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IF YOU WANT THE MILK, BUY THE COW: A STUDY OF YOUNG BLACK
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN SITUATIONSHIPS

by

Tierica Jemise Gibson

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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IF YOU WANT THE MILK, BUY THE COW: A STUDY OF YOUNG BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN SITUATIONSHIPS

Research on casual dating relationships remain centered on white individuals, particularly white women. Social dating research has largely ignored the lived experiences of women of color, particularly black women, and continues its commitment to studying participation and experiences in casual dating relationships through a white lens. Situationships can be described as noncommittal dating relationships which teeter between committed relationships and casual dating. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data on black women's experiences in situationships in order to provide greater understanding of how both race and gender shape black women's dating experiences. This study found that situationships operate within a liminal space, a place of in-betweenness, in which Black women attempt to gain the "girlfriend" identity by progressing into committed relationships. Situationships appear to be deviations of traditional committed relationships while simultaneously providing a false sense of progression into committed relationships for Black women. I also found that through exhibiting behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity, situationships appear to be oppressive to Black women's sexual agency and beneficial to men, ultimately seeming to affect how they view themselves and the culture of dating within the black community.

Keywords: casual sex, sexual behavior, social dating, race, gender

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IF YOU WANT THE MILK, BUY THE COW: A STUDY OF YOUNG BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN SITUATIONSHIPS

Dating activity between two individuals not committed to a romantic relationship is historically referred to as casual dating. Social dating literature is often qualitatively collected and comprised of the experiences of both men and women across racial groups. Researchers typically collect responses from participants which seeks to elucidate defining characteristics of these various forms of casual dating such as individual and collective experiences, how they are initiated, and positive and negative outcomes from engaging in a particular form of casual sex. Despite the apparent depth of social dating research in divulging individuals' experiences, this body of literature remains largely white. Meaning it tends to center white individuals, particularly white women, and their experiences of dating. Furthermore, black women's experiences in casual dating relationships are either conflated with those of white women's, marginalized or completely ignored within social dating research. This conflation underscores a gap in social dating literature in that it inaccurately perceives black women's participation and experiences in casual dating to be the same as white women's, rendering black women and their experiences invisible within the literature.

This is not suggesting that black women do not participate in casual dating, but rather the ways in which black women navigate casual dating relationships are different from white women due to a complex history of black women's sexuality and mainstream, white perception of their sexual behavior. Controlling images such as the "Mammy" and "Jezebel" have worked tirelessly for decades policing the sexual scripts and behavior of black women. Often times black women are characterized as hypersexual vixens and promiscuous, the "Jezebel", and other times completely desexualized and stripped of their femininity, the "Mammy". Such policing of black

women's sexual behavior possibly alters the conventional strategies employed to engage in sexual activities (French 2012). In other words, black women may find alternative ways to engage in casual dating that are not a detriment to the perception of their sexual behavior. Thus, the forms of casual dating black women participate in and their experiences may be different from what the literature informs us concerning white women's experiences in casual dating relationships.

In 2009, relationship and lifestyle blogger Demetria Lucas utilized the term "situationships" in response to her blog subscriber's plea for relationship advice. This term was used to describe casual dating relationships involving casual sex that led to confusion and emotional distress of the blog subscriber who finds ultimately has found herself in a "situation" instead of a "relation" with a partner, thus coining the term a "situationship" rather than a relationship. In the past decade the term has gained more popularity among both black Millennials and black Generation Zers who seemingly use the term to describe confusing relationships which involve romance but lack labeling and commitment, stalling the progression of the relationship. To my knowledge, research to produce formal knowledge of situationships is nonexistent. However, it is my belief that due to its popularity among black adults and emerging adults situationships may provide crucial insight into black women's participation in casual dating for the purpose of entering committed relationships and their experiences within casual dating relationships.

Situationships are not formally recognized as a form of casual dating, and informally, the term has no concrete definition despite being understood in the colloquial sense. Therefore, I define situationships as casual dating relationships that mirror serious, committed relationships in the form of dating but lack formal commitment and labeling of the involvement between two

individuals. This definition captures the basic features of the situationship – that is, it involves casual dating activities commonly found in committed relationships but does not feature mutual commitment and most importantly an official label of the involvement. Also, situationships as a phenomenon underscore a possible reality for Black women: the desire for committed relationships. Therefore, situationships in this study are understood as inadvertent dating relationships born out of attempts at entering committed, romantic relationships. Other features of situationships remain unknown but are a point of focus in this study.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: to bring visibility to black women's involvement in social dating and to gain understanding of situationships from black women in terms of definitions and both positive and negative outcomes in order to set the foundation for future research on situationships. Interviews were conducted to collect data from black women on their experiences within situationships including emotional outcomes, possible negotiating efforts for committed relationships, and general outlook on their position within black dating culture. From interviews I found that participants of this study sought out a “girlfriend” identity, in which they inadvertently found themselves in a situationship. I frame the situationship as a deviant dating relationship which seems to falsely signal progression toward a committed relationship. To understand situationships as a deviation of committed relationships, I utilized the concept of the “moral career,” which maps the trajectory of a particular identity through a set of social experiences. This study follows how the seemingly linear dating relationships Black women are involved in, while on their quest to gain the “girlfriend” identity, deviate from a linear progression and “become” situationships.

First, I introduce the situationship and define situationships according to how the Black women of this study both defined and experienced this phenomenon. I identify types of

situationships, the similarities and differences between the types, and their interconnectedness to the liminal space. I then present the various ways in which one can “get into” or stumble upon situationships, uncovering how situationships are inadvertently created within the liminal space. Second, I present findings on Black women’s experiences within situationships. These experiences demonstrate their attempts at gaining the “girlfriend” identity. The experiences of Black women in situationships also speak to possible behaviors of emphasized femininity, bolstered by the desire to become a girlfriend and enter committed relationships, and possible behaviors of hegemonic masculinity displayed by their male partners in which resist their efforts to progress into committed relationships. Lastly, I present findings on the outcomes of Black women’s participation in situationships. I find that situationships not only have an introspective impact on Black women, which includes their emotions and how they view themselves, but could also affect their perceptions on dating within Black culture including how a possible shift from courtship to a laissez-faire style approach to dating impacts their likelihood of entering committed relationships.

I then discuss what situationships through each “stage” infer about the sexual politics of Black women’s dating lives. I particularly focus on how behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity appear to restrict Black women’s sexual agency while simultaneously benefitting men and reinforcing their masculinity. I also discuss what situationships infer about the direction of dating within Black culture and the implication it appears to have on Black women, particularly the women of this study, as they continue to seek out committed relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Black Women and Intra-racial Romantic Relationships

Literature concerning Black women's experiences in dating and romantic relationships, specifically intraracial dating and relationships, is often focused on relationship formation, dating preferences and difficulty in partnering, sexual behavior and scripts within relationships, marital attainment, and Black women's attitudes towards Black men's dating trends. Yet, Black women's dating experiences remain largely disregarded within social sciences, and if they are included in analysis it is typically in comparison to the experiences of others' – typically white women. One glaring issue this presents is a covert assumption that the lived experiences of black women are homogenous with those of white women. For example, scholars researching dating have historically assumed a linear progression of romantic relationships that seemingly transcends race (Reiss 1960; 1981): initial attraction and interaction, self-revelation, mutual dependency, and intimacy which assists in transforming individuals' prior involvement into a committed relationship. However, I argue that the dating lives and negotiating actions Black women employ to gain committed relationships do not always follow this theorized linear relationship progression.

Structural and behavioral factors are both prominent in the literature that exists on Black women's experiences in dating and romantic relationships. Most commonly, scholars continue to argue that structural issues such as the proportion of Black men with equitable resources to economically attractive Black women (Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin 1991; Wilson 1987; Tucker and Taylor 1989), Black men's increasing participation in interracial dating (Wang and Parker 2014; McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 1999; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995; Spickard 1989), and the proportion of available never-married Black male partners to available Black women (Glick, Heer, and Beresford 1963; Schoen 1983; Glick 1981; Tucker and Taylor 1989; Taylor et al.1990) constitute a significant role in how Black women both experience dating

and relationships and negotiate relationship progression. Likewise, behavioral factors also have a significant role in Black women's dating lives. Trends in courtship, cohabitation, behaviors within marriages seem to demonstrate a shift in cultural norms which have a great impact on their experiences in dating and relationships. Research in contemporary dating points to hookup culture, delayed marriage and prolonged singleness, marital dissolution, and changing attitudes toward partnering in romantic relationships as signifiers of a possible shift in cultural values with major implications for the dating efforts of Black women (Guzzo 2014; Raley 2001; Cherlin 2004; 2009).

For example, Dickson (1993) argued that African American relationships and marriages become difficult to manage and work due to shifting values in expectations for the family coupled with the happiness of the individual and family. Harper (2010) suggests that increasing individualistic attitudes is associated with negative views toward marriage and rises in pessimistic views of traditional dating behaviors and marriages. The broad increases in individualism is also visible in broader American and Western European culture as the average age of women's first marriage has increased and women have declared their careers and leisure work equally important as entering marriages and starting families (Adler 2004; Goldstein and Kenney 2001).

Considerable groundwork has been made in the study of Black women's experiences in dating and relationships, yet the body of literature remains very limited. Although qualitative research on the dating experiences of Black women exists, including personal accounts, we know very little of the progression of their dating experiences with dating candidates and the ways in which they negotiate for committed relationships. In this study, I address Black women's

location in the liminal spaces of dating – that is, the “gray areas” of dating in which relationship progression seems to arrive at an impasse and negotiations for commitment possibly increases.

Black Hegemonic Masculinity and Black Emphasized Femininity in Intimate Relationships

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell 1995). This system of patriarchy provides motivation for male bodies in the domination of female bodies and asserts that women are inferior to men, thus expressing the ideal patriarchal values of a society (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, the masculine performances pleasing to the accepted ideals of hegemonic masculinity are not accessible to all men.

Collins (2004) suggests that Black men are incapable of reaching the following principles of hegemonic masculinity: being visibly distinguishable from women, maintaining control and dominance over women’s bodies and their emotions, possessing the mental and emotional responsibility and maturity that separates them from the behavioral and mental characteristics of boys, have possession of power and property, and be on the extreme opposite end of the sexual spectrum from homosexual men in order to be considered “true men.” Collins asserts this is due to centuries of the marginalizing and bastardization of both Blackness and Black manhood which renders it vulnerable to oppression from the gatekeepers of traditional or hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, because Black men are not perfectly aligned to the constructions of hegemonic masculinity and performances of ideal patriarchy needed to reach “true manhood,” there are consequences, such as social ostracization or questioning of sexuality, for their romantic relationships (Charleston 2014). Collins (2004) asserts that for Black men the act of loving Black women and committing to relationships with them constitutes a rebellious act. This is due to society construing black bodies as unlovable and inhumane, thus a seemingly simple act of

loving an individual in a black body affirms their humanity within an anti-Black society (Collins 2004).

Wilkins (2009) states, “For Black men, the intersection of race, masculinity, and heterosexuality entails both masculine privilege and racialized social control of their bodies.” Thus, the behavior of Black men actively reaching for hegemonic masculinity may be demonstrated through their dating lives. For example, some research has found that Black men will sometimes portray hypersexual images within contemporary dating in order to achieve status and respect of other men due to limited mainstream paths to masculinity (Anderson 2000; Majors and Billson 1992; Staiger 2005). By adopting a “cool pose” Black men are able to assert their masculinity by the sexual subjugation, deception, and conquest of women (Majors and Billson 1992; Ford 2011; Patillo-McCoy 2013). Likewise, the “player” extracts material and emotional resources from women, therefore positioning themselves as “in control, rather than being controlled” (Staiger 2005).

Hegemonic femininity, or emphasized femininity, is “the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support... patterns such as sociability... compliance... and sexual receptivity to men” (Connell 1987). Collins (2004) asserts that the characteristics and behaviors of hegemonic femininity require women to be heterosexual, practice emotional in the form of gentleness and daintiness, physical restraint by abstaining from casual sex with multiple men, child-bearing, and white. However, like Black men, Black women are also incapable of reaching hegemonic femininity due to centuries of sexual subjugation, hypersexualization, and the intersection of both racial and gender discrimination which positions them towards the bottom of the social hierarchy and consequentially less than women.

Reaching emphasized femininity is not an easy feat, and Black women are often met with resistance. Often times Black women, particularly working class and poor women, are viewed as “too strong” and “bitchy” which renders them as less attractive romantic partners than other racial groups of women (Collins 2004). To compensate for their inability to live up to this ideal it has been argued that Black women will behave in several ways: Black women will acquiesce to socially acceptable ideas of how they should be treated by men (Marbley 2003; Aborampah 1989; King and Allen 2007), use their sexual prowess to “catch and trap” men by getting pregnant in hopes that men will marry them (Collins 2004), or attempt to reach hegemonic ideals such as abstaining from sex and casual dating (hooks 2004).

hooks (2004) asserts that “When Black males and females are [sexually] exploiting one another, intimacy is not possible.” Meaning, Black men and women’s measurement of desirability based on deceptive and manipulative behaviors from attempting to reach hegemonic masculinities and femininities limits the possibility of intimacy that could have existed. In this study, I argue that situationships form inadvertently due to a clash in behaviors of hegemonic masculinity (heterosexual mastery and domination of women) and hegemonic or emphasized femininity (refraining from casual sex and striving for committed relationships) which become beneficial to Black men while suppressing the efforts of Black women in gaining committed relationships.

Friends With Benefits (FWBs)

Situationships were often compared to Friends with Benefits relationships by the participants of this study. Definitions of FWBs remain consistent among researchers. That is, they are described as sexual relationships between individuals who categorize themselves as friends but refrain from categorizing the nature of their sexual involvement as a romantic

relationship (Owen and Fincham 2010a; Bisson and Levine 2007). Friends with benefits relationships hold the capacity to form out of preexisting involvement such as platonic friendships, sexual relationships and romantic relationships (Vander-Drift, Lehmilller, and Kelly 2010).

Existing literature presents ways in which FWBs are distinguished from other forms of casual relationships. For example, FWBs are reported as more stable and involve mutual respect and emotional interaction not featured in other identified casual relationships that also include sex such as hook-ups and one-night stands (Wentland and Reissing, 2011; Lehmilller, VanderDrift, and Kelly, 2011). Friends with benefits relationships also hold the capacity for individuals to be sexually involved while maintaining a platonic friendship and avoiding monogamous commitment typically connected with romantic relationships (Bisson and Levine, 2009). Researchers also found that navigating the nature of FWBs are difficult for individuals participating because of the sexual relationship couple with a platonic friendship which creates uncertainty for the individual (Bisson and Levine 2009). Furthermore, Bisson and Levine (2009) reported that 49% of college students expressed feeling uncertainty during their time within an FWB relationship. Individuals reported feeling unclear of how to define the relationship, how to maintain such a relationship, the direction of the relationship, and how to remain friends after sexual intercourse.

Likewise, FWBs include communication about sexual monogamy more often than other forms of casual relationships which may aid in uncertainty of individuals if expected responses are not granted (Wentland and Reissing 2011; Weaver, MacKeigan, and MacDonald 2011). Around 25-40 percent of individuals report their FWBs lacking monogamy, leaving majority of individuals who report participating in an FWB relationship expressing that the nature of their

FWB relationship as exclusive (Weaver et al. 2011; (Lehmiller et al. 2011); (VanderDrift et al. 2010). Weaver et al. (2011) reported 40 percent of individuals who had additional partners disclosed to all participating partners they were sexually active with others, which further implies discussion of monogamy are more common in FWBs than other casual relationships. However, communication relating to other distinct features of FWBs are reported lacking between participating individuals. Bisson and Levine (2009) report 84 percent of people who claim to have participated in an FWB did not communicate with a partner about their relationship despite having uncertainty on how to negotiate the direction of the relationship. They also reported just 27 percent of FWBs engaged in some discussion of establishing “ground rules” for the relationship. Hughes, Morrison, and Asada (2005) reported that establishment of emotional rules (not becoming “too attached”), communication rules (maintaining an honest and open line of communication), and rules of sex (contraceptives and monogamy) were among the most frequent topics of discussion within FWBs. In sum, Goodboy and Myers (2008) posit that effective discussion of expectations and disclosure create the propensity of good and long lasting friends with benefits relationships.

This study introduces a form of casual dating relationships, the situationship, and utilizes what is known about FWBs to establish situationships as a distinct form of casual dating and romantic involvement. Meaning, situationships possess both qualities of FWBs and committed relationships, but could be even closer to committed relationships than what the literature informs us of FWB relationships. Academic knowledge of situationships prior to this study had yet to be uncovered as they have remained nestled within millennial Black culture as tacit knowledge among those immersed within contemporary dating. I argue that a sociological

understanding of situationships can render black women's experiences in dating visible as opposed to being masked over by white women's experiences as previously studied.

Romantic Relationship Negotiation and Outcomes

Studies on casual dating also seek to explain a possible relationship between forms of casual dating and an individual's expectation of future romantic relationships. Men and women alike report of hooking up with goals of future romantic relationships in the beginning stages of their hookup encounter (Garcia and Reiber 2008), yet women are more likely to communicate those desires of relationship progression during a FWB relationship than men (Lehmiller et al. 2011; Owen and Fincham 2011a, 2011b; Garcia and Reiber 2008). However, these results are mediated by the form of casual dating and the presence of sex; for example, some women may not express disappointment that a one-night stand encounter with a stranger or acquaintance did not develop into a romantic relationship (Campbell 2008).

Researchers argue that engaging in casual dating relationships, particularly those involving sex, hinders an individual's ability to harness effective skills for negotiating for and developing future romantic relationships, despite most individuals reporting they have not expressed a desire while engaged in a casual relationship (Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). Owen and Fincham (2010a) found that young adults with a history of involvement in FWBs express poorer decision-making processes than young adults with no history of FWBs or other forms of casual relationships. However, in a later study, Owen and Fincham (2012) reported minimal differences in couples' expression of relationship satisfaction when their current romantic relationship stemmed from a preexisting FWB than couples whose relationships did not undergo the transformation. The emergence of situationships coupled with its absence from the literature within sociological studies places this the study of

situationships in a prime position of explaining the existence of consequential outcomes that are present for individuals who are engaged in or have previously encountered situationships.

Negative Outcomes.

Casual dating research has been centered on the negative psychological outcomes of participating in Casual relationships especially those which involve sex. Individuals report a vast number of negative emotions stemming from their engagement in these relationships such as guilt, shame, regret, feeling used, and anger (Paul and Hayes 2002); Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Fisher et al. 2012; Eshbaugh and Gute 2008). Grello, Welsh, and Harper (2006) suggest that individuals who participate in casual relationships for prolonged amounts of time are at higher risk of depression than individuals who do not engage in them, and other research implies that these negative outcomes may persist longitudinally (Fielder et al. 2013).

Furthermore, casual relationships may present a risk for increased negative effects on an individual's self-esteem. For example, in a study by Paul, McManus, and Hayes (2000) college students who reported having participated in a casual relationship at one point expressed lower levels of self-esteem than students who reported only participating in exclusive, committed romantic relationships and those who refrained from all sexual activity. However, despite research on self-esteem, direction in the relationship between casual relationships and self-esteem is convoluted and remains unclear. In contrast to other research suggesting linkages between low self-esteem and casual relationships, Fielder and Carey (2009) reported that women with a history of hooking up did not express lower self-esteem than women who did not engage in hooking up. In their second round of analysis they found that women who engaged in hooking up sans sexual intercourse expressed higher levels of self-esteem later in time than women who had sexual intercourse while engaging in a hookup. This presents the possibility of self-esteem

being linked more to the decisions individuals make regarding their sexual behavior within the relationship context rather than their involvement in casual relationships (Claxton and van Dulmen 2013).

Positive Outcomes.

A small amount of research has focused on potential positive outcomes from engaging in casual dating relationships. Therefore, there is little known about if positive outcomes exist for individuals who have histories of involvement in these relationships. Owen and Fincham (2011a; 2011b) found that women's emotional expressions to FWBs and hooking up are more positive than negative, although this is eclipsed by men's emotional reactions to these relationships which are reported to be more positive and less negative. Some individuals reported feeling pleased, desirable, happy, and excited during their involvements in casual relationships, and many say they do not regret their experiences (Fielder and Carey 2010).

There is also variation in satisfaction across casual dating and sexual relationships with some individuals finding some experiences more positive than others. For example, hookups are considered the most enjoyable under certain conditions such as mutual interest, sexual chemistry, and an attractive partner. However, bad hookups were described as rushed sexual intercourse in the back of vehicles or businesses (colloquially termed "quickies") (Paul and Hayes 2002). Casual relationships are also less time consuming than committed relationships according to participants and can be less emotionally traumatizing than experiencing a bad romantic relationship (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010). Bisson and Levine (2009) suggest that friends with benefits relationships allows friends to grow closer without the pressures of being in a committed relationship once sexual intercourse has occurred.

There exists both pros and cons, positives and negatives to engaging in casual dating and sexual relationships. In a study by Campbell (2008) individuals' accounts of involvement in casual relationships were examined for positive and negative experiences, particularly the morning after a one-night stand. Individuals' experiences ranged from positive items such as "public esteem factors" (feeling success of the relationship because of the partner's looks) and "private feelings" (sexual satisfaction and increased confidence). Negative items included "public reputation" (anxiety towards a potential loss of reputational status), "interpersonal relationships" (expressed regret and feeling 'used'), and "private concerns" (potential unwanted pregnancies or sexual transmitted diseases). In general, research on outcomes of these relationships suggest that individuals may experience a range of both positive and negative outcomes which may vary based on the type of casual dating and sexual relationship (Claxton and van Dulmen 2013). This study explores both positive and negative outcomes of situationships based on the responses of Black women.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Symbolic Interactionism

I utilized multiple theoretical frameworks to aid in making sense of situationships as a previously unstudied form of casual dating and romantic involvement. First, this study uses symbolic interactionism or the ways in which individuals come to understand the world around them by attaching various meaning-making systems to specific objects and behaviors (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 1983). Symbolic Interactionism is guided by the following theoretical principles: 1) Individuals act toward an object or other individuals based on the meanings such an object or individual has attached to them; 2) the meanings of the object or individual originate from the social constructed interactions made with the object or individual; and 3) through an

interpretative process utilized by the individual who interacts with an object or person, meanings are managed and amended (Blumer 1969; 1983). Symbolic interactionism provides a foundation for a deeper understanding of identity, identity construction and authenticity, and for the purpose of this study, an understanding of how Black women's identities and the particular way they view themselves individually and as a group could possibly have a role in how they come to understand meanings around dating, particularly within Black culture.

Previous studies on social dating involving point to meanings individuals, particularly women, place on certain behaviors between two individuals engaging in dating. Actions such as holding hands, hugging, talking after engaging in sexual activity, and kissing signal that an emotional connection could be present between dating partners (Jonason, Li, and Cason 2009). As these actions increase in frequency over time, individuals begin to create meaning of the interactions happening between them and a potential mate (Jonason et al. 2009; Grello et al. 2006). In this study, I examine the definitions Black women gave for situationships, paying particular attention to the actions and behaviors included to make sense of the interaction and, more broadly, the phenomenon.

Collins' Black Sexual Politics

I frame the analyses of the findings using race and gender-specific theoretical frameworks, particularly Collins' Black Feminist Thought and Black Sexual Politics. Collins' posits that because of Black women's positioning within the social structure, factoring in intersectionality or various dominating systems of power that place Black women at an disadvantage directly relating to their intersecting identities of being both Black and women, their experiences navigating the social world and the constructions of Black womanhood are

unique which also extends to their experiences in romantic involvement (Collins 2000, 2004). To that end, Collins notes,

The intersecting oppressions that produce systems of domination such as slavery aim to thwart the power as energy available to subordinate groups. The sexual politics that constrains Black womanhood constitutes an effective system of domination because it intrudes on people's daily lives at the point of consciousness (Collins 2000).

I utilize Collins' theoretical contributions to further distinguish Black women's romantic experiences from those of white women's which have been disregarded by previous studies of dating and casual sexual relationships, thus positioning the knowledge of situationships as a phenomenon as specific and unique to Black women.

Collins' Black Sexual Politics also provides a race and gender-specific framework to the analyses, particularly pertaining to how situationships possibly form. Although interdependence theory and the investment model provides a foundation for understanding how vital commitment is to a developing relationship, it does not account for the sexual behaviors attached to masculinities and femininities, especially those that are both hegemonic and marginalized. Collins warns of such analyses that tend to mask over the experiences of the marginalized, stating,

Analyses claiming that African-Americans would be just like Whites if offered comparable opportunities implicitly support prevailing sexual politics. Such thinking offers hegemonic gender ideologies of White masculinity and White femininity as models for African-Americans to emulate (Collins 2000).

Thus, the concept of "relationship work" along with Collins' ideations of Black hegemonic masculinities and femininities and the behaviors attached to them will assist in further framing the analyses of article two. Ford (2012) states that relationship work "refers to the sometimes

incompatible ways black men and women learn to negotiate their bodies physically and behaviorally for the purpose of finding, attracting, and maintaining a relationship with a chosen partner.” The findings examine how situationships possibly form based on Black women’s perceptions of the level of commitment they receive from Black men, competing attempts of reaching hegemonic masculinities and femininities, and perceptions of a cultural shift from courtship to casual dating.

The “Career”

Sociologists utilize the concept of the “career” in order to understand the process in which individuals will participate in various forms of social deviance. The concept of the career maps the trajectory of a specific social identity through a set of social experiences an individual encounters. Everett Hughes (1971) was first to utilize the concept of the career to rituals which mark various events in a person’s life experiences. Since then, other sociologists have expanded Hughes’ application of the career to other forms of deviance such as Becker’s (1963) study on marijuana users, Goffman’s (1961) study of the mental patient, Adler and Adler’s (2007) study of self-injurers, and McLorg and Taub’s (1987) study of anorexics.

Becker’s (1963) account of the career in “Becoming a Marijuana User” demonstrates the concept of the career through social types, especially those that are considered to be social deviant. Becker theorized these deviant social types have “careers” which give the impression they are normal as they arrive into the social world. These social types, according to Becker, transition through phases in which each phase presents a new conception of self that will prompt other groups’ questioning of self. For the marijuana user, use of marijuana is only valid if learned from others that being high or the feeling of pleasure are appropriate, recognized, and

controllable effects of marijuana use. To transition through these stages means breaching a subgroup while deviating from what is considered normal in the social world.

In this study I frame situationships as a “career” and present stages in which a participant moves through to gain the identity of the “girlfriend”. The identity of the girlfriend, according to participants, is only granted once they enter a committed romantic relationship mutually agreed upon by themselves and their partner. It seems that as participants continue moving through the career of the situationship, they deviate further from what we consider “normal” in terms of traditional relationships. So much to the point where situationships are difficult to classify as a relationship, but rather seen as a subgroup of committed relationships. Progression through these stages also appear to impact how participants viewed their own identity. Meaning while moving through the stages of the situationship (the enter, during, and outcome), they deviate further from the “girlfriend” identity, just as the situationship deviates further from what we understand to be traditional, committed relationships.

METHODS

I took a phenomenographic approach to my inquiry of situationships to examine how black women attempt to gain the identity of the girlfriend through deviant acts of dating. According to Ference Marton (1978) the goal of phenomenography is to examine and map the variations of individual experience and the structure of this variation. Thus, in order to accomplish a phenomenographic study the researcher must value listening to the storytelling of research participants and privilege their stories to capture the possible variation individuals experience in a phenomenon. An important feature of the phenomenographic approach to this study is the distinction between the variation of experience, which occurs on the individual level, and the categories to describe them, which refers to the collective level. The phenomenon to be

studied are deviant paths to committed romantic relationships, in which I analyzed variation of experience – that is, individual black women’s experiences while deviating– and situationships as the category of experience. In the tradition of phenomenographic methodology I utilized semi-structured interviews to collect data on situationships as a deviant path to committed relationships and black women’s experiences within them.

As stated earlier, black women’s experiences in dating and casual sexual relationships are either conflated with the experiences of other women, mainly white, within research, or at worst, completely ignored altogether. Using a phenomenographic approach allows the research participants to define a phenomenon based on their individual experiences within them. In doing such, the purpose of a phenomenographic approach in this study is to challenge the dominant culture’s epistemology in social dating research which covertly suggests all women experience dating and casual sexual relationships in the same manner, and to bring visibility to black women’s involvement in dating and casual sexual relationships by examining an emerging dating relationship: the situationship. All this considered, the following research questions provided focus for the study:

RQ 1. What are situationships according to Black women?

RQ 2. How are situationships experienced by Black women as a deviant path to committed relationships?

RQ 3. What do situationships infer about Black women’s experiences while dating in Black culture?

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with both federal and institution regulations regarding human subjects in research, ethical considerations were made. Thus, I took the necessary steps to receive approval

from the University of Memphis's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct social research involving human subjects and to safeguard the protections and rights of any potential study participants. The study proposal went through expedited review by the university's IRB (See Appendix D for a copy of the informed consent form) and was approved by the IRB on November 26, 2019.

Potential Risks and Benefits

To the best of my knowledge this study posed no more risk or harm than one would experience in everyday life. It is possible the participants could have found some questions I asked to be upsetting or stressful. Psychological distress was the only potential risk to the study, though it was of minimal risk. At the beginning and end of each interview I referred respondents to the following national mental-health hotline that they may use in the event of psychological distress: 1-800-950-6264 (National Alliance on Mental Illness). I also reassured the participants they did not have to answer any question they did not wish to and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I reassured research participants that all information provided during the course of the interview will be held confidential.

It is common for individuals to feel a psychological benefit after narrating events from their life. There is an affective integration that takes place for the story teller. Although there has been a fair amount of research on social dating relationships and experiences, situationships have been excluded from analysis and, more importantly, black women's involvement in social dating and experiences more generally have remained largely marginalized. The purpose of this study is two-fold: to bring visibility to black women's involvement in social dating and to gain understanding of situationships from black women in terms of definitions and both positive and negative outcomes in order to set the foundation for future research on situationships.

Recruitment and Sampling

I used a purposeful sampling technique to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is a technique commonly used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton 2002). This form of sampling technique involves selecting individuals who are very knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest to the researcher (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). The type of purposeful sampling technique I used was snowball sampling. A snowball sample is one in which the sample is collected beginning with data collected from a few participants that one is able to locate, then allowing those individuals to recruit others who may be willing to participate and meet the criteria for the study and pass on the researcher's information (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). This technique is typically used when the target population may be difficult to find or want to keep their identity hidden. In the tradition of phenomenographic methodology, the ideal number of participants for qualitative study ranges from 15-30 individuals. I recruited 15 participants to conduct interviews and collect data for this study.

I conducted initial recruitment through student organizations (See Appendix A for recruitment script) specifically tailored to the African-American female population such as the Black Student Association, P.A.U.S.E., National Panhellenic Council sororities, etc. I also contacted similar organizations on the neighboring campuses of Rhodes College, Christian Brothers University and LeMoyne-Owen College. I posted flyers (see Appendix B) in common areas on campus such as the Student Union Center and in the common areas of classroom. I also posted a PDF version of the flyer on social media, such as Twitter to widen the scope of participants from just on campus.

I included my contact information in advertisements and flyers. Interested individuals contacted me through my university email. I verified that the individual identified as a woman, identified as Black/African-American or one of the groups of the African Diaspora, was over the age of 18 and had knowledge of or have participated in a situationship prior to the study. If they met these criteria, we arranged a date and time for an interview.

Participants

Individuals who wished to participate in this study were required to meet criteria. First, all participants must have been eighteen years of age at minimum. Second, because the study pertains to how black women experience casual sexual relationships, participants must have identified as Black. The criterion was not limited to Black American women, but open to any women who identified with a group with traces back to the African Diaspora, i.e. Afro-Cubans, Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Lantix, and Afro-Caribbean. In conjunction to the first criterion, the potential participant must have also identified as a woman. This criterion was open to all Black individuals who identified as both cisgender women and transgender women. Additionally, individuals were preferred to have at least minimal experience in a dating relationship self-identified as a situationship or, at the very minimum, have a working knowledge of this particular form of dating. Lastly, participants were encouraged to be open about their knowledge of situationships and experiences within them when applicable.

The participants of this study include 15 Black women with ages ranging from 19 to 29 years of age. In addition to demographic criterion that must have been met, participants of this study were required to meet criteria specifically concerning situationships. Primarily, all participants of the study must have had prior knowledge of the term situationships and proved

ability to provide their own definitions prior to the interviews that were closely aligned with my own definition and conception of situationships. The prospective participant's definition of situationships must have also demonstrated a clear distinction from friends with benefits relationships to avoid a misconstruing of meaning. All fifteen participants of this study demonstrated a knowledge of situationships that was aligned with my own definition of situationships.

Also, although not required, Black women who had participated in situationships were strongly desired as study participants. Of the fifteen participants, fourteen had been involved in at least one identified situationship prior to the interview. Among those fourteen participants who had experience involving a situationship, eight participants were currently involved in a situationship at the time of our interview, four had recently ended their situationships within six months of the interview, and two participants were a year removed from participation in their situationship. One participant had no experience in a situationship personally, yet had knowledge of situationships and was involved in a friends with benefits relationship. Due to the overlapping qualities between situationships and friends with benefits relationships and this participant's working knowledge of situationships during the survey portion of the interview, she was a good candidate to complete the entire interview.

Participant Anonymity and Confidentiality

Subject recruitment occurred through self-selection. That is, I presented information on the study to groups of young women and gave them my contact information. Women who wished to participate in the study initiated contact via email. I also asked women who participated in the study to inform their friends of the study if they possibly qualified for an interview, so that they could contact me should they be interested in participating. This method

of recruitment protected the identity of potential subjects until they have expressed interest in participation.

Interviews occurred in mostly via telephone. However, if the interview was in-person the interview took place in a private office of the University of Memphis campus, or a private room at the public library. For respondents who requested to have the interview conducted in a public location, such as a coffee shop, I clarified to the participant I could not guarantee her privacy in such a location. If the respondent chose to conduct her interview over the phone I also clarified I could not guarantee her privacy on her end of the line. The only personnel present during the interview were myself and the interviewee. Any identifiable information given in the interview was kept private, and pseudonyms were used for the research participants along with any individuals or identifying locations the respondent discussed in the interview.

Names and contact information for research participants were kept in a secure file cabinet and destroyed when the study was completed. Pseudonyms were given for all respondents and any identifying information or individuals mentioned in the interview. The recorded audio files were stored in a locked cabinet on campus and destroyed when the study was complete. Recordings were transcribed with identifiable information removed from the interviews.

The transcriptions were stored in a locked cabinet on campus and were destroyed at the end of the study. There were times at which the stored data was brought to the faculty advisor's office to be viewed by both the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, and the faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus. In this case, the data was transported in a smaller container with locking capabilities and was only opened once inside Dr. Jeni Loftus's office. The only individuals with

access to the data were the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, and the faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E) focusing on Black women's experiences in situationships including how they define this form of dating relationship, and what impact this form of dating may have had on them. A short survey (see Appendix D) was also administered for collecting demographic information. Colloquially, I define situationships as relationships which include both dating and sexual relations but lack the mutual commitment between individuals that is seen in more serious, committed relationships. However, one purpose of the interviews was to allow participants to recount their lived experiences in order for the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, to define this phenomenon sociologically.

Participants were given the choice to participate in either a face-to-face interview or a telephone interview. Participants who elected to participate in the telephone interview were informed it was not within the researcher's ability to control the privacy within their physical location during the phone interview. I conducted telephone interviews in a private, secure office on the University of Memphis campus to secure privacy on my end of communication, however if the participant was engaging in the telephone interview while at home with other family members, for example, I was not able to control who might have overheard the participant's conversation.

Participants who elected to participate in face-to-face interviews were given a choice of setting. A private office on the University of Memphis campus, such as the faculty advisor's office or the graduate student office, were available for interviews. If, however, the participant did not feel comfortable participating on campus, I was able to meet the participant at a mutually

agreed upon safe location. Prior to the interviews, participants were required to complete a consent form (See Appendix C) administered by the principal investigator. The consent form included information such as: a statement of voluntary participation, the purpose of the study, duration of the interview, potential risks and benefits, notification that the only alternative to voluntary participation is to not participate in the interview process, and compensation. The participants were asked to sign and date the consent form prior to beginning the interviews. If any research participant had questions regarding the consent form that were outside of the scope of my knowledge, they were be directed to contact the University of Memphis's Institutional Review Board to have their questions answered. In such a case, the interview was not conducted until their concerns were answered and consent form was signed and dated. The consent form was collected and stored in a locked file cabinet on campus that was only accessed by the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, and the faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus.

At the beginning of the interview a survey was administered to collect demographic information of participants such as pseudonyms chosen by the participant, age, ethnic background, educational background, marital status, prior knowledge of situationships, and whether or not the participant had been involved or ever been involved in a situationship. The survey averaged around ten minutes for the participant to complete.

Prior to the semi-structured interview, I provided the participant with my definition of situationships to give them some working knowledge of the subject matter. All interviews were be conducted by the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, and were audio taped provided the respondent agreed to a recorded interview. The interviews were recorded using a handheld SONY tape recorder with a built-in USB attachment. The recordings were stored in a locked file

cabinet on campus separate from the cover sheet with the demographic information. Only the principal investigator and the faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus, were given access to the data.

All recordings were transcribed by a paid transcriber and then coded. During the coding process, participant names were assigned the pseudonyms the participant listed in their brief survey to protect their privacy and maintain the integrity of identifying information. When the project was completed, all recordings were destroyed. The transcriptions were also in a locked file cabinet on campus until the end of the project, at which point they were destroyed. Individuals with access to the interviews and transcripts during the project included the principal advisor, Tierica Gibson, and the faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus.

Analysis

Phenomenographic methodology aims to examine variation of experiences within a phenomenon. To accomplish this, collected interview data was taken through the coding process. First, all recorded interviews were transcribed by a paid transcriber. All identifying information was redacted and participant chosen pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions. Once completed, I then began reading the transcriptions to prepare for coding. A line-by-line analysis was performed in the coding process, and participant responses were compared by question to identify any differences or similarities among responses. I utilized the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti to examine the transcriptions for themes among participant responses. Once themes were identified and analyzed, they were used to draw conclusions in regard to the questions of the research study.

I used an inductive approach to analyzing data through an open coding strategy. I used open coding to identify themes based on the specific topics from each question asked. Beginning with transcripts, I compared responses on a line-by-line basis to gain a comprehensive

understanding of the individual experiences regarding situationships and the personal meanings associated with the word situationship. The open coding strategy categorized the data and focused on key topics such as situationship features, definition of situationships, dating challenges, liminality, race, and culture. Once key themes emerged regarding the specific features of situationships and common experiences within them, I began the next phase of analysis to gain deeper insight.

The first phase of analysis regarded the situationship typology and modes of entry. During interviews, I asked respondents questions about their experiences in their situationships. I specifically asked respondents to provide answers on features they believe characterize situationships. The answers provided were personal to the individual experiences of each respondent. I then cross-examined responses during a line-by-line analysis and discovered similarities and distinguishing features of situationships based on their individual experiences. I specifically coded for items such as monogamy, liminality, boundaries, and consistency. These codes were utilized to analyze a situationship typology. I also coded for modes of entry into a situationship based on individual responses which included items such as FWBs, casual sex and casual dating.

The next phase of analysis focused on respondent's individual experiences during their situationship. I asked respondents questions regarding their experiences after they were aware of their participation in a situationship. I then cross-examined responses utilizing a line-by-line analysis to discover common experiences and emerging themes. Again, using an open coding strategy I coded for items such as negotiation, time, and progression. I compared the experiences of each respondent specifically focusing on negotiating practices for committed relationships and

motivation behind these practices such as length of situationship and perceived investments within the situationship.

Lastly, I analyzed respondent outcomes of participation in a situationship also using an open coding strategy in order to identify key points and emerging themes. I analyzed responses from each question on a line-by-line basis and cross-examined responses to draw comparisons and contrasts of individual outcomes. I sought out introspective outcomes and outcomes which specifically focused on individual perceptions of culture. I coded for items such as negative outcomes, positive outcomes, and a series of “outlook” codes including outlook on culture, desirability, and marriageability. I compared these responses to understand how situationships may or may not impact how a participant, specifically Black women, view themselves after participating and view the culture of dating within their community.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study follow the “career” of the situationship and are presented through three stages: “getting into” situationships, during the situationship, and outcomes of the situationship. As stated earlier, situationships can be understood as deviations of traditional committed relationships, yet give the illusion of progression toward a committed relationship. The findings demonstrate how situationships have the ability to mirror committed relationships and present illusions of commitment, yet simultaneously deviate away from committed relationships. *“Getting into” Situationships* demonstrates the inadvertent deviation from committed relationships that form situationships. *During the Situationship* examines Black women’s experiences within situationships and shows how they are maintained. *Situationship Outcomes* reveals the implications Black women possibly face during and after participating in situationships. I also show how situationships appear to be mediated by behaviors of emphasized

femininity and hegemonic masculinity, and how the presence of liminal space seemingly affect Black women's attempts at gaining the "girlfriend" identity.

"Getting Into" Situationships

Identifying how situationships form is a convoluted task as it is difficult to pinpoint at what precise moment an individual realizes they are in one and proceeds to refer to their involvement with someone as a situationship. For the women in my study, most suggest situationships seem to "just happen," appearing from thin air. To knowingly enter a situationship with another individual conflicts with its very nature, since situationships are understood and defined in terms of shrouded parameters of the relationship, lack of clarity and boundaries, and noncommitment. However, throughout the study I identified themes from participant responses which suggest there exists various manners in which a person "gets into a situationship", or rather how they come into knowing a situationship has formed.

In this section I present the findings of how Black women come to know they are involved in a situationship through two themes: situationship typology and situationships as false progression. The situationship typology theme suggests the connectedness of different entrances into situationships to liminality, or the state of in-betweenness. That is, how situationships are not only stagnant but exist at some undisclosed point between casual dating and committed relationships. The situationship typology theme is expanded by identified variations which reference the participants' point of realization of a situationship and provide further context of liminality within situationships. These variations are the gray area, the start-and-stop, and monogamous.

The next theme, situationships as false progression, suggests how situationships are formed out of previous noncommittal involvements. While this manner of entering a

situationship also involves liminality, it goes beyond by misleading a participant to believe progress toward a committed relationship is being made. I also identified two variations of false progression which further emphasize different pathways of entering situationships: FWB-to-situationship and casual dating-to-situationship.

Situationship Typology

From interviewing the participants of this study, I identified the possibility of there being multiple types of a situationship. These types are connected to each other due to their centrality of a liminal state. Thus, a typology formed which suggests that situationships can function differently for each woman. These types of situationships bound together due to the lack of clarity, parameters, and boundaries surrounding the involvement typically needed to define, give meaning to, and create a relationship. Not only does this typology characterize an assorted manner in which situationships can appear and operate, they also serve as a point of when a participant becomes conscious they are in a situationship. The various types of situationships include: the gray area, start-and-stop, and monogamous.

The Gray Area.

Some participants of this study defined a situationship by characterizing it as a gray area, a time of unknowing, or an in-between space. The waiting period between the initial beginning of romantic involvement and progression into a committed relationship, for these women, creates a sticky situation – hence, the namesake. This liminal space, better characterized as a waiting period in which transition takes place or a time between what was and what is next, serves as a catalyst for the formation of a situationship. Kiara asserts:

I feel like it is a very gray area, um, it's a gray area relationship. Uh, so like generally, I think that all of the things that come with a relationship are there. So there is, mmm, well,

to, to a degree, right. I think that there is, to a degree there is communication, to a degree there is some intimacy.

Kiara's characterization of a situationship underscores how this gray area holds the possibility of including both communication and intimacy which she believes are also found in committed relationships, despite lacking the title of a relationship. The point of contention, and realization, in the gray area arrives when the involvement appears to possess the qualities of what we believe belong to committed relationships (quality time, intimacy, communication, dating, etc.) but lacks clarity and boundaries surrounding the involvement leading to mutual agreement of what to define the relationship.

There exists issues surrounding clarity and boundaries in situationships according to participants. Clarity is understood in terms of a mutual transparency between two parties, and boundaries are the identified limits to the involvement. They proposed clarity and boundaries as two vital components to establish a committed relationship. According to participants, there must be clarity between two individuals of what to call their involvement and how to define it, and the boundaries, the limits placed around the involvement that police and guide the behaviors of both participants, must also be clearly defined and mutually agreed upon. When either, or both, of those components are missing it alerts an individual and prompts them to question the authenticity of their involvement with another individual.

I posit the point of recognition for gray area situationships is when neither clarity nor boundaries exist between two individuals. Kamora, who recently ended a situationship at the time of interview, affirmed she recognized she was in a situationship when she began to question clarity between her and her situationship partner and the boundaries surrounding their romantic involvement:

And there is a lack of communication as far as what your goals are and what this is so it's like but you're also kind of acting like you're in a relationship, but you don't have the title. And there's just kind of like this um, kind of gray area of are we moving towards a relationship? Are we going to get there at some point? There's definitely a lack of clarity in situationships.

Here “acting like you’re in a relationship” conflicts with the lack of communication surrounding goals of the involvement (clarity) and questioning when and if the relationship will progress into a “relationship” in the future signaling that those particular boundaries do not exist between them. The absence of both clarity and boundaries in gray area relationships appear to strengthen the liminality as one partner remains unclear of where they stand with the other partner before progression into a committed relationship can begin.

The Start-And-Stop.

Like the gray area situationship, the start-and-stop situationship also lacks clarity and boundaries surrounding a romantic involvement needed to define it as a relationship. However, the start-and-stop situationship introduces a new component to distinguish it as a type of situationship: inconsistency. Hence their name, this type of situationship is characterized by the inconsistency in duration of the romantic involvement. Such a situationship goes back and forth between an “on” stage and an “off” stage for a particular amount of time in each stage. Among participants, the women who I identified as belonging to a start-and-stop situationship had the most negative experiences. This is because the inconsistency not only strengthens liminality of the situationship, but also prolongs liminality.

One participant, Jamalia, who was involved in a start-and-stop situationship expresses her disdain for the inconsistency:

I was like really suffering on both ends. I was stuck between the, the ultimatums of either stop dealing with this person completely or...just take what they give you in order for them to just be in your life...So, it was kind of like a letdown... we would get distant again, and we would not talk. And then it would start back up again. We would talk, and we would try and reconcile things and it would just go in these cycles of 'we're talking, we're not talking'. It became very draining after a while.

Jamalia's expression toward start-and-stop situationships demonstrates the inconsistency of involvement prolongs the liminal state. The prolonging of the liminal state underscores a point that is implied in Jamalia's quote above: inconsistency, along with lack of clarity and nonexistent boundaries, make for progressing the situationship into a committed relationship a difficult, almost impossible task. The women of the study who participated in start-and-stop situationships often referenced them as their worst dating experiences, recalling them feeling stupid or "getting played" yielding little to no benefits from their situationship.

Additionally, the constant on-and-off of the situationship does not alert an individual of being in a situationship immediately. Instead, participants expressed after various cycles of the on-and-off did they come to realize they were in a situationship. One participant in particular, Shea, recalls the moment she came into knowing she was in a situationship:

And, like, it was our fifth time "breaking up" – if you can even call it that because, again, we weren't really together like that. I remember just sitting there after our little breaking thinking "damn, I'm in a situationship." Like I'm breaking up and getting back together with a man I'm not even in a relationship with. But I kept trying because getting to the finish line was so important to me. Looking back, it was crazy as hell.

For Shea, like other participants in a start-and-stop situationship, the prospect of one day “getting to the finish line” by entering into a committed relationship with their partner remains salient. This saliency of commitment prompts them to continue their effort within the undefined romantic involvement, despite having to endure a sense of “breaking up to make up.” According to Shea later in our interview, she expressed the start-and-stop cycle began to feel like a normal occurrence every few months. That is, until two years passed and a committed relationship with her partner had yet to form. “I wasted two years of my life chasing a pipe dream,” she states. This suggests that once they are conscious of the liminal state, or time wasted, due to inconsistency they are then able identify their participation in a situationship.

Monogamous Situationships.

Like gray area and start-and-stop situationships which lack both clarity and boundaries surrounding the romantic involvement between two individuals, monogamous situationships also lack clarity; however, some boundaries of the involvement are defined. The boundaries of a monogamous situationship are set in terms of exclusivity. Meaning they have agreed to limit their romantic involvement to each other, yet commitment is not agreed upon. For the previous types, gray area situationships and start-and-stop situationships, monogamy is desired but not assured. Despite the monogamous nature of this particular type of situationship, the participants who identified with this type expressed feeling, at times, fooled into believing they were in a full, committed relationship.

Women in gray area and start-and-stop situationships typically learn they are in a situationship once they are aware liminality is present in their romantic involvement with a partner. In monogamous situationships, liminality is shrouded by defined boundaries and prevents one from being aware of the liminal state. For the participants I identified as having

engaged in a monogamous situationship, they became aware of being in a situationship after discussions with their partners in which they were informed of not being girlfriends. Lori recalls the time her partner informed her of their relationship status:

We were hanging out with his friends one night and I introduced myself as his girlfriend. He was acting funny all night after that, so I asked him what his problem was. He asked me why did I tell them I was his girlfriend. I was like, “I am your girl right?” He told me no and that “that’s not what we ever agreed on”. Like, he really straight up told me I wasn’t his girl. We stopped talking like a week after that.

According to participants, partners in a monogamous situationship agree to only romantically involve themselves with each other prior to engaging in other activities that may resemble committed relationships. Establishing monogamy as a mutual boundary seems to lead them into assuming they are in a relationship, or at the very least exclusively dating. However, clarity surrounding the romantic involvement is absent as multiple participants expressed avoiding those discussions with their partners out of fear of being viewed as “too pushy” or being rejected.

Among the participants of this study, monogamous situationships were the most common. I posit monogamous situationships are the most common type as they resemble exclusive dating or committed relationships, and because the feeling of being in a relationship is desired, discussions to clarify their romantic involvement are either delayed or avoided altogether. Additionally, I observed from participant interviews these situationship types are fluid as one type can transform into other types. For instance, a gray area situationship can easily transform into a start-and-stop once periods of time together become fragmented, or a gray area situationship can transition into a monogamous situationship once the boundaries of monogamy are established. Certain transitions, however, can be misconstrued as relationship progression.

The next section outlines transitions I observed from interviews and their role in “getting into” situationships.

Situationships as False Progression

As mentioned earlier, during interviews participants expressed their situationships appeared to “just happen” or “come out of nowhere.” In-depth interviews, however, suggest there are pathways to entering a situationship. In “Situationship Typology” I listed types of situationships I observed that also served as points in which the participants realized they were in a situationship. In this section, “Situationships as False Progression” I list my observation of two ways in which participants entered their situationships. These pathways include: FWB-to-Situationship and Casual Dating-to-Situationship. I also demonstrate how these transitions from one kind of romantic involvement into a situationship provide a false sense of relationship progression, further aiding in the shrouded nature of situationships.

FWB-to-Situationship.

Friends with benefits, or FWB relationships, consist of two individuals identified as platonic friends who have set clear boundaries to be sexually involved without emotional attachments (Jonason et al. 2009). Emotional attachments include any behaviors or actions that may signal one person having deeper feelings toward another such as kissing, holding hands, or spending quality time together outside of sex. The boundaries of an FWB relationship are established and the status of the relationship is clarified as it is mutually agreed upon by both individuals prior to engaging in casual sex. This “no strings attached” relationship allows for individuals who are comfortable with each other as friends to engage in casual sex without the pressure of entering a committed relationship. When FWBs transition into situationships (depending on the type) either clarity, boundaries, or both become convoluted and unclear to at

least one or both individuals involved. From interviews I observed this is due to at least one person developing deeper feelings for their casual sex partner and attaching emotions to the nature of their romantic involvement of which they are unaware their feelings and emotions towards them and the relationship are not reciprocated.

During this transition, the two individuals may partake in activities that are beyond the boundaries established for an FWB relationship. These activities may include quality time outside of casual sex, kissing, or in-depth discussions that are uncommon for platonic friends. The primary activity engaged in during the transition from FWB to situationship includes dating activities such as going out, meeting friends and family, or appearances on each other's social media accounts for public consumption. Kamora, whose situationship transitioned from an FWB relationship, reiterates:

I have one that kind of started off as friends with benefits and then it became a situationship because there was more, um, romance kind of involved. And we definitely identified that we had feelings for each other. So we started, um, hanging out more, going out on dates, planning trips, and it's like okay, are we moving towards a relationship?

Kamora demonstrates what I observed as false progression, or assuming the relationship is progressing into a committed relationship due to participating in activities in which those who are in committed relationships also participate; thus, giving a false perception the situationship is another step toward a committed relationship. Kamora later expressed as time passed her expectations of progressing into a committed relationship waned and she accepted she was in a situationship because of inconsistencies citing, "All the signs were there."

Casual Dating-to-Situationship.

Friends with benefits relationships transition into situationships when emotional attachments appear as introduced by at least one person in the romantic involvement. I observed as casual dating transitions into a situationship emotional attachments seem to already be present. Participants mentioned going on dating excursions, kissing, and spending quality time together as activities done prior to entering a situationship. Nicole, who at the time of our interview revealed she had recently classified her romantic involvement with her partner as a situationship, spoke candidly on her and her partner's transition from casually dating to a situationship:

Yeah, we were just dating at first – you know, going on small dates and stuff. All things a normal couple would do but nothing too, um, extravagant. And we had had conversations about a relationship, but nothing happened. Then after a while we ended up having sex and, um, the dates starting getting more frequent, he would buy me gifts, and I met his dad once which was big to me because he said he never let another woman meet his dad before. It all just felt, uh, organic to me. Sex is huge to me, so after that I just thought we were in a relationship or least trying to get there, you know? I was so so so very wrong. Very wrong.

Every participant who entered their situationship via casual dating like Nicole also mentioned introducing sex into their romantic involvements. These women expressed the act of sex as the ultimate emotional attachment, and to give validation to the act it must be attached to a meaningful relationship. Otherwise, they become fearful of being labeled as “easy” or a “ho or slut.” The false progression in casual dating-to-situationship pathway is made visible by the attempt to validate having sex with their partner by attaching the label of relationship to their otherwise noncommittal relationship. Keisha references the act of sex when recalling what she believed to be a relationship between her and her partner:

I just don't go around having sex with any and everybody. My mama didn't raise me like that. And that's not a knock to anybody else. It's just not for me. So when I had sex with this guy of course he was going to be my man. I don't know, I would have felt, like, dirty... if I knew at the time that he wasn't actually my boyfriend and wasn't claiming me. If I knew at the time he wasn't claiming me we wouldn't have had sex at all.

For Keisha and other participants who entered their situationships from casually dating, engaging in casual sex is undesirable – an act they were taught to refrain from as women. Later I discuss this observation within the framework of emphasized femininity as the relationship between Black women's bodies and femininity provides additional context for this finding.

During the Situationship

According to participants during their interviews, to experience emotional and relational highs and lows during a situationship is normal, almost expected. Some women characterized their experiences during their situationship as emotional labor intensive. The managing of emotions throughout the situationship frequently appeared in interviews as these women sought to make the best decisions for themselves romantically and emotionally. When I inquired about their experiences during their situationships, I analyzed themes regarding how they navigate these situationships to ensure they progress into committed relationships and their emotional labor output through negotiation. However, none of the participants reported their situationships progressed into committed relationships.

In this section I present my findings of Black women's experiences during situationships through the following theme: "The Extended Interview." In "The Extended Interviews" I present findings which suggest situationships are likened to extremely long job interviews, except the "job" is to become a girlfriend in a committed relationship. I also analyze these "interviews"

through the following variations: proving one's worth, investments, and negotiations. In the concluding analysis, negotiations, I posit women attempt to transition the situationship into committed relationships through a series of negotiations and by the bargaining of their previous investments.

The Extended Interviews.

Liminality is a central function of situationships, and in this liminal space progress appears to be nonexistent. Despite little to no progress towards a committed relationship being made in what is considered an acceptable timeframe (anywhere from three to six months), participants claimed their situationships began to feel as if they were interviewing for a job; except, the interview lasted for months instead of the standard thirty minutes. In these "interviews" they are said to be constantly proving their worth to a potential partner in order to land the job of a girlfriend. Also, participants reported making various investments, both emotional and physical, to bolster their chances of being picked as girlfriends and gaining committed relationships.

Proving Worth.

According to the participants of this study, situationships appear to provide men the opportunity to "test out" a potential partner. Jamalialia asserts:

It's kind of like they use situationships as previews to a relationship, which makes no sense to me. 'Cause, I mean, go ahead and put a title on it if you're already doing all these relationship type qualities and things, go ahead and say what it is instead of trying to sugar coat and not take full responsibility and accountability of your actions.

For Black women, engaging in a situationship is an act of striving toward a committed relationship in the future, whereas Black women perceived situationships for Black men as

another mechanism to receive the benefits of a relationship, mainly sex and autonomy over the direction of the relationship, without the responsibility and accountability commitment brings. Throughout the interviews participants consistently characterized situationships as an opportunity to prove they are worthy of being girlfriends and not just placeholders for the convenience of their male partners. However, riding the highs and lows of the situationships while simultaneously attempting to prove their worth requires extensive emotional labor. Often time participants reported feeling taken advantage of when their efforts were not either acknowledged, rewarded or reciprocated.

What does proving one's worth entail in situationships? According to Rayne, it means overextending yourself in a manner that is, at times, unhealthy:

I did all types of things for him. I bought clothes and shoes, paid for haircuts... um, I one time paid for some work to get done on his car. I was having sex whenever he wanted. Everything was whatever he wanted, you know? You know, stuff I think a good girlfriend would do I guess. My mindset was "might as well prepare myself for what's to come." I was trying to show him why he should choose me. It was lopsided. I remember working myself so much trying to be everything he wanted me to be I had lost ten pounds in one week from stress.

Proving one's worth means taking on the perceived role of a girlfriend in exchange for a chance at a committed relationship, including acts of selfless giving, physical sex at the autonomy of the man, or other favors and gestures. Participants spoke of attempting to be emotionally prepared in case their efforts were not successful, but reported feeling rejected upon realizing a relationship would not form between them and their situationship partner. However, proving worth also has a dark side as some may use it as an opportunity to be violent. When I inquired about her

situationship partner's response to her attempting to prove her worth as a girlfriend, Alexis candidly responded, "Um, I had a man take advantage of me sexually, and that is all I will say."

I analyzed the act of proving worth as a central function within situationships. All participants responded having attempted to prove their worth as a potential girlfriend during their situationships. Yet, only a couple responded their efforts were acknowledged or appreciated, and no participants reported benefitting from attempting to prove their worth by having the situationship progress into a committed relationship.

Investments.

In addition to proving one's worth in the "interview" process, participants report making significant investments to secure landing the "job" of a girlfriend. Two investments I observed from interviews include refrainment from casually dating other people while in a situationship and the investment of their time. Together, monogamy and time, are perceived as risky investments or "all or nothing" attempts at gaining committed relationships among the participants of this study. Regarding monogamy, Tina referred to it as unfair:

They expect us to sit back and be faithful to them when they won't even claim us. But they get to go out and fuck anybody – and yea, I mean fuck 'cause there's no emotions behind anything they do. But god forbid I go on a date with someone else and he finds out? There'll be hell to pay for real. I'm sick of them. They can do whatever.

Monogamy on the part of the woman constitutes as a survival practice to ensure any potential progress is safeguarded and the situationship stay on course. All participants reported wanting to engage in casual dating during their situationships (or having multiple partners), but also having difficulty justifying casual dating. The idea of casual dating for Black women not existing is a mischaracterization. It exists, but at what cost to Black women? To engage in casual dating as

others are participating in it, particularly white women, means to consciously involve oneself with multiple men. Thus, raising the risk of being characterized and labeled as a “ho” or slut, particularly by eligible men within Black culture which could be detrimental to one’s own eligibility as a potential or preferred dating partner. Though technically it would not constitute “cheating” on their situationship partner, they refrained from casually dating other men, consequently running the risk of limiting their own dating pool, in order to be “all in” on building a potential relationship with their current situationship partner.

In addition to monogamy, I analyzed time as a significant investment from Black women engaging in situationships. The effort inputted to progress a situationship into a committed relationship is temporally extensive. To reiterate, I posit situationships do not begin as situationships, rather they grow from a previous noncommittal romantic involvement. The time spent in the previous romantic involvement in addition to the time invested during the situationship can equal to months or even years of time totally invested. Shea, who reported investing the most amount of time in her situationship among the other participants, expressed her thoughts on such an investment:

We were off and on for over three years... really close to four. And we recently just, I guess, “broke up” again if you can even call it that. It’s so stressful. It stresses me out completely. I’ve spent four years of my life chasing after a man when it should be the other way around.

Like Shea, other participants reported investing long periods of time on cultivating these situationships in hopes of one day entering a relationship. Time invested in situationships reported by the participants of this study ranged from one year to three and a half years. It is also significant to report participants claim that after one situationship ends, they unfortunately find themselves in another, repeating the cycle. Ultimately, these women can spend multiple years of

time attempting to gain committed relationships via situationships. I also inquired if they believed it should be “the other way around,” or rather, should men reciprocate their time to “chase” after them. Out of fifteen participants, thirteen believed men should be taking the initiative to be in relationships with them and thus, invest their time in the same manner.

The “interview process” of a situationship appears as a long, grueling process according to the women of this study. When felt they have invested enough of their time and desire faster results, they reported using these investments as leverage in their negotiating efforts for committed relationships. In the next section, I analyze how these women negotiate, or bargain, for committed relationship utilizing prior investments made throughout the duration of the situationship.

Negotiations.

Following my interviews with Black women and listening to their experiences in situationships, particularly the emotions attached to their romantic involvement, I arrived at the following analysis: negotiating for a serious, committed relationship is a form of emotion work. Also, emotions and the management of emotions play a major role in the decision-making process before and after negotiating actions occur. Participants felt they needed to negotiate for commitment in order to avoid feeling they wasted their time attempting to prove they were worthy of being girlfriends. In other words, they needed to “cash in” on the emotional labor invested into the situationship. Shea explained, “I expected it because I acted as if I was in a relationship, and I just assumed, and I felt like they would see all of my efforts, and they would be like, ‘Oh, I gotta make her my girl. Like, she's already acting like my girl.’ And it – it didn't work out.”

I observed participants negotiated for committed relationships in two distinct manners: withholding benefits and pseudo-cheating. I also observed these tactics as last resort measures that occurred when the women of this study considered ending the situationship completely. Weighing the emotional labor and other investments in the situationship also prompts some women to conduct a cost-benefit analysis in order to justify negotiating for commitment or staying in the situationship. When speaking of the state of her current situationship, Alexis contends:

It's why I've hung onto the current one. Like, I mean, he's getting a doctoral degree. He's in my field. He's one of the few in my field that is not gay. Um, and it just works. It's effortless. And I know that he cares and it's like, "Well, damn, I guess." At the same time, I know I deserve better. I know I deserve more, but am I willing to risk it? So, some days I am; some days I'm not. Just depends on when you catch me.

For some women, long periods of time in the liminal space causes feelings of anxiousness and frustration that drive the need to negotiate. Most participants mentioned withholding benefits and leveraging prior investments to push the situationship into a relationship. The primary benefit according to participants is physical sex. Other benefits include financial help, quality time, and personal gifts.

Withholding sex is viewed as a measure of “putting one’s foot down” or a way to demand a change in the current state of the situationship. In situationships, I suggest sex is a powerful tool that is used to get women to comply to the demands of their partners out of fear they may seek physical pleasure from other women. Participants expressed feeling pressured into having sex to keep the situationship on track. Jamalia contends:

So, it's kind of like the analogy of why would I buy a cow when I can get the milk for free? like my grandma says, "What you won't do somebody else will. So, just 'cause you're not having sex with them, they can get everything that they need from you emotionally and be going and get someone else on the side." And they're able to do that 'cause it's a situationship, it's a relationship they're not required to be committed to you 100 percent.

Although aware the act of sex has been used to their disadvantage, participants withheld sex from their situationship partner to grab their attention as a warning signal. However, no participants reported this tactic was successful in their negotiating efforts.

Next, I observed pseudo-cheating as negotiation tactic these women used to push for commitment. Because situationships are not legitimate committed relationships in the traditional sense, to physically or emotionally engage with an individual outside of the situationship does not constitute cheating. Both individuals in a situationship have the freedom to see other people, yet the women of this study expressed feelings of obligation to their situationship partner; which, again, points to them attempting to prove they can be worthy girlfriends by practicing monogamy. When pseudo-cheating, which includes going on dates, spending quality time, or having sex with other people, they hope to deliver a message that suggests they are desirable by other people and can end the situationship at their discretion. However, pseudo-cheating may yield results that are opposite of what they intended. Ella recalls:

I ended up going on a date with another guy. It wasn't anything big, just a dinner and movie type of thing. I purposely put it on Instagram so he could see it because he basically stalked my social media. By the time I got home I had so many missed calls and texts. All from him. Saying if he couldn't trust me to be faithful and honest now, how could he trust me later. We had a big blow up and it was downhill from there.

Ultimately, no participants reported their negotiating efforts succeeded in transitioning the situationship into a committed relationship. I analyzed that these negotiation tactics were not only emotionally labor intensive for these women, but also perceived as inequitable. In other words, participants believed that these tactics, withholding benefits and pseudo-cheating, would have succeeded if they were men rather than women.

Situationship Outcomes

I specifically asked participants questions regarding the aftermath of their situationships. I kept questions vague, such as “how are you afterwards?” or “can you think of any changes credited to situationships you may have experienced?” to avoid guiding them into biased answers particularly concerning their emotions. However, the outcomes of situationships appear to be overwhelmingly emotional. I also observed situationship may affect Black women’s perceptions on dating within Black culture. I analyzed these outcomes under two sections: “Introspective Outcomes” and “Perceptions on Culture”.

In “Introspective Outcomes” I present my findings on the effect situationships have on Black women’s emotions in duration and afterwards. I find that during the situationship emotions can vary daily, depending on the perceived health of the situationship. Black women’s emotions after their situationships have ended also varied depending on the direction of the situationship. Also in this section, I present how Black women perceived themselves once the situationship ended. In “Perceptions on Culture” I analyze how situationships may impact Black women’s outlook on dating within Black culture. I find that situationships may also affect Black women’s perceptions on their desirability and marriageability. Additionally, I observe some positive outcomes of situationships that Black women may use as they continue to navigate dating.

Introspective Outcomes.

“Um, emotionally I kinda feel like I'm all over the place because it's hard. It's hard to get jealous when you see that person, like, not only focusin' on you. It's hard to not get mad at things that you would expect a significant other to do versus a guy you're just talking to. It's hard to act like you don't care when you care. It's hard...when the partner still wants to talk to you every single day when you know that they're not getting everything that they want outta you. So, it's really easy for them to just move on with life, so you try to, like, do enough to still stay in their life.” – Ella

Ella's comments echo the beliefs of most participants when discussing their day-to-day emotions during their situationships: participating in situationships can result in emotional instability or distress. Certain features and behavior exhibited appear to be related to the emotions these women feel while involved in a situationship. Features such as secrecy and lack of a label to the relationship which allows for a lack of accountability or responsibility for the feelings of a partner, typically the female partner, appear to cause anxiety concerning the actions of a partner when they are away. Alexis, who is currently in a situationship, states “Some days I'm great, and I'm riding a high...and I am – I'm okay. And then other days I have crippling anxiety when I think about who he could be with outside of me and what is going on in his head and – and this and that and the third. Then...I'm anxious. I'm thinking of a day in particular back in June where I was just – I was a wreck.”

The liminality of situationships appear to bolster emotional instability in their duration. The fear and uncertainty from not knowing in what direction the relationship is headed, especially after one or several failed negotiation attempts, is a source of anxiety. Likewise, participants also expressed feeling “stuck” in a situationship adds to such anxiety. I also analyzed from participant responses a discrepancy in when positive and negative emotions are

experienced. When they are physically present with their partner, such as going on dates and spending quality time together, positive emotions such as happiness, pride, joy, and love are experienced. However, when physically apart participants experienced negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and loneliness. For Alexis, her perception of her partner's inability to attempt monogamy as she offered to him led to feelings of insecurity and anxiety:

Being with him physically in front of his face I had all the warm and fuzzy feelings. Being away from him I knew he was a player. And so it was like, "Well, who are you sleeping with today? Well, who are you with when you're not with me?" which gave me a severe level of anxiety. And the point where it became paralyzing for me, to the point where I didn't want to get out of bed. That's when I knew something had to change.

When experiencing the features of a situationship in which closely resemble committed relationships participants reported general feelings of happiness and other positive emotions that aided in the prolonging of the situationship. Yet, when experiencing features of a situationship closely resembling other forms of non-committed romantic involvement in which sex is central, negative emotions were reported among participants such as anger, guilt, sadness, and anxiety because they remind participants of the lack of a label to the relationship, lack of accountability, and perceived inequity – particularly, their partner's inability to reciprocate the time, effort, and emotional labor invested in the situationship.

The constant cycle of proving one's worth to be a girlfriend, negotiating for commitment and experiencing rejection, and identifying reasons to justify remaining in the relationship appears to have meaningful implications once a situationship has ended. The most common outcome of this cycle reported by participants was a significant loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. Participants in this study walked away from their situationships feeling "unworthy," "too

damaged for the next relationship,” and “less desirable.” Also, these emotions were expressed to be determining factors for how they navigate their next relationship.

For participants who have experienced multiple situationships, they reported being more aggressive and “clingy” upon entering a new situationship. I analyzed that for some participants, the behaviors they were subjected to by ex-partners were behaviors they reported exhibiting themselves in a new situationship. Nicole, for instance, who identified her ex-partner as controlling contends:

Everything that my ex was to me or my situationship that was to me, I was to my current boyfriend, right? I was controlling. I was a, "Who you with? Where you at? Is the club hopping," you know what I'm saying? It was a ‘my way, highway.’

This could suggest experiencing an unhealthy situationship affects an individual’s emotional intelligence resulting in unhealthy behaviors being mimicked and exhibited in new romantic involvements. An additional outcome participants reported was a loss of general trust in men, particularly Black men. Although there could be various reasons, the participants of this study reported gaslighting being a significant reason for such a loss of trust. Jamalia extends this analysis by recalling her last situationship:

Like, with that person it's like...they strung me along and...they would know exactly what to say to get me back. And so, once I'm there, they're just kind of like dangling...a relationship in front of me, and to me it was the fact of, why are you constantly contacting me? Why are you constantly bothering me? I don't want anything to do with you. And if you know what I want, and you're not willing to give that to me, why not just leave me alone in general?

Overall, Black women's emotions during situationships were overwhelmingly affected negatively by their experiences. These negative experiences left the participants of this study worried about the state of Black women's dating lives and if Black culture contributes to those concerns.

Perceptions on Culture.

Participants reported negative outcomes that not only affected them individually, but also negatively affected their outlook on dating within Black culture as well as Black women's marriageability and desirability. The Black women of this study previously expressed their less than desirable opinions on dating culture, stating reasons they perceive dating more difficult to navigate for themselves than for other groups of women, specifically white women. Because situationships operate as a hybrid between non-committal, casual dating and romantic relationships, their experiences in them appear to negatively affect their views of Black women's position within Black dating culture. Some participants expressed situationships unnecessarily prolong the dating process, in which they feel Black women have an already shorter window to date for the purposes of marriage, while other participants expressed feelings of settling for less than they deserve in situationships out of fear of not finding adequate partners or having to "start over" in the dating process. For Kamora, a young professional, situationships have masked over the idea of "dating to marry":

I think that it changes the way that that black people date because I don't think you're looking for the same things anymore. You're not looking for the person to spend your life with when you know all you're interested in is a situationship. So, even when you go on a date your questions are different. You're not really asking them serious questions about their values, their life, their money. You're kind of just asking surface level things to get to

know them and see if this is someone that you can become compatible with temporarily. So, I don't think that dating is as serious anymore. Whereas, I feel like before it was serious because you're dating to find someone to marry. Now the goal is just to find some temporary entertainment.

The idea of being dated “temporarily” and for “entertainment” is alluded when participants gave their opinions on how situationships have shaped their outlook on Black women's desirability. Although casual sex is not a central feature in situationship as it is central in other forms of non-committal forms of dating and romantic involvement, especially CSREs, sex remains a feature. The presence of sex coupled with lack of commitment aides in these women feeling like sex objects within their situationships. Thus, situationships left some participants questioning how desirable Black women are to men, specifically Black men.

Smokey, for example, expands such analysis:

I think that Black men who put Black women in situationships...make a sticky situation in the fact that it's like 'okay, well yes I'm confessing to you that I'm desiring you because we're together, or we hang out, or we are vibing,' or whatever they want to say that's not actually an established relationship. I mean and the Black woman has the right to ask, 'well how desirable am I if you're not wanting to establish that you're my man,' like how does that equal desirability if you're putting titles on White women, Mexican women, whatever other race, but you're stringing me along and saying that I should be happy with what's going on and the “bond over title conversation.”

Smokey clarified that “bond over title” refers to a tactic men, specifically Black men, use to convince women their perceived connection to each other is more valuable than a title to such a connection in order to keep women stationary in unsatisfactory relationships. According to

Jamalia, once Black women create boundaries within situationships in hopes of progressing into a committed relationship, Black men will go seeking other groups of women which led her to question the authenticity of desirability towards Black women. She states, “So, I feel like it's decreasing our value as a black woman just because they're not taking it seriously. So, they haven't been taking us serious for a while, and now we're putting our demands in place of, ‘Hey, this is what I'm going to tolerate. This is what I'm not going to tolerate.’ And so, now it's just kind of like, ‘Okay. We're going to shy away from them because we know now what they want, and they're telling us what they want and what they need.’ So, now it's kind of making the other races more desirable because, not to doubt anyone or anything like that, they're just more willing to compromise with what they want or what they're needing or accepting from people.”

For these participants, their perceptions of a declining desirability to Black men, and men in general, means perceptions of an increased desirability toward non-Black women in which further limits their dating pool and ability to find partners for committed relationship and eventually marriage. Thus, participating in situationships not only contribute in furthering their negative views of their own desirability, but such views are connected to their perceptions of how situationship affect Black women’s marriageability.

According to the participants of my study, marriage remains a primary goal in their romantic endeavors. In addition to the challenges they face in their dating experiences coupled with the sexual politics of Black womanhood which police their bodies and sexual agency, situationships, in which participants commonly characterized as dating for fun or “for play”, stifles the primary purpose of dating for Black women: to become married. For some participants, their involvement in multiple situationships throughout their dating lives have been detrimental to their individual self-worth and drastically altered how they view themselves as

desirable to men. To Lori, self-worth and desirability are significant factors in one's marriageability; however, her experience in her situationship negatively affected both resulting in a negative perception of her own marriageability:

I'm not desirable. Um, and that people might say, "Well, you're really pretty," but I don't feel that way because...the things that I have been through, and just the fact that I feel like people only want to talk to me because they think they can have sex with me. So I just don't have a lot of self-worth within myself, and I don't think that I could be anyone's potential girlfriend or wife just because I have such a low self-esteem about myself and I look at myself very lowly. So I just think that that's how others look at me. I want to get married. It's one of my dreams to. But at the same time, I don't know if anybody ever dreams of marrying me. Like I don't think people pray – 'cause like I pray for a husband, but I don't think someone prays for me.

Other participants contend because situationship and other nonconventional forms of dating are believed to be all that are available to Black women, they are unfamiliar with features of committed relationships perceived to be needed to progress into a marriage.

Although the outcomes for Black women's participation in situationships appear overwhelmingly negative, I analyzed a singular positive outcome from participant responses: Black women experiences while in a situationship are considered lessons learned as they move forward in their dating lives. The liminality, lack of accountability, and a partner's inability to commit to a relationship with clear boundaries are now red flags to consider when dating or entering new romantic involvements. According to Kamora, this is the single benefit to experiencing a situationship:

I think that works in the reverse too of knowing kind of what I want and it helped me realize that I wanted more. So after being done it was like ‘okay, it was a good learning lesson to say I like these couple things about the situationship.’ I enjoyed some of those moments but I know that moving forward, this is not something I want to do again and I feel a little more confident in myself to be able to say “Nope.”

Although the participants of this study may perceive situationships do not provide the “right kind” of experience to reach their goals of committed relationships, I suggest they may perceive them as quality guidelines to establish preliminary boundaries in dating, identify behaviors that signal barriers in reaching dating goals, and safeguard their mental and emotional health.

DISCUSSION

As Black women attempt to gain the identity of “the girlfriend”, a framing of situationships as a deviant path of the relationship “career” helps guide our understandings of the difficulties Black women experience in their dating lives. The primary focus of this study is the difficulty of existing on the intersection of Black and woman and its relationship with traditional or emphasized femininity within the context of relationships and social dating. A secondary focus is the paradoxical nature of situationships within the context of relationships and social dating. Together, a study of situationships draws attention to behaviors of emphasized femininity by Black women in hopes of gaining relationships and uncovers the qualities of situationships that Black women perceive as oppressive to them and beneficial to the men they engage in situationships with, particularly Black men.

“Getting into”

The genesis of discussing “getting into” situationships is an understanding of courting or courtship with men as a desired activity and validating behavior of emphasized femininity.

Having the desire to want relationship, particularly with men, showcases women's ability to perform traditional gender roles and ideals. Entering a situationship is not voluntary. Otherwise, its liminal parameters would not exist as both individuals would have a clear understanding of the relationship and its boundaries. As iterated earlier, situationships appear to develop from previous noncommittal romantic involvements, particularly FWBs or casual dating relationships. Although the paths to situationships are different, what they share in common is the desire from one individual (participants identify women as the individual with the desire more times than not) for a serious, committed relationship. This desire and the tactics which follow appear to be in direct conflict with behaviors of hegemonic masculinity, particularly the need to separate sex and other types of physical pleasure from love, relationships, and commitment. I suggest this clash between emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity is at play in every stage of the situationship and further prevents Black women from taking on the identity of the girlfriend while also validating hegemonic masculine behaviors.

In FWB-to-Situationship entryways, participants expressed being the individual who developed deeper emotional feelings toward their sexual partner and who also wanted to progress the sexual relationship into a more serious commitment. However, FWB relationships are already perceived as validating to hegemonic masculinity because they allow men to engage in seemingly meaningless involvement in which they are able to separate sex from emotion, successfully avoiding emotional attachment. In order to gain the identity of the girlfriend, Black women would have to assume control over the direction of the relationship, which includes attaching both emotions and meaning to the act of sex to first make sense of the activity beyond physical pleasure. It may be the case that men, in direct opposition of progressing the relationship, will resist these attempts as a way to not relinquish control over the

sexual relationship, and women's bodies, and maintain access to hegemonic masculinity. Thus, in what I visualize as a sort of "push and pull" motion between Black women attempting to access emphasized femininity by taking on the girlfriend identity and men working to maintain access to hegemonic masculinity by actively resisting commitment, progression towards a romantic relationship stalls.

In contrast to the FWB-to-Situationship pathway, the Casual Dating-to-Situationship entrance presents behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity in a different manner. I posit that in casual dating relationships, the prospect of a committed relationship in the future is a feasible goal as casual dating is understood to be utilized as a way to disclose surface level information to a potential relationship partner. As mentioned earlier, for the participants of this study casual sex is not a central feature of their casual dating relationships as opposed to FWBs in which casual sex is tied to its essential meaning. Whereas in FWB-to-Situationship entrance the women of the study perceive men possess and maintain control over the direction of the sexual relationship by continuing to disassociate sex with emotional attachment and ultimately avoiding commitment altogether, and it appears the women of this study were in control of their casual dating relationships until they attempted to gain commitment from their male partners.

If we assume that to be true, then I posit men resisted their attempts by introducing and using emotion-detached sex to gain control over the course of the relationship via these women's bodies. While these women attach meaning and emotions to the act of sex to make it "appropriate" for them to indulge in, and thus falsely believing the relationship is progressing and they maintain control, they believed their male partners retreated from the casual dating relationship utilizing emotion-detached sex as a barrier between themselves and commitment.

Therefore, any potential progress into a serious, committed relationship halts as it appears, by participant accounts, men actively work to regain control over the direction of the relationship simultaneously enjoying the benefits of sex while women appear to slowly relinquish control out of fear of losing the relationship.

During the Situationship

The experiences of the Black women of this study during their situationships also spoke toward behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity. I framed their experiences during their situationships as extended interviews, outlining the ways in which women, particularly Black women, are “tested” in their ability to be a girlfriend. In a sense, these women are “interviewing” to be granted the identity of the girlfriend by their situationship partner. These black women’s experiences during their situationships possibly convey two points toward emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity: 1) during the situationship liminality is a tool of hegemonic masculinity in order to maintain control over the direction of the relationship and 2) situationships are perceived as a tool to allow men to become gatekeepers of access to emphasized femininity by controlling who and when gets to take on the girlfriend identity.

Liminality, or the state of being in between two stages, is a central feature and vital to the maintaining of a situationship. As long as liminality exists within the situationship, progression of the situationship into a committed relationship appears to become difficult to attain. However, this may not be due to liminality itself, but rather the manner in which liminality is utilized as a tool by men in situationships to continue their resistance toward commitment and maintain control over the situationship. For instance, during their situationships the women of this study sought clarity and to define boundaries through the continuous asking of, “what are we?” A

simple question, “what are we?” implores their male partners to clarify the relationship between them, identify the boundaries and parameters of the relationship, and to provide a clear direction for their romantic involvement including whether or not a committed relationship is in the near future. Black women proposing the question “what are we?” to put an end to liminality implies their situationship partners may hold the answer to the future of their relationship, and thus control over the relationship, because at any time an answer to their question relinquishes control back to women as they can decide for themselves to continue or discontinue the situationship.

The “interview” process these Black women were subjected to endure during their situationships underscore an important discussion: situationships are perceived by the participants of this study as tools to allow men to be gatekeepers of the girlfriend identity by assessing who is “worthy” enough to fulfil the role. It seems the “investments” Black women make during this process are used to assess such worth as a potential girlfriend. However, within this particular framing and within the context of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity, what these women “invest” can also be viewed as sacrifices or assumed risk to their individual dating lives. These investments also, again, are perceived as working to the benefit of men while putting Black women at a disadvantage.

Earlier I presented two investments, monogamy and time, Black women may give in hopeful exchange of a committed relationship. Within the context of emphasized femininity and race which impacts access to such femininity these two “investments” become sacrifices to Black women’s dating lives. First, to practice monogamy in a noncommittal dating relationship means to consciously limit one’s own dating pool while striving for relationship commitment with a particular man. The women of this study spoke of the current difficulties they believe Black women experience in dating including availability of equitable partners within the Black

community, resisting the controlling images and stereotypes that work against Black women's sexual politics, trying to overcome centuries of both desexualization and hypersexualization of their bodies, and the perceived current culture of dating that assumes a laissez-faire approach to dating. This puts Black women in a peculiar position: while practicing monogamy in exchange for a relationship works at a disadvantage in their dating lives by limiting their ability to date freely, it also can be viewed as an attempt to access emphasized femininity as a way to avoid the stigma openly and casually dating multiple men brings when the sexual politics of Black women's bodies are at play.

Also, in the study I observed the average duration of situationship could last anywhere between one year and three years. Time availability is one concept participants alluded to throughout our interviews, specifically to suggest they believe they are not afforded as much time to dedicate towards dating and finding a partner as other women, particularly white women. Therefore, allocating up to multiple years of their time to progress situationships into committed relationships is also a direct sacrifice of their dating lives as it brings a particular fear into focus: the inability to establish a relationship that will lead to marriage in an "appropriate" timeframe. Monogamy and time may be sacrifices given to their male partners who gatekeep the girlfriend identity and decided who is worthy enough to be rewarded the girlfriend title. Additionally, since the desire of being a girlfriend is an assumed behavior of emphasized femininity, I posit men, based on participant accounts, could also possess the ability to gatekeep access to emphasized femininity.

Situationship Outcomes

Situationships are paradoxical, and when observed under a relationship career framework, situationships can be understood as a deviant pathway to gain relationships. I call

situationships paradoxical due to the seemingly linear progression of the relationship career. It presents itself as a straight path to relationships or marriage, or that of “A plus B equals C” suggesting there are rules to be followed to achieve relationships with little to no variation. However, situationships may sit on this career path for relationships, yet themselves are deviant as there are no set rules for an individual to follow that may result in gaining a relationship. Because there are no set rules, there exists the possibility of there being a multitude of pathways to gain relationships once an individual identifies themselves as being in a situationship. Additionally, situationships appear to behave like blackholes. To the participants of this study, situationships at times felt inescapable. The paradox of situationships, attempting to remain in the relationship career while simultaneously deviating from it by engaging in a situationship, appears not only emotionally taxing to Black women, but also alters their perception of self and the culture of dating within their own community.

Earlier I observed a possible discrepancy in when participants claimed they experienced positive and negative emotions during their situationships. When in the physical presence of their situationship partner, they reported feeling positive emotions. However, in their absence, they reported feeling negative emotions. Through the lens of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity as it intersects with the paradox of situationships, what I posit this means is that based on the individual accounts of study participants when the situationship enters a down period access to emphasized femininity is threatened. The perceived threat of denied access to emphasized femininity which could be granted by entering a relationship, and thus having the girlfriend identity, via situationships creates feelings of doubt and appears to prompt these women to question their own womanhood. The participants of this study reported feeling as if they were on an emotional rollercoaster as they were thrown back and forth between positive

emotions from believing the situationship may progress into more and negative emotions from down periods and the threat of the situationship, and therefore the chances of being a girlfriend, ending altogether.

Lastly, personal accounts of the Black women participants of this study in situationships suggest Black women must work harder for relationships with men than other racial groups of women. In their interviews participants expressed perceived difficulties they believe Black women face when attempting to date, especially intraracially. Participation in situationships seemingly heightens these concerns. I speculate time as a significant factor when the paradoxical nature of situationships is considered. While situationships are located on some point on the relationship career plane, they can also be viewed as a deviation of the seemingly linear progression. In other words, while situationships are progression from other noncommittal relationships, such as FWBs that are primarily centered on sex, they may also be viewed as an extra step Black women take in their relationship career; a step that deviates from a linear, traditional path toward relationships. This deviating path consumes a lot of time, which could already be considered sensitive in Black women's dating lives, as it could provide a sense of false progression toward a relationship. This suggestion draws back to their altered perception of dating in Black culture as participants expressed feeling only Black women have to endure this deviating path toward relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study both draws from and fills in gaps of previous literature on hooking up, specifically friends with benefits relationships. Like previous studies within hookup literature, this study focuses on a demographic of young, college-aged women currently participating in casual dating and seeking out committed relationships. This is due to a culture in which casual

dating and emotionally detached sex appears more socially acceptable for individuals of traditional college age, ranging from 18-24 years of age (Wentland and Reissing 2011; Lehmilller et al. 2011). Also like previous studies on friends with benefits, this study focuses on the ways in which participation in situationships possibly affects an individual's perception of self, culture, and their emotions. Because situationships encompass characteristics of hookup relationships, specifically friends with benefits, and of committed relationships, this study examines the casualness of situationships and the features which closely resemble committed relationships in order to distinguish situationships as a distinct form of dating. Therefore, this study contributes to body of hookup and casual dating literature by uncovering a previously unstudied form of casual dating.

However, this study distinguishes itself from previous literature on hookup culture and casual dating primarily at the intersection of race and gender. Previous studies on casual dating appear to attempt to generalize the experiences of those who participate in casual dating. Often times the participants of these studies are predominately white young women, and thus, data on casual dating within sociological research mainly draws from the experiences of white women and masks over the experiences of women of color, particularly Black women. According to Collins' (2000, 2004) work on the sexual politics of Black womanhood, the marginalizing of Black women's femininity due to racism penetrating Black women's romantic lives works to police the ways in which Black women navigate dating, relationships, and love. Therefore, the ways in which Black women both participate in and experience casual dating and relationships might differ from the experiences of white women. This study fills a gap in the literature, Black women's experiences in casual dating, by focusing specifically on a subgroup of Black women who might be more involved in dating culture, young college-aged Black women. Also, unlike

previous studies on casual dating and friends with benefits relationships, the intersection of race and gender is centered in this study as participants drew from the experiences specifically as Black women and how they felt being Black and woman impacts their dating lives. Such a privileging of the intersection of race and gender is underutilized in previous studies within casual dating and hookup literature.

Next, the behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity observed in situationships ultimately speak to a larger discussion of Black women's sexual politics. For instance, Collins (2000, 2004) assertion on marginalized femininities is that Black women's experiences on the margins of traditional femininity renders them vulnerable to structural and institutional oppression which permeates their romantic lives as they believe they are not considered first choices for potential dating. One structural factor being that of negative stereotypes which work to police Black women's bodies. This factor contributes to casual dating possibly being difficult for Black women to navigate because it includes dating multiple men, often times simultaneously. Thus, raising the risk of being characterized and labeled as a "ho" or slut, particularly by eligible men within Black culture which could be detrimental to one's own eligibility as a potential or preferred dating partner. Collins (2000, 2004) speaks to the controlling images and stereotypes that work to oppress the agency of Black womanhood, especially that of the Jezebel which polices Black women's sexual behavior in the midst centuries worth of both hypersexualization and desexualization. These stereotypes are considered a challenge to the Black women attempting to date in order to establish healthy romantic relationships.

Behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity intersect with the sexual politics of Black women as it uncovers an oppressive nature of situationships: when these

behaviors intersect they work to the benefit of men while simultaneously being detrimental to Black women's sexual liberation. Chodorow (2014) asserts that, "Women are more at ease with mutuality implicitly in love, as well as the surrender, while men tend to interpret mutuality as dependency and defend against it by separating sex from love, or alternatively, by attempting to dominate the beloved." The loss of Black women's agency while engaging in situationships serves as an example of both Black women and Black men exhibiting behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity respectively. The former chooses to "surrender," while the latter is provided the opportunity to "dominate."

In order to prove their masculinity and strive towards hegemonic masculinity, Black men tend to engage in heterosexual sex relationships with multiple women. To do otherwise threatens their personal sense of masculinity and welcomes others to challenge their manhood (Brown 2005; Ford 2011; Staples 2006). Whereas, for Black women the need to confine the act of sex within a monogamous relationship point toward refraining from casual sex as seeking access to emphasized femininity (Collins 2004; Harris-Lacewell 2001; Jewell 2012). Also, the ability to separate sex from emotions are both behaviors of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. For example, Rubin (1995) states, "for a woman, sex usually has meaning only in a relational context" while men seem to be more capable of engaging in sex without attaching emotions (Ford 2012).

Black women's fear of not finding equitable partners while they are young adults is not new. The "marriage squeeze" characterizes such fear as it refers to a decrease in equitable and available partners for Black women to date, thus limiting and influencing their dating and marital choices (Ford 2012). Also, Black women's inability to secure the kinds of relationship forms they desire, marriage and committed relationships, have lasting psychological and emotional

consequences (Tucker 2003). In all, situationships appear to be yet another oppressive structure to Black women's sexual liberation. They did not offer the women of this study a pathway to committed relationships, appeared to strip them of their sexual agency, and further limited their dating pool in an already scarce dating environment.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations I identified throughout this study. The first being generalizability. Utilizing a snowball sample to collect data means I am unable to generalize these findings to the broader population of Black women. However, the findings I presented do contribute to the body of research concerning social dating by illuminating an uncovered dating relationship typically found in Black culture, and it contributes to research concerning the sexual politics of Black women by showing how behaviors of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity revealed in situationships not only limit the agency Black women have over their own bodies but also their dating opportunities. A survey component could be utilized to increase sample size and include a larger population of Black women.

A second limitation is that I only interviewed respondents at one point in time. Thus, relying primarily on the memory of the respondent. Although some respondents of this study had either recently ended their situationships or were still in their situationships during the time of our interview, most were about a year removed from their last situationship and could possibly have had issues remembering their experiences or falsified their experiences to produce a response in interviews. However, consistencies in responses that produced a pattern during data analysis signaled I reached saturation and that such patterns analyzed are well founded.

Furthermore, collecting longitudinal data could strengthen my analysis of how race, gender, and

marginalized femininities affect access to emphasized femininity, Black women's dating agency, and Black women's sexual liberation.

A third limitation I identified is that while I spoke to behaviors of hegemonic masculinity found in situationships, I did not actually interview men. Instead, I relied on the responses from the Black women in this study about their interactions with men throughout the course of the situationship. However, respondents were very transparent concerning their experiences with men during their situationships. From their responses I was able to identify possibly behavioral patterns of hegemonic masculinity from the data. Interviewing men on their experiences in and perspectives on situationships could have rendered a more enlightening, richer data to uncover the complexities of situationships and the behavioral structures within them.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are three recommendations I propose for future research on situationships as there are many questions that remain unanswered. First, future researchers would benefit from expanding the population of research subjects when studying situationships. Although the respondents of this study, as do I, believe situationships were identified and termed out of Black culture and ultimately deemed a "Black culture thing", situationships as a dating structure might exist among other racial groups and cultures. To validate this belief, future researchers would benefit from implementing a survey component in order to increase population reach and sample size.

Secondly, I recommend future researchers with an interest in studying situationships within Black culture integrate the perspectives of Black men into data analysis by including Black men as interviewees. Black men might have different experiences in situationships which

may alter discussions on hegemonic masculinity or may provide a richer, well-rounded discussion on how situationships impact dating in Black culture from the perspectives of both men and women. Also, the perspectives of Black men participating in situationships may provide data on additional types of situationships not presented in this study.

Lastly, Black women's fear of not finding equitable partners for the purposes of marriage appeared during the interviews, however, it was unclear as to whether that particular fear was a motivator of why the women of this study remained in their situationships despite realizing it was not progressing into a committed relationship. Future researchers would benefit from adding questions concerning the desire of marriage to identify potential motivators of remaining in stationary situationships. Identifying other motivators of remaining in situationships that yield little to no results for Black women might provide a richer analysis concerning the structural and behavioral factors possibly present that create situationships.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITING SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Tierica Gibson and I am a graduate student at the University of Memphis in the Sociology Department. I am conducting research on young black women's participation in what are known as "situationships", and I am inviting you to participate.

Participation in this research includes taking a brief demographic survey which will take approximately 10 minutes. Afterwards, an interview about your views on situationships and your involvement in situationships will take place, which will take approximately 30 to 90 minutes. If you participate in both the survey and the interview, your total time commitment will be between 40-90 minutes. For your participation, you will be compensated in the amount of a \$10 VISA gift card.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at 901-567-6288 or tjgibson@memphis.edu

Thank you for your time and I hope to be in contact with you soon!

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FLYER



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY ON

SITUATIONSHIPS

PURPOSE

- To gain understanding and define the colloquial term “situationships” that is used to describe a gray area in social dating by conceptualizing black women’s lived experiences within these relationships.
- To employ an intersectional analysis to provide greater knowledge of how race and gender shape black women’s dating lives.

ELIGIBILITY

- Must be at least 18 years of age
- Identify as Black/African American/Any group of the African Diaspora (e.g., Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, etc.)
- Identify as a woman (including both cisgender and transgender women)
- Preferably have experience participating in a relationship identified as a situationship/knowledge of

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

- Complete a short demographic survey prior to the interview (~10 minutes)
- Complete an audio recorded interview with the principal researcher about situationships and your experiences, if applicable (~30-90 minutes)

CONTACT

Tierica J. Gibson, Graduate Student
Department of Sociology
tjgibson@memphis.edu

Note: If not available for an in-person interview, phone interviews can be employed as an alternative. Please contact the principal researcher by e-mail prior to choosing this option.

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title	PRO-FY2020-166: A Social Phenomenological Study of Young Black Women’s Involvement in Situationships
Researcher(s)	Tierica Gibson BA, University of Memphis, Department of Sociology Jeni Loftus Ph.D. (faculty advisor), University of Memphis, Department of Sociology
Researchers Contact Information	(901) 567- 6288, tjgibson@memphis.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 30 people to do so.

Key Information for You to Consider
<p>Voluntary Consent: You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</p> <p>Purpose: The purpose of this research is two fold. It seeks to 1) bring visibility to black women’s involvement in casual sexual relationship and experiences, CSREs, by studying their involvement in what is colloquially termed the “situationship” and 2) gain understanding of the features of situationships (such as how participants define them, possible positive and negative outcomes, and motivation for participation) and how involvement within them affects the dating experience of young black women.</p> <p>Duration: It is expected that your participation will last 40-90 minutes</p> <p>Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to take a brief demographic survey which will take approximately 10 minutes. Afterwards, an interview about your views on situationships and your involvement in situationships will take place, which will take approximately 30 to 90 minutes.</p> <p>Risk: Some of the foreseeable risk or discomforts of your participation include psychological distress in discussing what may be a negative relationship experience.</p> <p>Benefits: Some of the benefits that may be expected include a chance to have your lived experiences appreciated and privileged in research. Discussion on relationship experiences may feel liberating to some participants. Other benefits include contributing to the literature of social dating by bringing visibility to black women’s experiences in CSREs that is currently marginalized in the literature.</p> <p>Alternatives: Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate</p>

Who is conducting this research?

Tierica Gibson of the University of Memphis, Department of Sociology is in charge of the study. She is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Jeni Loftus, Department of Sociology.

No members of the research team have a significant financial interest or conflict of interest relating to the research study.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose is twofold. It seeks to 1) bring visibility to black women's involvement in casual sexual relationship and experiences, CSREs, by studying their involvement in what is colloquially termed the "situationship" and 2) gain understanding of the features of situationships (such as how participants define them, possible positive and negative outcomes, and motivation for participation) and how involvement within them affects the dating experience of young black women.

You are being invited to participate because you may meet the criterion for participation which includes being at least 18 years of age, identifying as Black/African American/Any group of the African Diaspora (e.g., Afro-Latinx, Afro-Caribbean, etc.), identifying as a woman (including both cisgender and transgender women), possibly having experience participating in a relationship identified as a situationship or possessing a working knowledge of situationships at the least, and a willingness to be honest about your experiences within a situationship.

How long will I be in this research?

The research will be conducted at a private office or private library room on the University of Memphis's campus. In the event you are uncomfortable at this location, you may request the interview be conducted at a safe location that is mutually agreed upon between you and the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson. It should take about 40-90 minutes of your time. You will only participate in this research study once.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?

If you agree you will be asked to complete an informed consent form prior to the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, conducting the interview process. Once you have signed and dated the informed consent form it will be collected and stored in a safe, undisclosed location to ensure your privacy and confidentiality. Then, the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson will begin conducting the interview process.

First, you will take a brief demographic survey which will take approximately 10 minutes of your time. Items on the demographic survey are voluntary to complete. After completion of the demographic survey, the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, will conduct an audio recorded semi-structured interview session in which you will be tasked with answering questions concerning "situationships" including your personal knowledge/definitions, your possible involvement within them, and how they have shaped your dating experiences. Participation in the survey and semi-structured interviews are completely voluntary. At any time, you may refuse to answer questions asked by the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, if you find them to be uncomfortable.

You will not have access to individual research results.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

Information collected for this research will be used to complete a Masters thesis project. Your name will not be used in any published reports or conference presentations. We may publish/present the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. The results from the research may be used for future research on a related topic, only conducted by the principal researchers, Tierica Gibson.

Identifiers might be removed for identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens. This information or biospecimen(s) could be used for future research or distributed to another investigator for future research without obtaining additional consent.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise.

The demographic survey will be stored in a safe, undisclosed location to ensure your privacy and confidentiality.

The audio recording will be stored in a safe, undisclosed location to ensure your privacy and confidentiality. The only individuals with access to the store audio recordings will be the principal investigator, Tierica Gibson, and her faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus.

Audio recordings will be transcribed using pseudonyms to protect any identifying information. The transcriptions will be coded for analysis using the pseudonyms to ensure your privacy and confidentiality. Transcriptions will also be stored in a safe, undisclosed location to maintain privacy and protect your confidentiality. At the end of the study, all audio recordings, transcriptions, and other identifying information such as the demographic survey will be destroyed.

Individuals and organization that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information, the demographic survey, audio recordings, and transcriptions. These individual and organization include:

- Institutional Review Board
- The principal investigator (Tierica Gibson)
- The faculty advisor (Dr. Loftus)

Research team members are required to report the following if a team member suspects child abuse or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion be reported. In such case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

What other choices do I have beside participating in this research?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study

As a student, if you decide not to take part in this study your choice will not affect your academic status or grade in your class.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis. At any time during the interview process, you may withdraw from the study. In this event, your data collected prior will be destroyed and not stored to ensure your privacy and confidentiality.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

Taking part in this research may lead to additional cost to you, such as transportation costs of getting to the interview location.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this research?

For taking part in this research you may be compensated a total of \$10 VISA gift card

Who can answer my question about this research?

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Tierica Gibson at (901) 567-6288 or tjgibson@memphis.edu, or the faculty advisor, Dr. Jeni Loftus, at jmloftus@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation

As described above, you will be audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio will be used for transcription and coding purposes of the study. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio as described

____ I agree to the use of audio

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

**Name of Research Team
Member**

**Signature of Research Team
Member**

Date

APPENDIX D: SHORT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Pseudonym (false name) for the study _____

Describe your racial/ethnic heritage:

Gender (female, cisgender/ female, transgender/ prefer not to answer:

Age: _____

Marital status: _____

Educational Background: (schools attended, when, degrees received)

Current Major (if not currently in school, please answer n/a):

Do you have any knowledge of what is colloquially termed the “situationship”? _____

Have you ever been involved in a situationship? _____

Are you currently involved in a situationship? _____

APPENDIX E – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Before beginning the interview, please briefly go over pertinent information such as privacy, consent, and confidentiality. Please remind the respondent that the interview is *completely voluntary* and that if they refuse to answer any question they reserve that right and at no penalties.

The first few questions are concerning situationships generally.

1. In your opinion, how would you define a situationship?
2. In what manner did you learn the term and come to know what it means?
3. What are some features of a situationships? In other words, how would you know you are in one?
4. What makes a situationship different from being friends with benefits?

The next questions are concerning your opinions on and experiences within situationships

5. Have you ever been in a situationship? What was it like?
 - a. Are you in one currently?
6. Are you willing to share a story about your best experience?
 - a. Your worst?
7. What do you personally like about situationships?
 - a. Personally dislike?
8. Can you think of some consequences of situationships?
 - a. Any benefits?
9. Why do you think the nature of the relationship is so hard to label?
10. Are situationships something that can be mutually agreed upon, or do they just happen?
Why?

11. Once identified you are in a situationship, do you expect the relationship to progress into a more serious, committed relationship? Why or why not?

12. Have you ever communicated with your partner, or have your partner ever communicated with you, about progressing the relationship in a more serious commitment?

a. If so, can you describe the dialogue between you two?

13. How are you emotionally while in a situationship?

a. When it ends? (if applicable)

Now let's discuss situationships within the context of black culture and dating practices...

14. Do you think the terminology and knowledge of situationships should be credited to black culture? In other words, do you agree they are products of black culture?

15. Do you think situationships are prevalent within black culture? Why or why not?

16. Do you believe situationships are becoming more normalized in black culture, especially among black millennials? Why or why not?

17. How do you think situationships are changing the ways in which black people date? If at all?

18. In what ways do you think situationships have shaped your outlook on dating within black culture?

a. Love?

b. Desirability?

c. Marriageability?

19. Are there any questions I did not ask, that you think I should have asked?

Thank you the respondent for their participation in the information and remind them of the measures to ensure any identifiable information will remain confidential through safe practices.

APPENDIX F – IRB APPROVAL

Date: 7-8-2020

IRB #: PRO-FY2020-166

Title: A Social Phenomenological Study of Young Black Women's Involvement in Situationships

Creation Date: 9-30-2019

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Tierica Gibson

Review Board: University of Memphis

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Jennifer Loftus	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	jmloftus@memphis.edu
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Member	Tierica Gibson	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	tjgibson@memphis.edu
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Member	Tierica Gibson	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	tjgibson@memphis.edu
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