

**Teach Me How to Love: Constructions of Heterosexual Romantic Relationships on Black  
Relationship Blogs**

BY

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THESIS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Barriers and Facilitators of Marriage.....	2
1.2 Affordances of Blogs.....	5
1.3 Socialization About Romantic Relationships.....	7
1.3.1 Media as a Socialization Agent.....	9
2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND ASSOCIATED LITERATURE.....	16
2.1 Script Theory.....	16
2.1.1 Existing African American Relationship Scripts.....	17
2.1.1.1 Sex-Related Scripts.....	17
2.1.1.2 Sustainability Scripts.....	18
2.1.1.3 Conflict and Resolution Scripts.....	19
2.1.1.4 Trust Scripts.....	20
2.1.1.5 Commitment Scripts.....	20
2.1.1.6 Support Scripts.....	21
2.1.1.7 Communication.....	21
2.1.1.8 Growth/Reflection.....	22
2.2 Intersectionality.....	22
2.2.1 Relevant Ideologies and Contextual Factors Considered.....	25
2.2.1.1 Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity.....	26
2.2.1.2 Masculinity.....	26
2.2.1.3 Colorism.....	28
2.2.1.4 Power Dynamics.....	28
2.2.1.5 Femininity and Media Portrayals.....	29
3. OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STUDY.....	32
4. METHOD.....	36
4.1 Blog Selection.....	36
4.2 Procedure.....	39
5. ANALYTIC PROCEDURE.....	40
5.1 Discourse Analysis Framework.....	40
5.2 Systematic Analysis of the Blog Data.....	41
5.3 Trustworthiness of the Data Analysis.....	42
5.3.1 Researcher Self-Disclosure.....	44
5.3.2 Statement of Biases.....	47
5.3.3 Reflexive Process.....	48

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	50
6.1 Defining Maturity.....	52
6.2 The Growth Mindset.....	53
6.3 Emotional and Behavioral Contexts of Maturity.....	57
6.3.1 Communication.....	58
6.3.1.1 Setting and Managing Expectations.....	58
6.3.1.2 Communication for Intimacy.....	65
6.3.1.3 Conflict.....	67
6.3.2 Financial Maturity.....	72
6.3.3 Parenthood.....	73
6.3.3.1 Fatherhood Discourse as a Cultural Blind Spot.....	77
6.4 Enhancing Awareness of Cultural Blind Spots.....	81
6.4.1 Additional Patterns of Heteronormativity and Heterosexual Ideology.....	81
6.4.1.1 Street Harassment and Sexual Assault.....	82
6.4.1.2 Redefining the Relationship Expert.....	84
6.4.2 Colorism.....	85
6.4.3 Inter-Mixing: Interracial and Interfaith Relationships.....	86
6.4.4 Help-Seeking.....	89
6.4.4.1 Fertility Issues.....	90
7. CONCLUSIONS.....	91
REFERENCES.....	97
VITA.....	113

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>TABLE</u>		<u>PAGE</u>
I.	DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BLOGS INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS.....	38



## SUMMARY

This study explored the discursive construction of heterosexual romantic relationships on 13 popular Black relationship blogs over a three-month period using scripting theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) as conceptual frameworks and employing an ideological discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1985). The findings from this study indicate that the blog medium serves as a space for bloggers to confront and correct the problems they see within African American intimate relationships. Overall, the analysis revealed that these blogs serve as a space that empowers both bloggers and readers to challenge or uphold existing relationship scripts and ideologies. There was one schema that connected all of the discourse on the blogs - growing into maturity, both individually and as a couple. That is, improving the quality of intimate relationships by investing in emotional and behavioral development.

The analysis revealed that blogs are used as a tool to empower readers to subvert existing heterosexual and heteronormative ideologies that serve as barriers to healthy, sustainable, relationships. The blogs were also used to educate readers about and alter prevalent discourse around cultural blind spots (biases and misconceptions) that impact relationship patterns within the broader African American population such as colorism, absentee fatherhood, street harassment and sexual assault, interracial and interfaith relationships, and help-seeking.

By encouraging readers to adopt these new ways of thinking and behaving, the bloggers articulate that the reader possesses the power to improve their current conditions and/or catalyze change if other people need to be involved. The advice given within the blog posts serve as the tools needed to enhance the capacity of the readers to wield this power.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage rates have been in decline over the last 10 years for the U.S. Population. The most recent marriage statistics in the U.S. indicate that the decline is particularly acute for African Americans. Currently African Americans have the lowest rates of marriage and lowest probability of ever getting married compared to all other groups in the U.S. (Goodwin, Gill, & Chandra, 2009). Specifically, recent census estimates reveal that only 28.7% of African Americans report being currently married compared to 51.2% of European Americans, 55.8% of Asian Americans, and 48.7% of Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). African Americans also have the highest rates of divorced and separated members in the population at 16.1%, compared with the other three major racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. — 13.3%, 6.7%, and 11.9% respectively for European Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The Centers for Disease Control’s National Survey on Family Growth, further predicts that African Americans have only a 63% chance of ever being married by the age of 40, while for European Americans the probability is 90% (Goodwin, Gill, & Chandra, 2009).

Beyond the racial disparity in marriage rates, African Americans face a great deal of other health disparities related to romantic relationships including the highest rates of infections for all STIs (Centers for Disease Control, 2012), high rates of out-of wedlock and teen pregnancy (Martin et al., 2012), and high rates of single parenthood or uninvolved fathers (Lane et al., 2004; Ohalete, 2007).

Over the past two decades researchers have tried repeatedly to understand why these disparities between African Americans and particularly European Americans exist. Researchers have drawn upon several structural and socioeconomic explanations to explain these disparities,

including inequalities in educational attainment, exposure to violence, incarceration, substance use, and poverty related factors such as access to healthcare and use of public health systems. Additionally, a great deal of research on individual and interpersonal characteristics such as attitudes towards risky behaviors, and peer norms have been conducted to explain many of the sex-related health disparities. While these factors may explain much of the variance in these outcomes, they do not provide a full explanation for the persistent gaps. Researchers have called for a more holistic approach to examining these disparities. Specifically, researchers have indicated the need for a better understanding of the meaning African Americans ascribe to relationship behaviors, in an effort to understand how and why the behaviors persist (Bowleg, Lucas & Tschann, 2004; Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009).

### 1.1 **Barriers and Facilitators of Marriage**

Within the research literature, several explanations for the low marriage rates among African Americans have been offered. Researchers have found that in spite of the low marriage rates, African Americans do value and desire marriage (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1998; Crissy, 2005; Lincoln, Taylor, & Jackson 2008), however there are sociocultural factors that serve as barriers to marriage (see Pinderhughes 2002; and Banks & Gatlin, 2005 for an extensive review). Two of the most frequently discussed barriers include availability of eligible Black men (sex-ratio imbalance) and economic status.

The sex-ratio imbalance refers to the low number of Black men available to marry the large population of single Black women. This imbalance has been caused by an education gap (King, 1999; Burton & Tucker, 2009), high rates of incarceration, homicide, STIs, drugs, and mortality (Ganong, Coleman, Thompson, & Goodwin-Watkins, 1996), as well as Black men seeking women of other races (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000). Researchers have argued that the

imbalance results in low incentives to marry or commit to a relationship among African American men (King 1999; Banks & Gatlin, 2005). Subsequently, women have grown to accept infidelity and long-term relationships without marriage as normative (Bowleg et al., 2004; Banks & Gatlin, 2005).

With regard to economics, African Americans young and old have reported that financial stability and educational and career attainment are important precursors to marriage (Manning & Smock, 1995; Packer-Williams, 2009). However, low educational attainment rates among African American men have led to a persistent and growing education gap between men and women (Pinderhughes 2002; Burton & Tucker, 2009). The education gap presents a significant barrier to Black marriages because it challenges traditional gender roles. Research has shown that both men and women value and desire traditional gender roles in which the man is the breadwinner and the authoritative figure (Browning & Miller, 1999; Pinderhughes, 2002; Burton & Tucker, 2009). At the same time, the education gap has created a situation in which career attainment and elevation of socioeconomic status among women has exceeded that of men. This has led to an increase in the number of women who serve as the breadwinner of the family; therefore, creating a cognitive dissonance and power struggle for both men and women that results in role ambiguity (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004) and role anxiety (Pinderhughes, 2002). This conflict often makes it difficult for Black men and women to sustain lasting relationships (Pinderhughes, 2002). Additionally, the education and career gap has resulted in low incentives for Black women to marry, as doing so does not provide the traditional socioeconomic benefits that White women achieve (Ganong et. al., 1996; Burton & Tucker, 2009).

Some researchers have pointed out that when taking cohabitation into consideration, the gap between Blacks and Whites in long-term, stable relationships decreases significantly (Manning & Smock, 1995; Raley & Raley, 2009). Because of this and the barriers to marriage faced by African Americans, several researchers have argued that African Americans should not be held to the same expectation of marriage as Whites and that the emphasis should shift from that of marriage to long-term stable relationships (Manning & Smock, 1995; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1998; Kiernan 2004).

Much research on the marriage gap has focused on factors that inhibit marriage, without due consideration of factors that promote marriage and stable relationships. The little research that does exist reveals that factors such as social support from kinship and social networks (Bryant & Conger 1999; Felmler, 2001; Cavanagh, 2007), church attendance (LaTaillade, 2006; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007) and the type of support that partners provide one another, specifically collaboration in decision making, friendship, autonomy, and cooperation (Pinderhughes, 2002) play a role in the stability of relationships over time.

In this study I proposed that in addition to understanding many of the socioeconomic and individual factors that shape attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs, it is also important to understand how African American adults conceptualize romantic relationships and how these conceptualizations impact relationship behaviors and beliefs. Little research has examined social constructions of relationships by African Americans. Moreover, no published research has yet examined how forms of new media, particularly blogs, are shifting or maintaining existing social constructions of relationships for African American adults. The purpose of this study is to start filling this research gap.

## 1.2 Affordances of Blogs

Blogs have become a dominant medium for information dissemination and gathering for web users. Short for weblog, a blog is a repository of commentary, links to websites, and other information (text, images, videos, etc.) managed on a webpage and presented in reverse chronological order. Social media such as blogs represent a more active type of media consumption than traditional forms of media (Castells, 2007). With traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, and even radio, consumers have little to no 1) ability to select what information is presented or what is important, 2) control over how the information is presented, and 3) ability to interact with authors or producers of the content. Thus, consumers are more passive with regard to those mediums than they are with blogs.

Blogs represent a bidirectional stream of content, where content is both produced by and consumed by the audience, which Bruns (2007) refers to as produsage. Because creating a blog does not require any formal credentials like traditional journalism would, anyone can create their own blog and become a citizen-journalist. Additionally the structure of the blogosphere makes it inherently interactive. First the hyperlink structure that underlies the blogosphere allows bloggers to connect not only with one another, but to also actively connect their content to content on other websites. Links may take the form of links to blogs that the blogger follows also known as a blogroll, links that direct users to blogs the blogger recommends or a linkroll, or permalinks to particular blog posts or website articles that are presented within a blog post.

The second structural feature of blogs that makes them inherently interactive is the comments section of the blog post. This represents an open invitation to readers to discuss the content in the blog and engage in a dialogue with blogger. Many traditional media outlets have adopted this aspect of the blog structure on their own websites, but still use it selectively.

Although blogging as a media format has existed for at least 20 years, the explosive growth after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center highlighted the utility of blogs as a feedback resource for mass media via public fact-checking, thus forcing traditional media outlets to be more cautious about the information they present and to correct errors quickly (Drezner & Farrell, 2004). The 2004 and 2008 U.S. Presidential elections further highlighted the importance of blogs as an outlet that both shapes and reveals public opinion as traditional media frequently looked to them to gauge the public's reaction to candidates and campaign events.

Several researchers (Byrne, 2007; Kvasny & Igwe, 2008; Pole, 2006; Stokes, 2007) have demonstrated that African Americans use web spaces such as blogs to engage in discourse with the mainstream media (MSM) and subvert the pervasive negative portrayals of their group in the MSM, often emphasizing the positive traits and accomplishments of their group. For example, in the only existing in-depth studies on how African American political bloggers use the blog medium, Pole (2006) revealed that bloggers use the blog medium to discuss race and ethnicity specific sociopolitical topics and highlight news stories that would otherwise be ignored or dismissed by the mainstream media (MSM); not only issues related to discrimination and oppression, but also cultural achievement, and policy changes that may have a direct impact on members of their racial or ethnic group, such as education reform. In so doing, the blog medium allows them to give voice and by extension, power, to their group, which would otherwise be silenced. The services provided by bloggers and other sites have been shown to be useful by the general population of African American web users as research on these groups has demonstrated that they are more likely than other groups to use the web, including blogs, to stay abreast of neighborhood and community issues (Smith, 2010).

Other research has demonstrated the power of blogs to disrupt hegemonic practices (Lopez 2009; Rapp, Button, Fleury-Steiner, & Fleury-Steiner, 2010). For example, Lopez (2009) argues that mommyblogging (parenthood blogs created by mothers) is radical because it defies the expert-parenting model such that now every mother is perceived as an expert in her own right. Therefore, they rely on one another rather than traditional experts (i.e. professionals trained in child development, popular academics and authors, etc.) for advice. As with the racial and ethnic minority bloggers, mommybloggers use the blog medium to counter existing representations of motherhood that have been glamorized by the MSM.

Finally, research has also demonstrated that blogs are used to collectively construct knowledge and to foster social support, collaborative learning, and development of social and cultural capital (Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010; Robertson, 2011; Vaezi, Torkzadeh, & Chang, 2011). For example, Brock and colleagues (2010) argue that African American women use blogs to develop technical and cultural capital by promoting diversity of beliefs about topics related to race and gender presented in mainstream media. One manner in which they accomplish this is by using the hyperlink structure of blogs to control discourse about these topics as well as evoke conversations about Black women's issues within racially diverse web-spaces.

With the current study, I demonstrate that African American relationship blogs serve many of the same functions detailed above. Namely, shaping readers' opinion on relationship topics, engaging in discourse that both supports and subverts the MSM, developing social capital, and disrupting hegemonic practices.

### 1.3 **Socialization About Romantic Relationships**

With this study I propose that an additional affordance of blogs is that they serve as a cultural socialization agent for African Americans. The purpose of cultural socialization is to



teach individuals within the culture how to interpret events, such that their interpretation and resulting behaviors or beliefs will be aligned with the rest of the cultural group (Beall & Sternberg 1995).

Given the racial disparities in sexually transmitted infections, and unplanned, out-of-wedlock pregnancies in the Black population, much of the research on cultural socialization as it relates to romantic relationships has focused specifically on sex. Moreover, this research has centered on adolescence and young adulthood (i.e., college). This research has shown that for African Americans, family members and peers are important socialization agents for sex (Dickson 1993; Browning & Miller, 1999; Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004; Grange, Brubaker, & Corneille, 2011). Particularly, much cultural education about sex for females comes from other females within the family (mothers, aunts, and grandmothers), while peers are the primary source of socialization for males (Dickson, 1993; Kapungu et. al., 2010, Oliver, 2006).

The current research on cultural socialization about romantic relationships among African Americans demonstrates that females receive more socialization messages than males (Dickson 1993; Wallace, 2007; Epstein & Ward, 2008; Kapungu et. al. 2010) and that the messages that females receive are different from those received by males. Particularly, messages communicated to females tend to be protective and emphasize the risks associated with relationships (Kapungu et. al., 2010; Grange et al., 2011; Shipley, 2011). Moreover, messages transmitted about relationships tend to focus on gender role expectations and partner selection, (Dickson, 1993; Packer-Williams, 2009; Kapungu, et. al., 2010). The research shows that mothers, in particular, tend to emphasize the importance of female independence while also promoting traditional gender roles of females being submissive and nurturing and males being

authoritative, a protector, and sex driven (Wallace 2007; Epstein & Ward, 2008; Packer-Williams, 2009).

As mentioned previously, much of the research focuses on youth and college students, however socialization about sex and sexuality continues throughout one's lifespan (Longmore, 1998). Recognizing that cultural socialization messages are transmitted vertically across generations and horizontally amongst peers (Bowleg, 2004; Grange 2011), it is important to consider the messages that African American adults receive and incorporate into their own lifestyle as these messages may be passed on to peers and passed down to children and adolescents. Thus, the current study examined blogs for which African American adults are the target audience.

### 1.3.1 **Media as a Socialization Agent**

Although peers and parents serve as primary sources of cultural socialization about relationships, it has also been established that mass media serve as an important socializing agent for African Americans (Rogers & Gyant, 2004, Stephens & Phillips, 2005; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005, Ward, 2005). Heterosexual romantic relationships receive a great deal of attention in African American media, particularly print media, radio, and the Black blogosphere. Moreover, all current broadcast television shows, including reality shows, with primarily African American casts center around or place heavy emphasis on romantic relationships of the characters or the family unit. Much of the existing research on media as a socialization agent for African American relationships has focused on hip-hop media. The misogynistic messages that are prevalent within the music and music videos have drawn criticism that hip-hop media socializes youth to adhere to negative stereotypes that promotes sexual risk taking and undermines healthy romantic relationship development (Stokes, 2007). Existing research has

linked exposure to hip-hop media with increased risky sexual behaviors and positive attitudes towards sex (Wingood et al., 2003; Stokes, 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007), as well as endorsement of stereotypical gender roles (Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Stephens & Few, 2007).

Although not specific to African Americans, several researchers have demonstrated that media has an impact on sexual behaviors as well as attitudes and beliefs for adults. Specifically, in research on the impact of television consumption, Segrin and Nabi (2002) demonstrated that viewing television shows that emphasize close relationships and marriage, such as romantic comedies and soap operas, predicted idealistic expectations of marriage and optimistic intentions regarding marriage (i.e., never getting divorced) for college students. Ferris and colleagues (2007) also found that consumption alone is not enough, but perceived realism also plays a role such that males who viewed reality television and perceived the content to be realistic were more likely to endorse negative stereotypes such as treatment of women as sex objects, men as sex driven, and dating as a game, than those who did not perceive the content as realistic. Additionally, men were more likely to endorse those stereotypes than women, although a similar pattern of results was found for women. In addition to perceived reality, motivation for watching also plays a role.

Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, and Yellin (2003) have demonstrated that college men who specifically watched television with sexual content for learning purposes expected greater variety in sexual activity with partners (i.e., sex in public, group sex), while for women, regardless of motivation, viewing of sexually oriented television content was associated with expectations to have sex early in the relationship. Similarly, Ward (2002) demonstrated that, for college students, watching television for entertainment value predicted endorsement of the same

stereotypes found in Segrin and Nabi's (2002) study as well as perceptions of sex as a recreational activity.

Ward also demonstrated that consumption of sexual content in television was associated with perceptions of the normativity of sexual activity among peers. Heavier consumption was associated with stronger beliefs that peers engaged in sex at high rates. Specifically, consumption of music videos was associated with endorsement of traditional gender roles and higher ratings of the number of peers adults' perceived as being sexually active. Perceptions of peer norms plays a key role in shaping attitudes and behaviors. Thus, it is likely that perceiving one's peers as sexually active is associated with actual engagement in sexual activity, and in fact Ward's research found that association. With the current study, I assert that the blog medium provides the audience with unique access to their cultural peers. Thus, the medium provides readers with insight about peers' experiences, behaviors, and attitudes, which may in turn shape their own behavior.

Like Ward, Bradshaw (2008) demonstrated that, for African American college students, exposure to hip hop music videos was associated with desiring partners who embodied attributes similar to the characters in the video. These included traditional gender roles such as sexual submissiveness in women and sexual dominance or aggression in men. Rogers and Gyant (2004) further argue that media are an important informal educational institution for African American adults. Particularly, they argue that books and movies such as *Waiting to Exhale*, by Terry McMillan trigger critical thinking about the lived experiences and reality of Black women. Their research demonstrated that many African American women were inspired by that movie to develop professional networks and informal book clubs where they could discuss the content and messages of the movie and book within a safe space. They revealed that many women did not

realize that others shared their experiences until that movie premiered. As explained below, one of the many benefits of the blog medium is that it provides the same type of safe space for discussion about media content and sharing of experiences.

To date no research has examined the role of blogs in socializing African Americans about romantic relationships. However, I believe that Black relationship blogs perform a function for African American adults similar to relationship advice presented in magazines.

Contemporary magazines have been heralded as a source of socialization about sex and relationships (Kim & Ward, 2004; Taylor 2006). Researchers have demonstrated that readers, particularly young adults, often rely on media sources such as magazines for advice about relationships, and especially sex, because it is less humiliating than asking friends or family (Triese & Gotthoffer, 2002). Among adults, readership of magazines and other print media (e.g., novels) has been linked to attitudes about sex and gender roles. Specifically, Kim and Ward (2004) have demonstrated that the type of magazines read by college women shaped beliefs such that women who read adult magazines (i.e., Cosmo) were less likely to endorse stereotypical gender roles for men than women who read teen magazines (i.e., Seventeen). The stereotypes measured include being sex-driven and afraid of commitment. As with the research on movies, their research demonstrates that motivations for reading play a role such that reading specifically for relationship advice was associated with endorsement of male stereotypes and the belief that women need to be sexually assertive to attract men. Taylor (2006) found readership matters for men as well such that reading general men's (i.e., Maxim) and pornographic (i.e., Playboy) magazines was associated with expectations for more varied sexual behaviors, and positive attitude towards short-term casual relationships.

In a different study, Taylor (2008) found that women express preferences for traits in men that align with the content of the articles they read, such as “bad boys” for short-term sexual encounters and men with father-like qualities for long-term relationships. This alignment between mate preferences and the content of print media was also demonstrated in novel readership. Specifically, Diekman, Gardner, and McDonald (2000) demonstrated that students who frequently read romance novels, which rarely demonstrate safe sex practices, held ambivalent or negative attitudes toward condoms and had low intentions to use condoms in the future. Moreover, they demonstrated, experimentally, that exposing readers to excerpts that demonstrate condom use, improved attitudes toward condoms and intentions to use them. Both of these studies, support my assertion that readers of blogs, which is similar in content to magazines, may demonstrate attitudes or behaviors that are aligned with the content of blog posts.

Finally, in a study of Black erotica consumption, Abrams (2010) demonstrated that women who read these types of books felt that it made expressing sexuality and enjoying sexual activity less taboo for Black women as a whole, and also made them feel more comfortable about their own sexuality. I believe that relationship blogs can serve a similar function for African American readers, as frequent exposure to topics that are traditionally taboo, may create an overall cultural shift in perceptions of these behaviors.

Although blogs are quite similar to magazines in terms of content, blogs have many advantages that magazines or other forms of media do not offer. First, blogs are a more interactive form of media in which readers are actively encouraged to participate. Thus, blogs give readers agency and voice in the discussion of these “community topics” -- allowing the community to openly push back or challenge in addition to endorse every aspect of the

conversation. Unlike radio, which is also interactive, blog readers are easily able to participate in the conversation and do not face the time restrictions to which radio listeners are subject (i.e., only a small number of listener calls can be aired and the probability of a call being selected is low due to competition).

Another advantage of blogs is that they do not require a paid subscription or purchase to participate like magazines would. Additionally, the intentions of the audience are easier to gauge on blogs than on magazine websites. Readers of blogs visit them for that particular content. Visitors to the websites for print magazines, however, may be visiting for any large number of reasons given the wide variety of topics covered by the magazines. For example, they may be visiting to see subscriber-only content that the magazine itself advertised in print, or they may be visiting for content other than the relationship advice pages (i.e., beauty or fashion pages), but land on the relationship content while there. This same limitation applies to digital only magazines. Also, print magazines tend to be more selective about what readers can reply to on the website, thus limiting the interactivity of that medium.

Finally, one of the greatest advantages of blogs is that they allow readers to gain access to how their cultural peers think and behave (Vaezi et al, 2011). By reading and/or actively participating in the comment area they are able to interact with other readers who are likely similar to them in terms of worldview, age, cultural identity, and social and economic status. This access to the feelings, perceptions, and even accounts of the behavior of their peers may contribute to their interpretation of common knowledge and serve to reinforce behaviors, beliefs and attitudes as normative and acceptable. Consistent with Script Theory and other theories of health behaviors such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985) and the Theory of Triadic Influence (Flay & Petraitis, 1994), attitudes and behaviors are often shaped by perceived

peer norms, and peer norms are shaped by sociocultural entities such as media. Thus, it is likely that this increased access to the thought patterns of one's cultural peers also shapes the behaviors and attitudes of blog readers.

The current study proposes that relationship blogs are a vibrant agent of cultural socialization about relationships for African American adults. Specifically, they provide guidance about culturally appropriate ways of behaving within a relationship and relating to members of the opposite sex. As such, I examined the dominant messages about African American relationships that are shared by African American bloggers.

Using Script Theory and Intersectionality as frameworks, I examined the ways in which African American relationship bloggers use their blogs to construct heterosexual African American relationships. Consistent with previous research, this study not only explored how relationships are constructed, but also the sociocultural and socioeconomic factors that underlie these constructions.



## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND ASSOCIATED LITERATURE

### 2.1 Script Theory

Two conceptual frameworks guide this research study –Script Theory and Intersectionality. Script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1984) is a conceptual framework that is often used as a lens to examine sexual dating behavior (Rose & Frieze, 1993; Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Stephens & Phillips 2003; Stokes, 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007;). Scripts guide social interactions among humans (Simon & Gagnon, 1984) and are presented at the collective level by mass media, family, peers, and other institutions such as churches and schools (Stokes, 2007). Also referred to as cultural scenarios at this level, these are abstract, or socially constructed scenarios for which there are established notions of expected behavior (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). The interpretation and application of these expectations to a concrete scenario is referred to as an interpersonal script (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). It is based on the combination of cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts that we extract what we refer to as cultural norms for a specific behavior (Rose & Frieze, 1993). Holmberg & MacKenzie (2002) further define relationship scripts as “consensually shared, culture-specific notions of normative relationship development” (p778). It is has been shown that scripts are communicated through cultural socialization (Longmore, 1998). The current study proposes that because blogs serve as a space to challenge existing norms and constructs or encourage the creation of new norms by reframing or rewriting existing scripts and introducing new ones, Black relationship blogs serve as socialization agents for African American adults. As such, scripting theory was also used as a framework for identifying the specific messages about romantic relationship behaviors that are provided within the blog posts.

### 2.1.1 Existing African American Relationship Scripts

Several researchers have conducted studies that have uncovered broad scripts and schemas for heterosexual African American adults. These scripts and schemas have been grouped by domain and summarized below. Within this summary, scripts refer to the actual behavior or set of behaviors that is associated with the domain whereas a schema refers to a set of beliefs about the domain. When schemas are presented alone it means that associated behaviors were not detailed in the research.

#### 2.1.1.1 Sex-Related Scripts

Multiple scripts about sex emerged across these research studies. In their study, Eyre and colleagues (2012) report that the schema of sex leading to a heightened emotional bond was prevalent in their study, however it was not required for participants to be in love or even identify one another as boyfriend/girlfriend prior to engaging in sex.

Postponing of sex to develop a relationship was regarded as important for long-term monogamous relationships in two studies. The behavior of note here is taking time to develop intimate communication with one another by learning about one another beyond a superficial level prior to engaging in sex. These behaviors were believed to set the foundation for a lasting relationship (Shiple 2011, Eyre et. al. 2012). Moreover, Eyre et al. (2012), found that men were only willing to postpone sex if they were interested in a long-term monogamous relationship.

Only one study reported a script related to condom use. In their study of lower- and middle-income African American women, Bowleg and colleagues (2004) reported that men control condom use because they wear the condoms. Also within this study, was the script that men control sex by initiating it, establishing the frequency at which it occurs, and selecting the positions used during intercourse.

### 2.1.1.2 Sustainability Scripts

Across several studies, women engaged in behaviors that were attributed to sustaining the relationship. Typically, these were behaviors that women did not enjoy doing. Specifically, Bowleg and colleagues (2004) revealed women perceived it was their primary role to sustain the relationship. They accomplish this by tolerating behaviors they dislike or are uncomfortable with such as infidelity, verbal abuse, and emotional distance. Moreover, women privilege their partner's sexual needs over their own and will often engage in consensual sex even when they do not actually want to. Another power dynamic associated with sustainability, was found by Cowdery (2009) who reported that African American women in long-term relationships often felt the need to “dummy up” around their men, because they believed men did not want to be with women who are smarter than them.

Fidelity management behavior was described by Eyre and colleagues (2012) and represents a similar concept. Specifically, women engaged in fidelity management behaviors such as checking their partner's cell phone or email for messages from other women upon becoming sexually involved with the man. This type of behavior is connected to a similar script found by Bowleg et al. (2004) that demonstrates infidelity is normative. Although it was reported as less common in stable or emotionally invested relationships, the researchers found that many of the women in their study remained with partners who have or were cheating on them and some had extra-conjugal partners of their own. All of the research I have found demonstrates that infidelity is perceived as a common occurrence and represents women's greatest fear (Cowdery, 2009; Tyson, 2012; Shipley 2012). As an explanation for the frequency of infidelity among males, Collins and Champion (2011) offer that the urban fathers in their study connected having extra partners to feelings of being valued and respected by women.

### 2.1.1.3 Conflict and Resolution Scripts

Conflict was viewed in the majority of studies as something that was inevitable, and handling conflict was identified as a tremendous challenge for African American couples. In their study, Eyre, et al. (2012) did not reveal any scripts related to resolving conflict, but instead revealed the behaviors that most frequently lead to conflict, these include infidelity, imbalance in financial contribution (one partner spending more money on the relationship), and men's perceptions of being consistently harassed by women, or the perception that the woman was throwing a temper tantrum over a trivial matter.

Cowdery (2009) identified conflict as a source of power struggle within long-term African American couples. The women reported that they frequently had to navigate around men's emotions in order to discuss certain issues, regardless of urgency, and because of this felt that men controlled conflict resolution within the family. Similarly, the women in Bowleg et al.'s (2004) study reported feeling that they often had to de-escalate conflict by self-silencing or acceding to partner demands. Thus, for them too, men controlled the conflict.

Alternatively, the women in Shipley's (2011) study all reported the importance of addressing conflict immediately through discussion. Additionally, they indicated the importance of making sure neither partner holds a grudge and managing emotions during time of conflict to avoid yelling at one another, which was perceived as counterproductive. Yet, Collins and Christopher's (2011) participants identified their inability to deal with their emotions during times of conflict, or to handle expressions of emotions by their female partners in the *need to get away* script. This script indicates that in the midst of conflict men retreat to a separate space until both partners calm down or the woman stops crying. Other researchers have reported similar

male behaviors and found that women connect this habit of men leaving to feelings that the man controls the relationship (Bowleg et al., 2004; Cowdery, 2009).

#### 2.1.1.4 **Trust scripts**

Trust was associated with different behaviors and definitions across research studies. For some couples it was regarded as more profound than sex or love and represents deep connection within the couple. Having trust within this context means releasing fears of infidelity and abandonment, and may only be gained through demonstration of reliability and engaging in intimate communication (Eyre et al., 2012). Similarly, in her study of young (18-25) urban African American women, Tyson (2012) found that trust was regarded by women as essential for the stability of the relationship and was defined as sexual fidelity. At the same time, however, Shipley (2011) found that college women in the same age group as Tyson's study regarded trust as something that needs to be withheld in order to avoid being hurt by a partner's eventual dishonesty, infidelity, or other betrayal. Additionally, Shipley (2011) found that African American women expressed unwillingness to trust one another. They perceived that other African American women frequently intended or attempted to "steal" partners.

Collins and Champion (2011) also identified two schemas that fit well in this category. The first indicate men's belief that relationships and love, were only temporary, thus participants argued that it was important not to make promises because the relationship may not last long enough to fulfill them. Second and also connected to perceptions of relationships as temporary, was expression of the belief that a person can only rely on their self.

#### 2.1.1.5 **Commitment scripts**

Commitment has been regarded as essential to the long-term stability of relationships and is expressed by prioritizing the well-being of the family (Cowdery, 2009), being dependable and

available when your partner needs you (Tyson, 2012), and supporting one another through challenging times such as illness or conflict (Shipley, 2011). Finally, commitment was also demonstrated by sharing of financial resources (Eyre et al., 2012).

#### 2.1.1.6 **Support scripts**

Several researchers have identified supporting one's partner, and especially unconditional support, as an important script (Cowdery, 2009; Collins & Champion, 2011; Eyre et al., 2012; Tyson, 2012). Also referred to as mutual support in these studies, it is defined as meeting a partner's physical and emotional needs by doing tasks such as running errands, helping with housework and childcare, doing favors for one another, listening to one another, and knowing one another's needs and habits.

#### 2.1.1.7 **Communication**

A variety of schemas and scripts emerged with regard to communication. Overall, the scripts reflected the importance of being open and honest with one's partners to achieve goals such as deep feelings of love and relationship satisfaction, as well as to minimize conflict and sustain the relationship.

First, communicating one's standards, expectations, and needs in the earliest phase of relationships was regarded as important for avoiding or minimizing conflict later in the relationship as well as ensuring one was satisfied with their relationship (Shipley, 2011; Eyre et al 2012).

Second developing intimate communication within which partners could be vulnerable with one another was regarded as important for setting the foundation of a long-term relationship and eventually reaching a state of love (Shipley, 2011; Eyre et al 2012; Tyson, 2012)

Additionally, expressions of feelings and emotions was regarded as acceptable and important for long-term relationships, but not for short-term relationships (Shipley, 2011; Eyre et al 2012). Specifically, Eyre and colleagues (2012) found that in the context of short-term or casual sex relationships, men reported withholding their feelings as a form of manipulation, to prevent women from developing feelings toward them.

Finally, for couples with children, communication was seen as essential to family solidarity. Particularly important communication patterns include making decisions together as well as collaborating on and negotiating household/familial duties. These collaborative patterns were regarded as a demonstration of one's commitment to the family.

#### 2.1.1.8 **Growth/Reflection**

In two studies, both with African American women, reflection on past relationships to learn from mistakes and demonstrate personal growth was regarded as essential for developing mature relationships (Shipley, 2011; Tyson, 2012).

One of the primary goals of the current study was to compare the relationship scripts on the blogs to these existing relationship scripts. Specifically, I sought to determine whether the bloggers 1) promote similar scripts, 2) subvert these scripts, or 3) create any new scripts that have not been found in previous research studies. In addition to examining the extent to which the same scripts existed, I also examined the extent to which such scripts are defined in similar and/or different ways within the blogs.

## 2.2 **Intersectionality**

The second framework, Intersectionality, provided the overarching framework used to shape the research questions, operationalization of variables, interpretations of the results, and conclusions that were drawn. Borne of critical race and feminist theories, Intersectionality is a

theoretical paradigm that refers to research that examines how multiple categories of identity (i.e., gender, race, class, marital status) interact with one another and other structural or institutional factors to shape attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives on lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Cole, 2009; Demos, Segal, Kohlman, Krieg, & Dickerson, 2013).

Inherent within social constructions of romantic relationships, or the interaction and joining of any two people is also the interaction of their identities. Thus, it is impossible to consider social constructions of romantic relationships without also considering the roles of gender and power dynamics between the two genders. Additionally, because I am studying one particular racial group, it is also important to consider how racial identity shapes this phenomenon. Crenshaw (1989), who is often credited with coining the term intersectionality, argues that the intersectional experience of identity characteristics such as sex and race is greater than the sum of the separate identity experiences. She further states that failure to consider intersectionality results in insufficient, or even inaccurate, knowledge of the lived experiences of the oppressed population under study. As will be demonstrated in the literature review, wrapped in the construction of what it means for African Americans to be in a relationship are also notions of what it means to be a Black man and what it means to be a Black woman within the context of relationships. The study of such intersecting identity characteristics is the primary focus of Intersectionality theory.

Research within this paradigm examines the way in which phenomena (i.e., perceived shortage of marriageable men) are socially constructed and how we rely on each of the identity categories, simultaneously, to interpret or ascribe meaning to events, or “facts” about the world. In other words, Intersectionality is one type of social constructionist approach to understanding how individuals experience and define reality.



Social constructionists believe that reality is created based on stored mental representations of people's actions, reactions to events, and experiences with a variety of phenomena. These mental representations are developed over time and eventually become internalized or habitual and institutionalized within society (Berger & Luckman, 1967). Such social knowledge is typically regarded as common knowledge or common sense. This knowledge is typically temporally and culturally bound, meaning it will vary across and within cultures as well as across time periods (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Beall & Sternberg, 1995). A culture in this case refers to a group of people with a shared set of beliefs, practices and traditions, and may also include shared geographic origin. In other words, the common knowledge within one's culture provides a worldview or lens through which events or experiences are interpreted and defined. Intersectionality, further specifies that we do not draw on only one cultural lens, but rather use multiple lenses simultaneously.

The specific Intersectionality framework that will be used for this study is that articulated by Cole (2009) for psychologists. Cole specifies three questions that psychologists should attend to when conducting intersectional research. First, she invites researchers to consider who is included in each identity category by paying close attention to the diversity within groups and taking care not to interpret any particular group's findings as a universal human experience. Second, researchers are urged to ground the research and analyses within "the social and historical contexts of inequality" experienced by the groups being studied, specifically differential access to resources and power (p172). In so doing researchers should take care to treat identity categories as "structural and social processes" (p173) or performances that shape one's perspectives and beliefs rather than individual-level characteristics that are embedded within us. Finally, Cole specifies that researchers should actively seek out similarities between

groups, emphasizing how groups are connected via their similar or shared histories with social or institutional power while still remaining cognizant of and sensitive to any differences that exist across groups.

Within the current study, Intersectionality was used to guide analysis of the blog posts. Consistent with Cole's first and third imperative, I examined the within group diversity amongst the bloggers in this study paying close attention to what voices were included and excluded from the discourse. Consistent with her second imperative, I examined how the bloggers translated the contextual factors described in the previous section (i.e., the sex-ratio imbalance) as well as ideologies associated with intersectional identities that are explained in the next section, into relationship behaviors or roles consistent with their interpretation of those factors. As a result, the analysis provides insight into how the bloggers use their cultural lenses to interpret events in their environment.

### **2.2.1 Relevant Ideologies and Contextual Factors Considered**

Consistent with the Intersectionality framework used for this study, existing research on constructions of intimate relationships with African Americans has revealed several important ideologies and contextual factors that should be taken into consideration in addition to the barriers and facilitators of marriage presented previously. Because scripts are typically grounded within ideologies, these ideologies likely underlie many of the relationship scripts and schemas that have been found in previous research. The list presented below, is by no means exhaustive, but instead represents the factors that have been identified in existing research.

### 2.2.1.1 **Heterosexuality and Heteronormativity**

Though not based on research solely with African Americans, a few researchers have indicated that heterosexuality is often overlooked when considering the role of culture in the social construction of intimate relationships. Both Rose (2000) and Kim et al. (2007) argue that existing cultural scripts for intimate relationships are deeply rooted in the heteronormative ideology that privileges heterosexual activity as the standard to which all sexual activity is compared, even when conducting research with homosexual people. A cultural script is a culturally bound notion of how one should behave in a given context. Kim et al (2007) argue that the heterosexual ideology grants men the privilege to prioritize their sexual desire, act freely on their sexual needs, and promise women status and power in exchange for sex. Meanwhile, women are expected to act as managers for men's sex drive. They must devalue their own sexuality, trade sex as a commodity, endeavor to please men, and/or wait to be chosen by men. Rose (2000) further argues that heterosexual ideals may not be relevant to all subcultural groups within a population and these groups serve as an important focal point for examining challenges to existing cultural scripts and schemas. For African Americans, Stephens (2012) argues that heterosexuality figures prominently in constructions of relationships created by hip-hop media, such that nearly all male-female interaction centers on heterosexual activity.

### 2.2.1.2 **Masculinity**

With regard to masculinity, there has been a great deal of emphasis on the tension between traditional American definitions of masculinity and African American conceptualizations of masculinity, which are impacted by discrimination. Specifically, several researchers have demonstrated that African American men wish to fulfill traditional American ideals of masculinity and patriarchy, including gender roles as a protector and a provider,

however structural inequalities and discrimination inhibit attainment of this goal (Lawrence – Webb et al., 2004; Crook et al., 2009; Barnes, 2009). The impact of this has been perpetuation of portrayals of African American women as strong, and men as weak (Crook et al, 2009), manifestation of interpersonal violence in relationships (Oliver, 2006; Barnes, 2009), conflict and power struggle within relationships (Barnes, 2009), and predisposition to behaviors that put men and their partners at risk for sexually transmitted infections (Bowleg, 2004).

A few researchers have demonstrated that, for African American men, the definition of masculinity is tied most closely to expressions of sexuality. Specifically, in her research on socialization in boys, Wallace (2007) argues that boys are socialized to be men at a young age, but considered a real man once they have had sex for the first time. Similarly, Bowleg (2004), argues that for adult men masculinity is defined as always being ready and available for sex, perceiving sex as a recreational activity, and the privilege of being able to have sex with other women even if in a relationship. Such definitions are also prevalent in hip-hop media where, as Oliver (2006) argues, masculinity is expressed and rewarded based on sexual conquest and fathering a child. Unfortunately, very little is understood about the relevance of fatherhood to masculinity among African American men. Crook et al. (2009), have argued that this stems in part from the pervasive rates of single-motherhood within the African American population. Nonetheless, it is an important topic that requires examination.

Speaking directly to the importance of intersectionality, Crook and colleagues also argue that it is important to examine how racial identity and masculinity, separately and together, impact sexual and other intimate relationship behaviors. They emphasize that it is of particular importance to examine how these two identity factors interact with discrimination and how they may aid or hinder men's struggle to fight misconceptions and stereotypes within relationships.

### 2.2.1.3 Colorism

Based on their review of ten years worth of research on African American families, Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, and Freeman (2010) proclaim that while researchers have gone to great lengths to pay more attention to historical, sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors that impact family formation and intimate relationships in this population, research on the impact of family structure (i.e., nuclear vs. extended family) and colorism, or discrimination based on skin color, is severely lacking. They argue that colorism plays an important role in family process variables such as parenting, racial socialization, interracial dating, and the impact of inequality and socioeconomic mobility on relationships. Moreover, Stephens (2012) has demonstrated that colorism plays an important role in the mate selection practices and preferences of African American males who identify with hip-hop culture. Specifically, she has found that males associate lighter skinned women with more positive stereotypes about women, and darker skinned women with more negative stereotypes.

### 2.2.1.4 Power Dynamics

Researchers have demonstrated a delicate balancing of power within relationships. Particularly they have found that daily experiences with structural inequality and discrimination have impacted gender roles such that women often consciously suppress or relinquish their power to their male partners to make them feel respected and powerful within the home. This is done to contrast the powerlessness they may feel outside the home (Barnes, 2009; Cowdery, 2009).

### 2.2.1.5 Femininity and Media Portrayals

Portrayals of African Americans in the media figure prominently in constructions of African American relationships. Although none of the research I found discussed femininity as an ideology, research on hip-hop media plays a role in this through its revelation of several archetypes of African American women that are defined primarily based on expressions of sexuality (Stokes 2007; Stephens 2003). As a summary, Stephens and Phillips (2003) have revealed the following archetypes, based on a content analysis of hip-hop videos. The Diva is a woman who uses sex to enhance her social status and gain companionship, even if she is already financial independent. Gold diggers intentionally exchange sex for money or material goods. The Freak is a woman who enjoys sexual activity and engages in high risk or unconventional sex with multiple partners. The Dyke is a self-sufficient woman who rejects sex with men, engages in sex only with women, and adopts masculine postures. The Gangster Bitch is a woman who is perceived as street tough, and uses sex to espouse loyalty toward her partner. The Sister Savior is a religious woman who only believes in marital sex for procreation. The Earth Mother is a woman for whom sexual interactions are an expression of her Afrocentrism or solidarity with her race. Finally, the Baby Mama is a woman who is no longer in a relationship with her child's father, yet has sex with him to maintain his financial support and sense of emotional connection with him. Stokes (2007) found that teenage girls construct web profiles that align with similar archetypes in her research.

In addition to the previously mentioned colorism that is associated with portrayals of these women, Stephens (2012) has found that issues of body shape figure prominently in these archetypes, particularly preferences for a woman who has a large butt, full breasts, a small waist, and a flat stomach. Accordingly, males express desires for women who meet the ideals set forth

in the media, which causes women to behave in ways that will help them achieve these ideals and attract men.

Oliver (2006) furthers the hip-hop research and argues that for men, hip-hop media reinforces definitions of masculinity that encourages exploitation of others (not just women) for financial and material gain, use of violence to resolve conflict, and indiscriminate sex with many women rather than being a protector or provider for one's family. Women, in turn, are portrayed as hypersexual, promiscuous, devious, violent, and interested in achieving financial and material gain through men, by any means necessary. He further argues that these portrayals are partly responsible for many of the relationship challenges African Americans experience. Specifically, men who embody these definitions of masculinity are less likely to be perceived by women as marriageable and are also less likely to prioritize familial responsibility such as fatherhood.

Finally, Tyson's (2012) study of African American women revealed that women generally regard media as hurtful and/or a burden. Specifically, the lack of portrayals of Black women in real relationships or being truly loved in visual media is perceived as hurtful and depressing, and hip-hop's perpetuation of the above stereotypes about women also makes women feel sad and hopeless. At the same time, although they know the portrayals in hip-hop are negative toward women, they also express difficulty balancing their disgust of those portrayals with men's desires for women who conform to such images. The women argue that it is sometimes necessary to behave in ways inconsistent with their beliefs in order to gain a man's attention. Finally, the participants expressed feeling pressure to embody idealized "Black love" portrayed in Black magazines, which forces them to face issues of colorism as the vast majority of "successful" couples portrayed in magazines feature women with lighter skin tones. This pressure is also tied to perceived pressure to sustain the Black community by achieving the ideals

within the magazines. Other research has demonstrated that this perceived pressure often inhibits exploration or maintenance of successful interracial relationships as well (c.f., Burton et al., 2010 for a review).

The heavy emphasis of the media related research on hip-hop and magazines is indicative of the lack of research on other types of media. The current study examined blogs the extent to which these ideologies and contextual factors impacted the messages about African American relationships that are presented on relationship blogs. Specifically, the ideologies, as presented above, served as operational definitions and were used to classify behavioral messages that emerged in the blog posts.



### 3. OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to build upon the existing research of relationship scripts within the broader African American culture. This study particularly focused on relationship scripts and their underlying ideologies and contextual factors that exist online within the Black Blogosphere. In addition to the features listed in the previous section, which make blogs an especially rich context for examining relationship scripts, these blogs are particularly interesting because of their audience. The target audience is adults in their mid-twenties to late-forties who are currently unmarried and seeking a relationship or marriage, as well as (for the marriage blogs) those who are married and seeking marital advice. Based on audience indicators such as Facebook fandom, Twitter followership, and the profiles of the commenter's, the audience of these blogs is predominantly African American. Moreover, some of the blogs specifically target an African American audience as indicated in the profile section of the blog (i.e. "about this blog"). Since no published research has examined the relationship scripts that are presented on African American relationship blogs, the first goal of the study was to identify what scripts are promoted in this medium.

**RQ1.** What scripts and/or schemas are present in the blogs, and how do they compare with the scripts and schemas previously identified in research?

Consistent with Intersectionality, and particularly, with Cole's (2009) framework for psychologists, it is important to understand the way that contextual or ideological factors such as inequality shapes the phenomenon under study. In this study I sought to explore how the scripts that are promoted reinforced or challenged ideologies such as heteronormativity (i.e., heterosexual activity and relationships as standard acceptable practices), masculinity and femininity. Additionally, I sought to examine how structural factors such as the education gap

and the sex-ratio imbalance, or other sociocultural or sociopolitical factors such as popular media or news events shaped the scripts that were presented. Thus, the second goal of this research study was to explore the extent to which ideological and sociocultural factors underlie the scripts that are promoted or subverted on the blogs.

**RQ2.** What sociocultural ideologies and structural factors underlie the scripts that bloggers promote about relationships?

The third goal of this study addressed the first and last criteria of Cole's framework. Within the framework, Cole identifies social categories as both individual and institutional practices. Even within a population-specific study such as this one, it is important to consider diversity within the sample - who is included, and what similarities as well as differences exist between the diverse groups under study. Thus, third research goal was to explore demographic variation based on the social identities of the bloggers.

**RQ3.** To what extent does the demographic variation among the blogs and bloggers impact the scripts promoted on the blogs or the ideologies that underlie those scripts?

A discourse analysis was selected to assess the three research questions. A discourse analysis is a research method designed to examine language use, specifically, written or spoken communication. In this study I used a combination of two types of discourse analysis. One type, ideological discourse analysis, establishes text as a form of social interaction whereby speakers or writers create textual representations of social knowledge, as they perceive it, as well as their beliefs and attitudes towards a particular phenomenon (Van Dijk, 1985). The purpose of an ideological discourse analysis is to uncover the ideologies or social patterns expressed within a text that underlie the worldview or values that a speaker or writer holds.

The second type of discourse analysis used was a critical media discourse analysis, which expands the definition of discourse to include any type of activity that produces meaning (Fairclough, 2000). This includes spoken and written language, visual imagery, and non-verbal communication. Specifically, Fairclough (2000) defines discourse as “language used to represent a social practice from a particular point of view” (p309). Thus, as in ideological discourse analysis, a text or other type of discourse is considered a type of social interaction. Fairclough argues that language or discourse simultaneously creates “social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief” (p309) within a society or culture while also being shaped by existing versions of these. Thus, a critical media analysis is concerned with the interplay of discursive practices (i.e., the production and consumption of a text) and sociocultural practices that shape the way a media text is produced and consumed. As it relates to the blog context, the discursive practice being examined in this study is the production of the blog post by the blogger. Specifically, I establish the blog post as text that is produced by the blogger as a means of communicating perceived norms for African American relationships. The sociocultural practices that may shape this discursive practice include the institutional features of the blog medium (i.e., ability to use multiple types of media, text editing capabilities, etc.), the broader context of African American journalism, and culturally bound ideologies such as notions of what it means to be Black man and a Black woman, to name a few.

Taken together, the discourse analysis methodology was a particularly appropriate methodology for applying Cole’s Intersectionality framework to the African American blogosphere because it is concerned with revealing ideological and structural factors that shape the social practices of a group, consistent with Cole’s second research imperative. Also, because it calls the researcher’s attention to the creation and interplay of social identity and systems of

belief with language use and media consumption, it is well suited for addressing Cole's other two research imperatives which beg the researcher to attend to the within group diversity (i.e., social identities) that is present within the research and similarities across these social identities.

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1 Blog Selection

Although many African American bloggers create posts about Black relationships, it is not always the primary topic of the blog. The blogs used in this study were selected based on the frequency of posting (to ensure inclusion of only active blogs), the primacy of relationships as a blog topic, and the popularity of the blog. A blogger was considered a frequent poster if they produced an average of four blog posts per month within the past year (equivalent to one post per week). This frequency was based on cursory review of the previous year's blog posts, which indicated that on average, themes/topics repeat on the blogs every 4-6 posts and the most prolific bloggers produce an average of eight relevant posts per month, while the less prolific bloggers produce four relevant posts per month on average.

A blog was deemed currently active as long as the blogger created at least one relationship specific post in April of 2013 (start of the analysis period). Blogs that met those two criteria were eligible for inclusion. Relationships were considered to be a primary blog topic if all of the following criteria were met:

1. The bloggers listed relationships, romance, love, sex, dating, or marriage as a main topic in their profile section ("About me/this blog").
2. Relationship specific tags (i.e., Dating, Sex, Love, Marriage, Romance, Women, Men) are used more frequently than other topic tags as indicated by the size of the tag in the tag cloud or the number of posts connected to the tag on the tag list.
3. Seven of the 10 most recent posts were centered on a relationship-specific topic.

To be considered popular, a blog had to meet at least two of the following criteria:

1. The blog/blogger was a nominee or winner of a Black Weblog Award between 2005 and 2012. *Note:* 2005 was the first year of the Black Weblog Awards.
2. The blog/blogger has been mentioned as a blog/blogger to read or watch in a popular African American magazine (or on the website of the magazine) such as Black Enterprise, Essence, Ebony, Jet, or Heart & Soul.
3. The blog/blogger has been mentioned as a blog/blogger to read or watch on theRoot.com. The Root is a popular digital African American news magazine founded by Dr. Henry Louis Gates. It is published by the Slate Group, which is owned by the Washington Post. At the time of writing, the Root had 145,844 Facebook Fans and 60,300 Twitter followers.
4. The blog/blogger has a minimum of 1000 followers or fans on Facebook and/or Twitter. Indicating a wide reach.
5. The blog is present on the blog roll of a blogger who met one of the first 4 criteria.

Using the criteria above 13 blogs were selected for analysis. Table I provides a list of the included blogs and provides additional detail about the gender, marital status, and social network followership of the bloggers. Every blog included in the sample was nominated for a Black Weblog Award at least once between 2005 and 2012.

**TABLE I**

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BLOGS INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>
		<b>Status</b>	<b>Fans</b>	<b>Followers</b>
Black and Married with Kids	Both	Married	176,592	13,529
Black Girls are Easy	Male	Unmarried	19,541	5,123
Black Love and Marriage	Both	Married	6,702	2,822
Black Love Forum	Both	Mixed	1,838	3,381
Black n' Bougie	Female	Unmarried	3,603	2,210
Choices, Voices, and Sole	Female	Unmarried	30	178
Feminista Jones	Female	Unmarried	335	9,884
		Not		
Relationship Playbook	Both	Available	9,060	555
Seriously Maybe	Both	Unmarried	192	42
Single Black Male	Male	Unmarried	6,200	4,932
Still Dating My Spouse	Both	Married	4,628	3,965
Until I Get Married	Male	Unmarried	2,185	5,855
Very Smart Brothas	Male	Unmarried	11,895	Not Available

## 4.2 Procedure

All blog posts published over a three-month period from April 1 through June 30, 2013 that focused on a relationship topic (i.e., dating, marriage, sex, gender roles and gender stereotypes within the context of relationships, etc.) were included in the initial analyses ( $N = 447$ ). Blog posts were considered relevant if 1) it was tagged with a relationship specific tag, or 2) skimming the first two to three paragraphs of the blog post revealed relationship specific content including words or phrases such as dating, attraction, love, sex, marriage.

The time period was selected based on a topical analysis of the previous year's posts. The analysis revealed that, on average, themes/topics repeat on the blogs every 4-6 posts and all bloggers produced at least four relevant posts per month on average. The three-month time period was selected to allow for thematic redundancy, or saturation of themes, as is required for a discourse analysis, and also to yield enough posts from each of the blogs to establish a representative sample of their writing. This time period was also selected because the bloggers' history indicate that for most of the bloggers, the number of posts tends to decrease dramatically over the summer, with very few posts in the month of July ( $M = 1$ ) and then picks up again toward the end of the summer around mid-August.



## 5. ANALYTIC PROCEDURE

### 5.1 Discourse Analysis Framework

A discourse analysis modeled on the critical media discourse (Fairclough, 2000) and ideological discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1985) frameworks was used to assess each of the research questions. The unit of analysis for the discourse analysis was the entire post published by the blog author. User comments were not included. Consistent with Fairclough's (2000) framework, I defined blog posts as cultural texts that have the potential to shape beliefs, social identity, and relations by transforming, maintaining, or reproducing existing cultural scripts. *Thus, the first goal of this analysis was to identify the relationship scripts that bloggers promote and subvert* in order to answer the first research question.

As mentioned previously, various cultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical factors either promote or serve as barriers to successful relationships among African Americans. These same factors also shape the scripts that guide social interaction. Van Dijk (1985) defines discourse as both a form of social interaction and an expression of the relation between the author and socioeconomic and cultural structures. He further promotes discourse analysis as means of understanding the "complex interplay of textual representations of scripts with social knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes" (p6). Specifically, he defines ideological discourse analysis as a method for understanding the sociocultural ideologies that underlie personal and social patterns presented in a text (i.e., power relations; p11). In-line with this, the second goal of this discourse analysis was to *identify the cultural and sociopolitical ideologies that frame the scripts presented in blogs* in order to answer the second research question.

Finally, scripts vary based on certain sociocultural features such as cultural group, gender, and social class (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003) and paying attention to this

variation is essential to the Intersectionality framework used to guide this study. Therefore, the third goal of this analysis was to *determine the demographic characteristics of the bloggers and the extent to which these characteristics impacted the scripts and ideological framing of the scripts presented on the blogs.*

As is customary for a critical media discourse analysis, notes were kept regarding the medium specific social practices that aid or hinder transmission and reception of the scripts within the blog post. These include presentation strategies or techniques for presenting text such as the use of lists, the use of multiple types of media within the post (i.e., pictures or videos), or the ability to hyperlink to external sources so that readers have direct access to external references.

## 5.2 **Systematic Analysis of the Blog Data**

All 447 blog posts were downloaded as PDF files. The PDF format was selected to maintain a record of the blog exactly as it originally appeared to the public. The constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was used as a systematic process for identifying themes aligned with the discourse analytical and conceptual frameworks described above and to organize the blog posts thematically. In the first stage of this iterative four-stage method – *comparing blog posts applicable to each theme* – every relevant blog post was read at least three times to develop a broad set of overarching themes, some of which were predetermined by the above literature review. That is I “coded” for each of the previously mentioned script categories, ideologies, and sociocultural factors. Once the 447 posts were organized thematically, I read them again, theme by theme, to gauge the range of subtopics within each theme and ensure consistent coding of the theme across the blogs. After organizing the posts by theme, a sample of 240 (54% of the original set) posts was created by selecting several blog posts in each category

that were representative of the range of the topics covered within the theme. The remainder of the analysis focused only on this sample of 240 posts.

The sample was created such that, when a blog had multiple posts for a theme, the post(s) that most represented the tone of the blog were included in the sample. Care was taken to make sure that each post that was selected for the sample from the same blog represented a unique aspect of the theme. This step was necessary to ensure the sample was theoretically saturated rather than “bulked up” by redundant posts. Thus, the sample was re-read in order to identify the theoretical properties of the theme. This re-reading was also necessary to achieve stage two – *integration of themes and their properties* – or to examine the interrelatedness of the themes, and to begin developing a “story” about the discursive patterns within the blogs by comparing the themes and their properties with one another. For the third stage – *delimiting the theory* – I re-read the posts and my notes about each of the themes with the intention of integrating themes not only with one another, but also with the prior research on this topic presented in the literature review and the conceptual and analytical frameworks guiding this study. The purpose of this stage was to refine and reduce the number of themes into the set of high-level concepts presented in the Results and Discussion section, and thus further refine the “story” about the discursive patterns across the blogs. Finally, all of my notes on each of the themes and concepts, as well as notes I had taken about the within sample diversity, were used to achieve the final stage – *writing the theory* – that is presented in the Results and Discussion section. In this stage I returned to the sample as necessary to clarify my writing.

### 5.3 **Trustworthiness of the Data Analysis**

Although inter-rater reliability is not an aspect of the discourse analysis research methodology, it is still important, as with any qualitative analysis, for researchers to demonstrate

trustworthiness (reliability and validity) of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide several indicators researchers can use to establish trustworthiness that were used in this study. The criteria are credibility, transferability, and dependability. To ensure credibility, or the alignment of the data with the findings, I enacted prolonged engagement with the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This included reading each blog post multiple times as well as reviewing and revising interpretations to ensure they are grounded within the data and the theory. I also reviewed the source materials for my conceptual frameworks and analysis methodology frequently, to ensure that I adhered closely to them. Second, I relied on critical feedback of my methodology and interpretations from peers, colleagues, and my dissertation committee members. Finally, clarifying researcher bias and maintaining a reflexive approach toward the research process is important for ensuring credibility and is also an important tenet of the Intersectionality framework used in this study. In the next two subsections, I disclose my personal worldview, biases, and reflexivity process, which were used to further ensure credibility of the research.

Transferability and dependability are two concepts related to trustworthiness. Transferability refers to providing enough information such that other researchers can make valid attempts to reproduce the results, potentially for verification in other samples or with other theories. Dependability refers to transparency in the research process. That is, providing accurate descriptions of entire research process (method, procedures, analysis). In this study I employ thick description (Geertz, 1973) or a rich description of the entire research process to achieve these goals. First, earlier in this document I have articulated the two conceptual frameworks that guided my overall study – Intersectionality and Script Theory. Care has been taken throughout to relate my literature review and methodology back to these frameworks as they are being used

within the study. Throughout the rest of the manuscript I have continued to make the same connections.

Second I have provided a clear explanation of the particular discourse analysis frameworks and systematic method I used for the qualitative analysis of the data. Included in this explanation is my definition of what text is, and the particular discursive practice I examined. In my review of other blog research that use discourse analytic approaches I have found such explanations largely absent, thus making it difficult to fully assess the reliability and validity of the research produced in those publications. The lack of transparency also makes it difficult for me to compare my research methods with those of other blog researchers, which is a key premise of transferability.

Within my method section I have provided my inclusion and exclusion criteria, analysis time period, and list of blogs, to make explicit the steps I have taken to collect the data used in this study. Third, in the coming results and discussion sections I have provided many examples and verbatim quotes to illustrate and support my interpretations.

### 5.3.1 **Researcher Self-Disclosure**

As a qualitative researcher I recognize that I am both separate from and part of the research process particularly as the source of both data collection and data analysis. As an African American woman, unmarried, and within the target age group, this content is targeted at readers like me. Yet, although I am a member of this population, and the target audience of the blogs, I am also an outsider in my role as a researcher. As such, I recognize that there is a high probability of researcher subjectivity and bias impacting this project. To minimize this, I have developed a reflexive process that requires acknowledgment and disclosure of my motivations

for conducting this research, professional paradigm, and biases toward the phenomenon. After this disclosure I provide further details of my process for managing these biases.

My interest in this research topic has been greatly shaped by my personal experiences and my professional experience with this research area. First, as an unmarried African American woman who deeply values marriage, I have a vested interest in the outcome of this research. My personal motivation for conducting this study stems from several personal experiences. First, in March of 2006, Joy Jones published the article “Marriage is For White People “ in the Washington Post. This article created a frenzy of conversation and debate in the online African American communities I participated in as well as among my African American friends. I was a very active participant in many of these conversations, and continue to participate in such interactions today. Every year since that article, the topic seems to resurface a few times per year in both of these areas. In fact, I distinctly remember sharing it with African American faculty and graduate students in my program upon entering into graduate school. In 2011, during a reactivation of this topic in one particular forum on [nappturnality.com](http://nappturnality.com), a user posted a link to a post from the Very Smart Brothas blog. Naturally, I became increasingly interested in the information presented on this particular blog as well as similar blogs, actively bookmarking and following their RSS feeds. I became interested in these blogs at a time that I was working on another media-related project in graduate school, explained below, which caused me to take a critical stance toward this material. Additionally, exposure to several community institutions across the U.S. that have “declared war on divorce” among African Americans or activated campaigns to increase marriage, namely churches, has acutely increased my awareness of issues related to intimate relationship patterns among African Americans.

Professionally, I have been involved in research related to African American families and relational patterns since conducting my undergraduate honors thesis, on preferences for types of family therapies within different racial groups. In graduate school, I have completed two large projects associated with African American relationships. First, my master's thesis that examined the role of racial and ethnic identity in sexual risk taking behaviors for African Americans and Latinos. I learned from that study that within the field we do not have a firm grasp of cultural factors that underlie sexual risk taking practices. I also found myself wondering whether researchers were putting too much emphasis on risk behaviors and attitudes to the exclusion of other behavioral and cognitive patterns that may be beneficial or protective.

The second project was a large-scale qualitative exploration of the role hip-hop media plays in shaping gender and ethnic identity formation of African American and Latino youth and young adults. From that study, I learned that in spite of the field's orientation toward media, particularly hip-hop media, as psychologically harmful, the participants perceive it as simultaneously detrimental, valuable, and empowering. Moreover, I learned that the participants valued and intensely craved engagement in discussions about media, identity, and intimate relationships within the African American community, and I wanted to learn more about this. I gravitated toward blogs as a research endeavor because the medium is especially suited for such conversations.

Finally, my research with this population and particularly on this topic is heavily colored by my research training within a community psychology program. Community psychology values diversity research with a particular emphasis on social justice. Moreover, community psychology emphasizes a strengths-based, rather than deficit-based, exploration of psychological phenomena. Most importantly, the community psychology perspective places great emphasis on

understanding how context (environment, institutions, politics, etc.) shape phenomena. As a direct result, I have selected conceptual frameworks and research methodologies for this study that are well aligned with these research imperatives. Even the grounding of this study within the context of racial disparities – a social justice issue – is a direct result of my training. Thus, I acknowledge that this research is limited by the paradigm that drives my research career. It is reasonable then, to believe that researchers who operate within alternate paradigms would offer alternate explanations of the data.

### 5.3.2 **Statement of Biases**

There is a specific set of biases that I hold toward this research that I would like to acknowledge. This list has played a critical role in my reflexive process.

1. As an African American woman and researcher, I believe that it is a privilege to conduct research on this population and share their perspectives with the rest of the world. At the same time I feel a strong sense of responsibility to portray an accurate image of this population, my population. Specifically, I wanted to make sure that I adequately portray the diversity within the population and that I do not offend members of the population. Moreover, it is of the utmost importance that I do not present research that perpetuates negative stereotypes or further marginalization of this population.
2. I value marriage as a sociocultural and sociopolitical institution and believe that it is inherently beneficial for society in spite of the many social justice and humans rights issues associated with it.
3. I believe that these blogs provide a valuable service for this population, by allowing readers to actively engage with the content and emphasizing their power to choose to



accept or reject the content presented. As such, I believe that these blogs are fundamentally good for the community.

4. I believe that it is necessary to develop intervention and education programs for African American adults that are culture specific and teach adults to address many of the challenges and hurts they experience within relationships, to prevent repetition of detrimental behavioral patterns in future generations.
5. My personal and familial experiences with interpersonal violence and emotional abuse within relationships have made me completely intolerant of these types of behaviors. As such it is difficult for me to deal with scripts that encourage abusive relationship patterns.
6. I believe that because of their history in the U.S., especially as it relates to slavery, African Americans experience challenges in developing and maintaining intimate relationships that are distinct from the experiences of other cultural groups in the U.S.
7. I believe that role models for loving, supportive, enduring relationships, and especially marriages, within the broader U.S. African American population are largely absent from or limited within media portrayals of African Americans and even within local African American communities. I also believe that such role models are essential to the evolution of intimate relationship patterns for this population. Thus, I am invested in finding and supporting such role models.

### 5.3.3 **Reflexive Process**

As mentioned previously, maintaining a reflexive process is an important aspect of the particular Intersectionality framework used to guide this study. I developed a reflexive process for this study that is based upon the methods used by other qualitative researchers who were

cited in the literature review for this project (Bowleg et al., 2004; Hyson, 2007; Abrams 2010; Shipley, 2011; French, 2013). First, I referred to the above list of biases frequently throughout the analysis and writing process. Second, I maintained a set of notes to keep track of my cognitive and emotional reactions to the data, as well as questions that arise during data analysis. These habits helped me to remain aware of my biases as well as become aware of additional biases I hold. These habits also helped me to keep track of how the data may be causing shifts in my perspective. Additionally, this encouraged me to probe information that supports my assumptions rather than accepting them at face value, creating blind spots. Finally, I debriefed with peers in my research program, faculty members, work colleagues, and members of my broader social network (close friends, church members, family) to check my interpretations. In sharing my experiences from my notes during these debriefing sessions my colleagues helped me to identify ways that my biases are entering into the interpretation and analysis of the data.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the blogs revealed a set of scripts and schemas nested within ideologies that are consistent with those found in previous research. However, the presentation of the ideologies and the exact scripts did not always align with the previous research. Overall, the analysis revealed that these blogs serve as a space that empowers both bloggers and readers to challenge or uphold existing relationship scripts and ideologies. There was one schema that connected all of the discourse on the blogs - growing into maturity, both individually and as a couple. That is, improving the quality of intimate relationships by investing in emotional and behavioral development. Evidence of this schema is presented not only in the content of the blog posts, but also in the stated missions of the blogs.

All of the blogs used in the analysis share a common goal of inspiring transformation within the African American community. This information was typically expressed within the profile area - the “About Me” or “About This Blog” section of the blog. Specifically, several bloggers expressed the goal of using their blogs to counter negative and/or destructive media portrayals of and attitudes toward African American relationships, as well as biases about African Americans within and outside of the context of relationships.

Fed up with the pervasive negative images of black marriage in the media, Lamar and Ronnie started the site to combat the negativity by focusing on positive messages about marriage in the black community. (Ronnie & Lamar Tyler, “About Us”, Black And Married with Kids, n.d.)

Relationships in **OUR** community are in serious crisis. There is a grave breakdown in our connections and communication. It is within our power to ‘pump the brakes’ of discord and bring this train safely to a halt. We invite you to start a new journey with us that will lead us to a destination of wholesome, healthy and financially sound relationships. (BLF StaffWriter, “About”, Black Love Forum, n.d.)

Another stated goal of the blogs is to encourage or provoke discussion of controversial or unpopular topics among African Americans and add an African American perspective to the broader dialogue about relationships.

We aim for the inappropriate, unpopular, and controversial topics because putting light on these issues get the conversation going and people thinking. (Kim, Markens P, and Rey, “About SM”, Seriously Maybe, n.d.)

I exist in a new era of critical thinking and self-identification. I promote the positive aspects of sex, sexuality, and sexual liberation. I’m Black and my race/culture inform an enormous amount of my values and perspectives. (Feminista Jones, “Who is Feminista Jones?” Feminista Jones, n.d.)

Through the content of the blog posts themselves and a variety of presentation strategies (techniques for presenting information), the bloggers reveal a belief that by inspiring readers to adopt healthier, more mature, ways of relating to one another through intimate relationships, a positive shift will occur within the broader African American community.

## 6.1 Defining Maturity

Whereas traditional definitions of maturity emphasize physical (i.e., age) and emotional development, maturity on the blogs was presented as a multi-dimensional construct defined by one's mindset, emotional development, and behavior. The three dimensions of maturity presented within the blogs are inextricable such that producing transformation in behavior requires a shift in or continued refinement of mindset and an elevation in emotional development. Bloggers frequently drew distinctions between being an adult and being "grown" or mature. They argued that although one may have the capacity to successfully engage in a relationship, grown or mature adults achieve the greatest levels of success in relationships - long lasting, fulfilling, and happy marriages or long-term relationships, or, short-term relationships that do not leave either partner emotionally damaged once the relationship ends.

For individuals, maturity was simultaneously dependent on and independent of age. Bloggers frequently presumed that younger people, specifically people in their teens and early to mid-twenties, were less mature and that the accumulated life experience as one transitions into the thirties and beyond naturally enhanced maturity.

When you're young you can blame the dating pool for providing you crappy options. Maybe it is the dating pool's fault, but eventually, you grow older and you can't take an "ignorance is bliss" or "I didn't know any better" approach to life. Eventually, you have to own the consequences of your own decisions. Stated bluntly, if you continue to date <redacted>, then maybe you just like <redacted>, believe you can't do better than <redacted>, or <redacted> are the only type of women you can be successful with due to their own personal shortcomings. (WisdomIsMisery, "5 Things Men Should Accept About Women and Relationships", Single Black Male, June 24, 2013)

At the same time, however, it was made clear that we cannot assume that a person is mature because they are older. Similarly, for couples, length of the relationship was presented as independent of maturity. Thus, it should not be assumed that couples that have been together a few months have not yet reached a mature state of love, nor that those who have been together for decades have achieved such an accomplishment.

While the “older” couples that we see in pictures or on the train are cute, it does not mean they have mature love. Mature love has less to do with your age and more to do with how your love has evolved over time. It has to do with your willingness to love each other unconditionally and stay committed (even through the tough times.). With that being said, I have seen many older couples that do not have mature love...not at all. On the other hand, I have seen couples that have only been married for 5, 10 or 15 years that are thriving in healthy relationships because they are very intentional about loving each other and are committed to making the marriage work. (Ronnie Tyler, “5 Characteristics of Mature Love, Black And Married With Kids, May 28, 2013)

Mature love is characterized within the blogs as a relationship in which the couple has reached the deepest levels of commitment, emotional intimacy, trust, and satisfaction. Such relationships are highly desirable because they are able to withstand even the most difficult challenges, which include infidelity, loss of a child or other dependent, financial ruin, major illnesses or disability, and the ebbs and flows of feelings of love and attraction.

## 6.2 **The Growth Mindset**

Consistent with previous research by Shipley (2011) and Tyson (2012), bloggers made clear that past relationships represented learning experiences, which made them wiser and more prepared for the next relationship. Thus, implicitly, it is expected that readers will adopt a growth

mindset in which they value learning from previous experiences and the experiences of others. This learning is accomplished by taking time to reflect on what did and did not work, and why. Thus, these blogs upheld the script that *personal growth is essential to the development of mature relationships*. The growth mindset was promoted on the blogs through the use of a variety of presentation strategies. First, within the content of the blog posts, it was common to see a call to action that encouraged readers to engage in an honest reflection of the ways in which the information presented is relevant to their lives.

Asking readers questions within the text or, more frequently, at the end of the article was a second strategy used by the bloggers to promote a growth mindset. These questions served two purposes: 1) to gain readers' reaction to the information presented in the article, for example, Michele Grant of Black 'N Bougie writes, "BougieLand, am I in the wrong? Is it cool for your s/o to go out one on one with members of the opposite sex?" (Michele Grant, "Is This Cool or Not?", Black 'N Bougie, May 30, 2013) and 2) to encourage readers to reflect on their own experience and share their story. For example, "BMWK – if you have ever been through a similar situation, how did you find healing?" (Saviela Edwards Thorne, "Life After Miscarriage", Black and Married with Kids, April 8, 2013).

Another popular strategy was the use of lists. As is typical for writers, lists were frequently used to make content more easily digestible by focusing the reader's attention on key points. Within the blogs, lists also served a prescriptive function by providing readers with succinct instructions for creating change or a set of criteria for identifying areas for improvement.

The fourth strategy was bloggers' use of themselves as examples. Bloggers frequently discussed their own relationships within posts. They did so carefully, providing just enough

information for the reader to understand the message being conveyed, but without providing too much information about the specific details of the event being discussed in order to maintain some sense of privacy. This information sharing seems to serve four main purposes. First to establish themselves as imperfect experts, thus using their experience as proof of credibility, unlike credentialed experts who can rely on their credential.

I'm a woman who has experienced a full range of relationships from which I have learned something I believe has made me wiser. I've been jump-off, friend-with-benefits, bottom-bitch, girlfriend, fiancée, and wife (and mistress) and I have the battle scars and trophies from all of those experiences. I've lived a lot and learned a lot. ("Who is Feminista Jones?", Feminista Jones, n.d.)

I will be the first to admit that control was going to be the death of my marriage in the beginning. There were several (ok tons) of times when I not only used control, I abused control [...] I'm a recovering control-aholic and you can be also. (Tarenia Carthan, "Control Freaks Ruin Marriages", Black Love Forum, April 19, 2013)

The self-as-imperfect-expert performance also served to demonstrate that the bloggers have done the work they are asking their readers to do, and reassure readers that it is acceptable to engage in this process of adapting a growth mindset. Third, through this performance, bloggers demonstrate to readers that the changes they are advocating are possible to achieve, and finally for catharsis. Specifically, telling personal stories allows bloggers to receive approval for their deeds, validation of their beliefs, as well as assistance and encouragement for overcoming ongoing challenges from readers.



I remember years ago having lunch with my husband and while watching him I made a secret promise to myself that I would never be responsible for hurting him in any way. From that moment on, I have been conscious of how I treat him. I could always improve in certain areas, but for the most part I am maintaining that promise. I desire a “no regrets” relationship. I don’t want to be sorry for anything I did or didn’t do in my marriage. For all those married couples out there interested in joining me, here’s where we begin... (Tiya Cunningham-Sumter, “Create A ‘No Regrets’ Relationship”, *Black and Married with Kids*, April 18, 2013)

Self-as-example information-sharing practices were common across all of the blogs, but there was a difference between married and unmarried bloggers’ use of the strategy. Unmarried bloggers were less likely to discuss their current relationship using this strategy. Instead, unmarried bloggers often told stories about friends, family members, other readers (who specifically requested their story be shared) or created stories. When the unmarried bloggers did talk about themselves, they most frequently did so within the context of a previous relationship. Such stories often began with phrases like “I once dated a girl/guy who...” When they chose to talk about a current relationship, unmarried bloggers took care to protect their partner’s identity through the use of generic labels such as Beau Nouveau (Black ‘N Bougie) or simply girlfriend/boyfriend. Other than occasional mentions of their relationship status, the unmarried bloggers rarely discussed their current relationship. This group difference likely occurs because married bloggers provide mutual consent or receive consent from their partner to share a story, whereas unmarried bloggers may not have consent from their partners to divulge personal information. Additionally, unmarried bloggers may be more mindful of their relationship “track record” and online reputation so as not to jeopardize future romantic encounters or relationships.

One important variation of the self-as-example theme appeared on the blogs where the authors went beyond sharing their own experiences as an example to encourage readers to view themselves as examples for others within their community and broader society. This was particularly true on married blogs. Here authors frequently exclaimed that as a married person/couple, the people within your social sphere, both married and unmarried, are likely to consider your marriage a role model. Additionally, broader society, particularly non-African Americans, will likely regard your marriage as a model of all African American marriages. Thus, bloggers appear to use the self-as-example strategy to emphasize that whether or not they like it, all married African Americans play a role in shaping the state of relationships within the broader community and should feel a sense of responsibility for doing so in a beneficial manner.

You serve others by being an example to other couples and singles that want to get married. Your marriage will minister in a positive or negative way to others depending on how you conduct yourself. Hopefully, your conduct is positive so others will see what a healthy marriage looks like. Your show of respect and love is watched by family, friends and even strangers. (Latoya Irving “Four Ways Your Marriage Is A Ministry”, Black and Married with Kids, April 26, 2013)

### 6.3 **Emotional and Behavioral Contexts of Maturity**

In addition to adopting a growth mindset, bloggers emphasized the importance of several behaviors for growing into maturity. These include verbal and nonverbal communication with one’s partner, family, and friends, developing financial maturity, and performances of masculinity, femininity, and parenthood.

### 6.3.1 Communication

Improving communication was the most frequent topic presented within the blogs. Thus indicating bloggers' implicit position that *communication is critical to the success of a relationship*, a script consistent with previous research. Blog posts on this topic indicate the importance of communication for sustaining relationships in a variety of ways, namely addressing conflict, setting and managing expectations, and establishing deep levels of emotional intimacy. Additionally, bloggers used the topic of communication to manage readers' expectations about appropriate ways of relating with one's partner. Specifically, using this topic to educate readers about physical and emotional abuse.

#### 6.3.1.1 Setting and Managing Expectations.

Most of the communication scripts were closely aligned to the scripts that have emerged from previous research, particularly the scripts about communicating expectations and scripts for developing emotional intimacy. Clearly articulating one's expectations to potential mates was regarded as critical to relational success regardless of the type of relationship one was pursuing.

Unmarried bloggers, however, made clear that this task was especially important when engaging in casual (sexual, uncommitted) relationships. These bloggers added to the requirement of articulation two additional related scripts, *1) listen carefully and believe your partner when he or she reveals the type of relationship that they desire and are willing to engage in*, and *2) do not settle for less than you desire*. In other words, the bloggers argue that if you want one type of relationship (i.e. long-term), but your potential mate wants a different type of relationship (i.e., casual), then both parties should stop pursuing one another. This set of scripts is consistent with previous research that revealed a script that sex should be postponed when a person wants a long-term relationship (Shipley, 2011; Eyre 2012).

This set of scripts was typically directed toward women and almost exclusively presented as a response to a female reader seeking advice because she is dissatisfied with her casual relationship status. The readers often revealed that they initially desired a long-term relationship with the person, but agreed to engage in casual sex with the man because 1) that was all he was willing to offer, or 2) he promised (through words or actions) to elevate their relationship status only after the couple had sex. Underlying this set of scripts is the heterosexual ideology that privileges male sexuality over female sexuality. As defined earlier in this manuscript, the heterosexual ideology grants men the privilege to prioritize their sexual desire, act freely on their sexual needs, and promise women status and power in exchange for sex. Women, in turn, are expected to act as managers for men's sex drive by devaluing their own sexuality, trading sex as a commodity, endeavoring to please men, and/or waiting to be chosen by men (Kim et al, 2007). With this set of scripts bloggers, actively advise women to reject certain aspects of this heterosexual ideology. Specifically, to reject men's promises of status in exchange for sex, and the notion that they must wait for a man to choose them rather than exerting control of their own relationship status.

Basically, you tell him how you feel and you let him know that you don't want to continue along the route of FWB for infinity plus one. Instead of immediately forcing him to choose – although, let's keep in mind that it's already been 12 months so he should know what the hell he does or does not want from you by now and his actions seem to indicate that he doesn't want more or he would have asked for more beforehand, but whatever – you give him a time frame - DETERMINED BY YOU, NOT HIM  
...(WisdomIsMisery, "How Can Women Escape the Friend Zone?", Single Black Male, April 4, 2013)

As the woman, you should be the one wielding all the power, but instead you sit there quiet as a mouse and hope that he asks for your number, takes you on a date, calls you after he hits, and tells you that he wants you to be his girl. Guess what? That nigga is going to keep doing what he's doing so long as you're following his lead like an obedient puppy [...] Get what you want, not what he's willing to give. Stop assuming that to know you is to love you because someone else may not think you're as bomb as you say you are. There is no backdoor into a relationship, so go through the front by laying your expectations out there the moment you start to like him. *I'm not looking to jump into a relationship, but I'm open to one.* That's authentic. I want all of you to walk into a bank and ask for a handshake loan because you're not comfortable with the paperwork, then take note as they look at you like you're the dumbest person on earth. That's the same look you should give to these fools who tell you they want you all to themselves, but not officially. (G. L. Lambert, "Exclusive But Not Official", *Black Girls are Easy*, April 2013)

Bloggers however, were careful not to place the onus of subverting this ideology solely on women, an act that would inadvertently reinforce the ideology. Instead men were also directed to reject this ideology by not engaging in casual sex with women who express an interest in other relationship types. The bloggers acknowledge, however, that this script is difficult for men to enact. One reason, the bloggers argue, is that relationships require work, and choosing the more difficult option of committing to a relationship rather than the easy option of freely available sex requires a mature understanding and expression of masculinity. In this

context mature masculinity means a willingness to be vulnerable and taking responsibility for the impact one's actions has on others, especially sexual partners.

Let me make something clear in terms of guilt. You have the right to just want to have fun, to date multiple girls, and to fuck like a rabbit until you feel it's time to grow up [...] If your only focus is "*How can I have sex with girls*" then you're missing out on the true beauty of women. Physical attraction is nothing compared to the chemistry you can have with a woman that can turn you on mentally as well. There are hoes, and there are women, if you just want sex then don't bother dating, hit the ATM then go buy some pussy. If you want to experience what women really have to offer, stop looking at them as objects and start looking at them as prospects. Approaching women can be intimidating, rejection is always scary, and actually falling for one is even more terrifying. The rollercoaster of *is she right for life or just right for a few nights* puts us men in a position where we occasionally have to hurt feelings, and no matter how easy you let a girl off after you figure out she's not the one, you will be painted the bad guy. [...] You can either stay behind your keyboard beating off to Pornstars or you go through the trials and tribulations of finding a woman that makes you a better man. It all starts with you. ("How To Talk To Women", Black Girls are Easy, May 2013)

The more difficult and therefore less traveled path is to respect all women, and faithfully honor one woman. On some level – reading between the lines of your comment – you seem to know this is true. Ironically, it's far easier to bed multiple women and involve yourself in relationships in which you don't have any real physical, mental, or emotional interest vested in the final outcome than it is to put in the work necessary to make a real

relationship with one woman work. Honestly, relationships are difficult. That's why I can understand why you, and men like you, would prefer to take the easier route while you focus on other goals with more clear-cut plans and objectives. However, in continuing on the path that you're on now you will hurt a number of women. [...] As a man, you need to own that responsibility. You need to have the personal accountability to recognize how your actions will hurt these women while you, selfishly and knowingly, figure out what you want from life and which particular woman you want it from [...] One day, I hope you – and men like you – make the choice to be the men you need to be over the men you want to be. (WisdomIsMisery, “5 Things Men Should Accept About Women and Relationships”, Single Black Male, June 24, 2014)

A second reason subverting the ideology is difficult for men is that women do not always clearly communicate that their desire for a committed relationship, thus bloggers introduced the script *women are liars*. With this script, bloggers argue that women are socialized to develop an emotional connection with men whom they have sex with, or to only engage in sex with men for whom they are attracted to and desire a relationship with, therefore, the vast majority of women who agree to have casual sex are lying about their desires to be in a “real” (committed) relationship and men should avoid having casual sex with them.

Now, if we believed Jane was being completely honest, Jack wouldn't be seen as a douche, and this would just be a story about two adults who've decided to have some fun with each other in a mutually agreed upon and mutually beneficial way. But, since Jane is a woman—and since both socialization *and* experience has taught us that she's probably not being honest with her feelings —the socially palatable (read: good) way for him to

have dealt with this situation is to assume that Jane's gender makes her completely unable to be honest about stuff like this. Basically, the only way for Jack to avoid being considered a douche is to assume Jane—and any other woman who'd say "I'm cool" in a similar situation—isn't really a-ok with the arrangement, and not sleep with her.

Basically, to be a "good" guy, sometimes you need to assume that women are liars.

(Damon "The Champ" Young, "Wanna Be a Good Guy? Assume Women are Liars", Very Smart Brothas, April 23, 2013)

This observation about women is consistent with research that has demonstrated that women believe it is their responsibility to sustain relationships by engaging in behaviors that they do not enjoy or that conflict with their desires, such as engaging in consensual sex and maintaining emotional distance from a mate, thus relinquishing power in the relationship to the man (Bowleg et. al., 2004).

The act of engaging in casual sex without developing an emotional attachment was regarded as a female performance of masculinity. Women who are able to put forth a genuine performance of such masculinity- they enjoy casual sex and are willing to engage in short-term casual relationships without an expectation that it will eventually develop into something deeper - were perceived as rare and highly desirable mates. These women were perceived as being in full control of their own sexuality and thus are not bound by the heterosexual ideology. On the other hand, women who "act like a man" by suppressing their emotions while engaging in a casual relationship despite their desire for an alternate relationship status frustrated male and female bloggers alike with their inauthentic performance of masculinity.

The girls who can truly handle casual sex are the ones whose clits we ride the hardest and try to lock down immediately because they really can take us or leave us, and that drives



our egos crazy and maintains her power over us. The ones who are just playing that role, we game the hell out of for as long as we can, and say shit like, “*but you’re the one who said you liked your freedom*”, because we know you’re dependent on us. (“Exclusive But Not Official”, Black Girls are Easy, April 2013)

Have you ever met a woman who proudly proclaims she “thinks like a man” but in reality she “acts like a man,” when it comes to love matters. She tries to stay in control emotionally by appearing emotion-less. She agrees to have sex with no ties, but weeks later she may have an extreme emotional outburst which no one can figure out [...]

Whether it comes to a man or a woman, if you choose to ignore your natural tendencies you will eventually burst at the seams. If you have to play mental games with others at your expense, it won’t be long until you realize that you will never get what you want if you continue pretending to be something you were never created to be. (Emma J. Wallace, “Why Women (Try) to Act Like A Man”, Black Love Forum, June 4, 2013)

Bloggers put the onus on both men and women to discern which performance of masculinity is genuine and act accordingly. That is, women who are performing inauthentically are urged to stop doing so, in accordance with previous script of not settling, while men are expected to only engage in casual relationships with the few women who are able to genuinely perform this masculinity.

Taken together this set of scripts represents a dynamic tension that authors struggled with when confronting the heterosexual ideology. Although, bloggers assigned responsibility for addressing this ideology to both women and men, it seems women bear the greater burden. The

bloggers, frequently reminded readers that, for men, fighting this ideology is a choice. With regard to sexuality, there is no real incentive for them to mature because the prevalence of the ideology and the sex-ratio imbalance structure the dating market in a way that guarantees men will always have a woman willing to meet their needs available to them. Even when they do choose to mature, there will be a new group of women waiting, thus they will always be in demand regardless of the choice they make. For women however, subverting the ideology is a requirement if they want to achieve a satisfying intimate relationship, whether casual or long-term, because 1) the women who subvert the script are most likely to be successful at finding a mate who meets their expectations and 2) the dating marketplace dynamics will not shift unless all women consistently refuse to continue privileging men's sexuality, and work harder to elevate their own, thus making it more difficult for men to gain sex successfully without maturing.

#### 6.3.1.2 **Communication for Intimacy**

Achieving a state of mature love requires couples to reach a deep level of intimacy, both physical and emotional. On the blogs, communication was the most important prerequisite for intimacy. Specifically, communicating to understand a partner's needs and then demonstrating commitment and support by consistently working to meet those needs was considered to set the foundation for both emotional and physical intimacy. Bloggers argue that consistently working to meet the needs of one's partner and communicating in a manner that resonates with the partner increases trust and enhances each partner's ability to be vulnerable with one another. This is especially true of behaviors that may not align with traditional gender roles, such as men sharing in chores such as cleaning the house or spending extra time with the kids so that the mother can "have a break". For women this also required letting go of culturally bound notions that uphold the strong independent Black woman stereotype which requires women to be completely self-

sufficient and prove they are able to effectively juggle many difficult tasks and competing priorities alone, particularly without having to rely on a man.

Running a house, raising kids and then being productive on our jobs is tiring. An exceptional spouse knows nothing about 50-50 and is more focused on “whatever it takes”. Seeking to take the load off of our spouse makes their life easier if even in only small ways. While the rule may be: “that” is a man’s job and “this” is a woman’s role. When we can move beyond those boundaries and take the load off of our husband or wife, we demonstrate how much we value them. And thus, put exceptional strength into our relationship. Note to Husbands: There was a study that came out a few years ago that made a strong link between the amount of house work a man does and the degree of intimacy he enjoys with his wife. (Edward Lee, “6 Things that Make an Exceptional Spouse”, Black and Married with Kids May 14, 2013)

Communicating such support and commitment to the relationship by engaging in these behaviors creates an opportunity for couples to reach the deepest possible levels of intimacy and insulates the couple from conflict and infidelity. This is not to say that couples that meet these criteria would not experience either of these issues, but that in a mature relationship these events would be less frequent and less damaging. Similarly, in a mature marriage infidelity is not a deal-breaker, instead it is an obstacle that can be overcome with counseling and open communication. These findings are consistent with previous research that found scripts which dictate that demonstrating commitment, trust, and support through communication are essential to the stability of a relationship (e.g., Cowdery, 2009; Collins & Champion, 2011; Eyre et al., 2012; Tyson, 2012).

### 6.3.1.3 Conflict

Managing conflict was the most prevalent communication topic on the blogs. The goal of blog posts that addressed conflict in relationships was to teach readers how to prevent conflict or to address it in a mature manner. Mature in this context means being aware of and effectively managing one's emotions and behaviors in order to diffuse rather escalate the conflict. Authors frequently emphasized the importance of remaining empathic toward one's partner even when they disagree with him or her.

Showing empathy will diffuse a difficult situation. To understand why they are upset you must listen to the "true" basics of your spouse words to understand exactly what is bothering them. (Pamela King, "Conflict Resolution in Marriage", Still Dating My Spouse, May 14, 2013)

As with communicating for intimacy, bloggers indicated that it is important to demonstrate commitment to one's partner by being fully present during conflict. This means paying close attention to how one's words impact their partner, whether the conversation is a productive one, and being mindful of body language or other non-verbal cues throughout the conflict.

Aligned with previous research on conflict scripts, conflict was presented as a natural aspect of relationships, thus couples that never experienced conflict were considered to be poorly functioning and destined for breakup. Similarly, partners who avoided conflicts rather than addressing problems and hurts were viewed as a less committed. Readers were frequently discouraged from actively avoiding conflict by allowing minor hurts to build up over time. Such behavior, it was warned, would result in larger, more harmful conflicts later in the relationship, conflicts that may never be resolved or would require professional help to overcome. However,

bloggers also used their posts about conflict to educate readers about emotional and physical abuse, and made clear that such treatment should not be tolerated.

Another important aspect of addressing or preventing conflict was managing communication with family and friends. Specifically, managing the information that readers share with family and friends about their partner and their relationship. Although family and friends were viewed as a great source of support for individuals and couples alike, bloggers generally forbid readers from divulging details about conflict with family and friends except in situations where abuse (physical or emotional) occurred. Thus, friends and family were presented as a threat to the relationship during times of conflict. There were three reasons that bloggers urged readers to avoid this common pitfall. First, friends and family are not unbiased. They typically have your best interests in mind and thus will take your side in the conflict. As a result, they will either encourage you to end the relationship, cause strain in the relationship that your partner has with your friends and family as they change their behavior towards him or her, or become too involved by engaging your partner directly. All of these are likely to escalate conflict between the reader and their partner. Additionally, it was argued that sharing such information with family and friends threatens trust because it is perceived as a breach of privacy.

When you have a disagreement with your spouse, one of the best things you can do for your marriage is to not talk about it with your family of origin. Families can be a wonderful source of support, but in new relationships it's essential for a couple to establish an identity that's separate from their respective families. This engenders trust in one another, strengthens your bond, and helps you make decisions that are right for the two of you, free of outside meddling and the resentment that can create. (Christine Steinorth, "5 Cue Cards for New Couples", *Black and Married with Kids*, June 6, 2013)

The final reason, provided by female bloggers, was that other women, even friends and family, are not always trustworthy. This script is distinct from the previous script put forth by male bloggers that women are liars. With the *women are not trustworthy script*, bloggers reasoned that it is often difficult to discerns woman's intentions and women with devious intentions to "steal your man" would be energized by knowing that there is conflict in the relationship; they would perceive the conflict as an opportunity initiate an affair. Thus, perpetuating the existing script that women are not trustworthy, which has been found in previous research (e.g., Shipley, 2011). Of note, bloggers also cautioned against sharing too much "good" information, particularly, information about one's sex life with other women to avoid making your partner more desirable to them. They also cautioned against allowing your partner to attend non-business related outings alone with another woman for the same reason.

This script is rooted in a heteronormative ideology, which constructs all male-female interactions as heterosexual activity that can never be truly platonic if both individuals identify as heterosexual (Stephens, 2012). Moreover, it reinforces the heterosexual norm that women are responsible for managing men's' sexual appetite. This method of controlling other women's perception of the mate is a fidelity management strategy designed to protect the boyfriend or husband from other women and thus manage his sexual appetite by eliminating a source of temptation. Importantly, we should not assume that this fidelity management strategy implies that men lack self-control and the ability to regulate their sex drive to avoid committing infidelity. Bloggers regarded this notion as offensive. Instead, women employ this fidelity management strategy because they believe men are not adept at identifying the subtle, devious behaviors that women use to seduce men.

So last week when we were watching a movie and he announced that he was going to see the new Star Trek with a friend of his and did I think it was okay [...] He explained it was a friend of his who was a girl, not a "girlfriend" [...]He added. "It's just a movie. Not dinner, not drinks, we'll go to the movie and then I'll come over here for dinner." "It's fine." I said with a smile though it wasn't. Past history had me wanting to jump up and down screaming, "NO! You may not go! B\*tches be treacherous. And I don't know her. I'm not cool with this!" [...] Um-hmm. She said maybe they could get coffee sometime. Without thinking I said, "Coffee is code for she wants to see you naked and needs a way in." To which he replied, "She's not like that." Hmpfh. Yes she is, he just doesn't know it. He said, "Coffee isn't a date anyway." Bless his heart. Yes it is, he just doesn't know it. She may not even have a nefarious plot going. But I'll be tagging along to the next movie. Won't that be interesting? (Michele Grant, "Is This Cool or Not?", Black N' Bougie, May 30, 2013)

Finally, the *women are not trustworthy script*, is also likely driven by the sex-ratio imbalance, which increases perceived competition among women who outnumber available, desirable men in the dating market place.

Blog posts written about conflict were often prescriptive in nature, drawing on the strategies mentioned previously such as lists and story-telling to teach readers how to successfully resolve or prevent conflict. In addition to the prescriptive strategies, bloggers often couched warnings about family and friends within discussions of social media usage. Specifically, they frequently discouraged readers from providing details about their relationship on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Not only would doing so provide a

relatively permanent record of one's relationship history, it was also viewed as divisive because of the ability to publicly humiliate his or her partner.

We live in a time where social media is a big part of life, and sharing is encouraged. But there's definitely such a thing as oversharing. Tweeting your frustrations is a big no-no. Changing your status on Facebook from "married" to "it's complicated" every other month is simply begging for trouble. (Brianna Myricks, *The Art of Keeping People Out of Your Relationship*, *Black and Married with Kids*, April 9, 2013)

First, it is none of their business what goes on in your house. Second, you can't get mad at everyone talking about and remixing the details of your drama if you freely post it online. Third, it's immature and disloyal to badmouth your mate in an open forum. (Tai'isha Gooden, "Us Against The World: 3 Types of People to Keep Out of Your Relationship Drama", *Black Love Forum*, May 20, 2013)

It is important to note that the communication scripts promoted on the blogs did not advocate for readers, particularly women to suppress emotion or relinquish any power in order to make their male mates feel respected or powerful as was demonstrated in previous research (e.g., Bowleg et. al., 2004; Barnes, 2009; Cowdery, 2009), nor did they advocate manipulating partners emotions by suppressing one's own emotions as Eyre and colleagues (2011) found. Bloggers did however, call attention to maintaining a balance of power by emphasizing the importance of choosing one's words carefully to avoid threatening one's sense of respect and power, particularly their masculinity or femininity, by acting in ways that would be considered belittling or demeaning. Additionally bloggers emphasized creating an atmosphere in which each



partner feels safe to express emotion and voice concerns and discontent without fear of retaliation (e.g., raised voices or aggressive language, withholding of sex, infidelity, berating or violence).

### 6.3.2 **Financial Maturity**

Financial Maturity was an expectation communicated frequently across the blogs, revealing the script that *financial maturity is essential to the success of relationships*. Financial maturity was defined in the blogs as being fiscally responsible and financially stable. This was defined as living within one's means by maintaining realistic budget, limited use of credit, being able to provide necessities for yourself and the family, and maintaining steady work - preferably a career and not a job. Additionally, for parents, the definition included actively teaching children about money so they will become financially literate and financial mature adults. Purchasing luxury items or living in extravagant homes was promoted as acceptable only to the extent that it fit within a budget and did not require accumulating consumer debt. In other words, it was acceptable to have a mortgage or car loan as long as one could afford the payments on those loans and still be able to fund the other areas of life without resorting to credit. Unlike the other contexts of maturity, blog posts that mentioned financial maturity were less prescriptive that is, bloggers provided little instruction on how one becomes financially mature. Instead mentions of financial maturity were mostly referential. Thus, it is assumed that readers already have a certain level of financial literacy such as the ability to create and maintain a budget, in addition to possessing a level of mindfulness around one's spending habits, appropriate costs of living, and the ability to earn money. Generally, the advice given emphasized the importance of having frequent conversations about finances with your partner even in the early stages of dating. Bloggers did share some general information about how they deal with finances in the

relationship, such as using spreadsheets, or maintaining a joint account but did not provide the comprehensive lists of directives that were typical for addressing communication patterns, and the growth mindset.

A terrible credit score or dark financial history may be a strike against you. In the past women might have prioritized a man's job, income and family as top dating requirements. But now singles are diving straight into financial matters first by directly asking about this revealing number. [...] Everyone has made mistakes, so if your credit score is less than stellar, acknowledge it. Let her know you're working on it by paying down your current balances and installing a loan plan." (WillWavvy, "Dating Deal Breakers and Deal Makers", *The Relationship Playbook*, May 14, 2013)

Begin by scheduling short monthly meetings with your partner to discuss not only your family's yearly savings goals, upcoming costs [...] In the event that monthly meetings are not sufficient, adjust the meeting times to meet your needs. [...] A lot of financial pundits will tell you that it is a must to open a joint savings and checking account when you first get married. I would have to disagree. I think each couple should experiment and test out what works best for them. [...] What is most important is that you communicate and figure out what is best for you. (Kara Stevens, "5 Questions You Must Answer To Build Financial Intimacy In Your Marriage", *Black and Married With Kids*, June 26, 2013)

### 6.3.3 **Parenthood**

Bloggers, regardless of familial status, used parenthood as a context in which to encourage maturity. Parenthood, they argued, forces you to "grow up" or mature. Because parenthood is inextricable from intimate relationships, parenthood was discussed frequently

across the blogs. However, it is likely that discourses of parenthood were particularly prevalent in this analysis because the analysis period overlapped both parent appreciation holidays - Mothers & Fathers Day.

Within the blog posts, parenthood was used as a space to address a variety of ideologies, namely, masculinity, femininity, maturity, and heterosexuality. Consistent with previous research on socialization about intimate relationships (e.g., Wallace 2007) the parenthood discourse emphasizes the importance of socializing boys and girls to become mature men and women from a very young age. Bloggers communicated this message by encouraging readers to reflect on the type of adult they would like their child to become and to role model the corresponding behaviors in addition to verbally articulating those expectations to their children. Posts on this topic were always prescriptive in nature, typically providing parents with lists of tips that they should enact in order to successfully socialize children to become mature adults and stories to illustrate how the author achieves this goal.

What our children witness and experience while they are being raised is important to both my husband and myself. I have to consider the impact every decision I make will have on their lives. They are going to develop into grown women who will mirror what they saw coming up. In addition to happy childhood memories, I want them to remember seeing a marriage filled with joy, love and trust. As a parent, I know my girls are worthy of the best life has to offer and being in a relationship that honors and respects them demonstrates that. (Tiya Cunningham-Sumter, "What Do You Want Your Children To Say About Your Marriage?", *Black and Married with Kids*, April 11, 2013)

There is a lot to be said about the things our father teaches us. Some of it never really sinks in until we're older. The lessons about being a gentleman, having character, and being a man of your word all come to mind. Yes, a woman can tell her son about those traits. But his father can actually show these traits by example. (Nick Campbell, Honor Thy Father, *The Relationship Playbook*, April 23, 2013)

Parenthood was also used as a context for subverting the heterosexual ideology. Specifically, teaching boys to honor and respect women, value their sexuality just as much as their own, and reject cultural scripts that equate masculinity with sexual conquest. For example, in his reflection on lessons he intends to teach his son, *The Mighty Most* writes to his newborn son:

There will come a time in your life when scheming on the lady parts of women is pretty high on your list of things to do. It happens. But no matter what, it should never be your top priority and as you get older you'll come to realize that chasing only begets more chasing [...] But as you get older you'll come to realize that finding a woman who will spread her legs for you is easy; finding someone you can trust to be your partner for the rest of your life is much harder. If you focus your interaction with women on the latter, you'll fall into more than enough of the former along the way to quench any thirst you might have. [...] Some men will dedicate their lives to chasing women. It'll be a constant distraction to their progress and overall life success, they'll equate everything to how many women they've been with, and they'll judge the masculinity of others by their ability to get women. [...] You'll also find that they generally have poor reputations amongst those who know them; if you spend too much time with them, their reputation

will eventually become your reputation. (The Mighty Most, “Five Things About Men I’ll Teach My Son”, *Single Black Male*, June 13, 2013)

Similarly, bloggers discussed wanting to teach their daughters to reject sustainability and femininity scripts rooted in heterosexual ideology, which encourage women to devalue themselves, and especially their sexuality in order to maintain a relationship. In her post about what she intends to teach her 5 month old daughter as she grows, Martine Foreman writes to her daughter:

Know when to walk away. Women can be so tolerant at times. It’s unnecessary. If you don’t feel appreciated and respected, just walk away – with no apologies. Trust me, there will be someone else. (Martine Foreman, “6 Things I Want My Daughter to Know Before She Starts Dating, *Black and Married with Kids*”, April 18th, 2013)

Aligned with the heterosexual ideology, bloggers especially encouraged single mothers, particularly those with daughters to be mindful of the treatment they tolerate from men and what such treatment teaches them about femininity. Accepting behaviors that conform to the heterosexual ideology perpetuates a treacherous cycle.

Yes it’s great to give your child a storybook home, but if you have to chase a man down and force him into that position, then it’s not worth it. By the time you finish explaining to your daughter why you allowed Daddy to have side hoes, call you out your name, and not come home Friday nights, it’s going to be too late because she’s going to be pregnant by a nigga who treats her just like daddy treated mommy. (“Making It Work For the Kids”, *Black Girls Are Easy*, May 2013)

Further, as with the blog posts on appropriate communication, bloggers used the parenthood as a context for encouraging women to be intolerant of domestic abuse as a means of protecting the emotional development of children.

Show me an ass whipping that's worth keeping a two-parent household together and I'll show you a unicorn. Your son or daughter may never ever talk about seeing daddy yell or hit you, but that shit will stay with them for life. "Daddy issues" isn't just some cliché saying, the shit is real [...] Parents have no business being selfish, and mothers especially can't afford to be weak. You have a child who looks up to you and you owe it to them to be confident, definitive, and Spartan strong. ("Making It Work For the Kids", Black Girls Are Easy, May 2013.)

#### 6.3.3.1 **Fatherhood Discourse as a Cultural Blind Spot**

Unlike previous research, which has revealed that the act of fathering a child was a critical indicator of masculinity, bloggers, indicate that being a man is not demonstrated by the act of creating life, but instead by being actively involved in the child's life and providing emotional and financial support to the child and mother.

However, as a man with a child, being responsible is the most important piece of the puzzle. It is the crux of everything else. Part of many mommas issue with fathers is that they think being present is enough. Naw, you have to be actively functional when present. Know how to do stuff. Be able to actually take care of your children so the mother doesn't have to feel like she needs to monitor you [...] And as your kid gets older, meet the necessary responsibilities for creating a viable member of society. Basically, provide your child with the necessary tools to make solid decisions so that they may be in

control of their destiny as opposed to becoming an undesirable member of society.

(Panama Jackson, “How To Be A Good Father in 1,300 Words or Less”, Very Smart Brothas, June 13, 2013)

Beyond discussing impact of fatherhood on children, the discourse on fatherhood was used to initiate a shift the dialogue about the role of the father in the Black community. Bloggers, particularly male bloggers, frequently commented that emphasis of fatherhood discourse on absentee-fatherhood within and outside of the Black community has been detrimental to the community. First, it perpetuates a deficit-based perspective of men that is difficult to overcome. Male bloggers felt that men who are active fathers are frequently under-appreciated and used the lack of enthusiasm during or absence of the celebration of Father’s Day in the African American community as evidence.

I spent most of my upbringing with my mother’s side of the family. A quick synopsis, that’s all women; my grandmother, great aunt, two aunts and mother. You can imagine what most holidays were like... but the one that stood out the most was Father’s Day. We simply never celebrated it [...] We definitely celebrated Mother’s Day — boy, did we celebrate the hell out of that day. But Father’s Day... was always a big thud. That got me thinking... are we overlooking Father’s Day? [...] And is that fair for Fathers who do a great job? I’m not sure. (Dr. J, “Is Father’s Day Really Overlooked?”, Single Black Male, June 5, 2013.)

They also felt the deficit perspective causes women and people of other races, to unconsciously and consistently question a Black man's motivation for and commitment to being an active part of the child's life, as well as doubt their capability to parent successfully.

Ironically, as men are stepping up to the plate in increased numbers, they still face a society who downplays them. When men are seen out with their kids, the typical "aww" and "oh that's cute" gets floated around. People even go as far as to state "Oh, you're hanging with Daddy today?" As if the father and his child hanging out at a park is just a fluke occurrence [...] how can women complain about the lack of fathers doing their part, only to treat the ones who are with suspicion? [...] Even worse is the disturbing trend of women who assume that a man cannot properly raise a child without a woman. This is interesting because we live in a society where many women are raising boys alone, in addition to that boasting how she's doing it alone. So with that said, how is that any different than a man doing the same exact job? (Nick Campbell, "Honor Thy Father", The Relationship Playbook, April 23, 2013)

Does he take care of his responsibilities as a father? \*taps foot and waits\* Then why do you care how he lives his life as a SINGLE man? [...] Your aggression and anger will spill over to your children and then sides will be drawn. Either Daddy becomes the mean man Mommy always complains about or Mommy becomes the bitter bitch who won't give Superdad a break. Either way you are making your child choose sides unfairly. Of course it's going to be hard seeing someone you love choose other females over you, but deal with it like a woman, not a brat. ("Making It Work For the Kids", Black Girls Are Easy, May 2013)



Second, it often results fathers being excluded, undermined, or treated as inferior and requires them to make an extra effort to advocate for themselves.

I can't tell you how many times I had people tell me that pregnancy is not about me, and that I should just throw all of my thoughts, opinions, and desires to the side as it related to our baby. The general perception seems to be that, because like 99% the actual biology of baby making occurs inside a woman's body, that means that men have absolutely no say, whatsoever in anything that happens along the way [...] Instead, from the beginning, approach everything as "we". Don't say, "my wife is pregnant," or "my wife is having a baby," instead say, "my wife and I are expecting a child." Approaching everything as "we" from the beginning does mean that you're taking on more responsibility - but it also means that you'll have a larger say in how everything transpires. (The Mighty Most, "Five Things Every Expectant Father Needs To Know", Single Black Male, May 2, 2013)

Thus, the discourse around fatherhood served to make readers aware of a cultural blind spot - an issue that impacts the community, but is often overlooked, underestimated, or misunderstood. These blind spots serve as barriers to improving the quality of intimate relationships within the community. In addition to fatherhood, discourse around cultural blind spots was used to educate readers about biases such as heteronormativity, colorism and interracial dating, abusive behavior such as street harassment and rape, and misconceptions or taboo topics such as help-seeking and fertility difficulty. Each of these will be discussed in the next section.

## 6.4 Enhancing Awareness of Cultural Blind Spots

### 6.4.1 Additional Patterns of Heteronormativity and Heterosexual Ideology

In addition to the previously discussed aspects of heterosexual ideology that bloggers sought to subvert, one blogger, Feminista Jones used her blog increase awareness, discussion, and acceptance about alternate expressions of heterosexuality. These include polyamory (multi-partner relationships) and swinging (open sexual relationships), the kink or BDSM lifestyles (Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, and Sadism & Masochism), and taboo sexual topics such as female pornography consumption, anal sex, and abortion. Moreover, discussion of these topics was not an occasional feature of her blog, nearly all of her relevant blog posts during the time frame of the study covered one of those topics. It is unclear why other bloggers have not addressed these topics. It may be due in part to the fact that they do not explicitly identify with any of these lifestyles and thus do not frequently think of them. Feminista Jones, on the other hand, openly identifies as a member of the BDSM/Kink population and as a sex positive educator, thus she is frequently involved in discourse around these topics. Feminista Jones blames the lack of discussion of these topics on the sexual conservatism that pervades the African American community. This conservatism, she argues is due in part to our history of slavery and perpetuation of stereotypes that equate blackness with hypersexuality within the U.S., the stronghold that religion, especially Christianity, has within the community, and cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity.

I argue that it's a defensive response to both how our ancestors were treated during slavery and also to how White-run media has historically portrayed Black men and women as uncontrollably hypersexual beings [...] This desire to not live up to these stereotypes often leads to a flat-out rejection of sex acts that seem to be engaged in

primarily by White men and women [...] Religion is also responsible for the more conservative views about sex within the Black community. As the church was once the center of the community, our core values and traditions stemmed from the mandates of those who ran our churches, and from the Bible itself [...] Finally, the representation of respectable manhood and womanhood factors into what kinds of sexual activity we engage in (or admit to engaging). (Feminista Jones, “#TalkLikeSex What Our Taboo Sex Says About Us on @EBONYMag”, Feminista Jones, April 6, 2013)

Regardless of the reason, she argues that it is important to end the silence around these topics in order to improve the quality of relationships and reduce the prevalence of negative consequences of poor relationship behaviors within the community, such as unsafe sex practices. Her efforts to reduce the silence and discomfort associated with open discussion of these topics by increasing reader’s exposure to them is consistent with Abrams’s (2010) findings that reading about sexuality making it less taboo makes it easier women to express their sexuality.

Maybe the answer is to become more comfortable discussing these things. Because ultimately, the more open we are, the better we can promote safer sex practices without shaming, and reduce a lot of the negative sexual behaviors and consequences that result from our collective silence. (Feminista Jones, “#TalkLikeSex What Our Taboo Sex Says About Us on @EBONYMag”, Feminista Jones, April 6, 2013)

#### 6.4.1.1 **Street Harassment and Sexual Assault**

Although none of the bloggers would argue that street harassment, rape, or sexual assault were acceptable behaviors, they did identify each of these as topics that require deeper discourse within the community. Specifically, they argue that although it is clear that overt behaviors that fit into these domains are intolerable, there is a lack of socialization of both youth and adults

about how to effectively handle more subtle situations where they run the risk of crossing the line. Additionally, there are often mixed messages promoted by mass media about some of these behaviors, especially with regard to rape and sexual assault, which create a culture that accepts such behaviors. On *Single Black Male*, for example, Dr. J. points out the mixed message about rape that Tyler Perry created in his movie *Temptation*. In the movie, the lead female character is seduced by one of her clients. While on a private plane with the client, the client initiates sexual contact with her. Despite clearly saying no, and pushing him away, the client continues the contact, eventually telling her to stop rejecting him by saying “now you can say you resisted.” He then proceeds to have sexual intercourse with her.

Tyler needs a lesson about rape. It’s funny how we just had a five-week long conversation about “rape culture” and then Tyler makes a movie where a woman is clearly raped and no one says anything about it. It was a very key part of the movie and Tyler just skipped right on over it and so did we. It’s obvious that the only people held accountable for promoting “rape culture” are people in Hip Hop and/or politics. (Dr. J., “5 Reasons Why Tyler Perry’s Movie ‘Temptation’ is Just Bad”, *Single Black Male*, April 5, 2013)

In a later blog post, Dr. J. further explains that the only way to stop perpetuating these mixed messages is to actively educate the community.

I think that the media and society perpetuates a rape culture. At the same time, there’s not much we can do to stop this but continue to educate our friends, family, and younger generations. [...] We have to teach both sides about the pitfalls of sexual assault and rape. It’s not enough to just teach boys not to rape, it’s not enough to teach men either. We also

have to teach important principles to women that are often left by the waste side. (Dr. J, “What Do Men Learn About Rape Growing Up?”, Single Black Male, June 26, 2013)

Panama Jackson of Very Smart Brothas, further points out the double standard faced by men who are sexually assaulted by women. He argues that the heterosexual ideology that equates masculinity with sexual conquest is to blame for this pitfall, but that this too perpetuates a rape culture.

It’s the same reason why people shrug off the idea that men can get raped. Men are bigger and usually stronger – though Wendy Williams pisses all over that theory – so a man should be able to stop some sh\*t from going down. If he doesn’t he must want it and since all men are all sex all the time its hard to fathom the idea of a man being sexually assaulted [...] I think we can all agree that male sexual assault isn’t getting as much face time, no pun intended, at the sex crime table. I wonder why that is? Or do we all, men and women, truly subscribe to the boys will be boys mantra and as long as its happening to him and not by him then he’ll be alright? I don’t know. But I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t punch any chick in the forehead for doming me off on stage either. Help me. (Panama Jackson, “Danny Brown Got Head On Stage and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt”, Very Smart Brothas, May 13, 2013)

#### 6.4.1.2 **Redefining the Relationship Expert**

The final heteronormative pattern that bloggers addressed was the historical tendency of relationship experts, particularly those who are highly visible in mass media, to blame African American women for the current state of intimate relationships within the community, and

placing the onus on them for “saving the race”. The bloggers in this study sought to distance themselves from such experts by emphasizing that improving the quality of relationships was a shared responsibility for men and women alike. This goal was accomplished by asserting scripts to subvert heteronormativity, as discussed in previous sections, as well as through the use of gender-neutral pronouns in the majority of the blog posts. For blog posts that were directed at one sex, it was also common to see bloggers use a parenthetical reference to the opposite sex as a means of communicating that both genders are responsible.

#### 6.4.2 **Colorism**

During the analysis period, the documentary *Dark Girls* was screened on Oprah Winfrey’s cable network channel OWN. The documentary addresses issues of colorism and attractiveness of dark skinned African American women. Several of the bloggers created blog posts in response to the colorism issues presented in the film. Specifically, the discourse on this topic emphasized the role that African Americans play in perpetuating this phenomenon. The bloggers did not discount the role of broader society in perpetuating it, or the history of slavery and racism that created it, but argue that, as a community, African Americans need to accept responsibility for their role. Specifically, bloggers point out that African Americans, including the documentary creator, perpetuate colorism by 1) silencing sub-groups.

Also, the OWN channel aired a documentary on colorism within the black community called *Dark Girls* on Sunday night. A firestorm erupted on the Twittersphere. Before I could even think to type an opinion I was told in no uncertain terms that "light girls need not comment, this was not their night" - oh. Alright then. Damn these Euros foisting their ideologies upon us generation after generation after generation. (Michele Grant, “This

Week in #PostRacismFAIL - Zimmerman, Deen, Scotus”, Black ‘N Bougie, June 24, 2013)

2) Not including enough diversity of perspectives within the discourse, particularly the perspectives of Black men and people of other races and 3) acting on subconscious, socialized preferences for mates with lighter skin.

#### 6.4.3 **Inter-Mixing: Interracial and Interfaith Relationships**

Scholars (e.g., Banks, 2011) have argued that one way African Americans, particularly African-American women, can improve their probability of getting married is by embracing interracial dating. The bloggers generally agree with this position, but argue that there is much work to be done in the community before achieving widespread acceptance of interracial relationships. Bloggers typically indicated that interracial dating was a controversial and uncomfortable topic for African Americans to broach because many associate it with a lack of racial solidarity and rejection of the culture. Most bloggers sought to debunk this misconception and argued that as the country becomes more diverse racial mixing is inevitable. They also point out that the controversy around interracial dating, within the United States, seems to be unique to African Americans, and specifically to Black/White relationships.

Brothers, Olivia embracing the swirl has nothing to do with you. She is not personally snubbing you by doing Fitz on all vertical and horizontal surfaces in the fake White House. If you are that worried about black women "leaving the fold" go pick you one and treat her right. Any questions? (Michele Grant, “Get Out of Your Feelings, #Scandal is Fiction. Great Fiction But...”, Black ‘N Bougie, May 17, 2013)

Perhaps what's most disheartening is the fact that out of all the people who find fault in Black women, it's brothers that are our toughest critics [...] Is there any wonder that I say (with tears in my eyes) that "didn't give up on Black men, they gave up on me? I came to this painful realization a few years ago, but it was a long time coming [...] At first I really did feel guilty over all of this. I was taught to stand by Black men no matter what, and to be their support and balance when times are most d. I was determined to be loyal, even though I it was clear that reciprocated loyalty from Black men came with conditions. [...] I decided to cast a winning ballot in favor of my own happiness. I've decided to be open to love the man who can love me without conditions or constraints – even if it isn't a Black man. (Jai Stone, "I didn't Give Up On Black Men, They Gave Up On Me", Black Love Forum, April 18, 2013)

At the same time, however some male bloggers were careful to draw a distinction between being open to dating outside of one's race and solely dating outside of one's race. Dating outside of the race was presented as "right" or acceptable only when a person did so in addition to dating within their race. People who exclusively dated outside of their race were labeled as "wrong" and considered to possess hatred for one's race.

Lost somewhere in the conversation about interracial dating, is the distinct difference between preferences and self hate. There is a big difference between the two, however, many people are choosing to blur the lines. A racial preference in dating is exactly that, a preference. E.G. I love dating Latina women, or Asian men. Self-hate tends to be more along the lines of someone refusing to date their own. (Nick Campbell, "The Choice Is Yours", The Relationship Playbook, April 25, 2013)



While I do believe that there has to be something wrong with someone who only dates outside of their race, I make concessions and justifications for Black men, Black women, and White men who do this that I never have with White women, and this lack of interracial dating-based empathy boxes me into a very awkward corner. (Damon “The Champ” Young, “Either She Homeless or She Got Problems”, Very Smart Brothas, May 9, 2013.)

While, the bloggers provided support for interracial relationships, they did not however, support interfaith relationships. In short, there was a pervasive belief across the blogs that interfaith marriages will eventually fail. It was argued that if both partners do not share the same religion then they could not be fully aligned spiritually. Sense of spiritual connection was deemed an important facet of intimacy and thus necessary for achieving mature love. Additionally, because Christian marriage requires putting God first and acting according with Christian principle, an interfaith marriage would not allow that and thus is out of alignment with Christian marriage. It therefore cannot be considered a successful marriage. This held true even for those who did not identify Christianity as their religion.

You have different faiths. My ex-fiancé was an atheist and I was not. While I have always been open to learning from those of different faiths, I believed that it was very difficult to create a spiritual foundation or intimacy with someone that did not have one. Think about how you will cope with life’s uncertainty if you can’t pull from a similar spiritual framework. (Kara Stevens, Confessions of A Runaway Bride, 6 signs that You Have No Business Marrying Him, Black and Married With Kids, May 22, 2013)

#### 6.4.4 **Help-Seeking**

Advising readers to seek professional help to overcome particularly difficult challenges was another cultural blind spot addressed by the bloggers. Professional, in this context, is defined as receiving counseling or advice from therapists, counselors, or religious ministerial staff. Such encouragement was more prevalent on married blogs than on unmarried blogs. The prevalence of such advice is one example of advocating for readers to confront controversial beliefs within the broader African American community. African Americans have traditionally been hesitant to seek help from secular mental health providers or institutions (see Snowden, 1999, for a review). By encouraging readers to seek help within religious and secular institutions alike, bloggers indicate that counselors in secular institutions are as beneficial and important for the community as religious sources of help. This point is driven home further when the bloggers themselves are ministerial staff, as was frequently the case with guest bloggers on *Black and Married with Kids*.

The presence of blog posts from experts who have a credential (i.e., certificate or specialized degree) also enhances the help-seeking message. By providing a space for such experts to share advice, the blogs provide readers with a sample of the type of advice or a window into the type of counseling they may expect to receive from this group of professionals. It allows readers to evaluate, the usefulness of an expert prior to spending money or effort. Additionally, the brief biography of the expert provided at the end of the blog posts typically included a link to their personal website where readers can find information about receiving counseling directly from them. Thus, serving as a resource for where to find help for readers who may not know how to find such experts or where to look, and building social capital within the community.

#### 6.4.4.1 Fertility Issues

Consistent with the help-seeking theme. Bloggers, particularly on the married blogs, used the blog space to draw attention to fertility issues among African Americans. Recent research on the topic has revealed that infertility and difficulty conceiving is not only an issue that African Americans typically do not discuss among themselves, it is also a problem that they rarely seek medical attention to address. The most recent Survey of National Family Growth has shown that African Americans have the highest rates of infertility or fertility difficulties of any racial or ethnic group in the United States (Chandra, Kopen, & Stephen, 2013) and are the least likely of all groups to seek medical attention or even religious counseling for it (Chandra, Kopen, & Stephen, 2014). On the blogs the specific fertility issue that was addressed was miscarriage.

On one blog, Black and Married With Kids, a blogger used the mini-series strategy - a series of blog posts over a short period of time - to discuss her experience with pregnancy loss. She detailed the entire progression from the initial discovery of her pregnancy through recovery from the loss and the eventual successful pregnancy and birth she was able to experience. Other blog posts on the topic from other blogs were not presented as series and thus contained less detail, however all of the blog posts appeared to share similar educational goals. First, as a form of social support, it provides readers, both male and female, who may face or are facing this experience with an idea of what to expect and encouragement that they can and will overcome the tragedy. Second, to identify sources of support for readers facing this issue and encourage them to seek additional support, specifically, from their partner, closest family members such as parents or siblings, and also from medical or other professionals. Bloggers also took care to emphasize the important role of the partner in this situation. Reminding women that their partner will also experience feelings of loss of their child and that it is important for both people to

support one another through the grieving process. Finally, these posts also served to provide readers who are within the social network of a woman who has, is, or will experience this challenge with a frame of reference for how to be supportive by providing an insider's perspective of what types of support are most beneficial.

Each of the bloggers who shared these stories was fortunate to have a partner (husband) who was actively engaged throughout the pregnancy and loss. Unfortunately, an unpartnered woman's perspective, the perspective of women whose partner is not involved, and the male perspective were all missing from this discourse. Also missing from the discourse around fertility were the perspectives of women or men who desire parenthood but are unable to conceive, and those who have had abortions. So although the discussion of this topic is in a sense groundbreaking, a great deal of work remains on this topic.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study indicate that the blog medium serves as a space for bloggers to confront and correct the problems they see within African American intimate relationships. The use of self-as-example strategies indicate that the bloggers feel a sense of personal responsibility for creating change within the community; to achieve the changes they wish to see, they must serve as proof of the lifestyle they advocate. By encouraging readers to adopt the growth mindset, communicate more effectively, and maintain an awareness of cultural blind spots, the bloggers also articulate to readers that they also have a personal responsibility for enacting transformation within the community. To achieve the mission of the blogs, the readers must also internalize the advice and make changes in their lives that will, in turn, produce changes within the community. This can be achieved by serving as a role model for future generations (i.e., their children) and fellow community members. It is important to note however, that forcing the reader to change or to change in a specific way is not the bloggers' intent. The bloggers never used language that indicated that the reader must accept what was written. Instead, readers were typically given the freedom to interpret the information presented in the way that is most applicable to their own lives or to disagree completely.

Thus, the blogs serve as a source of empowerment. By encouraging readers to adopt these new ways of thinking and behaving, bloggers articulate that the reader possesses the power to improve their current conditions and/or catalyze change if other people need to be involved. The advice given within the blog posts serve as the tools needed to enhance the capacity of the readers to wield this power. Additionally, by emphasizing the impact on children, the bloggers encourage readers to ensure that any change they enact will be sustainable.

Overall this study makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on African American intimate relationship behaviors. It is one of the few studies that examine social constructions of relationships as a means of understanding related behaviors for this population. Moreover, it is the only study to do so within the context of the blogosphere. As with any research study, it is nearly impossible to attend to every possible aspect of a phenomenon, and researchers must engage in a delicate balancing act of internal and external validity. Thus, this study is not without limitations.

The size of the blog sample and sampling method limits the generalizability of the results. The sample selected only includes a small subset of bloggers who produce content about African American relationships because I specifically chose to look at blogs for which intimate relationship were the predominate theme. However, intimate relationship issues are a very popular blog topic in general and blogs with other focal points may still include relevant content. The sampling method uses a limited definition of popularity dictated by freely available and easily attainable metrics. There may well be other methods of determining the popularity and relevance of a particular blog such as spending time in African American discussion forums and capturing links to blog posts, or sending online surveys to a broad population of African American blog consumers.

Cole's (2009) Intersectionality framework encourages researchers to pay close attention to the diversity of the sample and the similarities and differences across the subgroups within the sample. While I utilized those criteria to discuss the patterns of discourse presented in the results and discussion section, it is also important to note what voices were absent from the discourse studied and further emphasizing the similarity between the blogs that I studied. The sampling method chosen for this study results in a subset that excludes many voices from the discourse on

intimate relationships. This became particularly clear during analysis as I learned more about the bloggers. First, all of the blogs included in this research were written or maintained by college-educated and middle class African Americans, some of whom worked professionally as relationship and family therapists or counselors (Both Aiyana and Aiyize of Black Love and Marriage, most of the bloggers on Black and Married with Kids), journalists for mainstream media outlets such as Ebony Magazine and The New York Post (Feminista Jones, Jai Stone of Black Love Forum, Damon “The Champ” Young of Very Smart Brothas, Jozen Cummings of Until I Get Married) or as a romance novelist (Michelle Grant of Black ‘N Bougie). Thus, bloggers who do not belong to any of these groups are not represented, particularly those of other socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, their level of education and overall writing experience may make these blogs more accessible and enjoyable to read, thus increasing their popularity rankings.

Second, all of the bloggers in this study value marriage and communicate that value through the content of their blogs. Thus, even if promoting marriage was not an explicit purpose of the blog as declared in the profile section, in frequently discussing the value of marriage they promoted it as a desirable relationship status. Moreover, it is important to note that the type of marriage, and even the type of heterosexuality discussed on these blogs was one that was rooted in Christian ideology. Specifically, bloggers made explicit statements that the type of marriage they were promoting was Christian marriage. That is, marriage as defined in the Christian Holy Bible. Beyond the connection to marriage, Christian themes were prevalent across the blogs. This was revealed through the presence of guest bloggers who were active ministers of the Christian faith, which was most prominent on the Black and Married with Kids blog. This information was typically presented at the end of the article, in the mini-biography of the author.

Some bloggers declared their Christian identity within blog posts or in the about me section of the blogs, and still other bloggers, provided direct quotes or paraphrases of bible verses, references to Christian traditions such as the alter call or baptism, and verses of or references to gospel music. Thus, absent from this discourse, were non-Christian bloggers and bloggers who do not value marriage.

Another set of voices missing from this blog is the transgendered heterosexual community. In other words, individuals who embrace flexible gender identities or gender identities different from their biological sex and identify as heterosexual. These voices tend to be located within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) blogosphere, which was excluded from the sampling framework because the discourse on that blogosphere more heavily emphasizes homosexual activity, while this study focused on heterosexual activity. Finally, as mentioned previously, only one blogger in this study actively identified with a non-traditional, or non-vanilla, as it is called by the Kink/BDSM community, heterosexual identity. This was in part due to the narrow time-period of my study. Shortly after the time period ended the 2013 Black Weblog Award Nominees were announced and included two sex-positive blogs that addressed many of the same issues that Feminista Jones addressed. One of the two new nominees was also a Kink/BDSM blog.

The time period used for the study is another important consideration. Although the time period selected for analysis allowed for saturation of themes, there may be additional scripts that were not uncovered. Similarly, there are several scripts, such as those related to parenthood that may have only been present because both parent appreciation holidays occurred within the time frame. Moreover, because social constructions evolve over time, it is likely that the scripts found



in the present day may no longer be relevant in the future. Thus, at best this study can only be regarded as a snapshot of how this phenomenon works within this community right now.

In spite of all of these limitations, there is much strength within this study. This study represents an additional step towards a more nuanced understanding of how media socializes African American adults regarding intimate relationships. As one of the first studies to examine this phenomenon within the blog medium, the goal of this study was to provide a foundation for continued examination of African American blog content.

A great deal of research on African Americans and their relationship behaviors uses a cross sectional or cross- cultural paradigm. The use of a population specific approach in this study allowed me to consider the social constructions within their cultural bounds and allow them to stand on their own merit. Additionally, nearly all of the research cited in the literature review was conducted with college students or with participants who lived within a small radius of the universities with which the researchers are affiliated. Thus, our understanding of these phenomena within the African American adult population has been limited by the sampling procedures of the research to a relatively small portion of the population.

A central tenet of scripting theory is that scripts are encoded, stored and then retrieved based on environmental cues (Simon & Gagnon, 1984) therefore, it is important to consider the behavioral implications of these relationship scripts. A particular strength of this study is that it not only identifies important relationship behaviors, but also provides information about the meaning that is ascribed to them within this group. This revelation of the meaning of the behaviors is a key benefit of using the Intersectionality framework. I believe that understanding the meaning of these behaviors is important for creating and establishing sustainable change in detrimental behavioral patterns as well as identifying beneficial behaviors to reinforce and

maintain. As Rich (2005) points out “the leading causes of morbidity and mortality are no longer infections, congenital disorders, and cancers, but the outcomes of acquired health-risk behaviors.” Thus, it is especially important that future research focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the varied contexts in which these scripts are activated and how they are enacted within relationships. Eventual translation of these scripts into attitudinal and behavioral indices may help achieve this goal, however that will be difficult to accomplish without researching the extent to which readers internalize the messages presented on these blogs and their bases for endorsing and rejecting the messages.

Additionally, it would also be valuable to examine the extent to which the scripts on blogs align with those presented in other forms of media (radio, magazines, television), to understand the extent to which such messages are pervasive within the broader African American culture and how this contributes to the value placed on the behaviors. An exploration of potential uses of these blogs alone, or in conjunction with other media, as educational and intervention tools may also prove fruitful for tackling many of the health related racial disparities faced by African Americans.

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## VITA

**Tamara D. Springle**

### **Education**

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#### ***University of Illinois at Chicago***

Ph.D., Anticipated December 2014

M.A., 2009

Division: Community and Prevention Research

Minor: Statistics, Methods, and Measurement

*Master's Thesis:* An Examination of Sexual Risk Taking Amongst African American and Latino College Students. (Chair, Sabine French)

*Dissertation:* Teach Me How To Love: Social Constructions of Heterosexual Romantic Relationships on Black Relationship Blogs (Chair, Stephanie Riger)

#### ***Williams College***

B.A., 2006

Major: Psychology, with honors

Concentration: African American Studies

### **Honors and Awards**

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***Abraham Lincoln Fellowship***, University of Illinois at Chicago (Aug. 2006, Aug. 2011)

***Spirit of Community Award for Community Building***, University of Illinois at Chicago, Psychology Department – Community & Prevention Research Division (Apr. 2011)

***Spirit of Community Award for Mentorship***, University of Illinois at Chicago, Psychology Department – Community & Prevention Research Division (Apr. 2011)

***Student Employee of the Year – State of Massachusetts***, National Student Employment Association (Apr. 2006)

***Student Employee of the Year***, Williams College (Apr. 2006)

***Williams College Summer Science Fellowship***, Williams College (Jun. 2005)

***P. and W. Dickerson Scholarship***, Williams College (Jan. 2005, Jan. 2006)

### **Research Interests**

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My research interest is in development, construction, and expression of racial and gender identity in adults.

### **Works under review, in preparation, or in progress**

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Weinstein, T.L., Dinh, K.T., **Springle, T.D.**, Ho, I.K., & Holmberg, M.D. (manuscript in preparation). The relationship between ethnic labels, psychosocial factors, and educational outcomes among Cambodian American Students.

French, S.E., **Springle, T.D.**, Burnside E.J. (manuscript in preparation) To be young, male, and Black: Black males' perspectives on hip-hop, racial identity, and masculinity.

French, S.E., Burnside, E.J., **Springle, T.D.** (manuscript in preparation) Socialization contexts for the development of dating relationships among African American adolescents.

French, S.E., **Springle, T.D.** (manuscript in preparation) What it means to be Black: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

### **Conference Papers and Presentations**

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**Springle, T.D.**, French, S. E. (2011). To be Young, Male, and Black: Black Males' Perspectives on Hip-Hop, Racial Identity, and Masculinity. Paper presented at the SCRA 13th Biennial Conference. Chicago, IL.

**Springle, T.D.**, Mustanski, B., & Ozer, E. (2011). Innovative Interventions, Innovative Evaluations: Methodological Considerations for Evaluating Interventions built on Telecommunication Technology. Roundtable Discussion presented at the SCRA 13th Biennial Conference. Chicago, IL.

**Springle, T.D.** (2011). Teach Me How to Love: The Social Construction of Romantic Relationships on Black Relationship Blogs. Poster presented at that 2011 Black Graduate Conference in Psychology. Miami, FL

**Springle, T.D.**, Burnside, E. J., & French, S. E. (2010). The role of hip-hop in African Americans' definitions of racial identity. Poster presented at the 2010 Biennial Conference on Human Development. New York, NY

Burnside, E. J., **Springle, T.D.**, & French, S.E. (2010). The role of hip-hop on views of dating relationships among African American adolescents. Poster presented at the 2010 Biennial Conference on Human Development. New York, NY

French, S.E., **Springle, T.D.**, & Burnside, E. (2009). What it means to be Black: quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Paper presented at the 2009 Annual Midwest Eco Conference. Chicago, IL.

Weinstein, T.L., Dinh, K.T., **Springle, T.D.**, Ho, I.K., & Holmberg, M.D. (2009). The relationship between ethnic labels, psychosocial factors, and educational outcomes among Cambodian American Students. Poster presented at the 12th Biennial Meeting for the Society for Community Research and Action. Piscataway, NJ.

Chavez, N.R., **Springle, T.D.**, French, S.E. (2008) Ethnicity Related Experiences in Asian American and Latino American College Students: A Qualitative Comparison. Poster presented at the 2008 Biennial Meeting for the Society for Research on Adolescence.

**Springle, T.D.**, Chavez, N. R. , French, S. E. (2008) Understanding Asian American Identity: A qualitative analysis of ethnic identity in Asian American college

students. Poster presented at the 2008 Biennial Meeting for the Society for Research on Adolescence.

**Springle, T. D.** (2007). The link between ethnic identity and condom use as mediated by psychosocial factors. Poster presented at the 2007 Annual Black Graduate Conference in Psychology. Washington, DC

Weinstein, T. L., Birman, D., Taylor-Ritzler, T., & **Springle, T.D.** (2007). Special Education: Policy, and practice implications for immigrant and minority children. Roundtable Discussion presented at the SCRA 11th Biennial Conference. Pasadena, CA.

### **Community Practica and Other Relevant Experience**

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#### ***Evaluation and Program Consultant*** (July 2009 – June 2010)

*Lumity*, Chicago, IL

- Developed an online discussion and resource forum for community technology centers.
- Assisted with program development for an extensive collaboration network for partnering community technology centers.
- Assisted with program development and a management system for an extensive, statewide digital literacy initiative built upon Microsoft's IT Academy program.
- Designed an evaluation protocol for the digital literacy initiative.

#### ***Program Evaluator***

*GrupoSalto*, Chicago, IL (Fall 2009)

- Developed an evaluation plan for their parent education program for parents of children with Autism.

#### ***Program Associate/Practicum Student*** (Fall 2008 – July 2009)

*Lumity*, Chicago, IL

- Developed and executed an evaluation model and assessment for the 2010 Digital Literacy Project
- Developed a survey to assess Attitudes towards technology
- Assisted the Director of the Community Centers of Excellence in the creation of a marketing brochure for the 2010 Digital Literacy project.
- Developed and implemented a tracking process and program management system for Community Technology Centers participating in Microsoft's Elevate America Project in the state of Illinois.

### **Teaching Experience**

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#### ***Instructor – Undergraduate Level Courses***

- Statistical Methods in Behavioral Science, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Spring 2012, Summer 2012

#### ***Teaching Assistantships (Discussion Section Instructor) – Undergraduate Level Courses***

- Advanced Undergraduate Statistics, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Spring 2011, Spring 2012, Spring 2013
- Laboratory in Community and Prevention Research, Fall 2011, Spring 2013
- Fieldwork in Psychology, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Fall 2010
- Research Methods in Psychology, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Spring, Summer, and Fall 2008, Spring 2010, Fall 2012 (Lead TA)
- Statistical Methods in Behavioral Science, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Spring 2007, Spring 2009, Summer 2009, Fall 2009, Summer 2010, Summer 2011
- Writing in Psychology, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Fall 2007
- Introduction to Psychology, *University of Illinois at Chicago*, Chicago, IL, Fall 2006, Summer 2007

### **Other Assistantships**

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#### ***Graduate Assistant*** (Spring 2008- Summer 2011)

Diversity Advancement Committee, *University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology*

- Serve as a liaison between students and faculty for the diversity committee.
- Coordinator for all committee events including annual colloquia, annual dinner for prospective students, and informal gatherings.
- Created diversity webpage for the Psychology Department.
- Co-created brochure for the Graduate program in Psychology.

### **Professional Affiliations**

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Sigma Xi

American Psychological Association

Society for Community Research and Action (APA Div. 27)

Media Psychology (APA Div. 46)

Midwestern Psychological Association