journey: Thomas Bryant, Terrance Bryant, Shaquan Waters, Isaac Leonard, Carlos Mejia, Megan Crawford, Andy Montanez, Stephan Brooks, Jonathan Pereira, and the late Jerico Evans. I could keep going, but anyone else who took part in this achievement not mentioned, please know you are in my heart and I thank you as well. Lastly, I want to thank my knight in shining armor, Elan Fredette. Elan this has been a process and while you were not there the whole time you came at the right time. You motivate me, you inspire me, you shower me with unconditional love, and that gave me the fuel to push through this process. There are not enough ways to say I love you, but I will spend each day looking for more.

## **Abstract**

Tevis Denzell Bryant

THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE BLACK GAY MEN WHO USE  
DATING AND HOOKUP APPS WHILE ATTENDING A PREDOMENANTLY  
WHITE INSTITUTION

2020-2021

MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

Doctor of Education

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use hook up and dating apps while attending predominantly White colleges and universities. In using intersectionality as my theoretical framework, I was able to discover the essence of the experiences that Black gay men face while using these platforms. Intersectionality assisted the study in identifying the systems of privilege and oppression that are present for Black gay men, specifically when attempting to date within the LGBTQ+ community (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Through this framework I additionally began to understand that the multiple identities that Black gay men have are not viewed separately, but more so as intersecting (Collins, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2019). This study contributed to current research by revealing commonalities that Black gay students face when attempting to date at PWIs. The findings of this study indicated that through the use of hook up and dating apps undergraduate Black gay men experience racism and fetishism frequently. Other themes emerged in the study as prominent such as making friends with benefits and colorism, but every theme was associated with discrimination on the basis of race or fetishism in some form. This study shows the importance of creating an inclusive social environment for marginalized students that extends beyond the academic setting.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Throughout the history of higher education in the United States, students from all over the country have attended colleges and universities with the hope and expectation of finding romantic partners and potential spouses (Golden & Katz, 1999; Vine, 1976).

Contrary to the more contemporary notion that students attend college for alcohol, sexual experiences, and social engagement, finding companionship was historically a motivating factor for students to attend college (Johnson, 2017; Vine, 1976; West et al., 2017).

Seeking marriage while away at college in the colonial period of higher education was used to maintain or gain additional social status and power; it was not uncommon for college presidents to have the expectation for their children to marry each other when they reached the appropriate age (Golden & Katz, 1999; Vine, 1978). In addition to marrying the daughters of college presidents, some young men married the daughters of university trustees and sisters of classmates (Marginson, 2016; Vine, 1976). As time progressed, reasons for college student dating and romantic relationships began to transcend social mobility, and some students began dating for love and physical attraction (Bailey, 1988; Bogle, 2007; Vine, 1976).

During the 1920s, traditional dating, which constitutes a man and a woman declaring a relationship or going out on a formal date to learn about one another, was popular on college campuses (Bailey, 1988). The traditional idea of dating follows the societal norm in which men initiate the request to go out on a date, in advance, giving the women days to decide if they are interested in that specific suitor or not (Bogle, 2007). In addition to the man being responsible for initiating the date, in the traditional culture of

dating they are also responsible for planning the activities and paying for any expenses from the evening (Bailey, 1988).

Throughout the dating era, women were first married at the average age of 20 and men were married at the average age of 22; today that number has shifted to over 25 for women and over 27 for men (National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2010; US Census Bureau, 2010). During the period in which traditional dating dominated campus life, college men and women would go out on dates first, which sometimes resulted in sexual activity, however, with dating, the expectation was that sexual interest would match emotional interest as well (Bailey, 1988; Bogle, 2007; Whyte, 1990). Additionally, traditional dating was only viewed as appropriate when it occurred between a man and a woman (Bailey, 1988; Bogle, 2007).

### **Role of Dating in the Black Community**

Historically in the United States, dating for Black Americans has always proven to be difficult as there were laws in place that delayed and prohibited official unions for couples (Hill, 2016; Landale & Tolnay, 1991; Wallenstein, 1995). During years of enslavement Black people were not able to legally marry, so instead they created a tradition known as jumping the broom, which represented the union of two Black slaves that was respected and honored within the Black community (Finney, 2017; Parry, 2016).

While Black people have historically built long-lasting relationships (Hill, 2016), racial stereotypes have not portrayed Black relationships as being long-lasting. Stereotypes such as Black women emasculating men and dismissing the role of husbands and fathers to foster independence, and Black men being depicted as sexually immature

and rarely monogamous while expecting romantic loyalty, are common (Hall et al., 2014; Hill, 2016; Towner, 2013).

In modern educational settings, dating has evolved for White college students in a general sense but still proves difficult for Black students (Morrison, 2012; Murty & Roebuck, 2015). Black college students face the barrier of mate availability or lack of options on many PWI college campuses, which creates a difficult dating environment that does not foster the development of committed relationships for the population (Ferguson et al., 2006). Black heterosexual male college students tend to have more than one sexual partner, further limiting the options for other students to be in long term committed relationships (Ferguson et al., 2006; Murty & Roebuck, 2015). While options for same-race dating are limited for Black students, interracial dating provides students with opportunities for romantic relationships (Morrison, 2012; Murty & Roebuck, 2015).

Interracial dating has now become common on colleges campuses, but still is viewed differently among various demographics (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Rose & Firmin, 2013). Results from studies about college students' perceptions of interracial dating compared to same race dating suggests that students dating interracially do so for the same reasons as those who prefer same race dating, aesthetics and sexual attraction, rather than racial exploitation (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Ross, 2004). One study found that African Americans were more favorable to interracial relationships than White students (Murty & Roebuck, 2015); however, in other studies it is suggested that Black women are less likely than Black men to engage in interracial dating due to the complications of dating someone White and the discrimination that they may experience from their families (Henry, 2008; Ortega, 2002). Black families are often concerned

about interracial dating due to the historic oppression of Black people by White communities and the idea that interracial dating somehow discredits one's connection to the Black community (Field et al., 2013; Henry, 2008).

### **Dating Practices of Gay Men**

Throughout United States history homosexuality and homosexual activities have been condemned and repressed (Lewis, 2016; Tully & Smith, 2014; White, 2020). During the 1950s and 1960s shock therapy and other aversion methods were commonly administered to gay men in efforts to convert them to heterosexual practices (Dickinson, 2015; Lewis, 2016). In 1968 the DSM-II, the U.S. mental disorder classification guide, categorized homosexuality as a mental illness (Batza, 2018; Lewis, 2016). Due to the discrimination of homosexuality and how it was categorized, gay men were forced to find romantic and sexual connections in the form of cruising, the act of discreetly meeting other men in public areas that primarily resulted in sexual activity in spaces such as bathroom stalls and parks at night (Hilson, 2017; Needham, 2010). During the cruising era, many men waited in parks and abandoned buildings to meet with other men, but while the act of cruising was sexualized, most men participated in these activities out of a yearning for love (Ercolani & Stiglegger, 2020; Lynch, 2002).

LGBTQ dating and courtship was also heavily condemned in the college and university setting (Heintzman, 2016; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2015). In the 1920s, Harvard University administrators formed a secret council called "the court" that was charged with expelling students who were found to be homosexual or having had participated in homosexual activities; two of the students who were expelled committed suicide as a result of their verdicts (Paley, 2002). During the 1950s and 1960s LGBTQ college

student groups started meeting in secret to form support groups that allowed them to socially engage with one another and potentially find dating experiences, which carried into the 1970s and 1980s (Beemyn, 2003; Blumenfeld, 2012). Throughout this period homosexuality was still considered a mental illness, so any attempts at advocacy and to raise awareness were invalidated (Bayer, 1981; Drescher & Byne, 2009). In 1966, at Columbia University 12 students formed the Student Homophile League to begin having conversations with campus administration on ways to support the LGBTQ student population (Beemyn, 2003; Johansen, 2019).

Similar to Black college students, gay and lesbian college students find meeting other individuals and dating more difficult compared to their heterosexual peers due to limited visibility and smaller numbers of LGBTQ students who attend colleges (Morrison, 2012). In the Fall of 2010, Rutgers University – New Brunswick campus student, Tyler Clementi, was secretly filmed by his roommate having sexual intercourse with another man which resulted in Clementi committing suicide by jumping off of the George Washington Bridge (Cranmer & Ford, 2011; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Heterosexual students and institutional culture may contribute to unwelcoming environments for gay and lesbian students (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Morrison, 2012).

### **Black Gay Men Dating Experiences**

Marriage and dating for many LGBTQ couples fosters an idea of inclusion, but we oftentimes forget that some groups are not included (Hunter, 2013; Morrison, 2012). Historians refer to the dating and cohabitating of White gay and lesbian couples as homonormativity, but these strides towards social acceptance regularly exclude Black lesbian and gay people (Hunter, 2013; Morrison, 2012). Dating for Black gay men in

college settings is challenging depending on the type of institution; for example, Black gay men attending HBCUs must navigate the homophobia within the Black community, and at PWIs they must navigate lack of dating options as well as racism within the gay community (Mula, n.d, Morrison, 2012; Teunis, 2007).

Social experiences for Black gay males in college have become a focus for researchers, who have specifically explored objections from the Black community, racism within the gay community, and mental health concerns (Battle et al., 2013; Grant, 2020; Han, 2015), however, research on dating experiences for Black gay men is very limited. Black gay dating and relationships are most often stigmatized and associated with the presence of infidelity and HIV and AIDS (Bailey, 2020; George et al., 2012). Black gay males in general combat issues such as systemic and cultural discrimination, which translates in their dating encounters as deeming them as less desirable than White gay men (Grant, 2020; Mula, n.d.; Royles, 2020).

The general campus environment for LGBTQ identifying students, staff, and faculty has improved over the last decade; however, there is still a need for policy reform on college campuses as this population remains vulnerable to bigotry (Cranmer & Ford, 2011). The reasons that college students decide to date has evolved over the past few centuries, from maintaining social hierarchy to seeking social satisfaction and marriage, and more recently to seeking sexual encounters (Choi et al, 2017; Vine, 1976). While the evolution of dating in higher education seems to have impacted all college students, Black gay men are less represented in the current research.

## **The Emergence of Hookup Culture in Higher Education**

Murstein (1980) was among one of the first to investigate the shift from dating to primarily sexual encounters, suggesting that traditional dating was quickly dissolving with high school and college students. Other researchers disagreed, arguing that traditional dating culture was still intact (Cupach & Metts, 1995; Seal & Agostinelli, 1994). More recently Bogle (2008) suggested that traditional dating is still intact but is more likely to occur after college. From the 1960s on, there has been a shift from dating and romantically courting a partner to the emergence of regular uncommitted sexual encounters with multiple partners, which are now widely known as “hooking up” (Bogle, 2008; Buri et al., 2014; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Bailey (1988) refers to the mid-1960s, during the sexual revolution, as the period when American culture began using a new system of courtship, now referred to as hookup culture.

College parties and bars around campus are common places where students seek sexual partners or become sexually stimulated with their peers (Bogle, 2007; Strouse, 1987). Within the fraternity and sorority life, community hookup culture has been a normal part of college social life and was common on campus and within the Greek community (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Handler, 1995). Alcohol use often occurs among college students prior to hookup encounters because it lowers their inhibitions, making it more comfortable to hookup (Bogle, 2007).

Other studies focus on hookup culture among college students and alcohol and drug use (Landovitz et al., 2013; Plant, 2002), the need for gratification or validation (Gudelunas, 2012; Miller, 2015; Strubel & Petrie, 2017), and the convenient access to sex through social media apps (Buhi et al., 2010; Carpenter & McEwen, 2016; Landovitz et

al., 2013). Social media, particularly dating and hookup app usage, has become college students' most common method of finding romantic interactions with one another and hooking up (Buri et al., 2014; Wu & Ward, 2018).

### **Dating Apps Role in Hookup Culture**

Dating and hookup apps have become a large part of how people socialize and interact with one another (Condis, 2018; Wu & Ward, 2018). Dating and hookup app use is widespread, including among those 18 and older, among various racial and ethnic groups, and among those with LGBTQ identifying sexual orientations (March et al., 2017). A communications agency Cast from Clay (formerly known as We are Flint) conducted a social media usage survey in 2018 that indicated 23% of Grindr users were between the ages of 18 and 24, this demographic highlights the age range of traditional college students.

Research suggests that dating and hookup apps are the new socially acceptable manner to meet people (Clemens et al., 2015; March et al., 2017; Wu & Ward, 2018). Tinder and Grindr were among the first dating apps to use a location-based search function, which facilitates an emotional, physical, or sexual encounter between strangers based on proximity (Anzani et al., 2018). While dating and hookup apps provide access to more people, that access does not guarantee connections or positive sexual and romantic outcomes (Finkel et al., 2012; Liccoppe et al., 2016).

While the use of dating apps like Tinder appears to be a new trend, they began in 1965 in "Operation Match", a computer dating tool designed to allow users to see a list of potential matches after completing a questionnaire; this practice is still occurring with modern dating apps (Hernandez, 2014). Dating and hookup apps are usually associated

with risky sexual behavior, and due to their widespread use among heterosexual and homosexual users, researchers suggest that the apps should begin promoting HIV and STI prevention (Holloway et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2016). Researchers indicated that the youth are mostly involved with new technology for friendship, romance, or sexual encounters because they have a higher-level understanding of technical literacy (Choi et al., 2017; Sautter et al., 2010). Many young people use dating and hookup apps to navigate sexual experiences. There is evidence that younger individuals are on dating apps because the sexual negotiation is more comfortable to initiate online due to fewer chances of embarrassment (Anzani et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2017).

### **Increased Use of Gay Dating Apps**

Over the past decade, gay men's use of apps has also increased (Badal et al., 2018; Wu & Ward, 2018). Researchers have examined how dating and hookup apps play into current social norms and cultural contexts and how they shape gay men's virtual dating practices (Filice et al., 2019; Wu & Ward, 2018). While active on gay dating and hookup apps, users indicate that they are "not looking" to send the message of being disinterested in casual hookups; those who are seeking casual sex tend to use abbreviations such as: "fun" being for sex, and "nsa" being for no strings attached (Birnholtz et al., 2014). In addition to sexual experiences, many dating app users simply use apps for amusement and to pass time recreationally or for gamification purposes (Abelson, 2019; Condis, 2018). Gay dating apps such as Grindr have made networking between gay men much more convenient regardless of individual reasons for using the app. However, gay dating and hookup apps have also made the racism that exists within the LGBTQ community

more visible through these platforms (Choi et al., 2017; Callander et al., 2016; Mula, n.d.).

### **Discrimination on Gay Dating Apps**

In addition to high-risk sexual health behavior, discrimination based on appearance exists on dating and hookup apps. A problem within queer communities, particularly gay dating and hookup apps, is that they are known to be common areas where gay men of color are openly discriminated against and rejected (Carter, 2013; Mula, n.d.). Grindr, Scruff, and Tinder are the leading dating and hookup apps used by gay men. An area infrequently focused on in research is the isolation experienced by Black men within the gay community using dating and hookup apps. Unconscious and conscious biases based on race that impact gay men of color result in them either lying about or attempting to hide their racial identity in online dating spaces like Grindr to receive favorable responses (Callander et al., 2016; Mula, n.d.).

Although current literature reveals that while college students are using dating and hookup apps more frequently, and men of color are discriminated against on these gay dating and hookup apps, there is no focus on Black gay undergraduate students who utilize these apps. Undergraduate Black gay men are a unique population. The gap in the literature is that current research on college students and dating apps does not capture Black gay undergraduates' experiences as students or as men of color. This qualitative study will begin to address this gap in the existing literature and contribute to continually evolving knowledge about the experiences of Black gay students.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem that drives this study is the discrimination experienced by undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps. This discrimination can manifest itself in the form of racism, colorism, classism, and other ways that have not yet been identified. Adjusting to college for Black gay men and other members of the LGBTQ community has been a difficult process (Morrison, 2012; Washington & Wall, 2006). Students use dating and hookup apps as a method of communicating and connecting with others when in-person interactions are difficult for them to combat isolation (Penny, 2014; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Institutions must begin exploring ways to connect cyber engagement with support services. While colleges and universities do not provide access to dating and hookup apps and similar online platforms, they still must address the potential harm that these programs cause to Black gay men who are enrolled at their institutions. By looking at the evolution of dating in the United States and in higher education we can begin to understand how the experiences vary between individuals with different genders and racial groups, including sexual orientation.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men on gay dating and hookup apps. Dating apps have become a large part of college students' extracurricular activities (Albury & Byron, 2016; Choi et al., 2016). Gay dating and hookup app data suggests that White gay men are less likely to reply to gay Black men than other gay White men and gay dating apps perpetuate stereotypes and racial narcissism within the LGBTQ community (Penney, 2014; Mula, n.d.). The campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans students has remained hostile over the years

(Stewart, 2011; Washington & Wall, 2006). Dating and hookup apps can create an uncomfortable experience for gay men of color when fetishism and sexualization are present (Penney, 2014; Mula, n.d.). By understanding the challenges Black gay men face on dating and hookup apps, colleges and universities can begin developing methods to combat negative experiences and provide more resources on campus.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions used for this study were developed to further understand the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating and hookup apps. This phenomenological qualitative study (Giorgi, 1985; Paul & Hayes, 2002) helped identify themes and trends within the collegiate Black gay dating scene for app users. These questions are important as they provide a deeper understanding of Black gay students' experiences with dating apps. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men using dating apps?
2. How does making connections through dating apps influence Black gay male's college experience?
3. What experiences do undergraduate Black gay men have when attempting to date White gay men on dating apps?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework that helped shape this study is intersectionality. Intersectionality is the theoretical framework that looks at various social categories such as: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status; this framework intersects at the micro level of an individual's experience to reflect connected systems of privilege and oppression on the larger scale such as: racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Cole, 2009;

Bowleg, 2012). The population being studied fell within multiple intersectionalities, making this framework appropriate for studying the experiences of Black gay men and the systems in which they wield privilege and where they are oppressed.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study helps student affairs professionals cultivate support for Black gay students who have unfavorable experiences with using gay dating apps. On a macro level, the experiences of Black gay men on dating and hookup apps can result in organizational change, which may shift campus policies regarding social media use. These policies had limitations because campuses cannot monitor what all students post on their social media accounts. However, consequences can manifest for students who are not in compliance with the respective social media use policy. If an institution already has a social media policy, it can be updated to include language specific to gay dating apps. On a micro level, college administrators can use the findings to provide additional training for faculty and staff on how to support Black gay students who use gay dating and hookup apps effectively. This type of support can aid in the retention of Black gay students by normalizing their use of gay dating and hookup apps and creating opportunities for them to be open about it.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Assumptions in this study included the existence of discrimination within the gay community projected towards Black men. Research retrieved from Mula (n.d), asserted clear discrimination of Black gay men with the use of gay dating and hookup apps such as Grindr, Scruff, and Jack'd. This information created an assumption that participants would disclose experiences of being discriminated against based on their race or ethnic

background. This assumption created the idea that Black gay men are open towards interracial dating and do not exclusively prefer dating other Black gay men. The assumption of Black gay male's openness to interracial dating comes from the intentional interactions that they have with White gay men. Based on previous research, another assumption was that during the interview process, participants may disclose being coveted sexually due to fetishisms and stereotypes about Black males' penis size (Groves et al., 2015; Lang, 2014). Several findings discuss Black gay male's experiences with being fetishized and sexualized within the gay community (Bailey, 2020; Kumar, 2017); these behaviors that already exist within the gay community are assumed to manifest in Black gay men's use of dating apps.

There are several limitations associated with this study. Social norms with using gay dating apps have been previously investigated (i.e., discrimination, sexualization, fetishism), however, the effects on Black gay students are often not studied. The small amount of current research that is available regarding the topic impacted the findings' breadth. Limited research affects how the experiences of Black gay men are viewed. Common themes or situations experienced by undergraduate Black gay men on dating apps may be easily dismissed due to the lack of exploration. Another limitation is the amount of time participants utilize their apps in a day or week which was not investigated. The time used may be a variable in the type of responses or frequency but is not being studied as part of this topic.

Delimitations in the study ensure that the study remains focused throughout its entirety. A delimitation ensures that data is collected for a student demographic. The study focuses on undergraduate Black gay men and exclude graduate students, trans men,

and non-traditional students. The experiences are different between traditional undergraduate students and graduate and non-traditional students. If the study explored the experiences of each student type, then it would influence the current literature so that it cultivates a deeper understanding of the student demographic and what they experience.

### **Terms and Definitions**

Dating Apps – Dating apps are programs run on smartphones or web devices that connect users based on geographic distance (Ward & Wu, 2018). Apps for gay men or more broadly MSM or men who have sex with men are Grindr, Scruff, and Jack'd, which are increasingly studied by social scientists (Ward & Wu, 2018). In this study, this term is used with and interchangeably with the phrase hookup apps.

Traditional Dating – The concept when a man and woman go out to learn more about one another and have a shared romantic interest, this practice historically excluded the idea of gay and lesbian relationships.

Hookups – The primary definition means to attain sexual companionship resulting in sexual intercourse. Hooking up can be identified as a transactional sexual encounter that rarely results in a friendship or romantic companionship (Bogle, 2007).

Gay Community – Individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ within the context of a broader social community. Gay is often used as a blanket term to identify anyone who is not heterosexual.

Black – Black identifies a person of African American descent, regardless of light or dark skin tones (Tatum, 1997). African Americans have been the primary minority

connected to the overall history of America (Takaki, 1993). The terms Black and African American may be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

Interracial dating – Refers to the relationship status of couples who identify with different racial backgrounds. This study will primarily focus on the interracial dating between Black and White couples; however, other races are included in the concept of interracial dating.

Student Affairs Professionals – Any professional who is working in a college or university setting to engage students. The functions of student affairs professionals include but are not limited to academic affairs and student engagement on or off-campus.

Unconscious bias – Displaying some prejudice against a person based on their identity, including but limiting race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Racism – The act of discriminating against another person based on their ethnicity and skin complexion.

Gamification – Applying game-design elements or characteristics to items or concepts that are not related to gaming.

MSM (Men who have sex with men) – Any individual who identifies with the male gender and has sexual encounters with other individuals who also identify as male. This term is inclusive to heterosexual men who engage in strictly sexual relations with other men.

Jumping the Broom – This is the tradition created by slaves that signifies their marital union for one another. This tradition is believed to have originated in West Africa.

STI – Sexually transmitted infection. This acronym refers to infections or diseases that are caused through vaginal, anal, or oral sexual intercourse regardless of sexuality.

Truvada – A medication that is used as a precaution to prevent HIV. Truvada is also referred to as PrEP within the LGBTQ+ community. While it is not a cure to HIV it decreases the chance for the virus to be passed through unprotected sex.

### **Summary of Chapter One**

Chapter one introduces the topic, background, and problem. The topic focuses on the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps. The chapter broadly focuses on the history of dating and how those experiences were different for Black gay men. The chapter also includes how the dating culture evolved from colonial courtship into the modern app use. Chapter one shows research and data of college students who use online dating apps generally. The problem specific to gay dating and hookup apps is that they often perpetuate discrimination for men of color. While racial discrimination exists on gay dating and hookup apps, there are other experiences yet to be investigated with undergraduate Black gay men.

Chapter one also previews literature that reappears in chapter two. Chapter two focused on literature from themes associated with the topic. Chapter three provides an overview the methodology of the study and the process of how the study is conducted including data collection and limitations of the study. Chapter four provides an overview of the results of the study, highlighting all the themes discovered throughout the analysis. Lastly, chapter five looks at how the framework shaped the study, discusses limitations, and provides recommendations for how the research can be expanded on in the future.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

Chapter two presents a holistic review of scholarly literature on undergraduate Black gay men and their experiences with dating and hookup apps. The chapter provides general information regarding dating and hookup apps and Black gay men, indicating the gaps in knowledge. Expanding the research related to undergraduate Black gay men is essential to developing on-campus support for this population. This new scholarship also builds on previous research to enable student affairs professionals to make grassroots changes on college campuses. The literature review appears in five sections: History of Dating in Higher education, Black Gay Men in College, Dating Experiences of Underrepresented Groups, College Student Dating, and Gay Dating Apps. Each of these areas includes subthemes to provide additional understanding of the selected literature.

Scholarship focused on queer students is essential to advocate for the rights and needs of these individuals; however, this knowledge is lacking specifically regarding the intersectionality of two marginalized identities, Black, gay men (Kumashiro, 2001). Although more colleges offer programs and spaces for students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), they often fail to incorporate individuals in racial or ethnic minorities (Duran, 2019; Loiseau, 2018). Similarly, although there are programs and spaces for Black students, and even perhaps Black men, these spaces often do not address the needs of the LGBTQ community members. Black gay men, in general, are less likely to have come out while living at home than their White peers; as a result, they have to navigate both their race and their sexual identity, struggling to find a safe space and embrace who they are (Mitchell & Means, 2014; Young, 2011). As a result,

individuals embracing multiple identities, specifically LGBTQ and Black, often feel exclusion, as most queer spaces do not address race and groups of color (Kumashiro, 2001; Misawa, 2010). Queer people of color often lack resources and representation on many college campuses; finding peers, faculty, and staff who can relate can be a challenge for these individuals seeking support (Duran, 2019; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). These are all reasons showing the need for more research on this population.

Regarding perceptions of homosexuality in the Black community, Lewis, (2003) stated, “Blacks are substantially more religious than whites, more likely to be fundamentalist Protestants, and more likely to believe in a God who sends misfortunes as punishments.” (p.66). Black families often have deep roots in religion and are highly connected to the church, specifically Christianity (Lewis, 2003; Miller, 2008). Researchers have indicated that Black communities view homosexuality as deviating from religious values and as an attack on their beliefs, in addition to attempts to diminish the perception of the Black male as being strong and masculine (Buttaro & Battle, 2012; Miller, 2008; Ward, 2005).

African American men often see the performative aspect to being homosexual because gay men stereotypically behave in a flamboyant manner, as a result some gay Black men hide their sexual encounters, which is referred to as being on the down low or DL (Lewis, 2003; McCune, 2008). The need to examine both aspects of Black gay men’s identity is emphasized by researchers who believe that Black males are invalidated when their masculine performance is questioned or challenged (McCune, 2008; Young, 2011). Black men feel the need to be overly masculine, because any display of feminine

behavior shows weakness, and somehow makes it seem like they are less valued than White gay men (Lewis, 2003; Young, 2011).

### **History of Dating in Higher Education**

From the beginning of higher education during colonial times, companionship and courtship were a priority of those attending universities (Eustace, 2001; Vine, 1976).

During this period university trustees often scrutinized mothers' involvement with their sons' education, suggesting their coddling nature enabled unmanly behavior (Vine, 1976).

Parents gave up their right to take care of their children in an effort to not reinforce feminine behavior and provide them the opportunity to learn manly traits, considered appropriate during that time period (Eustace, 2001; Vine, 1976). Dating women at college was another way men were able to display their appropriate manly behavior and even signified their experience was successful if they were able to find their future spouse (Eustace, 2001; Vine, 1976). Marriage in colonial times was based on social and financial appropriateness; for the colonial elite, the connections made while in college often resulted in marriages and apprenticeships for young men (Eustace, 2001; Vine, 1976).

While dating for status and power has been part of the history of higher education, dating in modern times has become less intentional for college students (Allison & Risman, 2014; Vine, 1976). Hooking up, or casual sexual encounters, are increasingly popular on college campuses and have replaced notions of traditional dating (Allison & Risman, 2014; Bogle, 2007). College campuses that provide residential spaces are viewed as sexual arenas that encourage students to have an increased number of sexual encounters because the space is available (Allison & Risman, 2014; Bogle, 2008). Hookups on college campuses allow students to seek companionship by first learning

whether they are sexually compatible with one another (Albury & Byron, 2016; Wu & Ward, 2018). In the university environment, access to hookups are commonly provided through dating apps (Choi et al., 2017; Hanson, 2020).

### ***History of Dating in the Black Community***

The earliest accounts of dating and relationships in the Black community have references to slavery; for enslaved Black people the African tradition of jumping the broom was considered an official but non-legal way for Blacks to display their marital union (Dundes, 1996; Sullivan, 1997). Jumping the broom is when slaves who are in love physically leap over a broom, confirming their agreement of being life partners, these rituals are usually accompanied by slave owners of the couple if they support the union (Dundes, 1996; Sullivan, 1997). Believed to be originally a Ghanaian tradition, during the beginning of the ceremony the broom is waved over the couple's heads to signify the removal of evil spirits in the path of the couple's future happiness (Dundes, 1996). As time passed and Blacks gained more rights within the United States, dating patterns have evolved in the Black community; one dating pattern that was controversial was interracial dating (Barnett, 1963; Bowman, 2012).

Within the Black community interracial dating is viewed differently between men and women, while Black men are mostly open to these types of relationships, Black women are more hesitant to date White men due to the burden that women face with continuing family bloodlines through childbirth, and the family perceptions that interracial dating removes one's loyalty from the Black community (Childs, 2005; Loughran & Zissimopoulos, 2009; Ortega, 2002). The case of *Loving v. Virginia* which legalized interracial marriage, was a pivotal event in attaining rights for interracial

couples, which was a new concept for Americans in the 1960s (Childs, 2005; Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010). From the 1960s to 2006, American culture has consistently increased awareness of cross-racial dynamics and become more accepting of interracial couples and relationships (Field et al., 2013; Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010). In addition to the acceptance of interracial dating, romantic practices of Black individuals have continued to be normalized and validated (Edmondson, 2007; Field et al., 2015). While there is research in the Black community about men and women, intersectionality is lacking, specifically for Black gay males (Ford, 2012; Gonzalez, 2017; Nero, 2001). The next section discusses Black gay men who attend college in depth to understand how and why their experiences as students impact their trends in dating.

### **Black Gay Men in College**

In higher education, Black gay men are less likely to receive a bachelor's degree than their White peers who align with either the LGBTQ+ or heterosexual communities due to general knowledge that Black students have a lower retention rate (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Duran, 2019; Strayhorn, 2013). Black gay students' experiences and concerns are similar to their heterosexual counterparts in that they are often concerned with manhood, masculinity, power, and prestige (Balaji, 2009; Harris & Struve, 2009). Researchers who have addressed Black gay men in college explored the reasons behind their college selection choices and have also found that Black gay men seek colleges that can meet their specific needs such as academic programs and social activities (Strayhorn, Blackwood, et al., 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010).

Retaining Black gay men at predominantly White institutions is problematic based on challenges to their social and academic success, such as racism and homophobia

(Blackwood, et al., 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). Black gay men face barriers similar to their heterosexual Black male counterparts, such as added pressure to prove themselves and feeling unwelcome, however, gay men must also navigate stereotypes about homosexuality and homophobia in the Black community (McCune, 2008; Washington & Wall, 2006). Findings from studies about gay Black men's college selection indicated that most participants preferred to attend predominantly White institutions (PWI) to avoid negative perceptions about homosexuality within the Black community (Strayhorn et al., 2008). An additional challenge unique for Black gay men is that they experience and navigate racism within the gay community (Boykin, 1996; Mula, n.d.) while simultaneously experiencing homophobia within Black communities (Stein, 2005; Young, 2011). To better understand the challenges faced by Black gay men in college, it is important to learn about their unique identity development.

Researchers examined the queer theory and Black identity development models separately, and then analyzed the experiences of students who were both Black and queer; during their developmental phase Black students shift from stages that gradually enable self-actualization (Cross, 1971; Jackson, 1976; Sullivan & Esmail, 2012; Johnson & Quaye, 2017; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). The focus of race has been largely absent in queer theory and only recently have scholars critiqued White queer theorists for perceptions of holistic queer theory as color blind (Evans et al., 2010; Johnson & Quaye, 2017). Underrepresented populations pose challenges to constructive-development theories due to multiple dissonance-provoking experiences that required defining self, morals, and views (Magolda, 2004). The lack of focus on minority gay students in theory continues to limit a better understanding of the underrepresented student groups.

### ***Black Gay Men at Predominately White Institutions***

Experiences of Black gay students attending PWIs found that Black gay and lesbian students manifested both overtly and covertly in classrooms, residential areas, clubs, and organizations and within organizational policies (Evans & Wall, 1991). Black gay students who attend PWIs frequently disclose that their racial background, rather than their sexual orientation, impacts their relationships with faculty, staff, and peers (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008, 2009). Black gay men who attended PWIs expressed challenges in finding romantic partners; more frequently, the men they encountered were interested in sexual activity rather than a relationship (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008, 2009; Morrison, 2012). Due to the small number of Black gay men attending PWIs, this population's use of the Internet and social media to connect with potential romantic partners is common (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010).

### ***Black Gay Men at Historically Black Colleges and Universities***

Minority-serving institutions are more accepting and inclusive of various racial and ethnic backgrounds; however, sexual orientation has not been the focus of sufficient research (Duran, 2019; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Societal acceptance of the LGBTQ community is growing, challenging historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which generally operate conservatively, to become more inclusive (Loiseau, 2018; Watson, 2014). Researchers examined the experiences of Black gay students who participate in bands, concluding that the students experience a constant feeling of anxiety when functioning as a gay person within an HBCU band and the predominantly Black community (Carter, 2013; Wood, 2005). Homosexuality in the Black community has often been rejected due to religious views and perceptions of masculinity; these values

continue to be perpetuated on HBCU campuses creating an unwelcoming environment for Black gay students (Strayhorn, 2013; Lenning, 2017; Ward, 2005).

### ***Homophobia in the Black Community and Black Masculinity***

Black gay men are subject to more discrimination and homophobia than White gay men particularly from family and within the Black community, so more feel pressure to hide their homosexuality (Boykin, 1996; Cohen, 1999; McBride, 2005). Black gay men are more likely than their White peers to suppress their homosexual behavior or feminine behavior, because they feel that they would be met with disapproval by their friends and family (Lewis, 2003; Stokes et al., 1996). Black communities and families are historically connected to Christianity, which contribute to the general belief in the community that homosexuality is an abomination and allows Black gay men to be devalued (McCune, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Sullivan & Esmail, 2012). Homosexuality is feared in the Black community due to its feared attacks on Black masculinity (Ward, 2005; Washington & Wall, 2006).

The idea of Black masculinity and its place in society is a projection of identity and body politics developed by social cues of how Black men should be represented (Balaji, 2009; McCune, 2008). Cultural influences play a part into the acceptance and condemnation of young Black gay men and women (Balaji, 2009; Stein, 2005). Both media and society have projected ideas of what masculinity is supposed to be within the Black community, which is associated with hip-hop culture (Balaji, 2009). Men have an instinctual sense of masculinity but only because they need to measure up to social expectations (Stein, 2005). Black masculinity stereotypes make many Black men who are gay feel uncomfortable with themselves and reserved about their orientation, resulting in

a life of living on the down low and being closeted (McCune, 2008; Young, 2011). Young (2011, p.8) states, “Assigning nonheteronormative behavior to Black men historically exists as a way to disenfranchise us from the opportunities reserved for white men in this country...”. Black men oftentimes feel the need to be overtly masculine, because any implication of femininity implies weakness, and further perpetuates the notion that they are inferior to White men (McCune, 2008; Young, 2011).

Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) explored how manhood and masculinity impacted the educational and social experiences of Black gay men in college. Findings showed that Black gay male college students conceptualized manhood and their masculinity in three ways: accepting, adhering to, and performing traditionally masculine norms; intentionally or subconsciously challenging hegemonic notions of Black masculinity through behavior and self-beliefs; and recognizing their masculine identity is influenced by other social factors and locations. Inherent in the gay community is the suggestion that White gay men construct a particular culture, whereas Black gay men embody feminine stereotypes associated with homosexuality (McCune, 2008). Yet, expressing masculinity and identifying as a masculine gay man is essential for Black gay men to feel safe around Black straight men on campus (Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Learning the challenges of Black gay men holistically support a broader understanding of how their identities shape their dating experiences (Franklin, 1984; Wilkins, 2012).

### **Dating Experiences of Underrepresented Groups**

As young people begin to mature and develop, they start to aspire for traditional situations, such as long-term serious relationship and even marriage, that emulates their

parents' connection (Barber, 2001; Scott et al., 2009). College student perceptions of long-term relationships resulting in marriage typically vary depending on the demographic, however, college students generally view marriage positively (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). While dating historically has been included in the college experience since the colonial era, the experiences of underrepresented students have not always been pleasant due to facts such as limited partner availability and discrimination (Stackman et al., 2016; Vine, 1976). Thus, it is important to explore some of the dating experiences underrepresented students face while attending colleges and universities.

### ***Black Male Students Dating Experiences***

Black students on college campuses are frequently exposed to and can potentially experience discrimination based on their race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Morales, 2014). Black college students are oftentimes viewed as exotic and oversexualized by their non-Black peers, and they are perceived as more aggressive in several settings; these notions can be attributed to stereotypes about Black male's display of masculinity and Black women's angry Black woman stigma (McCune, 2008; Morales, 2014; Childs, 2005). Black men are often depicted as sexually aggressive and perpetrators of physical violence while in romantic relationships, stigmas around aggressive behavior affect relationships for Black men (Collins, 2005; Morales, 2014).

The stereotype surrounding Black males' aggressive behavior in relationships originated during the Jim Crow laws, in which the Black rapist narrative was perpetuated in order to control Black men (Collins, 2005; Davis, 2011; Morales, 2014). Black men are oftentimes viewed as desirable based on sexuality and fetishism, there are oftentimes connections made between the strong Black male physique and animals (Collins, 2005;

Hawkins, 1995). Additionally, Black men have also been assumed to have an inherently larger penis size than other races, which make the demographic more appealing to suitors, however, it also causes them to be sexualized (Donham, 2018; Marriot, 2010; Ponce, 2017).

### ***Gay Men's Dating Experience in College***

Gay men in college potentially experience more cases of loneliness and depression due to lack of romantic partner availability (Sandfort et al., 2007; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2015). Lack of visibility continues to be an issue for marginalized students on college campuses who are seeking both friendships and relationships (Ueno & Gentile, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2012). Gay men in college turn to dating applications such as Grindr and Scruff to seek companionship but may be discouraged due to the oversexualized nature or transactional communication which results in them feeling devalued (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Miller, 2015, Wu & Ward, 2018). Gay men in general are associated with being hypersexual and promiscuous, which originated with the cruising culture and bath houses (Hilderbrand, 2013; Hilson, 2017; Needham, 2010). Stereotypes around sexuality and assumptions of a heightened risk of contracting STDs or HIV impacts mate desirability for gay men (Brennan et al., 2012; Fergus et al., 2005).

### ***Interracial Dating***

In 1958, the Lovings, an interracial couple, were sentenced to a year in prison for breaching Virginia's Racial integrity Act of 1924, which outlawed marriage between Whites and people of color (Wallenstein, 1995). After taking their case to trial, in 1967, the U.S. supreme court overturned the Loving's convictions, which in effect eliminated all race-based marriage discrimination policies in the United States (DeWitt-Gregory &

Grossman, 2012; Wallenstein, 1995). Interracial dating has become common on college campuses, but still is viewed differently among various demographics (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Rose & Firmin, 2013). Studies suggest, though, that students dating interracially do so for the same reasons as those who prefer same race dating, aesthetics and sexual attraction rather than racial exploitation (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Ross, 2004). Additionally, African American men are more favorable to interracial relationships than White students (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Stackman et al., 2016).

Generally, college student attitudes regarding interracial dating in the United States is positive (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Stackman et al., 2016). Studies have shown that 40% of college students and students around the traditional student age range have been in a romantic relationship with someone outside of their race (Knox et al., 2000; Wang & Parker, 2014). The openness of interracial dating among college students is attributed to positive social interactions with others from different racial groups and consistent education about diverse populations and marginalized communities (Jacobsen & Johnson, 2006; Stackman et al., 2016). While it is known that Black women find interracial dating more difficult than men, Black students overall are more open to interracial dating than White students (Childs, 2005; Gullickson, 2006).

### **College Student Dating**

Traditional dating for college students has been viewed as extinct several times within the past half century, suggesting hookups are becoming the norm on college campuses (Bogle, 2007; Luff et al., 2016). Patterns of hookup and traditional dating occur often on college campuses depending on students' individual priorities (Luff et al., 2016). While hookup culture is a prominent aspect of the college student experience,

many still go on dates to get to know each other or end up in long term relationships (Heldman et al., 2010; Luff et al., 2016). Students who are in uncommitted relationships do not on average have more sexual experiences than those in relationships, however, they have more opportunities to engage in sexual behavior (Bogle, 2007; Luff et al., 2016). Additionally, college student dating partners and hookups are usually someone they were friends with or knew from school (Luff et al., 2016). Student dating and hookups are fostered through social environments such as parties and other events and programs (Bogle, 2007, 2008).

Heterosexual college students have indicated engaging in both hookups and dating, and research has indicated that 69% of straight college students indicated that they were in long-term monogamous relationships for at a minimum of six months or longer (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Reid et al., 2015). From a contemporary study, 67% of students discussed that dating and hookups overlap and that their experiences with hooking up resulted in a long-term relationship with their sexual partner (England et al., 2008). On college campuses students are exposed to potential suitors based on their surroundings, making both dating and hookups convenient based on their familiarity with peers and students they interact with in passing (Bogle, 2007; Reid et al., 2015). Students have indicated that location is relevant in how they determine whether to traditionally date or casually hookup, and that the perception of what is appropriate versus what is inappropriate factored in that interaction (Bogle, 2008; Reid, et al., 2015). The transition from dating to hooking up has been very fluid and empowered college students to feel the autonomy to engage in uncommitted sexual encounters with one another without the

presence of guilt or shame (Bogle, 2007; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Reid et al., 2015).

### ***Evolution of Campus Hookup Culture***

College campuses are known to be locations that foster and encourage sexual activity among students, which include multiple sex partners (Chng & Moore, 1994; Paul et al., 2000). Hookups are more frequent on college campuses; residential campuses provide students with more opportunities and locations to have sex or intimate encounters (Allison & Risman, 2014). Hookups are a prominent feature of students' college experiences, and these events are often associated with the use of drugs and alcohol attained from college parties (Bogle, 2007; Paul et al., 2000). Hookups on college campuses are connected to student personality traits and attitudes towards sexuality (Bancroft et al., 2004; Paul et al., 2000). Within hookup culture, perceptions of men's and women's experiences are viewed differently, men typically receive praise for their sexual conquests while women are condemned for being easily available or overly sexual (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Miller, 2008).

Integrated gender and sex residence halls contribute to hookup culture and provide easier access to physical romantic exchanges on college campuses (Allison & Risman, 2014; Heldman & Wade, 2010). The evolution of hooking up was sparked during and after the 1960s and has normalized nonrelational sexual experiences and transactions (Allison & Risman, 2014; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009). Multiple studies have indicated that at least 75% of college students have experienced a hookup and it has been a meaningful part of their experience as a student (Allison & Risman, 2014; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul et al., 2000). In addition to access to residential halls,

hookup factors include religion, class, and race (Allison & Risman, 2014).

Underrepresented students are less likely to hookup due to having to negotiate racialized and controlling images of sexuality (Bogle, 2008; Bersamin et al., 2012; Garcia, 2012; Kimmel, 2008).

A new iteration of hooking up among college students is having a friend with benefit (fwb), which is when two people engage in consistent sexual encounters with one another in an exclusive or undefined manner, while maintaining a platonic friendship (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Afifi & Faulkner, 2000). While hookups commonly occur between strangers or with unconnected individuals, friends with benefits allow cross-sex relationships between affiliated individuals who refuse to define their relationship as anything but sexual (Epstein et al., 2009; Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005). Men involved in friend with benefits dynamics are often and traditionally portrayed as sexually driven and commitment phobic, which associate with masculine stereotypes that men remain promiscuous to avoid potential romantic attachment (Crawford & Unger, 2004; Epstein et al., 2009; Levant, 1997; Grello et al., 2006). Men find it more difficult emotionally to handle hookup culture as researchers have indicated that 8% of males studied find it difficult to separate emotions from sexual intercourse (Herold & Mewhinny, 1993; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Townsend, 1995).

### ***Introduction of Dating Apps***

Powered by smartphones and GPS software, dating apps can connect users through proximity and in real-time. This method of dating has shifted many approaches to finding sexual and romantic companionship (Albury & Byron, 2016; Anzani et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2017; Wu & Ward, 2018). Dating apps allow users to achieve various

objectives, such as casual sex, dating, or networking, which can also increase the chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Buhi et al., 2010; Timmerman & De Caluwé, 2017; Wu & Ward, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Online dating and dating apps provide individuals who are more introverted or have social anxiety with the opportunity to engage in social exchanges without heightened levels of discomfort, which generally results in more favorable outcomes for app users (Aretz et al., 2010; Antoci et al., 2015; Bogle, 2007, 2008).

The fundamental questions about dating apps center around who uses the apps and why and how they decide to meet other individuals (Carpenter & McEwen, 2016; Timmerman & DeClauwe, 2017). Whereas some users report using the app for finding romance or long-term relationships (Choi et al., 2017; Spira, 2014), others suggest they use dating apps for amusement, much like a mobile phone game or for instigating arguments or unpleasant dialogue, also known as trolling (Carpenter & McEwen, 2016; March et. al, 2017). Beyond using dating and hookup apps for sex, some use apps to pass the time, which impacts the user's experience and satisfaction with using the app (Anzani et al., 2018; Carpenter & McEwen, 2016). Social sensation-seeking and gender social norms both affect whether app users' experiences meet their expectations (Carpenter & McEwen, 2016).

Among the various types of app users there are participants of all genders, sexes, and sexual orientations, but in comparing male and female users it was found that men, as opposed to women, were more psychopathic, narcissistic, and sadistic; however, there were no differences in trolling behaviors regarding gender or sex (Carpenter & McEwen, 2016; Choi et al., 2017). Psychological online outcomes from trolling are equal to

psychological effects offline, making it essential to consider antisocial behaviors in dating app environments (Anzani et al., 2018; Feinstein et al., 2013). Researchers examined the gender differences in individuals' goals for using dating apps, which included findings that men on dating apps were more likely to use the apps for sexual encounters, gamification, and trolling in comparison to women (Anzani et al., 2018; Carpenter & McEwen, 2016; Condis, 2018; Gudelunas, 2012; March et al., 2017).

Due to the immediate access apps provide to sexual encounters, infidelity can become a problem among app users (Alexopolous et al., 2019; D'Angelo & Toma, 2017). The use of dating and hookup apps can lead to infidelity in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships (Alexopolous et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2017). Individuals who find their romantic partners on dating and hookup apps are more likely to continue pursuing new relationships despite already being in one (Alexopoulos et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2017). However, men who find their current partner physically attractive have less interest in engaging in any type of infidelity (D'Angelo & Toma, 2017; Starratt et al., 2017). Dating and hookup apps have become increasingly popular and provide a unique experience for college students; however, there remain gaps in the knowledge and research of their use (Carpenter & McEwen, 2016; MacKee, 2016).

There is a connection between body satisfaction and dating app usage (Filice et al., 2019). Grindr users often use image enhancements, such as filters, to appear more desirable (Filice et al., 2019). Research found that, on average, Tinder users write a biographical introduction and upload about five images to appeal to potential suitors (LeFebvre, 2018). Among heterosexual Tinder users, the levels of physical self-monitoring and body shaming are higher; gender and sexual orientation do not influence

the likelihood of comparing oneself to others (Strubel & Petrie, 2017). However positive self-esteem leads dating app users to present themselves more authentically (Anzani et al., 2018; Ranzini & Lutz, 2017). Insecurity and low self-esteem contribute to app users obscuring their faces or using blank profiles, which causes their intentions for using the app to change often (Blackwell et al., 2015; March et al., 2017).

### ***Virtual Hookup Culture***

Multiple researchers examined the relationship between hookup app use and high-risk behaviors related to MSM in the United States and observed that dating app use among men who have sex with men (MSM) can cause sexual health concerns (Choi et al., 2017; Macapagal et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2016). Over 50% of individuals who use MSM-specific apps seek partners for sex and transactional encounters (Macapagal et al., 2018). Sexual health concerns related to app hookups were apparent, with 78.1% of participants reporting having sex with their hookup partner more than once, but only 25% of them always used condoms with these partners.

Dating apps provide MSMs the opportunity to explore their sexual fantasies and network with a broader gay community, which contributes to positive psychological outcomes, such as low internalized homophobia and higher frequencies of self-affirmation as a gay individual (Blackwell et al., 2015; Macapagal et al., 2018). Although identify affirmation is a positive outcome from using gay dating apps, sexual risk-taking and higher numbers of sex partners increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections for users (Macapagal et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2016).

Researchers have explored the connection between using smartphone dating apps and using drugs and alcohol in conjunction with risky sexual behaviors within the gay

community (Choi et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016). There is a general lack of understanding of the relationship between dating apps, alcohol, and recreational drugs in conjunction with sexual behavior (Bogle, 2008; Choi et al., 2017). Among gay dating app users, 48% of the participants disclosed having used substances during sex within the past month; of that number, 91.7% reported alcohol consumption, and 59.7% reported marijuana use during sex (Landovitz et al., 2013). Plant (2002) suggested that people use alcohol and recreational drugs during sexual intercourse to alleviate nervousness while improving the overall sexual experience. Although Choi et al. (2017) found a relationship among app use, drugs, and sexual behavioral patterns, there was no connection between these trends and sexting, or sending sexually explicit images via text message to a potential sexual partner (Benotsch et al., 2013).

### **Gay Dating Apps**

The average individual using dating apps is an educated and wealthy White man seeking other men, regardless of sexual orientation (Anzani et al., 2018; Wu & Ward, 2018). Gay men use social networks both socially and sexually (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012). Social media apps such as Grindr maintain users' anonymity, even excluding their sexuality or sexual curiosity (Gudelunas, 2012; March et al., 2017). Men are significantly more likely to disclose personal details about themselves on a sex-specific site than a site or app for general audiences (Gudelunas, 2012; Wu & Ward, 2018).

A modern finding with gay dating apps is the inclusion of gratification. Researchers have distinguished between gratifications sought, expectations related to using apps, and those who received organically fulfilled experiences from using social

media (Gudelunas, 2012; Miller, 2015). As technology develops, so does new models of gratifications, as well as general gratifications becoming more complex (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Miller (2015) identified seven sought-after gratifications through thematic analysis: safety, easiness, control, mobility, accessibility, connectivity, and versatility. In Miller's study, many participants disclosed having negative emotions using gay dating apps, finding incongruence between their expectations and what they received. These feelings included wasted time, anxiety, sexual indignity, loneliness, and low self-esteem.

Gay dating app users engage in meetings and relationships due to secure connectivity, proximity awareness, and instant messaging (Wu & Ward, 2018; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Other research suggests that the ability to identify romantic partners based on location drives the sense of urgency with sexual encounters (Licoppe et al., 2016). The idea of time and immediacy is evident on the Grindr "Looking For" section as "Right Now." The notion of "right now" and instant gratification on dating apps relates to the idea of social time. The concept of social time includes periodicity, tempo, duration, sequence, and timing that shapes the perceived experiences of one's social encounters in addition to how they will respond to future events, research on this topic explores how and why interactions on gay dating apps occur at a slower or rapid pace (Lewis & Weigert, 1981; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Findings from social time studies related to dating apps showed the transactional nature of browsing and communication on Grindr and Jack'd to be out of harmony with the cultural norms for creating friendships and long-term relationships (Yeo & Fung, 2018).

In studies on gay social media use, researchers proposed the mediation framework to critically assess existing literature on gay dating apps (Lievrouw, 2014). The mediation framework helps with understanding how communication and society collaboratively shape one another (Anzani et al., 2018; Wu & Ward, 2018). In using the mediation framework, scholars analyzed how studies on dating apps contribute to the knowledge of interactions and articulations among artifacts, practices, and social arrangements (Wu & Ward, 2018). Researchers have framed dating apps, including those on social media and meant for groups, as dating websites, without denotation by sexual orientation (Brubaker et al., 2014; Wu & Ward, 2018). However, MacKee (2016) identified grouping gay artifacts under the same category as a problem, because different gay dating apps can prompt different interpretations and motives by users.

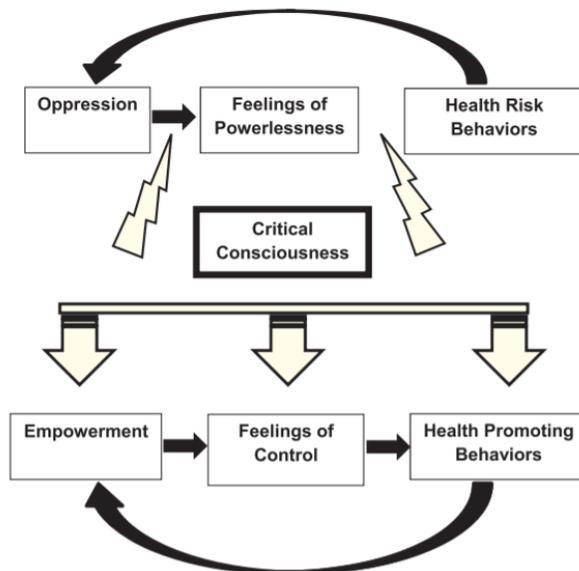
### ***App User Sexual Health Concerns***

MSM who use dating and hookup apps report more frequent HIV testing, suggesting that men who engage in high-risk sexual behavior are more likely to seek sexual health services (Landovitz et al., 2013; Rendina et al., 2014). Another conclusion could be that testing negative for both HIV and STDs creates a feeling of invulnerability, which results in higher-risk behaviors. Modern research includes information about app users consulting with health care providers about sexual orientation, sex with male partners, HIV testing, pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention, and HIV/STD preventives specific to MSM (Macapagal et al., 2018; Penny, 2014; Strubel & Petrie, 2017). Findings showed that MSM app users had more male sex partners overall as well as male sex partners with whom they engaged in condomless anal sex, resulting in a higher perceived risk of HIV.

Black gay and bisexual young men are the most at risk of contracting the HIV or AIDS virus; however, little education or intervention has occurred to address this concern (CDC, 2016; Harper et al., 2019). In the United States, 81% of new HIV cases are among young men who are gay or bisexual or identify as MSM; of that population, 55% are African American or Black (CDC, 2016). Harper et al. (2019) conducted a study about developing critical consciousness around this topic, using empowerment as a framework in educating members of this population about essential health implications. Harper et al. created and used the pathways to health model (see Figure 1) to connect oppressed groups and health risks associated with oppression to enable empowerment and healthy behaviors.

**Figure 1**

*Pathways to Health Model*



*Note.* Adapted from “Critical Consciousness-Based HIV Prevention Interventions for Black Gay and Bisexual Male Youth,” by G. W. Harper, L. Jadwin-Cakmak, E. Cherenak, and P. Wilson, 2019, *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 14(1), p. #22 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2018.1479668>). Copyright 2019 by Taylor & Francis.

Also studied has been sexual exploitation in the form of prostitution that takes place on Grindr, sometimes referred to as “cruising for cash” (Brennan, 2017). Defined in 1810, cruising was when men would meet one another in remote locations, such as parks, pubs, bathrooms, and theaters, to engage in friendships or sex (“A Brief History,” 2019). Gay cruising increased in the 1970s, as gay and bisexual men used colored handkerchiefs to signal their interest and position (e.g., top, bottom, oral, and more). Cruising was exceptionally popular in New York City, as men would meet in emptied tractor-trailers and beach bathrooms to engage in orgies and group sex. In the 1980s, sex with strangers became riskier with the emergence of AIDS (“A Brief History,” 2019). In the 2000s, modern-day cruising has manifested in the form of gay dating apps, such as Grindr and Jack’d.

Two primary types of users engage in cruising for cash on gay dating apps: those who charge and those who pay (Brennan, 2017). Individuals who charge for sexual experiences might be cash-strapped students or naive millennials (Brennan, 2017). Some college students view cruising for cash as a sustainable means of income, perceiving sexual exploitation as more viable than a traditional occupation.

### ***Racial Discrimination on Gay Dating Apps***

The phrases “No Blacks” or “White Only” may commonly appear on dating apps but this pattern of discrimination is also discussed in several academic disciplines (Callander et al., 2015; Han, 2008; Robinson, 2015; Smith, 2018). Callander et al. (2015) identified the acts of discriminating against potential romantic partners based on their race or ethnic background as “sexual racism.” Most of the work on sexual racism focuses on racial slurs or discriminatory language (Callander et al., 2015; Street, 2017). White app users, particularly gay men (Mula, n.d.; Riggs & Due, 2010), may dismiss or downplay arguments of sexual racism, arguing that political correctness suggests that White people should have sex with people of color (Smith, 2018). In Smith’s (2018) study, a White gay app user discussing a Black gay man said,

I’m simply just not attracted to him. That’s not racism. I’m certainly open to a relationship with a Black guy, of course, but generally speaking, they don’t really turn me on. I’m sure there are plenty of Black guys who feel the same about me, and that’s OK. (p. #111)

In 2017, three million active users spent about one hour daily using the Grindr app (Grindr, 2017). Although Grindr markets itself as a social network and not explicitly sexual, many users are attracted to the potential of establishing hookups (Shield, 2018; Wu & Ward, 2018). Grindr includes several drop-down options in the categories of “Looking For,” “Ethnicity,” “Position,” and others based on physical attributes and sexual health (Grindr, 2017; Shield, 2018). Since Grindr’s debut in 2009, race has been a central feature of the drop-down menus, suggesting a correlation with attractiveness (Shield, 2018). Multiple researchers have examined negative racist and sexual stereotypes

and the resultant interactions in online app subcultures (Mowlabocus, 2010; Nakamura, 2014). Grindr users of color or those with a background of immigration receive insults related to their race, nationality, or religious beliefs (Shield, 2018).

### **Introduction to Theoretical Framework**

Black gay males have difficulty transitioning into higher education and campus life due to feeling unwelcome and unsupported (Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). Black students who do not engage with their minority peers or cultural student organizations also find it challenging to interact with nonminority students (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009). Black gay students in higher education have received limited study. There is a large amount of research on Black gay men in general and their experiences regarding achievement gaps, coming out, stigmas around HIV/STDs, and sexual promiscuity (Duke, 2017; Stein, 2005; Young, 2011). However, few researchers have studied Black gay college students who navigate social dating apps such as Grindr, Scruff, and Tinder.

Students who identify as LGBTQ might encounter campus hostility and rejection (Rankin, 2003). Facing exclusion based on their dual identities by race and sexual orientation, Black gay men can struggle to find their place on campus, as a result, many look to social media for connections. Due to the various intersectionalities within the demographic addressed in this study, intersectionality provides an appropriate framework to explore the topic further.

### ***Intersectionality Framework***

Intersectionality was being used throughout the 1980's prior to Crenshaw coining the name, its practice was identified with the temporary umbrella term of "race, class, gender" by the US academy, and emerged from the challenge of social inequities

(Collins, 2015; Collins, 2012). Intersectionality seemed devalued and overlooked until it was legitimized by Crenshaw's recognition by the Stanford Law Review (Collins, 2015). Crenshaw's coining of the term is often presented as the point of origin for intersectionality prior to it being in existence (Collins, 2015; Collins, 2012).

During its early stages, Crenshaw separated the intersectionality into three forms: structural, political, and representational; additionally, at this time, the theoretical framework was intended to be used exclusively to research the experiences of women of color (Harris & Patton, 2019). Structural intersectionality suggests that experiences of people of color and other underrepresented groups in the United States are not factored into broader structures such as the legal system and community resources (Harris & Patton, 2019). This study examines the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men, and there are already substantial public and scholarly resources documenting the existence of systemic racism that Blacks experience (Anderson, 2020; Sangaramoorthy & Richardson Jr., 2020; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Zamudio & Rios, 2006).

Political intersectionality is when certain aspects of a movement or cause are minimized, reinforcing other forms of injustice or discrimination (Harris & Patton, 2019). One example is a movement against sexual assault that marginalizes the experiences that men have with sexual assault. Lastly, representational intersectionality originally focused on cultural representations in media (Collins, 1998; Harris & Patton, 2019), and Black gay males as they are often portrayed as inherently feminine, and overly sexual (McCune, 2008; Nunally, 2009; Wilson, 2007). The categorization of Black gay men as being fags comes from homophobia within the Black community, reflected in modern hip-hop music (McCune, 2008; Oware, 2011; Wilson, 2007). Many researchers have drawn upon

intersectionality in studying marginalized groups to understand the complexities of facing discrimination based on multiple identifiers, such as race, sexual orientation, and other attributes (Cole, 2009; García & Ortiz, 2013).

Intersectionality in educational research adds to the understanding of the multiple levels of identity, such as disability, race, language, gender, or class, and how institutions shape these various identities (García & Ortiz, 2013). In this study, those multiple identities are race, gender, and sexual orientation. Components meriting consideration include the participants' backgrounds, experiences, and demographics. Additional points of concern are environmental components, such as school and community culture. Both personal and environmental elements are necessary to fully analyze findings with an intersectionality lens (García & Guerra, 2006; García & Ortiz, 2013).

Intersectionality focuses on how individuals' identities can lead to their oppression, as well as providing privilege in certain settings (Cho et al., 2013; García & Ortiz, 2013). Acknowledging that race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are interconnected, intersectionality researchers are concerned with the interaction of various identities (Crenshaw, 1991; García & Ortiz, 2013; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Since the earliest adaptation within higher education scholarship, intersectionality has been a component of creating equitable cultures that challenge oppression (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). A key factor and challenge of intersectionality is making power dynamics visible, showing the actions of those in positions of power who oppress marginalized groups (Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Walby et al., 2012). In the discussion section of this study, the use of intersectionality allows me to identify organizations and individuals that

intentionally or indirectly oppress Black gay men throughout their dating app experiences and provide suggestions of best practices to begin mitigating this behavior.

Intersectionality is frequently used as the framework to explore the experiences of racial minorities in the context of higher education and to ground the theory of researchers who analyze underrepresented populations (Collins, 1998; Harris & Patton, 2019). There are three branches created by Patricia Hill Collins within intersectionality that help in guiding the framework (Collins, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2019). The first branch of intersectionality is that its use must include citations, connection to a methodology, explore the theory's history, and provide multiple definitions in addition to other aspects of the framework (Collins, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2019). The second branch is that intersectionality must promote social justice awareness and social change while connecting the research to broad approaches and suggestions that can be used in higher education to inform social change (Collins, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2019). The third and last branch of intersectionality is that it can and should advance social justice prerogatives and use or misuse of the framework could hinder transformative social justice (Collins, 1998; Collins, 2015; Harris & Patton, 2019). By integrating intersectionality in this study, the research contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges discovered by participants and increase social awareness of cellular and online dating experiences of Black men.

### **Summary**

This chapter included a discussion of dating app use, Black gay men, and the hookup culture associated with dating apps. Among the components affecting the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps is an underlying

culture on college campuses that isolates gay Black students, making them feel unwelcome and unseen (Morales, 2014; Mula, n.d.; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010). The literature presented in the chapter showed that Black gay men experience feelings of rejection within the gay community (Morrison, 2012; Mula, n.d.; Nero, 2001; Strayhorn, 2013). This chapter showed the racism, discrimination, and sexualization that Black gay men face in college and the gay community, specifically with the use of gay dating apps (Mula, n.d.). In response to encountering discrimination in the Black community, Black gay men often opt to attend PWIs, as they perceive coming out in that environment would be easier (Strayhorn et al., 2008; Teunis, 2007). However, in the face of racial discrimination, Black gay men often turn to dating apps to forge connections (Choi et al., 2017; Mula, n.d.; Wu & Ward, 2018). Gay dating apps provide Black gay men with various opportunities and experiences, some of them unavailable on campus or in clubs. Connections made on gay dating apps could lead to long-term friendships or romantic relationships, sexual experiences, exposure to drugs and alcohol, and changed self-esteem and body perception (Choi et al., 2017; Filice et al., 2019; Macapagal et al., 2018). Research is needed on the use of dating apps by Black gay men who face discrimination based on their membership in two marginalized populations. Learning how Black gay men navigate apps for socializing may help institutions in developing more ways to support this population.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study focuses on the personal accounts and the lived experiences of undergraduate Black gay men, making qualitative research the most appropriate research design for this study. Qualitative research provides knowledge for the researcher to begin documenting participants' experiences based on who, what, where, and under what conditions phenomena are occurring (Putney et al., 1999; Kuper et al., 2008). In the study I learned about participant's lived experiences through interviewing and, as I discovered new information, it allowed me to understand how an environment directly impacts an individual or group of people (Maxwell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). During my qualitative inquiry I learned about participants on a personal level, which is essential in answering my research questions specific to how Black gay men interpret their experiences using gay dating apps on campus and their interactions with White men on those platforms.

Qualitative research is conducted in multiple academic disciplines to reveal common themes that exist within minoritized populations, such as gay Black men (Putney et al., 1999; Goodman, 2011). Through qualitative inquiry, I identified common themes and lived experiences of Black gay men who use gay dating apps while attending a predominantly White institution. Conducting qualitative research with marginalized communities provides underrepresented groups the opportunities to share their experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). The specific qualitative design

focused on in this study is phenomenology. This study explores the individual lived experiences related to using gay dating apps by Black gay men.

## **Strategy of Inquiry**

### ***Phenomenology***

In the study I used phenomenology to study experiences that participants share and their observations from a first-person perspective (Spaulding, 2015). Edmund Husserl developed the concept of phenomenology in the 1900s, which takes note of how participants reflect on their lived experiences and make meaning of the phenomenon that surrounds them (Dastur & Vallier, 2017). Phenomenology allowed me to explore the essence of Black gay men's experiences on gay dating apps, which provided a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon. In phenomenology researchers suggest that certain situations are perceived to be accurate if the experiences of multiple participants are the same, referred to finding the essence of the experience (Bailey & Richards, 2014).

I used phenomenological inquiry because it focuses on different individuals who have shared experiences, which is also referred to as a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Phenomenological inquiry analyzes how individuals, or a group of people, experience a specific situation and make sense of the phenomena (Chang et al., 2013; Langdrige, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I specifically focused on hermeneutic phenomenology, which is commonly known as interpretative phenomenology or IPA in this dissertation (Gearing, 2004; Chang et al., 2013), which is one of the most common approaches because it connects most with how people make meaning of their experiences (Langdrige, 2007; Freeman, 2011).

## **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

In addition to phenomenology's purpose of exploring how individuals understand the world they exist in, IPA looks in more detail at how individuals interpret the phenomena that surrounds them (Giorgi, 1985; Murray & Holmes, 2014; Smith, 2004). In this study, IPA provided me with an understanding of a participant's lived experience and how their environment connects to a phenomenon (Boserman, 2009; McParland et al., 2011; Murray & Holmes, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2009). IPA focuses on cognitive thoughts and beliefs, which is information I collected and analyzed from the interview process (Murray & Holmes, 2014; Boserman, 2009). Using IPA complemented the theoretical framework of intersectionality used in this study, because participants were given the opportunity to share how they experience the phenomenon as it relates to their unique identities (Cole, 2009; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). For instance, there could be some advantages to being a male using dating apps, while disadvantages could arise from being Black or African American. Intersectionality provides a broader understanding of how multiple parts of an individual's identity impacts their overall lived experiences (Cole, 2009; Garcia & Guerra, 2006).

In IPA, the participants are viewed as the experts on the topic, and their reasons for being involved in the study is due to their expertise on the phenomenon being studied (Allan & Eatough, 2016). IPA provides the best method to understand my participants' lived experiences and captures the essence of these experiences (McParland et al., 2011; Murray & Holmes, 2014), and has been used in previous studies of the LGBTQ community (Chan & Farmer, 2017). IPA helped me discover the common experiences of Black gay men who use dating apps in college and their interactions with White men.

Participants shared their experiences with the phenomenon in interviews and provide additional understanding of the gay community as it relates to the experiences of Black gay men.

### **Bracketing in Phenomenology**

As the researcher in this particular study, it is important to note that I have experienced using gay dating apps while attending a PWI during my undergraduate years. Being one of few Black gay men on campus was a difficult experience so I sought out the use of gay dating apps to engage socially and romantically with other students of various backgrounds and ethnicities (Wu & Ward, 2018). My experiences were very unique to the time period in which I was an undergraduate student, but they were profound enough that I wanted to turn those experiences into research. In conducting phenomenological research, bracketing is an important practice that allows the researcher to legitimize and express their experiences while ensuring their personal experiences and bias are not represented in the findings of the study (Jick, 1979; Sanders & Cuneo, 2010). Most researchers have a connection to topics because it is of personal interests and while that is important, they must remain aware that they are ensuring the integrity of the study, but only recording the sample's experiences (Jick, 1979; Kaplan, 1959).

The concept of bracketing first originated within phenomenology and was in existence for over a hundred years, but it was not until being published with Husserl's ideas did the concept gain relevance as a philosophical practice (Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing is the process in phenomenological research that forces the researcher to remove their bias, personal views, or what they already know about the topic before and until the study has concluded (Carpenter, 2007; Gearing, 2004). I

bracketed my research so that my assumptions about the study are separate from the findings (Carpenter, 2007; Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2010). With the use of bracketing in research there is a temporal structure which requires the researcher to indicate a start, middle, and end point of bracketing (Gearing, 2004). My bracketing process for this study began immediately after selecting the topic and continued throughout my research process only concluding once I have recorded all the findings and fully completed the study.

The specific type of bracketing that I used for my study is reflexive or cultural bracketing which is the most appropriate type of bracketing because it focuses on making the researcher aware of their suppositions, so that they do not interfere with the phenomenon being studied (Gearing, 2004; Cutcliffe, 2003). Throughout the study, I conducted reflexive journaling, and this process began before I developed my research questions (Gearing, 2004; Ahern, 1999). When journaling I documented information about participants that may cause bias, such as socioeconomic status in relation to my hierarchy and positionality (Gearing, 2004; Hanson 1994; Porter, 1993). Journaling allowed me to revisit concepts, ideas, and perceptions that I have about findings and focus on what is presented instead of how I feel about the findings.

### **Role of Researcher and Positionality**

My undergraduate college experiences and personal life experiences shape my perception of dating app use experiences for Black gay men. By bracketing throughout this study, I can appropriately keep my personal experiences and biases from impacting my research (Gearing, 2004). I have used the apps during my undergraduate experience and for quite some time afterward. Sexual fetishism, racism, and discrimination were all

common themes that I experienced as a student and beyond. These reoccurring themes and interactions, particularly with White gay men, created assumptions about gay dating apps, the gay dating culture, and other Black gay men's experiences. My assumptions regarding gay dating apps are that they are almost exclusively used to find sexual encounters, but in the event an individual identifies as White, the likelihood of a sexual encounter becoming a relationship is higher. My second assumption regarding gay dating culture is that they do not hold space for Black gay men to be valued. In my experience using these apps, the only time I have felt valued or wanted was due to my physical appearance or the stereotypes suggesting that I have an above-average sized penis.

I have noticed in my time using gay dating apps that White gay men did not value the romantic and emotional aspect of being in a long-term relationship with Black gay men, and these trends connect to how Black men are treated within the broader LGBTQ community and particularly in the dating culture. Due to my personal experiences navigating the gay community on gay dating apps, bracketing allowed me to focus exclusively on the findings that are gathered from the data and also helps to enhance the validity of findings as it intentionally forces the researcher to focus on what is reported rather than what is already known (Gearing, 2004; Ahern, 1999; Chan et al., 2013). My most frequent method of bracketing throughout the study was journaling. These reflective journals allowed me to separate my experiences from my participants (Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2010).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study helped me understand how using dating apps in the gay community impacts undergraduate Black gay men. The questions as they

are framed focus on virtual dating within a marginalized and sexualized community and seeks to understand how Black gay men experience interracial dating within this community. The following question steered the process of the study: What are the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men using dating apps? The first sub-question of the study is: How does using dating apps influence Black gay males' college experience? The second sub-question is: What experiences do undergraduate Black men have when attempting to date White men on dating apps?

### **Research Site**

The study site was a Mid-Atlantic Public University's undergraduate campus that is considered a predominantly White institution (PWI). The Mid-Atlantic Public University's current undergraduate enrollment is 19,465 students; among this number, 53% (10,232) are men, and 47% (9, 233) are women (Collegesimply, 2020). The racial breakdown of the students who attend the institution is: 69% White, 10% Black, 10% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% two or more races, 1% international, and 3% race is unknown (Collegesimply, 2020). The research site has resources, including LGBTQ+ student groups and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs to assist with participant recruitment for the study.

### **Research Participants**

#### ***Sample***

I relied on two types of sampling during this study, purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling was used first for the study. The Black gay student population is very specific, and purposeful sampling aligns the best with recruiting from that demographic. Purposive sampling is the strategy of deliberately

selecting a setting, persons, or behaviors that provide information that is relevant to one's topics that other types of people are unable to supply (Maxwell, 2013). Purposeful sampling allowed me to identify students who meet the criteria necessary to be interviewed. Snowball sampling allowed me to gain additional participants from the recruited participants through purposeful sampling, if necessary (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Nadarifer et al., 2017). These two models of sampling complement one another and provide the most successful path of recruitment.

### ***Purposeful Sampling***

Purposeful sampling focuses is the intentional selection of participants because of their ability to elucidate a theme or phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). I used purposeful sampling in my study to deliberately select participants based on their identities and experiences. Purposeful sampling also helped to ensure that I had a population whose experiences align with my study most appropriately (Maxwell, 2013). By intentionally selecting participants that are part of my I gained the most beneficial information (Maxwell, 2013). Purposeful sampling should account for how feasible it is to access data and if that process is being completed in an ethical manner (Maxwell, 2013).

### ***Snowball Sampling***

Snowball sampling is also known as referral sampling; my participants recruited from purposeful sampling provided my contact information to additional participants who could contact me if they were interested in being part of the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Snowball sampling is the best method to contact hard to reach or underrepresented populations, making it the best sample type for this study about Black gay men (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Additionally, snowball sampling

allows researchers to recruit participants who are considered experts on a specific topic, otherwise referred to as a phenomenon (Dastur & Vallier, 2017; Heckathorn, 2011; Goodman, 2011).

### **Recruitment**

I partnered with the institution to get the contact information of specialized student groups that may have members of the population that I was seeking, such as LGBTQ+ student groups and organizations for undergraduate Black men. After identifying a few participants, I then sought out referrals from those individuals on an as needed basis as they would be much closer connected to the LGBTQ+ identifying students and students of color on their campus (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). This process would be considered snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is the process where a participant brings in more participants, and then the next tier of participants does the same until the researcher has the ideal number of participants for the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Maxwell, 2013). Pairing purposeful sampling with snowball sampling is the best way to recruit new participants. The criteria to participate in the study is as follows:

- Currently attend a full-time undergraduate program at a Mid-Atlantic Public University.
- Reside in an on-campus apartment or residence hall
- Identify as Black or African American
- Have used or are currently using gay dating apps while at college, including but not limited to Grindr or Scruff
- Participants must identify as gay or homosexual.

- Sex assigned at birth and gender expression must be male.

After the recruitment process, 10 participants were selected to participate in the study's interview portion. I selected the range of participants because interpretative phenomenological analysis is usually conducted using smaller sample sizes (Smith & Osborn, 2009). In phenomenological studies, there are different recommendations for the number of participants that should be used in a study. Creswell (1998) provides a larger range stating that 5 to 25 participants may be most appropriate for this type of study, while other researchers like Morse (1994) indicate that 6 participants would be appropriate for phenomenological studies. I considered the various scholarly recommendations for qualitative sample sizes and determined that because 6 was consistently listed as the minimum sample size and between 8 and 10 were the suggested maximum, that 6-8 participants was the most appropriate for this phenomenological study (Morse, 1994; Porter, 1999; Robinson, 2014). The participants were listed using pseudonyms to ensure the privacy of their involvement with the study. I verified that potential participants meet the criteria prior to the start of the interview process.

### **Data Collection**

The type of interviews that I used during this study are semi-structured interviews, using the interview guide approach. Using this approach helped me create questions that align with my three main research questions and allowed the participants to discuss other topics they may find relevant to the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Maxwell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews are most appropriate for my study because they explore the perceptions and opinions of participants regarding their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews apply the

notion that all participants have varying experiences, and it allowed me to freely probe unclear and ambiguous responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Heaton, 2008; Schatz, 2012). This interview featured 10-11 questions that will help answer the overall research questions (Appendix A). Each interview's timeframe was about 40-60 minutes long. The interview's aimed to learn about the participant's lived experience as closely as possible while following the order of questions.

In response to the most recent COVID-19 health crisis, I used an online platform called Zoom for interviews (Archibald et al., 2019). Zoom allows for a face-to-face meeting through an online service, including audio, screen sharing, and screen recording options (Archibald et al., 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Salmon, 2010). Before conducting interviews and connecting with participants, I gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. After I was approved to conduct human research, I began recruitment and provide participants with an informed consent form (Appendix B) before conducting interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing the semi-structured interviews, I began transcribing the interviews from audio to text using the software REV. REV is a program that converts any media into a written document. Transcription of data is a very pertinent part of the study. I listened to interviews several times to edit the documents transcribed through the REV program. Once transcribed, I coded my findings using two methods, first in vivo coding and then pattern coding (Saldana, 2016). Once I finished the second cycle of coding, I started the data analysis with the transcripts from the study. After transcribing the data, I proceeded to conduct member checking by asking participants to review their

transcripts to ensure it captures their thoughts and experiences (Saldana, 2016). Member checking allowed me to verify that I accurately recorded the participants thoughts during the interview and enhance the trustworthiness of the research (McCoy, 2006).

### ***In Vivo Coding***

In vivo coding is a first cycle coding process that is appropriate for most qualitative studies, with an emphasis prioritizing and honoring the experiences shared by the participants (Saldana, 2016). I used in vivo coding because it is applicable to virtually all qualitative studies and is most helpful to new researchers who are learning how to code (Saldana, 2016). During in vivo coding, each code is based on the direct comments from the participants to best capture their experiences and almost every line has its own code (Saldana, 2016). In this first cycle of coding, I looked at the interview transcripts line by line in the in vivo coding process to develop codes that reflect the participant's experience (Saldana, 2016). To remain organized, I retained notes of which codes in this cycle are participant centered by keeping those codes in quotation marks (Saldana, 2016). I removed my personal biases from this portion of coding through the reflective practice of journaling.

### ***Pattern Coding***

Once the in vivo coding was completed, I started pattern coding. Pattern coding is considered second cycle coding and is the appropriate next step for my study. Pattern coding identifies emerging themes presented in the first cycle of coding. Pattern coding condenses more extensive data into smaller analytic units and creates significant themes from the data (Saldana, 2016). I used pattern coding to help organize my data and discuss themes discovered throughout the interview process. During the coding process, I created

my codebook for all my data. The codebook included my themes, their definitions, and any information on excluded material and rationale.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues must be anticipated and continuously addressed throughout a study (Maxwell, 2013). Some common ethical issues are researchers siding with the participant and only reporting positive results, which can be addressed by the researcher reporting various experiences and reporting contrasting data (Maxwell, 2013; Lincoln, 2009; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). My study depends on human participants who shared their lived experiences. Participants' privacy must be respected by ensuring information remains confidential. This aspect was reaffirmed through the IRB approval process. My personal experiences pose potential risks and ethical concerns; however, bracketing and self-reflection processes helped me maintain a neutral and factual interpretation of the data.

### **Credibility, Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability**

Credibility is significant in conducting research. There are several ways that I ensured the data is credible, while establishing trustworthiness. I developed a credible and trustworthy study by member checking. The member checking process of my study allowed participants to continue being the expert of their own experience, but also helps to support trustworthiness in qualitative studies (McCoy, 2006). Validity helps ensure that a study is credible by identifying the risk of a study and researcher bias (Maxwell, 2013). Research bias is a concern in qualitative research, and the reason I decided to bracket throughout my study with reflective journaling.

An additional validity concern is reactivity, which is the researcher's projected influence within a specific setting or on participants (Maxwell, 2013). While there is no sure way to exclude researchers' influence in studies, validity should be continuously checked by long-term participant involvement, gathering rich data, validating responders, intervening when needed, searching for discrepancies in data, numbers, and comparisons (Maxwell, 2013). I validated the responses through the multiple interviews I have with men who are of the same population. This additionally allowed me to make comparisons of the experiences that the participants share. Lastly, reliability ensures data findings are consistent and can be repeated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I displayed reliability during the thematic analysis portion of the study. Thematic analysis supported me in capturing the essence of phenomenon being studied.

### **Summary**

In chapter three, I provided a detailed summary of how the study was conducted. I explained the methodological approach that guided this research. Phenomenology is broad and has various approaches. I identified my specific approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and provided a rationale of how and why it connects to my study. The chapter also showed the details of participant recruitment, interviews, transcription, coding, and thematic analysis. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, it is vital for me to bracket my findings to ensure the research's validity.

The chapter also discusses standardized and regulated qualitative research processes such as IRB approval, informed consent, and interview approaches. Including these processes in this chapter provide a holistic understanding of the items necessary to conduct qualitative research. As a researcher, I am not seeking to prove or disprove

anything but discover new knowledge about a marginalized student population. The sections of validity, credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness explain the risk associated with the study area and how I plan to address them. This chapter outlined how the data will be retrieved and used to advance scholarship. In chapter four, I discuss themes and trends discovered from the data that I collected and analyzed.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research Findings**

Gay dating apps have grown more popular and have become a means that college students use for networking or casual sex (Bogle, 2008; March et al., 2017; Wu & Ward, 2018). The interview responses from the participants structured this chapter and revealed the themes that capture the essence of Black gay males' experiences on dating apps. The following research questions guide the study and support a better understanding of the phenomenon:

1. What are the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men using dating apps?
2. How does making connections through dating apps influence Black gay male's college experience?
3. What experiences do undergraduate Black gay men have when attempting to date White gay men on dating apps?

The qualitative research methods that guided this study were participant interviews and reflective journaling. After receiving IRB approval, I began the recruitment process at the mid-Atlantic public university. Ten participants agreed to take part in the study and share their campus experiences directly related to their app use. Confidentiality was a very important part of this study and pseudonyms were used for each participant (Cooper & McNair, 2015). Pseudonyms were determined alphabetically; for example, the first participant was given a pseudonym beginning with the letter A and the second was given a pseudonym beginning with the letter B, and so on. In addition to interviews, reflective journaling was an important part of my study. I have experienced using a gay dating app as an undergraduate student, and it was important for me to ensure

my suppositions were excluded from the study (Ahern, 1999; Gearing, 2004). Journaling allowed me to focus exclusively on what the participants shared and their unique experiences (Gearing, 2004).

Contemporary research that has studied Black gay men in higher education specifically focuses on their experiences at HBCUs, PWIs, masculinity, or homophobia in the Black community (Lewis, 2003; McCune, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Young, 2011). While these studies provide insight into the perspective of young Black gay men and students, they did not include the experiences Black gay men have in social settings, specifically the ones centered in technology. Gay dating apps have been known to foster a divisive and isolating culture that includes racist slurs and discrimination, particularly towards Black men (Mula, n.d.; Wu & Ward, 2018). Due to the preexisting knowledge of discrimination on gay dating apps and its limited application in scholarly research, I felt compelled to begin closing the gap in knowledge by investigating the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men on dating apps.

### **Meet the Participants**

Ten Black gay men who were current undergraduate students at the predominantly White Mid-Atlantic public university were interviewed for this study. The participant information is listed below in Table 1 in alphabetical order based on the assigned pseudonyms.

**Table 1**

*Study Participants*

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Year Enrolled	Major Program
Akeem	20	Sophomore	Multimedia Studies
Bryson	21	Junior	Communication Studies
Caleb	20	Junior	Physics/Math
Darius	19	Freshman	Undeclared
Ewing	21	Junior	Music Performance
Frodo	22	Senior	Art
Gambit	21	Junior	Science
Huey	21	Senior	Science
Ian	19	Sophomore	Undeclared
Jackson	21	Sophomore	Theatre

The table was created to provide a clear profile of the study participants and their academic experiences. Table 1 highlights student names in the form of pseudonyms, ages, what year the students are enrolled, and their major degree programs. All this information helps consider how their experiences may be similar or different. After I completed all the interviews, I had each interview transcribed verbatim and then shared those documents with the participants so they could verify I captured their experience

accurately, and it also served as a method of member checking during the research process (McCoy, 2006; Saldana, 2016).

Once all the transcripts were approved by the participants, I began to code each document individually. For the first cycle of coding, I used in vivo coding to use direct language from the participants to determine what types of experiences Black gay students frequently have on the app (Saldana, 2016). In vivo coding places importance on the direct spoken comments of a participant, which allows the participants to be viewed as the experts in the study (Saldana, 2016). Once I coded all the transcripts, I highlighted themes, similar word use, major ideas, opinions, and thoughts using different color pens (Ratajczyk, et al., 2016; Saldana, 2016). After this step, I conducted a second cycle of pattern coding, which allowed me to group participant's similar experiences into themes and subthemes (Atkinson, 2017; Saldana, 2016). To ensure themes were consistent throughout each transcript, I created a codebook to reference during the coding process (Saldana, 2016). The themes and subthemes created provide a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

### **Interview Themes**

Interviews provide a deeper understanding of the experiences that undergraduate Black gay men have while using dating apps on predominately White college campuses. During the interviews, participants shared detailed accounts of different situations that were related to their app use while on campus. The questions focused on learning more about the phenomenon that is specific to Black gay men and their social media use and how their identities provide them with the unique experience in comparison to their non-Black peers. Some of the unique challenges and general experiences of undergraduate

Black gay men who use dating apps were coded, and themes were developed from them.

Table 2 provides a visual of themes created after the interviewing of the six participants and the second cycle of coding had finished.

**Table 2**

*Thematic Map*

Main Themes	Subthemes
Racism & Fetishism	Colorism
Being Ghosted	Getting Blocked and Avoidance Rejection & Feeling Alienated
Sexual Exploration	Learning the lingo: top, bottom, versatile Sexual health education
Making Friends	Friends with benefits Professional boundaries

Table 2 helps display the major themes discovered throughout the coding process of the study. Each theme was present multiple times and captured the essence of the participant's experiences. These themes while help better understands the interactions Black gay men have on gay dating apps while attending PWI's. While racism and fetishism are a separate theme, it is important to note that it is reoccurring and present throughout other themes. Each theme represents a unique experience, however, the attachment of racism and fetishism attached with those themes still exists.

## **Theme 1: Racism and Fetishism**

All ten of the participants mentioned experiencing racism and fetishism while using gay dating apps during their time attending a PWI. Fetishism refers to the notion that a sexual desire is abnormal or associated with a particular object body part, which in this study includes skin tone and race (Donham, 2018). Racism is widely known for its consistent presence in United States history and refers to the discrimination or prejudice of an individual or group of people based on their race or ethnicity (Banton, 2018; Wallis, 2007). The topic of fetishism was the most frequent in responses, followed by racism and racial slurs. Other forms of discrimination were mentioned, such as slut-shaming and fat-shaming, which were not common experiences for each of the participants (O’Keefe, 2014; Rhode, 2009; Shah, 2015). In discussing experiences regarding fetishism on the app, Akeem shared:

I have had random White men say, oh, I like that penis picture you sent, and you’re Black, so I want you. I think it’s a fetish; if it were me that they were interested in, they would have said things in a different way or within a different context. But by highlighting those specific physical aspects of me, it’s because of my race.

Each participant discussed how racism was present at some point during their app use on campus, whether the experience was malicious or ignorant. During the use of gay dating apps on campus, Bryson shared:

I have been asked to do things like race play, which I will never forget, which is basically when people play on racism and refer to you as racial slurs and want you to call them master while engaging with them sexually. The guy who asked

actually used an acronym for it, and when I looked it up, I said “yeah I'm sorry, I can't do that” because he said it was just a little name-calling or whatever, but using the n-word against me isn't ok, and then it was just like “ok well I don't want to talk to you anymore then.”

Frodo additionally shared the prominence of racism on gay dating apps in general and on college campuses:

I feel like White gay people are empowered to be even more so discriminatory because they're behind a screen, and you don't always know who you're talking to. But for example, I've gotten proposition to have sex, and then when I denied the sex, all of a sudden I'm getting called nigger or you're an ungrateful, dirty, N-word and all this stuff.

The use of racial slurs on gay dating apps towards gay men of color is becoming more widely discussed on a national level (Lang, 2017; Mula, n.d.). Black gay men are oftentimes disqualified from being considered for dating or hookups due to the color of their skin, where White dating app users frequently indicate that they are only looking for other White gay men or explicitly exclude Black and Asian men with the common language of “No fats, no Black, and no Asians” (Lang, 2017; Mula, n.d.). In a conversation about his experience speaking with White students on the app, Bryson noted, “I’ve been called the n-word, a monkey, it seems like whenever you refuse sex, you’re called these things as an attempt to hurt you.” Another participant, Frodo, shared, “I literally told this guy no to oral sex, and after that, I was every n-word in the book, but when you thought I was going to sleep with you, I was cool?”

Huey shared a story of when racial slurs were used against him after he declined sex from a previous hookup, stating that:

When the person sent me their picture, I was like, “ok, well, how do I say no? It's the same person.” So I basically said, "I'm sorry, I'm not interested anymore. I can't do it." And then the next thing he was like, "Well, you're a bitch-ass nigger." or something. Basically, he started to curse me out of nowhere. I just didn't answer. My response to that was I'm not going to give it breath, so I just didn't answer.

Regarding fetishism, sexual stereotypes were experiences that participants shared having. Stereotypes about the Black male penis size, presumed masculinity, enlarged features, and athletic physique were ideas present during the participant interviews about their use of gay dating apps on campus (Balaji, 2009; Lang, 2014; McCune, 2008). Many participants shared not feeling wanted due to things like race and their ethnicities; however, they shared experiences of being coveted based on the generalization and assumptions that all Black men inherited particular traits (Lang, 2014; Washington & Wall, 2006). While this attitude elicited some flattery from the participants, it still contributed to most of them feeling sexualized or taken advantage of by this behavior. Ian discussed the prevalence of sexualized stereotypes in his dating app experiences, stating, “Like the BBC [Big Black Cock] thing, and the overly masculine thing, and the no fem thing, just stereotypes and it's like, it's here.” In connection to this topic, Darius shared:

I feel like most White guys, and most Latin men, are interested in me because of my Blackness. Because they think I have a big dick. It's weird because nowadays, you can put your sexual position on your app so that people know. But before that

wasn't a thing. But I was never mistaken for a bottom ever, especially by a non-Black person.

Caleb also discussed his experiences on gay dating apps while on campus that were related to sexualization by White gay men and shared:

I have more than once spoken to someone whose name is just "Looking for Big Black Dick" or something like that. And I hooked up with them. In the hookup, it's very much just all about race. It's like you're fulfilling someone's fantasy. I don't know, and it's not exactly what I thought I was signing myself up for at times.

### *Colorism*

Colorism was another common experience for the participants. Colorism is discrimination based on one's skin complexion; this is a common internal rift within the Black community regarding the lighted skinned versus dark-skinned debate; however, it can be perpetuated by other races as well (Burton, et al., 2010; Mathews & Johnson, 2015). The type of colorism that participants discussed seeing was in the form of perceived flattery. Participant's shared experiences of White male gay app users seeking or rejecting interactions with them based on their skin complexion. Caleb mentioned experiencing colorism by stating:

I was told directly when I was dating someone that they only responded and talked to me because I was dark-skinned. And they thought that that was a compliment. That was supposed to be like, "Oh wow, this guy only likes black guys." I should be appreciative of that. And yeah, that doesn't feel good because it

doesn't make you feel like your liked because of who you are. It makes it feel like you're liked because you were born in a certain way. And that doesn't feel good. Bryson also provided an example of experiencing colorism while using gay dating apps on campus. He revealed that his experiences surrounding his complexion made his success using the app more difficult; he stated:

I remember sending a picture of myself with the sun glaring, so I appeared to be lighter, and a guy wanted to meet with me, and then I sent more pictures, and in one picture I was a little darker, and the guy asked, “who is that?” And I told him that was me, and he replied, “I don’t mess with dark-skinned people.”

## **Theme 2: Being Ghosted**

Ghosting someone is present in college dating culture, but more broadly exists within friendships, on social media, in the workplace, and can be notably seen on dating apps (Dyson, 2021; Grindr, 2017; Mula, n.d.; Timmermans et al., 2020). Being ghosted is a modern term that many young people use that signifies that communication between them and another person ends abruptly without reason or cause (LeFebvre et al., 2019). The term ghosting originated between the early and mid-2000s through pop culture and various forms of social media (Bonos, 2021; Montemayor, 2021). Ghosting can present as the emotional disinterest in someone after giving them the impression of being interested in the possibility of dating (Bonos, 2021; LeFebvre et al., 2019). Studies show that ghosts, the individuals who conduct this behavior, oftentimes have deeper level of insecurity and through ghosting they gain a sense of power and security (Bonos, 2021; Sanders, 2019). Ghosting leaves the recipient lost and confused regarding what happened and can add to feelings of abandonment (Montemayor, 2021; Sanders, 2019). Oftentimes

individuals connect on dating apps and begin engaging in conversations with someone they are attracted to sexually or interested in based on personality traits and the discussion they are having, and then the other person abruptly stops responding or deletes them (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2020). Many of the participants in this study discussed being ghosted on gay dating apps and the reasons they feel it occurs and how being ghosted makes them feel. Akeem shared his first time being ghosted, stating that:

I was with this White student, but it was very chill. We had oral sex, and we talked for a while, but then he started acting funny. I thought we were actively talking or dating; we did things, hung out, and out of nowhere, he stopped talking to me.

Caleb also experienced being ghosted on dating apps while attending a PWI and shared his experiences, stating:

There are a lot of people who, if you don't have a picture up, they'll have a conversation with you. And then the second that you send a picture, I mean, it could be that "You're so ugly." But I'm not ugly, so I know it's not for that reason. You send a picture, and they stop responding immediately, or they say something like, "Now I'm not interested anymore." And you're left to think to yourself, "Well, it must be because of the way I look." It's just like so many people have expectations and assumptions about who you are and what you look like. And a lot of times after they see that you're Black, a lot of that changes, a lot of their perspective changes, and it sucks. Because I mean, for me, I just want to be

treated as a person that's either found attractive or not attractive, completely separated from my race. But not a lot of people are like that.

Ewing added shared similar experiences after disclosing that he rarely posts his face picture on dating apps due to fear of rejection, stating:

Well, I don't ever put my pictures up there. You would hit somebody up without the picture. They'd be like, "Hey, what's up? How's it going?" And then soon as you send the picture, it's like they're not interested. And I think there's a lot of ignorant people on the app towards Black people. So I think that's one of the things that we experience.

Jackson also shared his experiences of ghosting on apps stating:

There are just so many people on there that you just kind of get lost in the mix. And when you know anyone who's horny will just settle for anybody, you really don't feel validated. Tinder kind of sometimes like that, especially with all the ghosting. Sometimes it plays with your self-esteem because you're like you match with people, but then they never say anything to you.

### ***Getting Blocked and Avoidance***

In connection to being ghosted, the participants shared experiences of getting blocked on dating apps or being completely avoided, which they mostly attributed to their physical appearance, which included weight and skin complexion (Kumar et al., 2021; Penney, 2014). Getting blocked on a dating app is when a person removes all of your visibility of their profile and communication abilities (Connor, 2019; Kumar et al., 2021). Blocking someone usually indicates a disinterest in the other person or lack of physical

attraction (Connor, 2019). When discussing the topic of blocking on dating apps, Akeem discussed his challenges around the trend:

I don't fit the criteria, so I am always getting blocked, no messages back, it's either oh you're ugly, you're fat, you're this, you're not my type, you know what I mean so it was hard for me because I was facing discrimination on all types of fronts. It was absolutely hard.

In addition to potentially being blocked, Akeem mentioned weight being another barrier that all gay men face and that fit White gay men are the standard. He emphasized this cultural norm is heightened when referring to Black men suggesting that it creates an additional form of discrimination stating, "I'm fat and gay so it's like I got two things against me and I'm just not the standard." Caleb also discussed being blocked by a White student with whom he previously had a sexual encounter, sharing:

I mean, I know a lot of people have had experiences where they feel like they're being hidden away from other people, and that's what I felt like. I legitimately did not understand why. And I don't think I do still. I always give answers to these questions, and I feel it was a very negative experience. Oh, then he blocked me. So that was fun. I responded once to a message he sent, and then he blocked me. I don't know. Whatever, it kind of stunk.

Gambit also discussed being ignored or avoided, attributing those experiences to his race by stating:

I guess a lot of times, when I would hit up a White student, sometimes it would be like, "Hi, hello." It'd be pretty normal. Other times, though, I just feel like it was just a lot of you try to be sincere. You can say hi or hello, and you don't get any

response. But I also have White friends who have Grindr on campus, so I'm seeing their Grindr, and I'm like, "Wow, you're getting a shit ton more messages than I'm getting,"...I think it's just harder when you're Black because there's just, I don't know. I think racism can be very suppressed, and I feel like there can be microaggressions on Grindr, as well.

### ***Rejection and Feeling Alienated***

As a result of being ghosted or abruptly blocked mostly by White men during their time on dating apps, all my participants discussed feelings of rejection as a result of these actions and how that made them ultimately feel devalued. College students, in general, seek a sense of belonging among their peers, which includes romantic partners (O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). When students experience isolation or scrutiny, it can negatively impact their student experiences (Kerrigan et al., 2020). In discussing this topic, Bryson shared:

I mean, people have it posted on their profiles that they don't date people of color. I try not to let it get to me because I can't let what they say or do give them the power to control how I feel about myself, but it does sting a little because it's like you don't even know me, but you're judging me because of the color of my skin. It was like I was being discriminated against because of my race or fetishized in some way or the opposite that they wanted nothing to do with me.

Caleb also shared similar thoughts based on his experiences feeling rejected from his use of gay dating apps:

On one side, you have a lot of homophobia in the Black community. And then, on the other side, you have a lot of racism in the gay community. It's like either side

doesn't exactly completely accept you, and you kind of have to try to traverse your way around that, which is in itself super complicated and not ideal. Because I feel like a lot of the time, the two groups don't necessarily see how many similarities there are between them. It can be very complicated. Especially there are a lot of people out there that either, one, don't want to have anything to do with you once they find out that you're of color. And some people aren't completely straightforward with that.

Jackson shared his experiences of feeling alienated in interracial dating that was a result of using dating apps, he shared:

They seem to always start out fine. And then I almost feel like, after a point, you start to kind of feel kind of alienated from them and not alienated, but you'll be dating, and it'll be going well. And then, as more time goes on, more and more issues will come up that they don't seem to understand, or appreciate, or even realize exists, like racial profiling or fetishism. And they might take it on and be kind of defensive like, "well, you don't think I'm doing that, do you?" Or something like that.

### **Theme 3: Sexual Exploration**

A common theme during the use of gay dating apps that the participants shared was their experiences with their own sexual development and with learning more about their likes and dislikes (Holman & Sillars, 2012; Paul & Hayes, 2002). For most of the participants, the dating app use in college gave them the opportunity to have their first or among their first sexual encounters with another male (Homan & Sillars, 2012; Paul & Hayes, 2002). The combination of being away from home and having instant access to

several potential sex partners gave the participants the space to learn about their sexuality (Paul et al., 2000). Darius shared his early on-campus dating app use experiences, stating:

Let's see, so when I got to college, college is where I discovered Grindr. And so, I think Grindr was the first app that I really started to use, a little bit more around that area that I was in. And I think it got me my first hookup off of an app.

Akeem also discussed his sexual exploration from dating app use on-campus sharing that:

You're meeting online, but you're also meeting them in person, so it's like kind of scary as an 18-year-old just getting out of high school and haven't had a lot of sexual or, uh, I would say gay experience. Trying to be new and trying to be different was really different for me. It was really scary, to be honest, but you get over that after a couple of hookups here and there.

Bryson shared his sexual exploration but discussed his hesitation with it at first, stating:

Talking with other students is nerve-wracking because you don't know if they are going to tell other people. There's a perception if you use the app, it's sexual, and I didn't want to get slut-shamed or judged for using the app.

Sexual exploration is common among college students in general (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

They are provided with the location and multiple opportunities to engage with multiple sex partners without any expectation for an immediate commitment. The opportunities for sexual encounters are enhanced through the use of dating apps and the number of college-aged students who use the platforms (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016; Lamont et al., 2018). Caleb provided some context to his sexual exploration, stating:

When I went on Grindr for the first time, that was when I saw that there were a lot of people who were just there to hook up. And they were very straightforward and

obvious about that; there was no hiding it. It would be in their bios, or their names or whatever like that. So yeah, that's the first time. My first experience with Grindr was that it was much more straightforward than Tinder ever was. People said what they wanted a lot, and they also said what they didn't want.

### ***Learning the Lingo: Top, Bottom, and Versatile***

In the LGBTQ+ community among gay men, there is a categorization of individuals based on their preferred sexual position (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018). These categories are oftentimes simply referred to as positions and help others identify partners with whom they are sexually compatible (Johns et al., 2012). Dating apps such as Grindr and Jack'd have a setting that allows users to advertise their sexual positions to one another (Jaspal, 2017). A top refers to the more dominant person within the sexual encounter, usually associated with a more masculine performance (Zheng, Hart, & Zheng, 2013). Tops are the individuals who engage in anal intercourse as the penetrator (Moskowitz & Roloff, 2017; Zheng et al., 2013).

A bottom is mostly associated with a more submissive role in the sexual encounter and often tied to more feminine performing gay men (Moskowitz & Roloff, 2017; Zheng et al., 2013). Bottoms are the recipients of anal intercourse (Johns et al., 2012). Lastly, versatile refers to an individual who enjoys both the top and bottom aspects of anal sex equally (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018; Zheng et al., 2013). The theme of sexual positions was present during all of the interviews because, for most participants, their sex app use was the first time they learned what the positions were and why it was important to align with one. In connection to this experience, Akeem shared, "Certain things that I didn't know I have learned from gay dating apps like top, bottom, vers, the

lingo, but I have learned a lot from other gays. Why not learn this information from your people.” Ewing recalled using the app on campus and learning new terms, specifically what a top and a bottom was, stating, "The lingo, oh my God. I was like, what does that mean? I was very nonchalant before when it comes to the whole population, but by using the app, I learned a lot of things." Frodo also shared, “I learned about top and bottom and all that stuff from these apps. And so if I had that information going into using the apps, I think I would have saved myself a lot more heartache.”

Darius also discussed learning about positions and suggested that due to his race, he was always assumed to be the dominant sexual partner stating that:

It's weird because nowadays, you can put your position on your app so that people know. But before that wasn't a thing. But I was never mistaken for a bottom ever, especially by a non-Black person. So they see me as a Black bull.

Bryson discussed how learning the lingo prompted him to use the language regularly in the community and while making connections with other students stating, "I've made it about three friends from the app, we've chatted on there, and we realize, ‘Hey, two bottoms don't make a top.’ And so, we just became friends."

Huey shared that using the apps helped him learn about and understand ideas and concepts within the LGBTQ+ community, stating:

I do find... since I've been [using] the apps, I'm still learning new lingos. It really, especially with Grindr, really pushed me to explore more my sexuality, because when someone tells me, "Ok, well, I'm into this." So we have a conversation about what they're into. I learn about it, and sometimes people tell me stuff that

they do; I'm like, "Oh, I'd like to try that and see if I like that." And sometimes I do, sometimes I don't.

### ***Sexual Health Education***

Gay men are the highest group of individuals in the United States reported testing positive for HIV; among these demographics, Black gay men are most likely to contract the virus (Hussen et al., 2012; Litchenstein, 2000). Sexual health is a large concern in the gay community and is heightened when sexual encounters are easily accessible like they are through dating apps (Holloway et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2016). Participants shared their experiences around safe sex practices and how these themes were present in their time using the apps. Frodo said simply, "I learned about HIV from these apps." Ewing specifically discussed encounters that he had on the apps with campus members and his introduction to STDs and specifically HIV stating:

I learned how to have a conversation without offending people. Like the whole thing, asking somebody about their status. Before, I'd be like, "You HIV positive or negative?" You know what I mean? That's a little ignorant. And the app pretty much taught me how to ask the question...before the app, I was... Knock on wood; I was so trusting. If it looks good, it's good. You know what I mean? You know that lingo? And actually, when I went on the app, I was in my area and this guy who, back in high school, I was crushing on him. I found out he was [HIV] positive. So, I'm like, "Ok, so you definitely got to ask, motherfucker, because not everything that looks good is good."

Akeem discussed how his experiences with other students on dating with STDs and HIV prompted him to use his fraternity to educate others on those topics:

My campus involvement is Greek Life, so I take to account what types of events I could put on to raise awareness about aspects of a gay dating app like how to wear a condom, get tested for STDs, how to properly use a gay dating app, so you're not meeting weird or scary people or when and when not to hook up with somebody on an app.

Huey discussed different features of the app helping him navigate sexual health awareness around campus, stating that:

I also find it really helpful because they have a little section where you can put when was the last time you got tested and be able to get testing reminders. "Hey, your last test was over six months ago." That, to me, was very helpful, and I've really learned mostly about just how the gay community operates, especially being a Black male in a mostly White college campus, as in people who are looking for BCC, people who are looking for a Black experience or trying to be with their first Black guys.

#### **Theme 4: Making Friends**

Dating app users go on these platforms for a number of different reasons. Some users are searching for love, others searching for sex, but some are simply looking to expand their friend groups (Hernandez, 2014; Liccoppe et al., 2016; Wu & Ward, 2018). A common experience the majority of the participants shared was that, during some point of their time using the app on campus, they were able to make a friend and network with other students who may be struggling with coming out or just looking to find a sense of belonging and community (Hausman et al., 2007; Ueno & Gentile, 2015). Students come to college with the expectation of making new friends and meeting new people, and the

app provided that experience for some of the participants (Torbenso, 2012; Mofatt, 1991). While some experiences finding friendships through dating apps can be positive, some participants indicated having negative experiences in making friendships and through negative encounters they experience various forms of oppression. Akeem shared this quote about his experiences making friends through his dating app use:

So using a gay dating app while you on campus is completely different from using the app when you're at home or whatever because there are students like you out there looking for the same thing. So you kind of bond over that, you meet new friends, and you meet new people when you're on these apps. So a lot of people that I met that I am still friends with now have been from Grindr, or Jack'd or Scruff or whatever.

Ian spoke about his first time using the apps and casually looking for friends stating that "I've always really used them just to like see what other LGBTQ members were around me discreet or not. But to see who's around. Who thinks like me, who likes the same things as me." Ewing also shared his experiences making friends on campus through dating apps and why it was important for him to connect with other gay men stating:

Because yeah, you have your friends, it's one thing that you have your friends, but it's another to have people that experience the same thing, that's going through the same struggle you're going through. Just like, for instance, a rape victim, they feel more comfortable talking to another rape victim than talking to just somebody random—so same thing.

Frodo provided an experience with meeting friends through the dating app on campus and how that was different from meeting in real life, stating:

Well, I just think I revert to using the apps whenever I'm lonely. Whenever I feel like, "All right, I have nowhere to go or there are not people in the real world," so to speak, aren't really connecting with me or there's nothing attractive happening on campus, I'll go to that app as a getaway. But it also helps you in many ways, if you're open to it and make friends... So one of my really good friends actually, I met him there, and he was like, "Hey, let's just hang out and not any weird stuff. Let's just meet behind the student center."

### ***Friends With Benefits***

Forming a friends with benefits relationship is a common result from using dating apps (Epstein et al., 2009; Wu & Ward, 2018). Friends with benefits (FWB) refer to casual sexual encounters that, over time become regular, but exclude the expectation of the relationship becoming more of an emotional connection (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). Friends with benefits allow students to explore sex with multiple partners while always having an option that is accessible to them (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). During their usage of dating apps, some participants discussed forming a friend with benefits dynamic with other students (Wu & Ward, 2018). This was a common shared experience. Frodo recalled a moment where he became regular friends with benefits with another White gay student and how the experience was negative and resulted in fetishism and ghosting:

I was just messaging this guy, and we ended up becoming FWB. One night I was drunk. I ended up going over to his residence hall, and we're in bed just chatting and just lying there chatting, and then we ended up having sex; it had all been me giving him oral sex until that point, but while it's happening, there's commentary,

and it's pretty disturbing. He's like, "you're doing so many firsts for me right now. This is the first time I've had someone who was uncircumcised. This is the first time I had my first Black guy. This is great." It was just an experience for him. It was just like I checked boxes on his to-do lists almost, and he treated me as such. I reached out to him after, and he just didn't respond to me.

Gambit discussed having a FWB that he met through Grindr, and that while the sexual relationship resumes, they have gotten to know each other genuinely and bond through hobbies:

We're actually really good friends now. I met him on Grindr, too, but we've had a common interest in video games. So we started hanging out at his dorm, and we would also play video games for hours... We had sex quite a few times, but it never became anything serious.

Akeem discussed one of his first encounters from using a dating app on campus resulted in a FWB, and it left him unsettled and disappointed, sharing:

He was this upper classmen White dude who had a girlfriend. After our second time having sex, he asked if I wanted to keep doing it on the low or DL or whatever. I was like sure, but when we saw each other at parties he would straight up ignore me, which I mean I get it but if we are friends, I don't see the problem. Then after he would see me out, he would message me to come over to his apartment late at night.

Huey also shared meeting his former FWB, who took his virginity from connecting through a dating app and how their relationship helped him get involved on campus.

Huey had revealed earlier in our conversation that, while they had a reoccurring friendship and sexual relationship, the dynamic evolved into being strictly platonic:

Usually, when you go on the app, just especially with Grindr, it's mostly used, not really for dating, yes, but really, people go on Grindr for hookups. Me, being on there sometimes, I do look for platonic friendship and stuff, and I have met, actually, the person that I lost my virginity to, I met on Grindr. We still stay in touch, still to this day, and we're very good friends. He took me around to [the campus cultural center], and that's how I met all of those people.

### ***Professional Boundaries***

While using the apps on college campuses, the participants discussed not only seeing other students and classmates on the platform, but they would sometimes see faculty or staff members on them. All of the participants identify as legal adults based on their age, but seeing a professional staff member on the app was definitely confusing for the participants who shared these experiences. Some had the attitude that they were all adults so they could do whatever they wanted, and others hesitated at the idea of speaking with a staff member and avoided interactions with them intentionally (Gossett & Bellas, 2002). Faculty and undergraduate student dating is a topic that has consistently been present within higher education (Dixon, 1996; Rupert & Holmes, 1997). While the policies vary at different institutions, there is a general belief that it is not best practice even if it is allowed (Dixon, 1996; Keller, 1990). The participants of the study were open with their experiences speaking with staff members on the apps. Akeem stated:

I did meet some staff members on the apps, and the experience was scary because I was like they could lose their job or I could get in trouble in some way. It was

like walking on thin ice. You have to be careful no matter what because you really don't know who these people are. Yes, they may be a staff member or student on the campus, but you don't know who they really are outside of that.

Caleb also shared his experiences speaking with staff members on the app, he shared:

It was after I had just gotten the app, and I was at work, and I had actually looked at the app to see who was around. And it was the first time I actually realized how many people there were around that were so close. Especially people that you work with and things like that that you don't really think about a lot of the time if they're going be... Whether or not they're gay, because there are a lot of people who obviously are down low, or they don't outright say what they prefer. And I remember explicitly one of my supervisors coming up there, and not realizing at first that it was this person and getting into a conversation and talking to them. It was just very weird to realize that, oh, slowly over time, that there were so many people that were so close to you that we're all doing this. Yeah, it was a very surreal experience.

Frodo talked about his experiences interacting with gay staff members and faculty on that app and what his moments were like stating:

Sometimes I got nervous that professors would see me or like staff members would see me because I'm on campus, and you think, oh, only other students are going to be here, but you're in a town, and so there are other community members within the town that are on this app. There's teachers, which they're allowed to be on there because they're adults; they have their own lives and their personal lives outside of being a professor. So you see them sometimes, and they are very

mindful not to respond. Or, in my experience, they've been very mindful not to respond or just say, "Hey, I work for the institution, you can't talk to me," type of thing.

Frodo additionally stated, "I mean, there were other staff members. I specifically remember someone who worked for the food company that was very abrasive with his approach, and he really didn't care that we were students or not."

Gambit shared his experiences with meeting faculty on dating apps, stating:

There was a visiting teacher from another institution who had come to [my university] to teach in the place of one of my teachers for a few weeks. He was assisting somebody in that building for something for at least a semester. I recognized him. I saw him on the app, but I never really said anything. But when I had him as my substitute professor, I recognized him. I guess he recognized me, too, because he hit me up a little bit after class was over. And we were just having a conversation. I was like, "It's interesting what you're doing here," and everything. As soon as he walked in, I told him I thought it was so funny that it was him because it's never happened to me before where it's been like here, I am a student, and here this guy is, a professor. I don't know. It just introduced me to a whole new thing about, "Ok, well, that's his whole career. I don't want to do anything that'll get in the way of that." You know what I'm saying? Because I just feel like there's boundaries there when you're so intertwined within a career.

Participant's shared various experiences that allowed me to understand the essence of this study such as experiencing racism and fetishism, to their experiences with seeing faculty and staff on the apps. As an undergraduate student I had similar experiences using dating

apps, but I also had very unique interactions, so it was important to address my suppositions and biases regarding the study. The next section will discuss how I removed my bias from the study and focused solely on the findings shared by participants.

### **Researcher Bias**

To ensure that I was consistently limiting my personal bias from interfering with the study, I practiced bracketing in the form of reflexive journaling. Journaling allowed me to keep my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in a document separate from the findings and the information shared by the participants (Gearing, 2004). I used my journal entries to compare the way in which I presented the participant's information in the findings and wanted to ensure that I capture the phenomenon from their unique perspectives (Gearing, 2004; Hanson, 1994). Removing researcher suppositions from the study is essential to make sure that research remains credible and that the phenomenon is depicted in the most appropriate manner (Ahern, 1999; Porter, 1993).

One of the main goals of qualitative research is to account for the influence the researcher has on the study. Bracketing of qualitative research in a study is a common method of ensuring the study remains valid and addresses researcher bias (Chan et al., 2013). During the data collection process, bracketing was difficult as I recalled experiencing similar situations during my time as an undergraduate student; however, I was able to use my journal to go back and write down those similar experiences, which removed my perspective of those common experiences from being included in the study (Gearing, 2004; Porter, 1993). Throughout the study, it was critical for me to continue bracketing regularly and consistently to present the essence of the participants' experiences most accurately.

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, themes that were created at the conclusion of the coding process were revealed and discussed in detail. Each theme discovered captures the essence of participants' experiences. Through these themes, the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps at PWIs can be understood with a better lens. Fully explaining each present theme allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In the previous chapter, the first and second cycles of coding identified enabled me to collect the direct quotes from participants that suggested they were the experts of this study, and the information that they shared during interviews was correct.

Throughout chapter four, I included direct passages from participant interviews, so their interpretations of the phenomenon were reflected in the findings. This chapter focused on the participant's recollection of using dating apps while attending a PWI. While each participant had very unique experiences, they each had moments and situations that related to one another. The reoccurring ideas or experiences became coded as themes or sub-themes, which I included in the chapter. The findings from this chapter allowed me to connect the participant's experiences with current research and will enable me to create recommendations for future research related to this topic. In chapter five, I discussed limitations, future directions and answer the proposed research questions.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and examine the experiences that undergraduate Black gay men have using dating apps at a mid-Atlantic public predominantly White institution (PWI). I interviewed ten currently enrolled Black gay men who met the criteria of my study. Each participant went through a semi-structured interview process which I analyzed to find reoccurring themes, which I discussed in detail in the fourth chapter. Participants shared experiences of their on-campus dating app use and how those interactions affected them socially and personally. After the interview process, four main themes were discovered, with additional sub-themes discussed. The first theme was 1) Racism and Fetishism with the subtheme of colorism, followed by 2) Being Ghosted with the two subthemes of Getting Blocked and Avoidance and Rejection and Feeling Devalued, the third theme 3) Sexual Exploration with the two subthemes Learning the lingo: top, bottom, and versatile and sexual health education, and the final theme of 4) Making friends with the subthemes of Friends with benefits and Professional boundaries. These themes represented the study's findings and allowed me to begin looking at ways this information can be helpful in various higher education settings, specifically PWIs.

Through my findings, I discovered that the essence of this study was the presence of positive and negative experiences and that both could occur in unison to contribute to the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating and hookup apps at PWIs. While the participants had some positive experiences, the negative experiences that existed were more prominent and hurtful to the participants. Black gay men in these

settings experience being highly sexualized through fetishization and stereotypes of larger penis sizes and assumed masculinity. Additionally, Black gay men experience racism and racial slurs regularly. These experiences contribute to the negative aspects of dating app use for undergraduate Black gay men. In contrast, using apps has allowed these men to make friends and build community. Participants indicated during the study that they have built and maintained friendships with peers through using dating apps on campus. Another positive experience shared by the participants is the ability to grow and comfortably explore their sexuality. The contrast between the two types of experiences was the commonality among all the participants in this study.

In this chapter, I provide answers to the three research questions asked throughout this study, reflect on the intersectionality conceptual framework, and provide implications for educational leadership, policy, and practice. In addition, I provide multiple recommendations for gay dating app developers and leaders within higher education. Lastly, I discuss limitations throughout the study and directions that future researchers could take on this topic.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Since the colonial period, dating was a large part of the college experience, which has evolved into the contemporary hookup culture (Eustace, 2001; Vine, 1976). Hookup culture has been a significant aspect of college students' experiences and impacts their social integration within campus life (Allison & Risman, 2014; Bogle, 2007). The evolution of hookup culture at college rarely accounts for the experiences of underrepresented groups, specifically Black gay men. Current research exists on the experiences of college students hooking up and heterosexual dating app use, but there is

limited information available regarding Black gay men (Bogle, 2007, 2008; Morrison, 2012). Findings in my study show that Black gay men have a more difficult time navigating dating in college and are often alienated and discriminated against when using gay dating apps, and while some participants were able to have positive interactions most of the shared experiences were unpleasant and undesirable.

When Black men in the study are desired on dating apps, they are often sexualized and stereotyped regarding penis size and other physical attributes, similar to previous research findings (Donham, 2018; Lang, 2014). Another challenge that Black men identified when dating is a lack of options regarding partner availability. The number of gay men attending colleges and universities is significantly less than heterosexual students, making romantic opportunities for students in the LGBTQ+ community limited (Morrison, 2012; Ueno & Gentile, 2015).

While romantic opportunities may be limited, Black gay men still use dating apps as an opportunity to explore their sexualities. Participants discussed how dating apps helped them to learn new terminology associated with the gay community, such as top and bottom, and sexual health information like the presence of HIV in the gay community and ways to prevent spread, as found in previous research (Grindr, 2017; Landovitz et al., 2013; Shield, 2018). Black gay men are ranked as the largest demographic for HIV transmission, and stigmas around this topic impact their desirability when dating (Brennan et al., 2012; Duke, 2017; Fergus et al., 2005). Additionally, throughout the study, participants discussed a projected ideal by White gay men that, as Black men, they needed to be tops or masculine, which aligned with fetishization. While

being fetishized by White men, Black gay men feel like they also are portrayed as dominant sexual and masculine individuals.

Similarly, masculinity within the Black community is an expectation, and Black gay men must conform to this expectation without the ability to be themselves (McCune, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013; Washington & Wall, 2006), particularly because of the additional belief that White people use homophobic stereotypes about femininity to degrade and dehumanize Black men (McCune, 2008). Thus, Black gay men face stereotypical expectations of masculinity both within the Black community and within the gay community that are used to fetishize and stereotype (Collins, 2005; Hawkins, 1995; Morales, 2014). This leaves Black gay men without a supportive outlet to express their femininity.

In association with masculinity, penis politics is another topic associated with the fetishization of Black men (Groves et al., 2015; Kumar, 2017; Lang, 2014). Black gay men in the current study shared experiences of White men assuming they were well endowed or had an abnormally large penis size, making them more desirable in a sexual capacity. In the United States, African American men are ranked number one for having the largest penis size in terms of length and circumference ("Average penis size," 2019; Chukwuma, 2009; Ponce, 2017). While research validates the stereotype that Black men generally have larger penis sizes, this fact does not make it acceptable to overly sexualize or fetishize them.

Research regarding dating app use also introduces the concept of gamification which is when game-like attributes are applied to something; there is an idea that gamification allows individuals not to take things too seriously (Abelson, 2019; Condis,

2018). Most participants were actively seeking either a hookup or a long-term relationship. In relation to gamification on dating apps, research further indicates users feeling more comfortable speaking to others virtually because they are not required to share images, and there are no stakes involved, which empowers users to be overtly sexual through messages (Bogle, 2007; Filice et al., 2019; Macapagal et al., 2018). Participants discussed being direct about their feelings when looking for sex on dating apps, and that other user would behave similarly. Dating apps seem to remove inhibitions and allow users the comfort and confidence to pursue others in ways they usually would not (Bogle, 2007; Strubel & Petrie, 2017).

While dating apps allows Black gay male students to explore their sexualities, it additionally allows them to create community and build friendships. Building community and relationships is a significant aspect of the college student experience and can ensure students enjoy their time on campus (Camargo et al., 2010; Mamaros & Sacerdote, 2006). Research shows that LGBTQ+ students and students of color are the most alienated groups on college campuses and often experience feeling unwanted in those settings (Collins & McElmurry, 2014; Morrison, 2012; Strayhorn et al., 2015). Through dating apps, many Black gay male students in the study have found platonic friendships that helped improve their college experiences and helped them to build community while in college. Participants shared stories of meeting friends on dating apps and building their community through experiences from Grindr and Scruff.

The integrated sexual identity model is a theory that relates to this study (Evans et al., 2010; Patton, 2011). While not mentioned in the literature review, it connects to Black gay male's exploring their sexuality through dating apps. Applying sexual identity

development to college students' multiple processes provides insight into their behavior, emotions, and values (Evans et al., 2010; Patton, 2011). The first status of compulsory heterosexuality, coined by Adrienne Rich, describes the commitment to an individual's dominant culture's expectation of heterosexual relationships with the inability to explore sexually (Patton et al., 2016). In contrast, active exploration is sexual exploration that either cognitively or behaviorally impacts one's sexual identity (Patton et al., 2016). Participants shared experiences including having their first multi-person orgy, losing their virginity, and having their first kiss. This identity model connects with this study because it highlights Black gay males' exploration experiences that often prompt their use of gay dating apps. The main idea behind the study is that undergraduate Black gay men are exploring their sexualities, and from that exploration they have certain experiences, which can look different depending on where they are in their personal identity development. This study also applies intersectionality as the theoretical framework (Collins, 2015; Collins, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991) to demonstrate the layers of identity that impact the Black gay male experience and the inability to separate those layers, which will be discussed in depth later in the chapter.

The experiences that undergraduate Black gay men have on dating apps combine cultural and social perceptions of race, racism, and institutional climate (Mula, n.d.; Wu & Ward, 2018). Colleges and universities have services that can support Black men with their experiences of gay dating apps, such as offices of counseling services, health centers, and various clubs and organizations (Hawkins & Larabee, 2009; Holland, 2016; Vader et al., 2011). However, there are a limited number of resources that mainly cater to Black gay men and there is usually a one-size-fits-all approach to diversity initiatives on

college campuses (Morrison, 2012; Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). However, a more efficient way of serving underrepresented students would be to provide individualized opportunities and experiences (Abdullahi, 1992; Majied, 2010). Participants shared that they were seeking more visibility in the form of staff who share their identities and groups that speak to their specific needs and experiences rather than one aspect of their identity.

### **Answering the Research Questions**

There were three questions that this study focused on to learn more about the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use gay dating apps at PWIs. By answering these questions, my study provided a better and more in-depth understanding of some of the challenges undergraduate Black men face when using these platforms on college campuses. The information and themes collected from the participants in this study allowed me to gain insight into the phenomenon being examined and provided me with information to answer the research questions. The following sections reviewed each question while answering them based on participant responses and relevant research.

#### ***Research Question 1***

**What Are the Experiences of Undergraduate Black Gay Men Using Dating Apps?** All the participants discussed the theme of sexual exploration when initially using the dating app on campus. For some students, the issue was not about others finding out about their sexual orientation, but they were worried about others knowing about their sexual desires and judging them. Sexual encounters among college-age students is common, but is present mainly with alcohol and during social events such as parties or at bars (Bogle, 2007; Bogle, 2008; Paul et al., 2000). Studies show that residential halls and

housing for students give them the freedom and desire to have more sexual interactions due to having a location (Allison & Risman, 2014; Heldman & Wade, 2010). While space is not a barrier for students who live on campus to hook up, the issue comes from being identified and then judged on dating applications (Daley, 2016; Moore et al., 2013). Dating apps allow individuals to hide who they are from others while they become comfortable; many users choose not to upload an image of themselves until that point (Filice et al., 2019; Strubel & Petrie, 2017). During the interviews, multiple participants shared having a great conversation with other White students while on the dating apps. However, once they shared images of themselves, the other student stopped responding or replied they were not their type, which the participants attributed to the racial differences. This theme of being ghosted was shared by multiple participants. On dating apps, Black men are generally among the least replied to demographic of user (Brown, 2018; Lin et al., 2021).

Another common experience the participants shared was that using dating apps like Grindr and Jack'd provided introductions into the gay community because they learned terminology and norms within the culture that they otherwise would not have known (Mula, n.d.), which aligns with the subtheme, learning the lingo: top, bottom, and versatile. A few participants discussed learning the definition of top, bottom, and versatile (vers) through conversations with other students and random men on the dating app. In the broader Black community, homosexuality is often condemned in households due to its perceived attack on Black masculinity and because of Christian religious beliefs (Buttaro & Battle, 2012; Lewis, 2003; Miller, 2008). Many young Black gay men within these settings are not provided the space to learn about gay sex or sexual health-related

risks with being a MSM (Blackwell et al., 2015; Macapagal et al., 2018). Grindr has a feature so users can disclose and see the HIV- status of other users (Grindr, 2017; Rodriguez, 2016). In connection to the subtheme, sexual health education, participants discussed lack of education as something Black gay men using the app often had in common, so app use provided an opportunity to learn more about the gay male culture including new terms and lingo. Participants in the study also experienced racism and fetishism in addition to making friendships while using dating and hookup apps. These themes were prevalent throughout the study and will be elaborated on in the following research questions.

### ***Research Question 2***

**How Does Making Connections Through Dating Apps Influence Black Gay Male's College Experience?** Finding community and making connections are a large part of college students' experiences (Moffat, 1991; Tinto, 1997). It is essential for students coming to campus to find a sense of belonging among their peers and within the campus as a whole (Freeman et al., 2007; Meuwisse et al., 2010). Students within the LGBTQ+ community and college students generally have a more difficult time making connections and being retained at colleges and universities due to this struggle (Morrison, 2012; Strayhorn, 2015). A theme that was present for Black gay men making connections on dating apps while on campus was theme four, making friends. Participants in this study shared that while many of their interactions on dating apps were used for sexual and romantic exploration, they were able to find long-standing platonic friendships that they retained throughout their college experience. Companionship is a basic human need, and the ability to connect with others emotionally and socially improves the general

student life experience (Gostin, 2019; Jackson & Hui, 2017). Using dating apps for Black gay students allows them to cultivate and expand a network of friends they would not conventionally have access to (Mula, n.d.; Wu & Ward, 2018). This study highlighted that dating apps are ways that introverts and underrepresented populations build community in a comfortable setting for them, and that aligns with the experiences of many of the participants (Hanson et al., 2011; Walker, 2007).

In addition to building platonic friendships during their college experiences, Black gay men indicated that apps helped them explore their sexualities on campus, which highlights the theme, sexual exploration. Participants shared experiences of cultivating relationships with FWB, engaging in unique sexual encounters, and even some indicating they lost their virginity from using apps while on campus. Sexuality and sexual exploration are significant parts of the campus experience, which has allowed students to learn their likes and dislikes (Bogle, 2007; Paul et al., 2000). Sexual exploration on college campuses has also given young men the opportunity to learn more about their sexual orientation and the fluidity of attraction (Bancroft et al., 2004; Bogle, 2008). Making connections through dating apps allows Black gay students to network, have sexual awakenings, and understand and learn new aspects of their previously unaware personality (Evans et al., 2010; Johnson, 2017).

### **Research Question 3**

**What Experiences Do Undergraduate Black Gay Men Have When Attempting to Date White Gay Men on Dating Apps?** The participants shared many different experiences during the interview process; however, one major theme that remained consistent throughout the experiences of each of the young men were the

presence of the racism and fetishism. In efforts to date White gay men using these apps, the participants described that they were often met with opposition due to their skin complexion and cultural background. Some participants identified that they were not considered the norm, which is a conventionally attractive White man with an athletic body. There seems to be a dichotomy in the experiences undergraduate Black gay men have when attempting to date their White peers. On one end of the spectrum, they are seemingly valued through fetishism, and contrarily they are devalued or less desirable because of their race.

Through the conversation of value that Black gay men hold, participants who shared experiences of being considered less desirable due to race all have experiences of either being avoided on the app or blocked altogether when reaching out to White men, which align with the second theme of being ghosted and the subtheme, rejection and feeling devalued. Participants shared that they would engage in conversations with White men on the apps without having a profile picture. When they finally sent an image of themselves, they were blocked, or no further messages were exchanged. This experience aligns with general dating app statistics that indicate Black men are the least likely demographic to receive a response on those types of platforms (Brown, 2018; Lin, 2021). In being diplomatic, some participants said the lack of response could have been due to another aspect of unattraction, but most reported they believed the changed interest was due to racial biases.

Black gay students shared that in efforts to date White men racism and fetishism were ever-present. In addition to racism and fetishism, the participants also expressed being tokenized in multiple ways. Tokenization refers to using one's limited

experiences with a minority group to allow one the ability to be discriminatory or racist (Niemann, 1999; Solorzano, 2000). Tokenism can take the form of flattery when cultivating a false sense of empathy towards underrepresented groups (Niemann, 1999; Solorzano, 2000). Many of the participants who experienced this shared how they felt initially flattered by these sexual stereotypes associated with their race. However, they felt devalued because they were often being reduced to a sexual experience or awakening for White men who have never had sexual encounters with Black men. In some instances, fetishism took the shape of racism when participants were asked to participate in race play, which asks for the Black individual to role-play as a slave and the White individual as the slave master. These interactions are likely to cause emotional trauma for Black gay students as it reduces them to being viewed as subordinates or less than White gay students.

### **Reflecting on Conceptual Framework**

This study investigated the experiences of a marginalized and underrepresented student demographic. To better conceptualize the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating and hookup apps at PWIs, I used intersectionality as my theoretical framework (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality refers to the interconnectedness of an individual's identity, most frequently referring to one's race, class, and gender and how those identities are associated with one's experiences of advantage or disadvantage within a social system (Collins, 2015; Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Walby, 2012). Participants in the study were not able to associate with one aspect of their identity over another; they all worked together to impact the experiences of Black gay males using dating apps.

Using intersectionality in this study allowed me to understand that individuals with multiple identities have unique experiences, and their multiple social categories are not independent (Collins, 2015; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Black gay men using dating apps at PWIs shared various experiences of racism and fetishism. Their race contributed to the experience of racism; their sex contributed to the experiences of fetishism due to stereotypes about the Black male penis. Lastly, their sexual orientation is connected to being sexualized, as gay men have a reputation for being highly sexual. The participants were not able to shed specific categories of their identity to give them a different experience. Moreover, their identities worked in conjunction to provide participants with unique experiences. The unique experiences were shared everyday experiences for individuals who identified as Black gay men.

In addition to being unable to separate one's multiple identities, intersectionality also refers to how one's intersecting identities contribute to larger structures of advantage and disadvantage (Collins, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Through the experiences shared by participants of the study, I was able to identify how Black gay males benefited from structures of privilege and oppression. Privilege refers to an individual right or advantages associated with a person or a specific group of people (Bhopal, 2018; Messner, 2011). While Black gay men shared positive exchanges as a result of using dating and hook up apps, there was no clear display of privilege experienced by the demographic in this study. Using dating apps seemed to further oppress undergraduate Black gay males in both social and educational settings as demonstrated through themes such as racism and fetishism, rejection and feeling devalued, being ghosted, and colorism.

In contrast to privilege, intersectionality helped identify systems of oppression in the experiences Black gay men have on dating apps at PWIs (Choi et al., 2017; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Mula, n.d.). Participants experienced racism in overt and covert ways. This study indicated that they experienced racism through racial slurs while attempting to connect with White men on dating apps. Racism refers to the prejudice and discrimination of a person or group of people due to their connection with a racial or ethnic group and distinguishes those members within that community as inferior and of less value than another group (Glasgow, 2009; Sundstrom & Kim, 2014). Participants of the study are minorities who exist within already minoritized communities, which increases the probability of being discriminated against (Harnois, 2014; Stewart, 2013; Tesfai, 2019). Research indicates that minorities who have multiple identities face a more significant number of prejudices and discrimination (Gonzales et al., 2002; Tesfai, 2019). In the findings, participants mentioned being ghosted and blocked once revealing their race to White app users and being told comments such as, "I am not into Black guys." This pattern created the assumption of perceived racism among undergraduate Black gay men using dating apps.

Intersectionality's use in this study revealed concepts that affirm that Black gay men are put down on multiple levels. Racism and discrimination are directed towards Black people in the United States, but most specifically Black men (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Garcia & Sharif, 2015). Racism in this country has been a controversial topic over the past few years with the wrongful murder of innocent Black people such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castro to name a few (Currie, 2015; Hoofnagle, 2020). These instances further confirm that Black Americans

are disproportionality impacted by policy and ethical practices. The lack of restraint used towards Black individuals during encounters with law enforcement, which more frequently result in weapons being fired, and how they are treated in judicial processes represent the magnitude of oppression that Black individuals face. Black gay and trans individuals are more deeply impacted by these systems of oppression as they face this type of oppression in a larger system, within the Black community, and in the LGBTQ+ community which is mostly populated with White gay men (Lane, 1994; McCune, 2008; Mula, n.d.). In these larger systems of structural oppression, Black gay men are subject to a deeply harmful culture. Black gay and trans individuals are more likely to become involved with drugs, alcohol, sexual violence, and additionally are at higher risk of contracting HIV and other serious STIs (Bailey, 2009; Peters, 2015). Black gay men often get involved with the underground ballroom scenes due to their consistent oppression. The ballroom culture is known for being held in grungy spaces like abandoned warehouses, empty buildings, and other vacant spaces where gay men met for vogue battles and drag shows, but which also includes the use of drugs and risky sexual behavior (Bailey, 2009; Glover, 2020). The effects of this history of Black gay men still lingers in their current experiences, and further marginalizes them.

The oppression of Black gay men is also present within higher education (Pelzer 2016; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013). The hegemonic layers of discrimination, racism, and classism impact the Black gay student experience as demonstrated throughout the study. Black gay students face racism from their White peers who also identify as gay, however, while these White peers are marginalized due to their sexual orientation, they still maintain privilege as a result of their race (Berube, 2017; Mula,

n.d.). In predominantly White academic settings Black gay men must navigate societal pressures of what being a Black man is supposed to be. One example is the expectation for Black men to be naturally athletic and inherently masculine (Murty et al., 2014; McCune, 2008). These stereotypes prohibit Black gay students from being themselves while at college and can contribute to their feeling isolated from the campus community.

In short, Black gay men in college are subject to the White perspective of what sexuality and relationships should look like, which contributes to their general oppression. Their involvement within these settings is influenced by the majority. For instance, Black men are often viewed as less desirable, and that concept was affirmed from the participant's recounts of using dating apps while attending a PWI (Bedi, 2015; Choi et al., 2017; Mula, n.d.). Black men do not align with characteristics that gay White men are accustomed to, which impacts how Black gay men are embraced into the general LGBTQ+ community and impacts their dating options at PWIs (Hawkins, 1998; Morrison, 2012; Mula, n.d.). The literature review of this study looks at the origin of dating in higher education which was purely a heteronormative White experience, centered in classism and hierarchy (Bailey 1988; Vine, 1967). Black Americans have been viewed as less than since the beginning of slavery in 1619, so it is logical for the Black perspective and experience to be undermined at PWIs (Freehling, 1972; Galenson, 1981; Morgan, 2005). In order to push back on these hierarchical systems of oppression, higher education institutions need to become aware of the issue that Black gay students face and work to challenge their practices through policy reform, cultivating a community of inclusion, and removing social and academic barriers for the demographic.

Intersectionality was used to more fully understand the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating and hookup apps while attending PWIs (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality highlighted the participants' inability to separate their identities and embrace the interconnectedness of multiple identities, providing them with a unique lived experience. This framework also helps to look at ways to build larger support systems for Black gay males who use dating apps in college and university settings, such as providing Black gay men with more health services resources and increasing representation within the faculty and staff.

### **Implications for Educational Leadership, Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

#### ***Educational Leadership***

The findings of this study provided implications for leadership. Black gay men are a student population that finds difficulty finding their place of belonging or community on campus, which can be better supported through leadership (Palmer & Maramba, 2012; Strayhorn, 2015). Educational leaders at colleges and universities work hard to provide students with a rigorous academic experience and engaging extracurricular activities (Ciulla, 2003; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Students begin to build their identities based on their experiences with their peers and with the general campus environment. In addition, the leadership on campus should begin providing more support for Black gay students. Participants in the study discussed coming out in college, exploring their sexualities, learning about the LGBTQ+ community, and feeling alone in these processes. Participants mentioned wishing they had more mentorship in dealing with isolation they faced on campus and while using dating apps.

While participants shared experiences of becoming engaged with different clubs and organizations on campus from their interactions with other students on dating apps, educational leaders should make more of an effort to create specific opportunities that cater to the needs of Black gay men. Educational leaders must maintain a level of understanding of the social issues that marginalized students experience. They can make an organizational change that can benefit underserved students (Hess, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). As a leader, I rely on the lens of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership enables one's followers to develop personally and professionally while gaining a sense of self-authorship (Karakas & Sarigollu, 2013; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). I identify as a Black gay man who used dating apps while attending a PWI and can empathize with and validate the experiences of many of my participants. Understanding how transformational leadership works allows me to understand how this can benefit Black gay students and support them in their student development.

In a leadership role as it connects to this study, I would demonstrate transformational leadership by creating peer to peer mentorship experiences for undergraduate Black gay men to be mentored by other Black gay men, but I would additionally create a pathway in which Black gay men can receive a professional staff mentor who would provide students with emotional and academic support. By facilitating these experiences through leadership, I can empower the students, but also the staff who are serving as mentors. As an administrator I would also create multiple focus groups to give students the opportunity to discuss any new or reoccurring challenges or adversity they experience on and off-campus. Through these initiatives I would provide students

tools and spaces to become leaders and to speak out on their adversities. When students are empowered to speak their minds, they reach a level of self-authorship (Evans et al., 2010; Patton, 2016; Porosoff, 2018) that helps inform institutional policy (Evans et al., 2010; Nigam, 1986; Patton, 2016; Porosoff, 2018).

Transformational leadership in theory can help assure to undergraduate Black gay men that they have allies on campus and within administration. Hierarchy is an important aspect in leadership, and the feeling that the individuals who make the decisions supports you, can increase a sense of belonging for marginalized students (Ghosh et al., 2001; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Using the transformational leadership model, I would use the student perspective to implement policy change in social areas that may intersect with dating such as policies for clubs and organizations, student handbook, conduct processes, and other areas that impact the student experiences.

### *Policy*

Many college campuses have LGBTQ+ student groups and Black student groups, such as the Black student union and NAACP. However, there is a need for more specific groups that focus on the Black gay experience (Beemyn, 2003; Collins & Sturdevant, 2008; Kuh, 1995). The study's findings suggest that policymakers in educational organizations can develop policies to empower Black men given the experiences of isolation and discrimination they face from their White peers on dating apps.

Educational leaders can use the findings of this study to create a new policy and refine dated policies using this contemporary research and experiences of Black gay students. For example, leaders can use this research to ensure the use of language in their policies is inclusive to all students and that the bullying policies include experiences of

racism on online platforms on their campuses. In addition to revising and creating policy, leaders should create a pipeline program or intentional relationships between health services and students who identify as Black and gay. This relationship will allow Black gay students to have a resource to discuss their experiences on dating apps and help them understand sex theoretically before exploring.

### ***Practice***

Concerning practice, my study suggests a need to continue or increase funding for affinity groups on campus that provide Black gay males with a safe space to establish a connection with the institution and within their social and romantic experiences. Institutions must begin to move past performative solutions for underrepresented students and create change and initiatives that will promote the success of these types of students in a systemic and long-standing way—representation matters both in and out of the classroom. Black gay students need mentors and staff who share their identities working for the institution in various capacities. I noticed in my experiences working at PWIs students of color and gay students gravitate towards me and take an interest in viewing me as a mentor. Students want to connect with professional staff and see professionals who look similar to their relatives, so they do not feel so disconnected from home (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Parasnis & Fischer, 2005). When students connect with educational leaders, they have access to major stakeholders and inform institutional changes that can benefit underrepresented students.

In addition to hiring more diverse faculty and staff, colleges and universities can integrate more training through the human resources department to better equip personnel with frameworks to advise and support Black gay students. Information and training

about Black gay men's student development theory can equip staff with more efficient ways to support the demographic. When students are in different stages of development, their social and emotional needs vary; by understanding the multiple stages, faculty and staff can empathize with the student's experiences (Dugan & Yurman, 2011; Evans et al., 2010). Black students' needs are unique compared to White students, so training for faculty and staff will help create a more inclusive campus community (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Kresl, 2017).

### **Consideration for Future Research**

Future research related to this topic should replicate this study to find similar themes and experiences of other Black gay students. Other adaptations of this general topic can include the experiences of undergraduate Black lesbians' use of dating apps and other marginalized groups' experiences using dating apps at PWIs. Another topic to be explored in the future is to view the perceptions White gay students have when interacting with Black gay men on dating apps. This study focused on the Black gay male experience, where I discovered the prevalent culture of racism, fetishism, and other types of discrimination through dating app use. Research presented in the literature review of this study suggests that Black students are more open to interracial dating than White students based on other studies (Bowman, 2012; Henry, 2008; Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Ross, 2004). The literature review also discussed the prevalence of interracial dating in the history of romantic relationships, and how they have evolved over time (Field et al., 2013; Rose & Firmin, 2013; Ross, 2004). Learning about the White gay male perspective of this topic would allow researchers to confirm further or contest some of these experiences or even understand if the discrimination is overt or covert.

Another theme developed through this research was how dating apps were many participants' introduction to sexual health education and learning about sexual positionality within gay culture. The resistance towards homosexuality is prominent within the Black community and hinders Black gay males' ability to learn about sex at home (McCune, 2008; Washington & Wall, 2006). Future research should work to advance these types of studies to discover ways that Black gay students can proactively learn about positionality and gay lingo, the increased risk of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and HIV within the Black gay community, and practicing safe sex. This study helps create a broader discussion about issues experienced by Black gay college students and ways that colleges and universities can support these individuals in an impactful way.

### **Recommendations**

Throughout the study, I developed themes that represented the participants' experiences to get an in-depth understanding of their worldview in using dating apps at a PWI. Participants shared various topics such as facing racism and sexual fetishism, making friends, and learning a new language specific to the gay community. In learning more about the themes and the overall essence of the Black gay dating app experience, I developed four recommendations for organizations that design gay dating apps and institutional leaders for colleges and universities. The four recommendations are race-based preference removal on apps, zero-tolerance cyber discrimination policy, LGBTQ+ sexual health education for Black gay students, and developing peer mentoring and networking groups for LGBTQ+ students. These recommendations will help to inform best practices that help Black gay males navigate using gay dating apps at PWIs in a healthy and supportive setting.

### ***Race-Based Preference Removal on Apps***

Racism and discrimination are issues that Black gay men face on dating apps and within the LGBTQ+ community when attempting to date and navigate other social settings (Mula, n.d.; Sobel & Clark, 2014). I believe that there is a substantial difference between preference and prejudice. Preference is defined as having a greater liking over one thing that supersedes others (Fisman, 2008; Sobel & Clark, 2014), while prejudice is defined as assumptions or opinions based on someone or something based on their association with a specialized group or community (Cox, 2012; Lehrman, 2006). In the dating app world, many users normalize having preferences based on physical appearance and use filters to narrow down their prospects who meet their specific criteria (Fisman, 2008; Sobel & Clark, 2014). Being attracted to a specific body type or personality is appropriate on an individual level. However, that crosses the line when there is an overt and advertised form of exclusion towards any person or group based on physical characteristics. For example, many participants shared being sought out during the interview process due to assumptions of having a larger penis or being denied after showing their face pictures. Many users are not interested in dating Black guys (Groves, 2015; Lang, 2014; Timmermans, 2020). Enabling users to filter based on race perpetuates a larger sense of discrimination that Black gay men experience within the LGBTQ+ community.

This first recommendation from this study is not for institutions of higher education but for dating app creators who are looking for ways to make their platforms more inclusive. Removing race-based preferences on dating apps will allow users of color to navigate the programs without feeling alienated or devalued (Penney, 2014;

Mula, n.d.). The homosexual male sector of the LGBTQ+ community is dominated by homogenous cisgender White men who are viewed as conventionally handsome, and these standards or ideals, prevalent within the community, isolate the individuals who fail to meet these standards (Hsu, 2021; Tan et al., 2013). Throughout the interview process of this study, participants shared that White users would have comments such as “no Blacks” or “no fats, no fems, no Blacks, no Asians” listed on their bios or even as their usernames. By removing the preference feature, users who are more prone to discriminate against racial minorities would no longer have the outlet to do so.

### ***Zero Tolerance Cyber Discrimination Policy***

The next recommendation is for colleges and universities to reinform and revisit their policies to support Black gay men and other minorities within the LGBTQ+ community. Many colleges and universities have an anti-bullying policy that can be applied to instances when students are bullied on the web that covers general harassment, but there is room to create a policy explicitly supporting underrepresented groups so that they begin to feel a sense of visibility and security (Pascoe, 2013; Weissman, 1997). Colleges and universities are consistently reviewing and revising their student handbooks and conduct processes to ensure that institutional policies are being appropriately represented and comply with state laws and standards (Brackett, 2011; Lindsay, 2015; Weissman, 1997). During this process, there are opportunities for institutions to review the policies that do not provide protections or seemingly exclude LGBTQ+ students and students of color. Racist and homophobic comments and messages are categorized as hate crimes, which should clearly be stated in the student handbook and included in educational training for students, faculty, and staff (Brudholm, 2015; Reiddy, 2002). In

addition to creating clear language as to what constitutes discrimination, institutions must distinguish the magnitude in which bullying impacts minoritized groups compared to the majority.

### ***LGBTQ+ Sexual Health Education for Black Gay Students***

Literature suggests that the Black community has a historic aversion towards homosexuality, including their homosexual family members (Stein, 2005; Young, 2011; Washington & Wall, 2006). Due to the Black community's opposition to gay and lesbian family members, incoming students from that demographic are less likely to have experienced a sex education or health education conversation from a parent (McBride, 2005; Seaton, 2018). This knowledge provides colleges and universities with the opportunities to create learning modules specifically for Black gay students to learn about sexual health and education related to them. Black men are more likely to contract HIV and other STIs, including chlamydia and herpes; these statistics are vital for young Black gay men to know about, especially where they are beginning to explore sex (George et al., 2012; Strayhorn, 2015). Providing Black gay students information about condoms, contraceptives, and Truvada can make a difference in how they engage in sexual exploration and minimize their risks of contracting STIs (Jack, 2016; Landovitz et al., 2013; Macapagal et al., 2018).

### ***Develop Peer Mentoring and Network Groups for LGBTQ+ Students***

A way for colleges and universities to support Black gay men is to create an opportunity for Black students and LGBTQ+ students to feel supported and welcomed on campus is to create a peer-to-peer mentorship experiences. College students are more likely to connect with and listen to others (Ueno & Gentile, 2015). Incoming students

often organically build relationships with upper-level students whom they view as a mentor or older sibling in many ways (Good et al., 2000; Ueno & Gentile, 2015). By intentionally creating mentorship opportunities for underrepresented students, they would be more likely to be retained at the institution and contribute to overall campus diversity (Bowman, 2012; Good et al., 2000). As a program of this level continues to grow, it will create space for underrepresented students to foster a sense of community and connect with students, faculty, and staff who have similar lived experiences.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are common occurrences in research and were expected in this study. Due to the phenomenological nature of the study with the specific use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, it was difficult to generalize participant experiences. Additionally, the study was conducted at one institution, so generalizing the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men at PWI's was limited to the students' experiences attending the particular one used for this study. In the future, the study may be expanded with the use of more participants, and also recruiting participants from multiple PWIs, which will allow the experiences to be much more generalizable. During the study, two significant limitations were sexual compatibility and class standing or the exclusion of graduate students. Participants shared experiences of racism, sexualization, and fetishism, which results in a significant theme, but the sexual preferences of White app users could also be a limitation in this study.

### ***Sexual Compatibility***

One common theme shared by participants during this study was the presence of discrimination that they felt was based on their race and ethnicities. On the gay dating

apps, users can set their own preferences for the type of person they were interested in; additionally, they can see the preferences of other users. One major limitation was that we could not be sure that the limited attraction for the participants was solely based on their race, however, research shows that White gay students are less likely to be interested in Black students in a general sense (Childs, 2005; Gullickson, 2006). Sexual compatibility was not discussed prominently throughout the study but could potentially be a reason why some participants are avoided or viewed as less desirable. Research about homosexual hookup encounters shows that more dominant positions are typically more interested in finding a submissive partner. This area could be included in future research to understand the role it has in the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men.

### ***Undergraduate vs. Graduate Students***

Another limitation that was present during the study was the academic standing of the participants. The study focused exclusively on the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men; however, Black gay graduate students also have experiences that prompt them to live on-campus such as graduate assistantships. The study allowed undergraduate participants from all class standings but excluded graduate students. Graduate students tend to be older in age and focused on different parts of their lives but could have potentially sought out social engagement through gay dating apps while on campus. Including graduate students may have provided a larger sample size and new themes specific to Black gay students in the paraprofessional stage of their career.

### **Conclusion/Summary**

This study focused on the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who used dating and hookup apps while attending a PWI. The experience of Black gay men in the

United States related to racism and discrimination was present in the study and within their online romantic experiences with White college men (Mula, n.d.; Wu & Ward, 2018; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). The discrimination that exists toward Black gay men within the LGBTQ+ community was a reoccurring experience that shaped their interactions with other gay men both romantically and socially. The essence of the study revealed that Black gay men's experiences on dating apps at PWIs are filled with racism and sexual fetishism but, in contrast, are also filled with opportunities to make friends and become educated on sexual health and wellness (Groves et al., 2015; Seaton, 2018; Strayhorn, 2015). The negativity of racism and fetishism did not exclude the presence of building friendships and self-exploration. The existence of this dichotomy is what best captures the participants' lived experiences regarding the phenomena.

This study looked at the origin of dating within higher education and connected it to the emergence of hookup culture, which is a common experience among college students (Bogle, 2007; Buhi et al., 2010; Vine, 1976). In understanding the nature of hookup culture, the study specifically investigated the role that dating apps play in hooking up for underrepresented groups, particularly Black gay men. Dating trends that exist while using dating apps among heterosexual students are frequently explored, but there was a gap present in the experiences of Black gay men, which this research helps to narrow (Choi et al., 2017; Wu & Ward, 2018). Colleges and universities support students' academic and co-curricular experiences; however, students' social development needs to become a priority (Clarke, 1994; Evans et al., 2010). Student dating patterns relate to their social development in college. Their ability to connect with other students,

romantic or otherwise, can make the difference in how Black gay students are retained at PWIs (Bogle, 2008; Strayhorn & Tillman-Kelly, 2013).

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

Hi my name is Tevis Bryant. I am a current fourth year doctoral student in Rowan University's Educational Leadership program. I am completing this research guided by my chair, Dr. MaryBeth Walpole. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men and their experiences with gay dating app use. As a reminder this study is voluntary, and you are participating of your own free-will. There will be no compensation connected to this study, however, you will be provided with the findings prior to the study being published. This interview may result in a follow up conversation, should a topic present itself that needs further elaborating. During the interview, I will be asking questions specific to your dating app use while residing on-campus. Lastly, this interview will be recorded so that I can review our conversation during the transcription process. All the recordings and documents collected from the interview will be kept and stored where only I can access them.

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Interview Participant:**

Questions:

1. When was the first time you were introduced to gay dating apps and what were some of your initial thoughts about the platforms?
2. Tell me about a time you used a gay dating app while on campus and what was that experience like for you?
3. What is it like when communicating with students or other campus community members on dating apps?
4. How does the use of gay dating apps relate to your campus involvement and experience as a student?
5. How do you think the experiences of Black gay men who use dating apps are different from others?
6. What are some experiences you have had on gay dating apps that were centered around your race or ethnicity?
7. How important is it for you to date other Black gay students and why?
8. Tell me a story of a time when you communicated or met up with a White gay man as a result from using a dating app, what was that experience like?
9. What are your thoughts on dating White gay male students and the general concept of interracial dating?
10. How do you think that campus support services can be improved to support Black gay men with their experiences using gay dating apps?

## Appendix B

### Consent Form



Please read and sign this consent form. You will be provided a digital copy via email upon my receipt of this document. If you have any additional questions, please contact me at (856) 392-4352 or [tevis.bryant91@gmail.com](mailto:tevis.bryant91@gmail.com)

I \_\_\_\_\_ (*print full name*), give my consent to participate in the study of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps at predominantly White institutions being conducted by doctoral student Tevis Bryant. I acknowledge that my involvement in this study is completely voluntary and that I will be answering questions of my personal experiences related to the topic.

Additionally, I understand and agree to having the interview recorded for the researcher to review and use while completing the study. I understand that I can withdraw myself from the study at any point without penalty or retaliation from the researcher.

In order to ensure confidentiality during this process, Mr. Tevis Bryant will be identifying my shared experiences using an alias in place of my birth name. All the information I provide the researcher with will be kept in a safe and secure location that only he has access to. I am aware that all of my information gathered will be completely discarded at the conclusion of the study.

I understand that my initial interview may last between 30 and 90 minutes and if more information is required, Mr. Tevis Bryant will schedule a follow up interview that may last up to 45 minutes. I am aware that I may refuse to answer any question that without consequence.

If I would like a copy of the study, I will email Mr. Tevis Bryant at:  
[Tevis.bryant91@gmail.com](mailto:Tevis.bryant91@gmail.com)

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol



**Title of Project:** The experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating and hookup apps while attending a predominantly White institution.

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. MaryBeth Walpole

**Funding Source(s):** Department Funded

#### 1. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps while they attend residential colleges and universities. Black gay men face numerous challenges while attempting to date in the LGBTQ community, many of which are related to their race and ethnicities. Black male students face challenges on college campuses such as academic achievement gaps, racial discrimination, and financial hardships. While it is known that Black men face issues in college, this study shows a new experience for Black gay men specifically and how their romantic relationships on dating apps connect to their student experience. Understanding the challenges with college dating for Black gay men can help college administrators improve support services for this demographic while additionally providing social engagement opportunities to assist in their efforts.

### *1.1 Objectives*

The results from this qualitative study will provide opportunities for colleges and universities to better support marginalized communities. Black men in college are historically at a disadvantage on academic environments, and these disadvantages are heightened when homosexuality is added as an intersection of their identity. LGBTQ students and Black students enter the college environment with a limited number of resources to ensure they receive a positive experience. Through the findings of this research essential support services from academic affairs, student affairs, and counseling services can be identified and developed.

Potential programs that can be developed would be based on what themes are discovered throughout the interview process. Mentorship programs and development of a Black LGBTQ social student group are examples of new initiatives that could be developed from findings. Counseling and mental health services for students of color are usually absent or lacking on college campuses. One expectation for this study is that results will shed light on the specific emotional and psychological needs for gay students of color. Having a broader understanding of undergraduate Black gay males dating practices on apps can result in several outcomes, but most importantly create a more welcoming and inclusive campus environment for underrepresented students.

## **2. Background/Significance of Study**

Since its inception, higher education has been the environment where dating of many types has been welcomed and even sometimes developed into long-term relationships or

even marriage (Golden & Katz, 1999; Vine, 1976). Over time the traditional model of dating has evolved into hookups and transactional sexual encounters. Hookups are defined as sexual encounters that are casual experiences which involve sexual activity (Bogle, 2008; Owen & Fincham, 2011). College students have frequently engaged in hookup culture, which has become increasingly convenient with the help of dating apps (Bogle, 2007; Buhi, Marhefka & Hoban, 2010). Dating apps are often used for hooks and other networking opportunities among college students (Clemens, Atkin & Krishnan, 2015; Wu & Ward, 2018). There are multiple studies regarding the dating patterns of Black men and Black women, however, research is limited to the dating efforts of Black gay men. The lack of research prompted my interest in Black gay men's use on dating apps in addition to my personal experience using these programs.

The significance of this study to understand the experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps while attending predominantly White institutions. The findings will equip institutions of higher education on methods to best support Black gay men socially and to develop equitable engagement opportunities for these students. Black gay men are known to experience discrimination within the LGBTQ community and in family settings, this study can help support students going through similar issues in addition to having a better understanding on Black gay dating practices in education. This study will begin to close the gap of knowledge between university administrators and their understanding of Black gay men's social experiences on college campuses.

### **3. Research Design and Methodology**

In this study I will be investigating the lived experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps at a Mid-Atlantic public university. The nature of my research is qualitative as I plan to understand phenomena that impact this community with respect to the specific use of these social media platforms. Qualitative research was the best method in that it allows the research sample or participants to serve as the experts in the study, and I am merely observing their perspectives. Qualitative research seeks an in-depth understanding of what an individual part of a unique community experiences with the researcher controlling the environment and activities being examined (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Kuper, Lingard & Levinson, 2008). Qualitative research is reflective which allows the researcher and participate to discuss several aspects of experiences that happen throughout time and situationally (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

My specific qualitative method will be phenomenology. Phenomenology is designed to fully immerse the researcher into the lived experiences of participants, which aligns itself with the qualitative model (Putney, Green, Dixon & Kelly, 1999). Phenomenology is the approach in qualitative research that helps identify common issues that may inherently exist within a community and are only experienced by that population (Langdridge, 2007; Chang, Fung & Chien, 2013). The phenomenon that is present and that will be researched in this study is the intersection of Black gay men attending a predominantly White institution and what the commonalities are for the unique experiences of using gay dating apps. The study is limited due to the barriers such as reason for gay dating app use and the use of gay dating apps being a requirement for participation in the study. To fully understand the experiences of Black gay men in this

setting, the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the specific phenomenological inquiry is essential to the study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allows the researcher to investigate the participants accounts of their lived experiences in great detail (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). IPA allows the researcher to enter the world of the participants and share their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2009). IPA contributes to an in-depth understanding of a populations intersectionalities and those various aspects that contribute to their experiences (Allan & Eatough, 2016). Using IPA as my specific method will guide my study and help me broadly understand the lived experiences of undergraduate Black gay men on dating apps while enrolled in a predominantly White institution. Due to the nature of this study, I will use intersectionality as the theoretical framework. Intersectionality is the most appropriate framework because this demographic is a minority due to both race and sectional orientation. Additionally, other intersectionalities may be discovered during the interview process such as socioeconomic status, and physical or mental disabilities. This framework will provide a lens of how intersectionalities impact the participants on a micro level and then provide context of how these differences impact these individuals on a macro level.

### ***3.1 Duration of Study***

Once granted IRB approval, the duration of the study will be at a maximum of 6 months. The interview process will last between 1 and ½ month to 2 months.

### ***3.2 Study Sites***

This study will occur solely at a Mid-Atlantic Public University.

### ***3.3 Justification of Sample Size***

I will be using the purposeful sampling to initiate my research because I have a specific population that I am seeking to research. Purposeful sampling indicates that the researcher controls the settings, participants and other activities that aligns with the researcher's goals (Maxwell, 2013). My targeted sample size is 6-8 undergraduate Black gay men who use dating apps during their time on-campus. During this study, the participants will be considered the experts on the topic of discussion, their lived experiences will allow me to connect their responses to my research questions and begin closing the gap of knowledge in this area. In addition to purposeful sampling, I will also be using snowball sampling as my population is very specific and finding members of this demographic may be challenging without additional support. Snowball sampling is known to be a referral technique that allows researchers to draw from a larger pool of participants (Maxwell, 2013; Heckathorn, 2011). I will be asking my initial participants for additional names and contact information for others who meet the qualifications of this study. My goal is to gain at least 18 participants to ensure a robust array of findings.

### ***3.4 Subject selection and Enrollment Considerations***

The Mid-Atlantic Public University currently has 16,120 undergraduate students and of this number 801 are identified as Black males. There is no current information regarding the exact number of Black gay men enrolled due to multiple factors including

refusal to disclose one's orientation, and individuals who may still be closeted. Out of the 801 Black men enrolled in undergraduate studies, finding between 6 to 8 Black gay men is not unreasonable.

The subjects must be actively using gay dating apps or have used them once during their time at the university. Previous use is equally valuable as I am not looking to study use over a period of time, but the experiences of the population whenever they are engaging on the social media platforms such as Grindr or Jack'd. Once my participants have been selected and agree to participate, I will provide them with informed consent documents prior to scheduling interviews.

### ***3.5.1 Inclusion Material***

- Currently attend a full-time undergraduate program.
- Reside in an on-campus apartment or residence hall.
- Identify as Black or African American.
- Have used or are currently using gay dating apps while at college including but not limited to Grindr or Scruff.
- Participants must identify as gay or homosexual.
- Sex assigned at birth and gender expression must be male.

### ***3.5.2 Exclusion Material***

- Any student who does not identify as a Black gay male as this is the demographic being studied.

- Any student identifying with any sexual orientation outside of homosexuality. Transgender, Bisexual, Pansexual, or any other identity is not applicable in this study regardless of race.
- Any student who has not used gay dating applications while enrolled in college.
- Non-residential undergraduate Black gay students. I want to focus on the use of apps for students who have the on campus living experience.
- Part-time students. I want students in the study who are fully immersed with the campus community and spend a lot of time on campus.
- Any students under 18 as dating apps require individuals to be ages 18 or older to create a dating profile.

### ***3.5.3 Subject Recruitment***

I will be recruiting my participants through purposeful sampling. I will contact various departments on campus that either provide support for minority students such as EOF and minority student services, and student groups such as NAACP and Pride, to potentially gain my goal of 6-8 participants. I must ensure these students have used gay dating apps such as Grindr and Scruff during their time on-campus. Once I receive students interested in participating in the study, I will begin a secondary wave of recruitment called snowball sampling, where I will ask my pool of participants to provide me with referrals to increase the total number of participants. Once I have identified all my participants, I will review my expectations, the nature and purpose of the study, and

their involvement and rights as participants. I will then provide them with the consent form and advise them that our interviews will be recorded and conducted through ZOOM to limit human during the current public health crisis.

#### ***3.5.4 Consent Procedures***

Each participant will receive a consent form once they are selected and agree to participate. The consent form identifies any risks associated with the study, audio recording information, and participant's rights throughout the entire process. Forms will be signed and then scanned virtually. Participants will receive a digital copy of their signed forms.

#### ***3.5.5 Subject Cost and Compensation***

There will be no cost or compensation for participants. Participants are involved in this study of their own free will, understanding their involvement is considered an act of volunteerism.

### **4. Study Variables**

#### ***4.1 Independent variables or Interventions***

Gay dating apps and Black gay student lived accounts are considered the main variables of the study. This data will be gathered through interviews and the document collection process.

#### ***4.2 Risk of harm***

There are no predetermined risks associated with this study.

#### ***4.3 Benefits of the study***

There are suspected benefits for students from this demographic. It is anticipated that new programs, initiatives, and goals will be created to support Black gay males in college who are navigating romantic relationships and other social experiences.

Assumed benefits from this policy are updated policies on the treatment of gay Black men on college campuses, which could subsequently benefit other LGBTQ and Black students. This study can potentially normalize the use of dating apps on college campuses and value the social practice as multiple student demographics engage on those platforms. This study will also benefit to the current research on interracial gay dating practices.

### **5. Data handling and study analysis**

My interviews will be transcribed and coded as part of the research project. The first cycle of coding in my study is in vivo coding. This method of coding focusing on direct quotes from each participant. This phase will be followed by my second cycle of coding which will be pattern coding. Pattern coding is the process where themes are developed, and findings are condensed to reviewed data much more efficiently. The coding will be concluding with the creation of my code book that will be readers translate

my findings and connect it to the broader research questions and theoretical framework. I will keep all files and documents in a folder that only I have access to as the primary researcher.

## **6. Data and safety monitoring**

All material collected during the interview including but not limited to documents,

transcripts, and recorded materials will be stored at the personal residence of the researcher. No one else will have access to the items stored to ensure participant confidentiality.

## **7. Reporting results**

### ***7.1 Individual results***

Participants will be provided with findings from the study at each individual's request. I will additionally review the meaning of the findings upon further request.

## Appendix D

### IRB Approval Letter

**DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier:** FWA00007111  
**IRB Chair Person:** Dr. Ane Johnson  
**IRB Director:** Eric Gregory  
**Effective Date:** May 25, 2021

#### Notice of Approval - Initial

**Study ID:** PRO-2021-293

**Title:** The experiences of undergraduate Black gay men who use dating and hook up apps while attending a predominantly White institution

**Principal Investigator:** MaryBeth Walpole

**Study Coordinator:** Tevis Bryant

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Submission Status:** Approved

**Approval Date:** May 25, 2021

**Expiration Date:** May 24, 2022

**Approval Cycle:** 12 months

**Continuation Review Required:** Yes

**Review Type:** Expedited

**Expedited Category:** 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Subjects:** 297

**Pregnant Women, Human Fetus, and Neonates Code:** N/A

**Pediatric/Children Code:** N/A

**Prisoner(s) – Biomedical or Behavioral:** N/A

**Protocol:** Interview Protocol - 5.6.2021.do

**Recruitment Materials:** [Bryant Recruitment.docx](#) [BryantRecruitmentFlyer.pdf](#)  
**Study Instruments:** [Interview Questions - 5.6.2021.d](#) [Bryant Document collection prot](#)  
**Consent:** [Bryant Consent Form.docx](#)

**Study Performance Sites:** Rowan University, Educational Leadership Department, 201 Mullica Hill Rd. Glassboro, NJ

**ALL APPROVED INVESTIGATOR(S) MUST COMPLY WITH THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Conduct the research in accordance with the protocol, applicable laws and regulations, and the principles of research ethics as set forth in the Belmont Report.
- 2a. Continuing Review: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses in approval, submit a continuation application at least eight weeks before the study expiration date.
- 2b. Progress Report: Approval is valid until the protocol expiration date shown above. To avoid lapses, an annual progress report is required at least 21 days prior to the expiration date.
- 3a. Expiration of IRB Approval: If IRB approval expires, effective the date of expiration and until the continuing review approval is issued: All research activities must stop unless the IRB finds that it is in the best interest of individual subjects to continue. (This determination shall be based on a separate written request from the PI to the IRB.) No new subjects may be enrolled and no samples/charts/surveys may be collected, reviewed, and/or analyzed.
- 3b. Human Subjects Research Training: Proper training in the conduct of human subjects research must be current and not expired. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator and the investigator to complete training when expired. Any modifications and renewals will not be approved until training is not expired and current.
4. Amendments/Modifications/Revisions: If you wish to change any aspect of this study after the approval date mentioned in this letter, including but not limited to, study procedures, consent form(s), investigators, advertisements, the protocol document, investigator drug brochure, or accrual goals, you are required to obtain IRB review and approval prior to implementation of these changes unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. This policy is also applicable to progress reports.
5. Unanticipated Problems: Unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB Office  
(45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online  
at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>
6. Protocol Deviations and Violations: Deviations from/violations of the approved study protocol must be reported to the IRB Office (45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 312, 812) as required, in the appropriate time as specified in the attachment online  
at: <https://research.rowan.edu/officeofresearch/compliance/irb/index.html>

7. Consent/Assent: The IRB has reviewed and approved the consent and/or assent process, waiver and/or alteration described in this protocol as required by 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50, 56, (if FDA regulated research). Only the versions of the documents included in the approved process may be used to document informed consent and/or assent of study subjects; each subject must receive a copy of the approved form(s); and a copy of each signed form must be filed in a secure place in the subject's medical/patient/research record.
8. Completion of Study: Notify the IRB when your study has been completed or stopped for any reason. Neither study closure by the sponsor nor the investigator removes the obligation for submission of timely continuing review application, progress report or final report.
9. The Investigator(s) did not participate in the review, discussion, or vote of this protocol.
10. Letter Comments: There are no additional comments.

**CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE: This email communication may contain private, confidential, or legally privileged information intended for the sole use of the designated and/or duly authorized recipients(s). If you are not the intended recipient or have received this email in error, please notify the sender immediately by email and permanently delete all copies of this email including all attachments without reading them. If you are the intended recipient, secure the contents in a manner that conforms to all applicable state and/or federal requirements related to privacy and confidentiality of such information.**

## Appendix E

### Audio Recording Consent Form

#### ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Tevis Bryant. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape the interview as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study. The recording(s) will be used for analysis by research team.

I will be transcribing the audiotape and then look for emerging themes and patterns that comes out of the interview. The recording(s) will include your name and the answers to the interview questions. However, your identity will not be used during the analysis of data as previously agreed.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file on my personal laptop that requires having a password to access information. The recording will be retained until the end of the study. Once the study is completed, I will be discarding the recordings. Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_