Dating In The Digital Age: Race, Gender, And Inequality

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Abstract
Intimate romantic relationship formation, including marriage, remains a significant cultural aspect of life in the United States despite the overall decline in marriage rates. Marriage remains popular among the college educated as they are more likely to be married than those without a college degree. Among the college-educated however, marriage among heterosexuals remains stratified by race/ethnicity. College-educated Black women, unlike their non-Black counterparts, are less likely to see marital returns to their degree. This study seeks to understand how race, gender, and technology intersect to contribute ethno-racial differences in intimate romantic relationship formation among this population. Drawing on interviews with 111 heterosexual Asian, Black, Latina, and white college-educated women between the ages of 25 and 33, I find that respondents experience three kinds of barriers in their romantic partner search: locational barriers; adverse interactions with men on and off dating technology; and gendered initiation courtship scripts. Women's experiences of these barriers sometimes differed by their ethno-racial background; other times the intersection of women's ethno-racial background and gender informed and bolstered similarities across groups. Based on these findings, I argue that women of color, especially Black women, face the greatest number of barriers in the romantic partner search and this may contribute to their being the least likely to be married compared to Asian, Latina, and white college-educated women. Moreover, I conclude that although dating technology has the potential to alleviate the barriers women face in their search for a romantic partner, it also reifies and perpetuates racial and gender inequality. This study not only broadens understandings of how college-educated ethno-racial minorities continue to experience racial inequality, but also expands explorations of how race, gender, and technology intersect to influence everyday life, including intimate romantic relationship formation.

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DATING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: RACE, GENDER, AND INEQUALITY

Sarah Adeyinka-Skold

A DISSERTATION

in

Sociology

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Winifred and Bola Adeyinka. Thank you for letting me live my dream and always encouraging me on my path. Mommy, I wish you were here to see what you have helped me to become. I dedicate this work to my respondents. Without you, this dissertation would not be possible. Thank you for sharing with me your stories of joy, triumph, and challenge of finding a romantic partner. Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to all the women of the African diaspora; past, present, and future. May my work always reflect that you are enough. You will always be enough.
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ABSTRACT

Intimate romantic relationship formation, including marriage, remains a significant cultural aspect of life in the United States despite the overall decline in marriage rates. Marriage remains popular among the college educated as they are more likely to be married than those without a college degree. Among the college-educated however, marriage among heterosexuals remains stratified by race/ethnicity. College-educated Black women, unlike their non-Black counterparts, are less likely to see marital returns to their degree. This study seeks to understand how race, gender, and technology intersect to contribute ethno-racial differences in intimate romantic relationship formation among this population. Drawing on interviews with 111 heterosexual Asian, Black, Latina, and white college-educated women between the ages of 25 and 33, I find that respondents experience three kinds of barriers in their romantic partner search: locational barriers; adverse interactions with men on and off dating technology; and gendered initiation courtship scripts. Women’s experiences of these barriers sometimes differed by their ethno-racial background; other times the intersection of women’s ethno-racial background and gender informed and bolstered similarities across groups. Based on these findings, I argue that women of color, especially Black women, face the greatest number of barriers in the romantic partner search and this may contribute to their being the least likely to be married compared to Asian, Latina, and white college-educated women. Moreover, I conclude that although dating technology has the potential to alleviate the barriers women face in their search for a romantic partner, it also reifies and perpetuates racial and gender inequality. This study not only broadens
understandings of how college-educated ethno-racial minorities continue to experience racial inequality, but also expands explorations of how race, gender, and technology intersect to influence everyday life, including intimate romantic relationship formation.
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CHAPTER 1: Relationship Formation in the Digital Age

ever since I realized there waz someone callt
a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a nag
i been trying not to be that & leave bitterness
in somebody else’s cup / come to somebody to love me
without deep & nasty smellin scald from lye or being
left screamin in a street fulla lunatics/ whispering
slut bitch bitch niggah / get outta here with alla that/
i didn’t have any of that for you / I brought you what joy
i found & found joy / honest fingers round my face
—Ntozake Shange, “For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf”

Kelly meets me in the lobby of my apartment building. She is a curvy, medium brown 26 year-old-Black woman originally from Detroit, Michigan. She has lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania since earning her bachelors’ and master’s degrees from an ivy league university. We arrive at the conference room. I can sense Kelly’s simultaneous reluctance and eagerness to tell me about her love life since college. About five minutes into the interview, Kelly tells me that she is no longer actively looking for a romantic partner. “What does that mean?” I ask. Similar to other women in my study, many who were also disappointed and frustrated with their romantic partner search, Kelly responds, “I think I’m in a place right now where I’d like to focus on self-improvement and my own goals. I think that if it finds me, it’s okay. I don’t think I’m closed to it. I’m just not actively looking for it.” How did Kelly get here? What happened in the search that caused her to come to this conclusion?

This study explores the experiences of young adult, college-educated, heterosexual women searching for short- or long-term romantic relationships\(^1\) in

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\(^1\) Refers to short (e.g. sexual, hookups, otherwise temporary) or long-term (non-marital or marital) romantic
the digital age. Specifically, how do their experiences of searching for a romantic partner in the digital era reflect a transformation, reification, or complication of gender and racial inequalities? Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 111 Asian, Black, Latino, and white heterosexual college-educated women, I argue that college-educated women searching for romantic partners in the digital age encounter barriers and these barriers vary by race/ethnicity. In examining these barriers, I also demonstrate that dating technology\(^2\) exacerbates gender and racial inequalities and in doing so, reifies these inequalities. Lastly, I explore how these barriers, facilitated by dating technology, contribute to ethno-racial variation in intimate romantic relationship formation\(^3\) among college-educated women.

What’s Love Gotta Do with It?

Relationship and marital formation occupy a unique and significant space in American culture. Although the proportion of people ever married is declining, marriage remains a culturally and politically significant status granting institution in the United States (US). Even as people postpone their nuptials, many Americans still express a desire to be married someday (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Andrew J. Cherlin (2009), moreover, argues that marriage persists in American culture as an accomplishment and a sign of prestige. Other evidence, such as the proliferation of popular reality television shows like Marriage at First

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\(^2\) Moira Weigel (2016) uses the term “dating technology” to describe online dating websites, apps, and platforms. I also use the words apps, platforms, websites, and online dating interchangeably, as most dating websites have apps and vice versa.

\(^3\) The phrase “intimate romantic relationship formation” in this study refers to the formation of relationships that are long-term, monogamous, and are either non-marital or marital. I also use the “union formation” and “relationship formation” interchangeably to refer to these types of relationships.
Sight, The Bachelor, 90-Day Fiancé, and the currently wildly popular Is Love Color Blind also demonstrate the cultural significance that forming and having romantic relationships have in the United States (US). Politically, lingering tension and debate remain over between whom marriage should be, despite the legalization of marriage between LGTBQ+ people July 2015. Marriage also remains central in debates about poverty. Although numerous studies illustrate that increasing marriage among the poor is not a solution for poverty (Edin and Nelson 2013; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Lichter, Anderson, and Hayward 1995; Lichter et al. 1992), conservatives still support policies that promote marriage among welfare recipients (Gunn 2017).

Furthermore, romantic relationships also play a significant role in individuals’ physical and mental well-being (Horn et al. 2013; Finkel et al. 2012; Musick and Bumpass 2012). Married individuals average higher life expectancies than their unmarried counterparts (Zheng and Thomas 2013). Researchers also find that marriage and cohabitation can contribute to improved household income, especially among college-educated individuals (Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston 2019; Greenwood et al. 2014).

**Ethno-Racial Variation in Relationship Formation and Marriage**

At least since The Moynihan Report (1965), scholars have focused on racial/ethnic disparities in heterosexual marriages. Much of that focus has been on poor Black women. Due to consequences that Black women face, the scholarship over-emphasizes marital behaviors and patterns among this population (Furstenberg 2011; Wilson 2011; Stack 1974). For example, unmarried
Black mothers are more likely to live under the poverty line than their white counterparts (Edin and Kefalas 2005; McClanahan 2004). Compared to non-Black women, poor Black women are more likely to have a non-marital childbirth (Sweeney and Raley 2014; Edin and Kefalas 2005; McClanahan 2004); and they are less likely to move from a cohabitating into a marital relationship than white and Latina women (Lichter, Qian, and Mellot 2006). While this hyper focus on Black women has some merits, it nevertheless facilitates stigmatization of poor Black women (Collins 2009; Roberts 1997). It also misses another important population of women, Black middle-class women.

An additional vein of research explores class and educational differences in marriage behavior. Sociologists investigate class differences between the poor, working-, and middle-class. Furthermore, while looking at class differences, researchers primarily focus on differences between poor Blacks, whites, and Latinos (Edin and Nelson 2013; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Class differences are also often framed in terms of the marriage gap between individuals with and without college degrees. Scholars find that college-educated individuals are more likely to be married than those with some or no college degree (Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston 2019; Harknett and Kuperberg 2011; Cherlin 2010; Goldstein and Kinney 2001); and thereby, examine racial/ethnic differences among the latter group.

There is evidence, however, that there are significant ethno-racial differences in relationship and marital patterns among college-educated women, particularly between non-Black and Black women. For instance, Black women with college-educated mothers are less likely to be cohabiting or married by age
thirty compared to white women of the same class background (Caudillo et al. 2017). Research also finds that Black college-educated women are the least likely to be married compared to their non-Black counterparts (Reeves and Guyot 2017; Raley, Sweeney, and Wondra 2015; Clarke 2011). Yet, this variation is typically ignored in sociological research. The implicit assumption in relationship formation scholarship is that because marriage is the norm among college graduates, and the norm is advantageous, there is little need to investigate the unequal distribution (Clarke 2011). The unequal distribution of the relationship and marital experience is simply taken for granted. When studies do come across these racial differences, particularly between college-educated Black and white women, they are simply ignored because Blacks in general are the least likely to be married compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Pew Research Center 2010; Fitch and Ruggles 2000). Goldstein and Kinney (2001), for instance, found that both Black and white female college graduates marry more often than their non-college educated counterparts. However, their study demonstrates that, Black college grads married far less than white college graduates. The authors dismiss this difference with the explanation that, overall, Blacks marry less than whites in general. This explanation is an inadequate attempt to address why this pattern also holds among the college educated. Lastly, these ethno-racial differences in marital outcomes are even more important given that more Black women are attaining college credentials (Reeves and Guyot 2017; NCES 2016) but may not

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4 The percentage of never-married women at age 40 by race/ethnicity: White=13%; Black=35%; Latina=13%; Asian=13%. The rates are significant at the 1% level when Black women are compared to non-Black women (ACS 2015).
see the same return on their educational investment in the form of a marital relationship as other women.

Given that being in a romantic relationship remains culturally and politically significant, grants prestige, provides physical and mental health benefits, and yet remains stratified across the educational spectrum, relationship formation among college-educated women remains ripe for sociological inquiry.

*Theoretical Background*

The research that explores ethno-racial differences in relationship formation and marital patterns embeds itself in the marital search model. That is, this literature is largely concerned with the search for a partner. This is a different focus from maintaining a relationship after having found a partner and/or the process of deciding to marry a particular partner. Rather, scholarship that utilizes the marital search model focuses on attitudes toward marriage (marital attitudes theory), the availability of potential marriage partners (marriage market theory), and the value within marriage models of the attributes that individuals bring to the partner search (gendered racial exclusion theory). These three theories take as their foundation that the search process and the conditions under which the search happens help explain racial/ethnic differences in marital and relationship formation outcomes (Cohen and Pepin 2018; Choi and Tienda 2016; Bany, Robnett, and Feliciano 2014; Lin and Lundquist 2013; Lichter et al. 1992; Trent and South 1992; Oppenheimer 1988).

*Attitudes toward Marriage*

Family scholars investigate attitudes and aspirations toward marriage to
understand ethno-racial differences in marital and relationship trends. There is consensus in the family formation literature that there are few racial/ethnic differences in marital attitudes, which therefore do not explain the differences in marital rates across groups. Trent and South (1992:434) examined attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and unmarried motherhood among Blacks, whites, and Hispanics. After controlling for sociodemographic status factors such as age, marital status, education, and income, they found that there were no "significant differences between Blacks and whites in approval of marriage." However, Hispanics were significantly more likely to approve of marriage than Blacks and whites. The authors concluded that, at least between Blacks and whites, differences in marital rates were not due to differences in attitudes toward marriage. Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1993:339) explored “perceived likelihood of marriage, perceived benefits of marriage, the importance of economic support in the marital timing decision, and adherence to traditional mate selection norms” among never-married Blacks and whites. Black women were more likely than white women to see themselves as likely to marry, and also perceived more economic benefits from marriage at younger ages. At older ages, however, their perceptions reversed. White women were more likely to perceive the economic benefits of marriage than Black women. In terms of social/emotional benefits, Black women perceived greater benefits than white women, but as both groups increased in age, their views converged. These findings demonstrate that during their prime years for marriage, Black women were more optimistic than white women about their likelihood of marriage and the economic and social benefits of marriage (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993). Edin and Kefalas (2005) also examined
attitudes and aspirations towards marriage among poor Black, Hispanic, and white women. They found that Black women aspired to be married more than white or Hispanic women; however, there were no differences in their attitudes and worldviews toward marriage.

Sociologists have also examined marital attitudes among individuals currently earning a college degree and found both negative and positive attitudes toward marriage. Arline Bronzaft (1991) explored marital attitudes among white, Hispanic, and Black women enrolled in college and found that most wanted the trifecta of career, marriage, and children. At the same time, Black women were also the most likely to state that they did not want to be married at all after graduating from college. Porter and Bronzaft (1995) conducted a similar study with seventy Black female undergrads. Seventy percent of their sample want to marry, but quite a few desired to remain single following college. While these findings support evidence that most Black women want to be married, they also complicate the marital attitudes theory because these undergrad Black women, for whatever reason, also find singleness more appealing than their Latino and white counterparts.

Men’s marital attitudes may also factor into ethno-racial differences in marriage, though the topic has received scant attention. Because Black men are the least likely to be married (Copen et al. 2012), the few studies that exist focus primarily on this population. Research illustrates that age and income are the most significant factors shaping men’s attitudes toward marriage. Perry (2013) found that Black men younger than 25 and those with incomes lower than $24,999 were more likely to view marriage negatively. Thus, older and higher
earning men have the most favorable attitudes toward marriage. This finding is consistent with research that argues that men’s income is significant for women’s marriage timing (Oppenheimer 1988). If men have more stable incomes at older ages, then women’s age at marriage will also increase. This evidence should bode well for college-educated Black women over the age of twenty-five. However, they are less likely to marry than college-educated women of other races; and if they marry, they do so later (Copen et al. 2012; Clarke 2011). Thus, Black men’s attitudes toward marriage do not appear to completely explain marital patterns among Black women. Overall, these findings and those above demonstrate that the marital attitudes literature is limited in explaining racial and ethnic differences in marital rates.

*Bear Market*

Researchers also examine the availability of partners that match a searcher’s preferences within a defined pool of people to explain ethno-racial variation in relationship formation. Marriage scholars call this pool the marriage market and argue that the quantity and quality (condition) of the marriage market are important predictors of racial/ethnic disparities in marriage in particular. Scholars determine the condition of the market for women by evaluating the ratio of men to women within a certain geographic location in terms of several demographic categories such as race, employment/income, age, and education. As Lichter et al. (1992:781) define it, “a shortage in the quantity and quality of available males characterizes an unfavorable marriage market” while an abundance characterizes a favorable marriage market.
In the 1990s, family scholars used marriage markets to explain the differences in marital outcomes between Black and white women. They demonstrated that unfavorable marriage markets contributed to delayed first marriage for both Black and white women (Lichter et al. 1995; Lichter et al. 1992). More importantly, however, they found that structural factors, not individual characteristics, drove low marriage rates and high rates of non-marital childbearing among Black women compared to white women. Factors like the conditions of labor markets, which influenced the “deficits in the local supply of economically attractive males”, were more significant for racial differences in marriage timing and transition to marriage than individual factors such as “racial differences in public assistance receipt, in premarital childbearing, or living in a multigenerational family” (Lichter et al. 1992:797; Lichter et al. 1995; South and Lloyd 1992). Without considering differences in preferences, scholars also found that white women’s marriage markets were far more favorable than that of Black women in terms of the availability of employed and/or high-income earning men.

The addition of preferences only compounds the effect of unfavorable marriage markets. Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1993) found that Black women emphasized economic support in their desire to be married. Thus, arguments that Black women had lower rates of marriage compared to other women because their pool of marriageable partners was smaller also demonstrate how marriage markets mediate preferences for marriage. In the face of poor marriage market conditions, rather than marry men with fewer resources than themselves, Black women chose to remain unmarried (Lichter et al. 1995; Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1992). Among the college and non-college educated, Asian, white, and Latina
women marry more often than Black women (ACS 2015; Clarke 2011; US Census 2010). Marriage market proponents explain that this is because Asian, Latina, and white women are more likely to be in more favorable marriage markets in terms of age, race, education, and employment than Black women (Choi and Tienda 2016; Lewis and Oppenheimer 2000).

Yet, marriage market explanations remain limited in explaining the reasons behind racial variation in marital trends. Research demonstrates that even in comparable marriage markets, Black women still do not transition into first marriage at the same rates as white women. In their study, Lichter et al. (1992) found that the transition for Black women is roughly fifty to sixty percent to that of white women. South and Lloyd (1992) find that only seventeen percent of the racial difference in marital rates between Black and white women is explained by unfavorable marriage markets for Black women. Moreover, even in favorable marriage markets (measured by education and employment), Black (but not white) women, still have a difficult time marrying (Lichter et al. 1995). Thus, it is also possible that even among women, the degree of difficulty of navigating marriage markets differs by race and may also influence differences in marital patterns. Furthermore, research shows that it is more difficult for women than men to navigate unfavorable marriage markets (Tienda and Choi 2016).

Lastly, and perhaps most important, there is the issue of whether marriage markets are as important for women as they are for men for finding a marriage partner. Research shows that the conditions of marriage markets are less salient for women’s marital outcomes than for men’s (Choi and Tienda 2016; Raley and Bratter 2004; Lichter et al. 1995). Raley and Bratter (2004) find that if women
broadened their partner preferences and thereby accessed a larger marriage market, the differences in rates of marriage were not much affected.

These findings complicate the predictability of marriage markets. They demonstrate, first, that favorable marriage markets do not fully explain racial differences in marital outcomes. Second, they illustrate that there is something about the process of searching for a mate that renders it difficult for Black women to marry in favorable marriage markets. There is also something about the search process that makes marriage markets less important for women’s marital outcomes, but also make it more difficult for women to manage unfavorable marriage markets than men. Third, these findings also show a need to understand what occurs during women’s search for partners within their marriage markets.

*Gendered Racial Exclusion*

Another significant aspect of understanding racial/ethnic differences in relationship formation is exploring how the attributes of those searching are valued within the marriage market. The argument is that those with more highly valued attributes are more sought after and pursued than those with less valued attributes (Schwartz 2013). In a society characterized by ethno-racial hierarchies such as the United States, users’ racial status can be a highly salient attribute (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Additionally, gender intersects with race to mediate the value of one’s racial status. Proponents of gendered racial exclusion theory maintain that the valuation of users’ racial and gender status by potential partners is important for understanding why the marital experience is uneven.
across racial/ethnic groups (Nemoto 2006, 2009; Collins 2005; Glenn 2004; Pyke and Johnson 2003). They maintain that both men and women use gendered racial/ethnic stereotypes when searching for and selecting dating partners. This kind of searching strategy leads to the exclusion of some ethno-racial groups as potential dates, and ultimately, as potential long-term romantic partners.

Studies show that individuals of all races/ethnicities prefer to date and marry partners with their same ethno-racial background, and that these preferences for same-race partners also tend to be much stronger among women than men (Lundquist and Lin 2015; Hwang 2013; Schwartz 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Fisman et al. 2008). In terms of interracial dating, whites are the least likely to want to date outside of their racial group, with white women being the least agreeable (Lundquist and Lin 2015; Hwang 2013; Herman and Campbell 2012). Non-white groups, however, are most likely to choose whites as the group they would date interracially (Lundquist and Lin 2015; Hwang 2013). The studies below illustrate how these racial preferences and gendered racial exclusion play out in the search for a dating partner.

Bany et al. (2014) found that among Latino, Asian, Black, and white college students, Black men and women were the most likely to be excluded as dating partners. Moreover, Black women were significantly more likely to be excluded than Black men. These authors also found that Asians, Latinos, and “relied on stereotypes regarding Blacks’ personalities and behavior, particularly that they are aggressive, as an explanation for not selecting them as potential dates” (Bany et al. 2014:208). Spell (2017) and McClintock (2010) found that among college students, Black women were the least likely to be involved in
hookups, dating relationships, and exclusive long-term relationships compared to Black men and white, Latino, and Asian men and women. Consequently, they felt the most isolated in the relationship scene. This exclusion of Blacks was not limited to college students. Choi and Tienda (2016:13) found that while whites, Asians, and Latinos were willing to consider each other as marital partners if there were not enough co-ethnics in their marriage market, these groups are “less likely to expand their pool of potential spouses to include Blacks.” These studies demonstrate that it is important to explore how the intersection of gender and racial inequality make it difficult for Black women to navigate within marriage markets.

To date, Averil Clarke is the only sociologist who has examined dating, marital search, and family formation among college-educated Black women. In her book, *Inequalities of Love: College-educated Black Women and the Barriers to Romance and Family*, Clarke (2011) attempts to explain the differences in marital behavior and non-marital childbearing between college-educated Black, Hispanic, and white women, as well as non-college educated Black women. Using an intersectional approach, she argues that for Black college-educated women, it is the intersection of their status as Black and middle-class that impacts them to a greater degree than their white and Hispanic peers. Thus, the location that should be advantageous, college-educated and middle-class, intersects with a more disadvantageous social location of race to both create and maintain inequalities, including the unequal distribution of love, sex, and marriage for Black women. Clarke furthermore concludes that Black women face “race-based inequality” in their search for love, and these experiences “constrain their sexual
and family formation choices regardless of [their] class” (Clarke 2011:274). Their experiences of inequality in love also influence the “decision-making moments in which [black] women must consider what their racialized and gendered bodies ‘say’ in multiple settings even as they struggle to determine and achieve their desires in money and love” (Clarke 2011:274). This reality of racialized gendered selves ultimately influences their rates of romantic relationships and partnerships, marriage, and voluntary sexual activity.

While her study represents a landmark analysis of Black middle-class marriage patterns, Clarke’s conclusions are limited due to her research design. Clarke aims to compare the experiences of Black, white, and Hispanic women; however, there are no white or Hispanic women in the qualitative parts of her study. She includes demographic comparisons of college-educated white, Hispanic, and Black women’s contraception use, abortion rates, virginity loss, unwanted and wanted pregnancies, but is unable to make qualitative comparisons about their romantic search experiences. Consequently, it remains unclear how white and Hispanic women’s decisions over their life course are different from college-educated Black women’s and how these differences lead to differential marital rates.

_The Rise of Dating Technology: Searching and Partnering in the Modern Era_

The ways in which people search for romantic partners has changed in the last twenty to twenty-five years. The rise of computer-based online dating has altered the search process in three important ways. First, it has widened the opportunities for romantic connections beyond the neighborhood, work, school,
and friend and family networks. Individuals can search for romantic partners outside the confines of their neighborhood, city, county, state, and even the country. In doing so, they can make their marriage market as small or as large as they desire—all without changing their partner preferences or leaving the comfort of their home or office (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). Second, dating technology facilitates searching for romantic partners based solely on one’s preferences. These preferences can range from sharing similar hobbies to sharing the same ethno-racial or religious backgrounds as niche apps cater to specific preferences. Lastly, dating technology makes it much easier for users to act on their preferences. Users can include or exclude others based on their racial, educational, religious or a myriad of other attributes with the mere click of a button or via a description on their profile. In the last 10 years, dating technology once again evolved from computer-based to mobile phone or application dating (Schwartz and Velotta 2018) (see Figure 1). Individuals can search for romantic partners using a dating app installed on their phone as they wait in line at the grocery store, for example.
The use of dating technology to find a romantic partner soared in the last fifteen years. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found that between 1995 and 2005, there was an "exponential growth in the proportion of respondents who met their partners online" (p. 531). Between 2005 and 2012, one third of all the couples who got married in the United States met on the internet (Azari and Klinenberg 2015). Eleven percent of adult Americans had used online dating apps or sites to meet potential dating partners in 2016 (Smith 2016). In 2019, dating technology became the most common way to search for romantic partners (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hauser 2019). There are also demographic differences in using dating technology to find a romantic partner. For instance, those with a college degree are twice as likely to have used online and app dating than people without a college degree (Smith 2016).
Dating Technology and Ethno-Racial Stratification in Relationship Formation

Although dating technology presents opportunities to expand one’s partner preferences, individuals’ real world and online preferences are remarkably similar (Henry-Waring and Barraket 2008). In fact, compared to other preferences such as age, religion, and educational background, ethno-racial preferences remain the most persistent in the transition from real world to the digital world (Thomas 2019; Hwang 2013; Lin and Lundquist 2013). Robnett and Feliciano (2011) examined the online profiles of Black, white, Latino, and Asian men and women in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Atlanta. While Latinas and Asian women were the most commonly preferred groups for out-dating, Black women were the least preferred. Moreover, Black women were the only group “more excluded than their male counterparts. That is, white men, Black men, Latinos, and Asian men were all more likely to exclude Black women than their female counterparts are to exclude Black men” (Robnett and Feliciano 2011:817). Hwang (2013) and Lundquist and Lin (2015) found very similar results in their online dating studies. Hwang (2013) also found that race was the largest predictor of whom people were willing to date interracially. Men, regardless of race, were most willing to date white women but least willing to date Black women interracially. Lundquist and Lin (2015) found that education did not mediate racial preferences. Their findings also revealed a preference for same-race partners in searching behaviors, as well as racial hierarchy in responding behaviors. For instance, college-educated white women and men were more likely to contact and respond to white daters without a college degree than Black daters with a college degree. They also found that Black women, with
or without college degrees, were the group least likely to be responded to. These studies illustrate that Black female exceptionalism is the norm online as well as it is in the real world. They also document a racial hierarchy of romantic desire (Han and Choi 2018), with Black women at the bottom. This research also supports scholarship that demonstrates how racial inequalities and biases are perpetuated in digital technologies (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018; Roberts 2011). Lastly, these findings contradict scholarship that assumes that low rates of relationship formation among Black women can be addressed if they are open to dating and marrying men of other races (Banks 2011).

**Putting It All Together**

The marital attitudes, marriage market, and gendered racial exclusion frameworks provide compelling explanations for the ethno-racial differences in marital outcomes. This study nevertheless attempts to improve these explanations both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, because the majority of studies that utilize these theories examine ethno-racial variation among the poor, working-class, and/or those with some or no college degree, this study examines relationship formation trends among the college educated. Second, given that the family and relationship formation literature primarily focus on women and marriage markets are less salient for heterosexual women’s marital outcomes, this study explores the search for romantic partners among women. Lastly, research on union formation tends to focus primarily on Blacks, whites, and Latinos, with emphasis on comparisons between Blacks and whites. This study includes Asians to provide a more comprehensive examination of the
romantic partner search process and ethno-racial variation in relationship formation.

Theoretically, these approaches imply that women encounter varying hurdles in their romantic partner search, and that these barriers may also vary by ethno-racial background. First, being unable to find a partner who matches one’s desire for a long-term relationship can be a barrier. Second, searching for a romantic connection in an unfavorable marriage market, which is dependent on one’s racial/ethnic status, can also be a barrier because of the limited number of eligible potential romantic partners. Third, gendered racial exclusion also demonstrates that individuals’ racial and gender status can contribute to being excluded as a romantic partner; and thus, become a barrier for forming romantic relationships. Given that barriers to relationship formation are a theme in each of these theories, I utilize the barrier framework, my theoretical intervention, not only to address the gaps that these theories present, but also to integrate the marital attitudes, marriage market, and gendered racial exclusion theories into a coherent approach. Lastly, given that racism can be embedded in digital technologies, this integration allows me to explore barriers that can arise as a result of dating technology, and to further understand how gender, race, and technology, separately and together, create and/or perpetuate barriers in the search for a romantic partner. To this end, the research questions examined in this dissertation are: what are the barriers that college-educated heterosexual women experience in their search for romantic partners in the digital age? How do these barriers differ by ethno-racial background? How do college-educated women cope with these barriers? How does dating technology challenge,
perpetuate, or reify gender and racial inequalities that are revealed by these barriers? Finally, how do these barriers contribute to ethno-racial variation in intimate romantic relationship formation?

The Study

Sample

This analysis draws on interviews with 111 college-educated women over the course of 15 months in 2018 and 2019. The women self-identified as Asian, Black, Latina, or white, heterosexual, childless, never married, and were single or in a monogamous dating relationship for a year or less.

Gender differences in mate selection, societal norms, the consequences of sexual relationships, and experiences while utilizing digital technology, informed this study’s focus on heterosexual women. First, research shows that women are much more selective than men about whom they choose to date (Hitsch et al. 2010a). As such, they present a kind of ideal case by which to study barriers associated with the romantic partner search. Second, research demonstrates that despite the social advances brought about by the Civil Rights and feminist movements and the increase in dating technology, women still face societal expectations and stigmas that influence their preferences and search for a romantic partner (Eig 2014; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Henry-Waring and

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5 I define “single” using the language of the respondents and the way they are defined in the relationship formation and “hook up” literature. Single means that the woman could be searching for romantic partners, going on dates, and/or having sex with multiple partners.
6 Monogamous relationships were those where the man and woman agreed not to date and/or have sex with other individuals.
Barracket 2008). Black women are especially prone to some of these societal expectations. For example, both mainstream and scholarly authors chide Black women for their purported aversion to interracial dating when addressing their lament over a shortage of marriageable Black men (Judice 2018; Banks 2011). However, suggesting that Black women expand their racial/ethnic preferences to include non-Black men presupposes that non-Black men are open to dating Black women. In popular and social media, college-educated Black and Latina women are also scolded for desiring educational homogamy or having standards that are too high (Muro and Martinez 2016; Hurt et al. 2014). Men are allowed much more autonomy in their partner choice. Third, sexual relationships remain riskier for women than for men. If contraception fails, for instance, and a woman becomes pregnant, her partner can walk away in ways that are not available to her. Women, especially women of color, are also more likely to be the victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence in their romantic relationships (Roschelle 2017). Lastly, emerging literature on how individuals’ experience the digital world show that women are more likely than men to experience verbal and sexual harassment online (Amnesty International 2018; Jane 2017; Powell and Henry 2017).

I confined the scope of the study to women between the ages of 25 and 33 to increase the likelihood of recruiting women who were college graduates and to capture the population of women most likely to be actively searching for a partner given the culture-wide increase in age at first marriage. On average, it takes five years to complete a bachelor’s degree in the United States (Yue and Fu 2017; Shapiro et al. 2016; Metler 2014); and the median age of marriage for
women in the US is 27 (US Census 2016; Copen et al. 2012). In selecting respondents between the ages of 25 and 33, I sought to recruit women who had spent some time searching for romantic partners post-college, who were less likely to be new to the dating scene after college, and who were potentially on the verge of their first marriage. At the latter end of the age spectrum, I capped the age at 33 as most women are married by this age, and women older than this may not be representative of their birth cohorts in terms of age at first marriage. Respondents in this age range are also the mostly likely to utilize dating technology in their romantic partner search (Smith 2016). Lastly, as research shows that Black and white women change their expectations of marriage as they age (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1992), I wanted to capture women at an age when their expectations and preferences are most stable.

The study restricts the sample to women who identify strictly as heterosexual. As marriage between LGTBQ+ individuals was only legalized in 2015, there is little data about ethno-racial variation in marital rates for college-educated women in this population. Sociological work on relationship formation among this population is emerging (see Lamont 2020; Lin and Lundquist 2015) and presents an opportunity for future research. Nevertheless, relationship formation among college-educated heterosexual women remains understudied and undertheorized and this work aims to address these issues.

Lastly, research demonstrates that searching for a romantic partner as a single mother and/or who is divorced, separated, or widowed has unique challenges compared to those who are not in these social locations (Anderson et al. 2004; Raley and Bratter 2004). Consequently, this population has barriers
associated with their search that are very different from women who are never married and childless.

Recruitment

I recruited respondents using snowball sampling, Facebook, Meetup.com groups, affinity groups at a university campus in Philadelphia, and college alumni Facebook groups. The recruitment blurb (see Appendix B) included a link to an online survey that asked interested participants about their college education, sexual orientation, race, current relationship status, and children to determine eligibility. For those who were eligible, I followed up with an email where I assigned them an identification (ID) number to use for the remainder of the study. To protect the anonymity of participants, only pseudonyms were used thereafter. Twenty-four hours prior to each scheduled interview, I emailed respondents a link to a survey that inquired about partner preferences including ethno-racial, educational, religious, and occupational characteristics. This email also contained the consent form for the interview. Completing these surveys on their own and anonymously gave the women the ability to answer the survey truthfully. I also used the surveys to provide context for subsequent in-depth interview.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present descriptive statistics of the sample. The vast majority (over 80 percent for all groups) was single and open to finding a romantic partner at the time of the interview (see Table 1). The mean age of respondents was 28 years old, ranging from twenty-seven among Latinas and twenty-nine for white women.
Table 1: Relationship Status of Respondents at Time of Interview by Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status*</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td></td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monogamous Dating Relationship</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monogamous Open Dating Relationship(^7)</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\)Column percentages

A monogamous open relationship is where initially monogamous partners mutually consent to having sex with other individuals outside of this relationship. This differs from polyamorous relationships which are often defined as having multiple main or primary relationships (Ritschel 2019, Schippers 2016).

Table 2: Educational Attainment of Respondents by Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment (%)*</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-College Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\)Column percentages

\(^7\) A monogamous open relationship is where initially monogamous partners mutually consent to having sex with other individuals outside of this relationship. This differs from polyamorous relationships which are often defined as having multiple main or primary relationships (Ritschel 2019, Schippers 2016).
Table 3: Sample Respondents by Region and Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region (%)*</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Column percentages

The sample was also a very educated one, with slightly more than half of the respondents possessing a post-college degree (see Table 2. Respondents worked in middle-class occupations (e.g., nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers, college professors, and supervisors for non-profit agencies) (Patillo 2005) or were enrolled in professional or academic graduate programs (e.g., medical school, law school, or doctoral programs). I also noted no significant differences in the search experiences of women who were currently single and those who had been in an exclusive relationship for a year or less. It is important to note that this research sample is not a nationally representative sample.

Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. I inquired about respondents’ modes of searching for a partner, frustrations in their search, experiences with online dating, and marital intentions and expectations. With women who were in my geographic area (e.g., Philadelphia and central and southern New Jersey), I performed face-to-face interviews at cafes, offices, conference rooms, and in respondents’ homes. I conducted all other
interviews by Skype, Google Hangouts, and telephone. The majority of respondents resided in the northeastern region of the US (see Table 3), particularly for Asian and Black women.

The last phase of this project included a year of monthly follow-up interviews with 10 women from the original sample (see Appendix C), from April 2018 to April 2019. These interviews were intended to gather more detailed data about the larger patterns that appeared in the original data set, to provide greater context and continuity from the original interviews, to draw further comparison between women who did and did not utilize dating technology, and to address the issue of recall bias. In the follow-up interviews, I asked about dates, men in whom they were interested, on- and offline interactions, and frustrations and joys of the romantic partner search. All respondents who used dating technology in their search also sent me screenshots of their online and/or app profiles and profiles of men with whom they matched and/or were communicating. Both tech and non-tech users could also share screenshots of text conversations with potential dates and any other interactions and updates they saw fit. This information provided me with real-time, detailed data about the respondents’ search process. I employed a transcription service to transcribe the initial 111 interviews. However, I also took copious notes during the interviews and compared the transcriptions against the recorded interviews. I transcribed all the follow-up interviews.

My positionality as a woman, close in age to the respondents, and who embarked on a romantic partner search herself, was significant for building rapport with respondents. For example, respondents reacted with excitement or
relief when they learned I was familiar with the dating app or website they used in their search. Being a Black woman was an added benefit with the women of color in the study because I could readily discuss and empathize with stories about fetishization and stereotyping. Additionally, Black women used phrasing such as “you know how...” or “we experience ...” when discussing experiences of exclusion as romantic partners or narratives regarding the shortage of marriageable Black men. At the same time, my race may have heightened social desirability bias among the white respondents, representing a potential limitation of the study. This bias, however, was somewhat abated by asking white and non-white respondents to complete their surveys in private and by posing questions about race/ethnicity in the same manner to all respondents.

Coding and Analysis

I utilized a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) to data analysis; using coding and memo writing, I analyzed themes that emerged from the data to build concepts and arguments. As grounded theory requires an inductive rather than deductive approach (Charmaz 2014), I initially coded interviews and screenshots to find large, thematic categories using Atlas.ti. Four broad categories reflecting barriers to relationship formation emerged: frustrations of the search, coping with frustrations of the search, race and dating, and education and dating. To develop, check, and compare categories, I conducted a second, focused coding of these large categories and discovered the smaller thematic categories of locational barriers, gender and education, aggression and harassment online, gendered racial encounters, inclusion and
exclusion, gender and dating, and coping strategies. Throughout this process, I wrote analytical memos to explore and integrate emerging thematic categories and to examine ethno-racial variation within them.

Organization of the Study

This study focuses on the barriers that college-educated women face, how these barriers vary based on their ethno-racial background, and the implications of these barriers for racial/ethnic variation in relationship formation trends. In Chapter 2, I show how respondents view location as a barrier to making romantic connections. Regardless of race, women observe that some locations provide limited opportunities to meet desirable men and that the mismatch between their dating norms, beliefs, and/or expectations for relationships and the location where they reside make their search more difficult. While white women articulate these locational barriers, women of color also observe that some locations provide fewer opportunities for same-race and/or interracial dating than others. They are more likely to employ strategies to address their locational barriers than white women.

Chapter 3 explores how gender, race, and technology intersect to inform the barriers of verbal abuse and harassment and men’s intimidations by respondents’ educational background and/or professional accomplishments that women searching for romantic partners endure. I also show that women of color experience additional barriers as men include them as potential romantic partners via fetishization. While this inclusion exposes them to potential romantic partners, fetishization sexually objectifies ethno-racial minority women,
and for a majority, also rules out men who utilize it to show romantic interest as potential romantic partners. Black women are the only ethno-racial group who are simultaneously excluded as romantic partners by in- and out-group men due to negative stereotypes that rely on debasing their gender and Blackness.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrate that dominant cultural initiation scripts, where men initiate and women respond, persists in the age of dating technology and constitute a barrier to relationship formation. I also describe how dating technology facilitates women’s agency in their romantic partner search, but cannot diminish their adherence or use of gendered initiation scripts. Consequently, I conclude that use traditional initiation norms persist as a barrier to relationship formation despite the potential for liberation from them that dating technology provides. I also discuss how the intersection of gender and race make it riskier for women of color, particularly Black women, to subvert the initiation scripts despite opportunities to do so.

Chapter 5 outlines alternative explanations for ethno-racial variation in intimate relationship formation, limitations of this study, and the implications of the findings presented. I argue that despite the advent of dating technology, gender and racial inequality, together and separately, continue to create barriers to relationship formation that contribute to the uneven distribution of relationship, including marital formation among college-educated women of varying ethno-racial backgrounds. Furthermore, dating technology reifies these inequalities. Black college-educated women bear the burden of this reification more than women of any other racial/ethnic group.

Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of accepting Black women’s
decisions to opt out of the search for a romantic relationship despite the limits to opportunities for relationship formation that this option presents. Lastly, I end with suggestions of how media and dating technology creators can facilitate the eradication of systems of oppressions and inspire the liberation of Black womanhood.
CHAPTER 2: Race, Place, and Relationship Formation in the Digital Age

We found love in a hopeless place
We found love in a hopeless place
We found love in a hopeless place
We found love in a hopeless place
—Rihanna, “We Found Love”

Sociologists have long explored how place or location (which I define as cities and towns using U.S. Census Bureau designations)\textsuperscript{8} influences and explains ethno-racial variation in life chances. Furthermore, research on the influence of place for life chances illustrates that individuals’ and groups’ ethno-racial status within a particular geographic location has consequences for their educational, labor market, wealth, homeownership, and healthcare outcomes (Wilson 2011; Flippen 2010; Squires and Kubrin 2006; Massey and Denton 1993; Massey and Eggers 1993).

Furthermore, dating websites and applications have increasingly become the primary mode of finding and forming romantic relationships. This is the case especially among college-educated individuals (Tottham 2018; Smith 2016; Smith and Duggan 2013). Dating technology also widens the pool of potential romantic partners as site and app users can search for romantic connections beyond their neighborhood, city, state, or country. Therefore, dating technology

\textsuperscript{8} Drawing on the U.S. Census Bureau definition of place, location or place in this paper refers specifically to places that the U.S. Census designates as a city, town, township, borough, or unincorporated community in 2018 (Ratcliffe 2010; U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Because only a small fraction of my respondents resided at locations that were not designated a town or city, I combined them into one category called “not designated as a town or city in Census”. For more information on how the Census defines and assigns designation to U.S. locations, please see Radcliffe 2010 and the U.S. Census glossary (2019) (https://www.census.gov/glossary/#term).
not only has the potential to decrease geographical boundaries as an obstacle in the romantic partner search, but also to potentially decrease the relevance of location in the relationship formation process. Dating technology may also alleviate the challenge of finding romantic partners that besets college-educated women. However, it may also make disparities in partner availability even more visible to women, heightening feelings of frustration, disappointment, and exhaustion as women search for both short- and long-term romantic partners.

What is the significance of place for relationship formation and romantic search experiences for college-educated women given the rise of dating technology? This chapter examines how place and race intersect to influence the romantic partner search experiences among college-educated women of varying ethno-racial backgrounds in the digital age. This examination also contributes to our understanding of assortative mating and racial/ethnic differences in relationship and marriage formation trends among college-educated women.

This examination is important for a few reasons. First, a wide body of research examines how location shapes marriage patterns among women who have none or some college education (Furstenberg 2011; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Wilson 1987; Stack 1974) but there is little research on the college-educated population. College-educated women also increasingly desire romantic partners who share the same educational background as themselves (Schwartz 2013; Fisman et al. 2008) and, like their non-college educated counterparts, also desire partners of the same racial/ethnic group (McPherson, Lovin, and Cook 2001; Kalmijn 1998). While marriage rates are much higher among the college-educated than other groups, racial differentials among them remain pronounced.
Black women are increasingly becoming college-educated, but they are the least likely to be married compared to non-Black college-educated women (NCES 2017; Reeves and Guyot 2017; Raley et al. 2015; Ruggles et al. 2015).

Second, an important segment of Black college-educated women follow jobs and educational opportunities to areas outside of traditional areas of minority settlement (Frey 2018), making location a central limitation on their dating lives in a way that is not the case for non-Black women. How do women’s ethno-racial status intersect with their place of residence to influence experiences and variation in relationship formation among Black and non-Black college-educated women?

Third, romantic relationships also play a vital and significant role in individuals’ physical and mental wellbeing and outcomes (Horn et al. 2013; Finkel et al. 2012; Musick and Bumpass 2012; Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham 2010; Liu and Umberson 2008). Thus, ethno-racial variation in romantic relationship formation may be an important site for understanding differences in mental and physical wellbeing. Fourth, men and women differ in their selection of romantic partners. Research shows that women are much more selective than men about their partner preferences in general (Schwartz and Hassebruck 2012). For example, women are more selective about their partner’s race/ethnicity and educational level than men (Hwang 2013; Hitsch et al. 2010a, 2010b; Bratter and King 2008; Fisman et al. 2008; Regan 1998). How does the intersection of race and place influence women’s opportunities for mate selection in terms of race/ethnicity and educational attainment?

Lastly, both academic and popular scholarship suggests that men’s and
women’s attitudes toward gender roles in heterosexual relationships are changing as women increasingly attain economic independence (Lamont 2014; Gerson 2010; Sassler and Miller 2011). Differences in desires for marriage are also in flux, even though women still desire marriage more than men (Kabiri 2016). Furthermore, men’s and women’s attitudes toward marriage and desire for marriage or other types of romantic relationships differ by location, and cities and towns also often embody beliefs, rituals, attitudes, and norms of the people in them (Kefalas et al. 2011; Gieryn 2000). What then are women’s romantic search experiences at locations where gender differences in attitudes toward and about relationship formation and in expectations are salient?

*Explaining the Race Gap in Marriage*

*Marriage Market Explanations*

Location is an important theme in the literature on the race gap in marriage among poor and working-class women as place and race are central to marriage market explanations. Marriage markets are measured using the ratio of same-race men to women within a certain geographic location in terms of several demographic categories: employment/income, age, and sometimes education (Wilson 1996; Lichter et al. 1995; Lichter et al. 1992). These ratios are examined at the neighborhood level as measured by census tracts (South and Crowder 1999) or metropolitan areas (Cohen and Pepin 2018; Choi and Tienda 2016). These ratios produce a marriageable-men index which is used to determine the quality of the marriage market. Because the marriageable-men index is often higher for white women than it is for Black women, white women’s marriage
markets are considered more favorable. Researchers explain that due to having more favorable marriage markets, white women have higher rates of marriage than Black women.

The marriage market literature is limited in two ways. First, because the studies are often quantitative, they provide little insight into how these women experience relationship formation within these places that may have favorable or unfavorable marriage markets. Qualitative research is necessary in order to demonstrate this experience. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas’ (2005) *Promises I Can Keep*, for example, investigates how the problems associated with the neighborhoods in which low-income mothers reside can facilitate or create obstacles to forming and maintaining romantic relationships. This study similarly focuses on the romantic partner search experiences college-educated women have in particular cities and towns. Second, the marriageable-male index is calculated to show that most individuals in the market desire and/or marry partners of the same race (Wang 2012; Fisman et al. 2008; Kalmijn 1998). While ethno-racial homogamy is something many Americans desire, this calculation ignores desires for interracial marriage. These desires are also increasing (Wang 2012). Without more consideration of the desire for interracial romantic relationships, marriage market explanations cannot fully explore how opportunities for marriage are constrained.

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*For an exception, see Tienda and Choi (2016).*
Marital Attitudes Explanations

The importance of location is underemphasized in scholarship that examines racial/ethnic differences in desires for marriage to explain ethno-racial variation in marriage trends. These studies have not found significant ethno-racial differences in marital attitudes among women (Edin and Kefalas 2005; South 1992). This may be the case because these studies often overlook how location may influence desires about type of relationships (casual or long-term) or aspirations for marriage. Data suggest, for instance, that individuals who reside in large, urban metropolises such as New York or San Francisco or in the Northwest and West regions of the United States are more likely to be open to casual and/or short-term relationships. On the other hand, individuals who reside in the South, Midwest, or in more rural towns are more interested in having long term marital or non-marital relationships (Kabiri 2016; Kefalas et al. 2011). Therefore, location may shape how women experience their romantic partner search because of “locational norms” that influence desires for certain kinds of relationships. Furthermore, these locational norms may also influence ethno-racial differences in desires for short- or long-term relationships.

Gendered Racial Exclusion Explanations

Lastly, consideration of how location may impact the exclusion of individuals in particular ethno-racial groups as potential partners is also missing from explanations that focus on gendered racial exclusion to understand ethno-racial differences in marital trends. Proponents of gendered racial exclusion theory maintain that users’ racial status is valued differently in American marriage markets. Gender additionally intersects with race to mediate the value
of one’s racial status. This literature demonstrates how the exclusion of individuals in particular racial/ethnic groups as potential partners may lead to ethno-racial variation in relationship and marriage formation trends. However, it leaves out how place influences this exclusion. This omission is problematic as college-educated people are highly mobile and follow career opportunities. These forces are (slowly) transforming patterns of racial/ethnic settlement across the country, with “new destinations” emerging for Blacks, Asians, and Latinos alike (Frey 2018; Flippen and Kim 2015; Lichter 2012; Lichter et al. 2010).

Furthermore, studies also show that Black women are the least likely to be desired as potential romantic partners for interracial dating compared to white, Asian, and Latina women, even when they have a college degree (Lin and Lundquist 2013). However, it is unclear if this is the case for Black women who reside in cities such as Washington DC, San Francisco, and Boston. These cities are the top three destinations for college-educated Black men and women (Frey 2018).

*Educational Attainment and Marriage*

Educational attainment among Black women has risen in recent decades (NCES 2017; Reeves and Guyot 2017). Unlike white, Asian, and Latina college-educated women, however, Black women’s odds of getting married are not rising with their educational attainment. In fact, Black women between the ages thirty-five and forty-five with a college degree are less likely to be married than white women without a college degree (Reeves and Guyot 2017).

Similar to their non-Black college-educated counterparts, Black women
also desire partners with the same racial and educational background as themselves (Muro and Martinez 2016; Lundquist and Lin 2015; Hwang 2013; Lin and Lundquist 2013; Schwartz 2013; Feliciano, Lee, and Robnett 2011; Fisman et al. 2008; Robnett and Rosenfeld 2008). However, they have a more difficult time achieving this desire (Lundquist and Lin 2015; Robnett and Feliciano et al. 2011).

For an increasing number of Black college-educated women then, relationship formation is a site for racial inequality that requires sociological examination.

**Dating Technology and Relationship Formation**

The rise of computer-based dating technology, beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, widened the opportunities for romantic connections beyond neighborhoods, work, school, and friends and family (Schwartz and Velotta 2018; Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). Prior to the rise of dating technology, place, particularly the local neighborhood, mattered for relationship formation. One third of couples who got married in Philadelphia in the 1930s, for instance, lived within a five-block radius of each other (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Brossard 1932). These patterns held steady for small rural towns as well (Ellsworth 1948). Due to large macro forces like immigration and discriminatory housing laws, neighborhoods were segregated. This facilitated racially and religiously homogamous marital relationships as individuals found partners close to home and racial norms discouraged interracial marriages (Adeyinka-Skold and Roberts 2018).

Shifts that started in the late 1960s, such as greater participation of women in the labor force and higher education, the lengthening of the
transition to adulthood, independence in choosing romantic partners, increasing time investment in education, later ages at marriage, and the shift to the individualized marriage (Cherlin 2009; Oppenheimer 1994; Rosenfeld and Kim 2005), also contributed to widening the pool of potential matches beyond the neighborhood. Young people today often leave their childhood homes and neighborhoods for college and then reside in different cities in their twenties and thirties as they explore different jobs and career paths (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). They are more likely to find romantic partners at college, work, and in their friend networks from these institutions rather than in their childhood neighborhood. In the last ten years, dating technology once again evolved from computer-based to mobile phone or application dating (Schwartz and Velotta 2018; Woo 2013).

Despite this latest evolution in modern dating, location remains central to how dating apps and online websites bring individuals together for romantic encounters and relationships. Both apps and websites ask users for their location and give them the option of searching for romantic partners within a specific mile radius of their choice (from one mile to 100 miles, and more) (Orenstein 2017). Some apps, like happn, use location as the primary way to meet romantic partners. This app shows users how many times they have overlapped with other happn users at a particular location. It also displays profiles in the user’s app with how many times they have “crossed paths” (Ma Sun, and Namaan 2017; Dillet 2014). If a user taps on a profile in the app, happn will also show users a map that details the time and place of the most recent overlap (Ma et al. 2017). Dating applications, better known in the media
and digital literature as “location-based media and reality dating” applications (LBRTDs) (Blackwell, Birnholtz, and Abbott 2015; Handel and Schklovski, 2012; Woo 2013), depend on GPS capabilities in smartphones to connect potential partners to each other. Dating technology relies on users’ locations; thus, patterns of migration, residential segregation, or even attitudes toward gender roles in a particular place, may also influence what kind of romantic partners users may come across on dating websites and/or apps. Consequently, it remains important to explore how location influences relationship formation experiences and how those experiences differ by race/ethnicity in the digital age.

FINDINGS

Respondents, regardless of race or whether or not they utilize dating technology, feel that some cities or towns in which they reside create barriers as they engaged in their romantic partner search. First, I discuss locational barriers that were common to all women, but which white women discussed more than women of color. Next, I examine the locational barriers that only women of color encountered. Lastly, I explore the strategies that primarily women of color employed to address these locational barriers. I show throughout that location remains relevant for relationship formation as the intersection of race and place creates locational barriers for relationship formation among women of color. This intersection further demonstrates that opportunities for relationship formation are racially stratified. Tables 4
and 5 show the location of respondents using the Census designations.

**Table 4: Location of Respondents Using U.S. Census Designation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place Designation (%)*</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not designated as city or town</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Total</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: Location of Respondents by Race/Ethnicity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region (%)*</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Column percentages

**Race and Place Among White Women**

Regardless of whether or not they utilized dating technology, women I interviewed observed that where they resided did not always provide opportunities to meet men for romantic connections or that men in these places practiced dating norms and/or had expectations of long-term relationships that ran counter to respondents’ norms and beliefs. White women, however, discussed these locational barriers more often than women of color. Unlike women of color, white women rarely actively addressed these barriers.
Limited Opportunities to Meet Men

Rosalia, a 25-year-old white woman who lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma discussed her frustration with living in a city where everyone knew each other and the challenge it posed for her romantic partner search:

Tulsa's a big place, but Tulsa’s also a very small place. I went to one of the largest high schools in Tulsa. I graduated with 1,500 kids, so that’s people that are in my past that I see all the time, and that I don't necessarily want to be in my future. That’s actually happened to me too. I was talking to this guy [on an app] and he ended up knowing someone that I went to high school with. They opened their mouth and said some not true and not nice things about me. Then the guy ghosted me. So, it’s hard when you live in a city where everyone knows everyone.

Rosalia utilized dating technology; however, it did not assuage the problem of familiarity that she felt hindered her search in Tulsa. Rosalia considered moving from Tulsa, though mostly in jest. She explained:

I feel we have a really small pool of men to choose from. I joke with my parents all the time that I’m going to have to move to Boulder; that I’m going to have to move to Austin or Dallas where there are so many more people to choose from. A lot of people move away from Tulsa once they graduate and go to school. And then they don’t come back. So, there’s not a lot of people that are near my age range that are not already married or that are looking for what I’m looking for.

Living in a small town also posed challenges for meeting new people.
30-year-old Monique, a white woman, lived in Lubbock, Texas where she worked as a general manager at a big box store. Monique typically never spent more than a month on any website or app and was off the apps when I first interviewed her. She explained that she felt she could “literally go through every guy that was on the dating site within a few days or a week.” She continued, “There was just the same people over and over again because I live so far out in the middle of nowhere.”

Callie, a 27-year-old white woman living in Stamford, Connecticut felt as though her opportunities to meet men were limited by the small population of young adults in the area:

I feel I don’t know where to meet people and feel like I just see the same group of people every week. And there’s just not a lot of young people in this area. There are even less that are Christian. In a lot of senses, I feel like I know all the young Christians in this area, and I’m not really interested in any of them.

Callie also used dating technology on and off but grew frustrated. She relied on church services, church social events, and her friendship network to make romantic connections with men. Her locational barriers were further compounded by her desire to date Christian men who not only attended church, but whose beliefs centered on their faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, location could be a barrier not only in terms of the number of men available, but also men who fit certain preferences on which women did not want to compromise or give up.

Vesta, a 28-year-old white woman living in Alexandria, Virginia framed
the opportunity to meet single college-educated men, her partner preference, as a matter of imbalanced sex ratios in Washington, DC and its surrounding suburbs. Vesta explained there were more single female than male college grads which constrained her opportunities for making romantic connections. She described dating in Alexandria as “frustrating”:

I live in the city of Alexandria, and that is immediately outside of Washington, DC...It’s definitely imbalanced in terms of there are more women than men. They are also pretty extremely higher numbers of educated women (compared to) men, women who have higher socioeconomic status than men, all of those things are high.

Sex ratio imbalance remains a widely accepted explanation for the marriage gap between college-educated Black and non-Black women (Cohen and Pepin 2018). However, as Vesta experienced in her romantic partner search, it is also a nationwide phenomenon that varies by location (Birger 2015) and is regularly written about in popular media (e.g., Codik 2015; Swanson 2015). New York City, for example, has a higher ratio of college-educated women to men than DC (Birger 2015). Jeanine, a 31-year-old white woman, lived in New York City prior to moving to Philadelphia, and also noted that the sex ratio imbalance in New York City was a barrier in her romantic search there. She explained, “I don’t know what the sex ratio is in Philly, if there are more girls than guys, which would be to my disadvantage. I lived in New York for a little bit and that was definitely the case there.” Like Vesta, Jeanine found dating in New York to be disappointing and frustrating.
Mismatch with Dating Norms and/or Relationship Expectations

White women, like women of color, also felt that dating norms that governed a particular location constrained their opportunities to find romantic partners. They discussed men’s gendered expectations of long-term relationships and/or their approach to dating. Monique not only felt that Lubbock, TX was too small a town to meet men. She also felt that Lubbock was a “very conservative” town in which to search for long-term romantic partners. She described it as a place where men in long-term dating relationships expected their partners to have children and stay home after they were married:

I feel that my purpose isn’t necessarily to be a mom, but to impact other people with my time and energy. That’s where I see myself being more of a value to people is in that aspect, rather than being a mom. I don’t want to give someone the wrong impression that I’m ready to pop out three kids and be a stay-at-home mom, because that’s not the case. Particularly in Lubbock where I am, it’s a very conservative town, and there is quite literally a church on every corner. That’s traditionally what everybody does. They meet their significant other, either in high school or college, and as soon as they graduate college, they get engaged, get married, and start a family. That’s typically the order of things. So, most guys that I meet are looking for that. They’re looking for that person, that woman where she might have a career, but is she willing to give it up to raise a family? Or does she at least want to have kids and have a good job and be able to afford daycare, because that’s
what you’d have to do…I’m not the only one down south that doesn’t want to be a stay-at-home mom; but I would definitely say the mass population of women, that’s their goal. It is to find a husband with a good job, to make the babies, and stay at home to raise them.

Monique described her romantic partner search as “extremely difficult” because her desires to remain childless after marriage and to continue in her career was a mismatch with what most men (and in her opinion, most women) in Lubbock were interested in when looking for in long-term romantic partners.

In contrast, women who live in cities felt that men there approached dating casually and were not interested in exclusive, long-term relationships. This was a significant issue for women in my study who had or currently lived in New York City. Angela, a 31-year-old white woman, lived and dated in New York before she left the city for another job on the West coast. She described New York City as a “terrible place to try to meet men.” Angela felt this way because:

I feel like maybe everyone is just looking. There are so many people that there’s always the sense that there’s probably someone better right around the corner...It didn’t seem like there were a lot of people who were really committed to the idea of looking for a relationship. Even if they liked the idea of a relationship, they were more into their job or—I don’t know. That seemed to be an experience that a lot of my friends were having too.

Jeanine described New York City as a place where “there are just more
guys who were not willing to grow up than girls.” She felt that women approached dating and relationships more seriously than men. This mismatch between how respondents versus the men where they resided approached dating was a source of frustration for women searching for romantic partners.

**Place and Race Among Women of Color**

Most white women and women of color in my study wanted to date men of the same educational and ethno-racial backgrounds as themselves. For educational homophily, women felt that they had more in common with or it was sometimes easier to discuss their professional or educational aspirations with men who were college-educated (even though that was not always the case). In terms of ethno-racial homophily, women of color often cited a desire for romantic partners who are familiar with negotiating race and racism in their daily lives as a reason they preferred men of the same ethno-racial background or men of color in general. They also preferred that their partners already be knowledgeable about elements of their culture such as food, language, traditions, or cultural values.

Jazmin A. Muro and Lisa M. Martinez (2016) noted similar preferences in their study of partnering among college-educated Latinas. Women of color, particularly Black and Latina women, experienced location as a barrier in two ways that white women did not: some locations had limited opportunities to date men of color and some places had limited opportunities to date interracially. Towns and places not designated as a town or city with limited opportunities to meet men further constrained chances to achieve education.
and ethno-racial homogamy because few educated men of color lived in there. 
White men in these locations were also sometimes reluctant to date women of 
color. These issues, however, were not abated by living in a city. College-
educated Black women often outnumber college-educated Black men in 
metropolitan locations (Cohen and Pepin 2018). Therefore, the opportunities 
to date men of their same racial and educational background, especially for 
Black women, could also be limited in these cities, even if interracial dating was 
slightly easier to do.

**Limited Opportunities to Achieve Racial/Ethnic Homophily**

Women of color sometimes found it difficult to meet and make romantic 
connections with men of their same racial/ethnic and/or educational 
background because there were simply not enough men with these 
characteristics in a particular city or town. Women who used dating technology 
experienced these constraints more immediately than non-tech users because 
the apps and websites instantly showed them who was available at a particular 
location. Although the apps could not capture the entire population of single 
men of color in a particular location, they could serve as a window into a city’s 
ethno-racial diversity. To illustrate, Jane, a 25-year-old Latina, described the 
change in ethno-racial diversity she noticed on OkCupid when she moved from 
Central Texas back to Houston, her hometown:

I was living in the central Texas area suburbs, and I felt like it was 
limited in Hispanic/Latino men. It felt like there weren’t that many to 
choose from. There were mostly white men my age. It was about half
white men my age and half other races, Arabic, Middle Eastern, some Hispanic, some Asian, other ethnicities. When I moved back to Houston, it was a totally different demographic. Once, I logged back into OkCupid just out of curiosity when I moved back, it was a lot. It was almost seventy-five percent Latino men showing up near me. I felt like there was more to choose from.

Cadence, a 27-year-old Black woman residing in west Los Angeles (LA), expressed similar opinions about the difficulty of finding college-educated Black men to date in LA because of her location. She described her options for Black men on Tinder as “horrible” and “super limited, because I live in a very white, affluent area.” Cadence directly names location as the reason for her inability to meet men of color, despite the assistance of dating technology. In one of our follow-up interviews, Cadence also recalls a trip she took to Atlanta, GA earlier in the month, to illustrate how location was a barrier to making romantic connections with college-educated Black men. She used OkCupid and Bumble in Atlanta and noted that the “number and quality” of college-educated Black men is “much higher in Atlanta than it was in LA.” This is not surprising given that Atlanta is one of the top destinations for college-educated Blacks (Frey 2018). Ultimately, Cadence’s experience of the differences between Atlanta and LA reveals that locations where women reside and search for romantic connections do not all provide the same opportunities. Location can constrain chances for forming romantic relationships depending on the woman’s race/ethnicity and her partner preferences.
“Culture” of Place

Despite the primary desire to date men of the same racial/ethnic backgrounds as themselves, women in my study were also open to dating men outside of their race. Overall, white and Asian women were more open to dating interracially than Latinas and Black women. While half of the Asian and white women in the sample were interested in dating interracially, only a third of Latinas and Black women were open to doing so. The women of color who expressed a desire to date interracially discussed their attempts to do so in the cities where they resided. I found that regardless of whether or not they utilized dating technology, women of color felt that some cities did not provide ample opportunities for interracial dating, particularly with white men, which posed a barrier in their romantic partner search. One way in which women of color experienced limited opportunities to date interracially was in how white men embodied the “locational culture,” a concept I explore below. Other limiting factors included perceptions of a general reluctance to date interracially because they did not see many interracial couples and/or that men, including white men, were explicitly not interested in doing so.

Regions, cities, and towns embody the distinct rituals, beliefs, history, and other characteristics of the individuals who live there and make up the particular “culture” of a location (Gieryn 2000). Among women who use dating technology, a location could be a barrier for a woman’s relationship formation if she feels the men’s profiles on the apps depict an embodiment of aspects of the locational culture that she finds unattractive. For example, Rhea, a 29-year-old Latina woman living in Columbia, SC, sent me picture after picture of
profiles with men holding both live and dead animals (see Figures 2–4 below) in one of our follow-up text exchanges. Rhea used Bumble and Tinder, mainstream apps that attracted a diverse group of users, not a niche app that catered to hunters. Hunting, nevertheless, was a significant part of white male culture in the South (Klinenberg 2018). It was also a major turn-off for Rhea. Thus, she did not initiate a match with men who expressed these cultural behaviors in their dating profiles.

Figure 2: Man with Reptile

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10 Mainstream apps and websites are those that are well known and do not cater to any particular demographic or user group. Niche apps and websites are those that cater to individuals in specific demographic groups which include race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, hobbies, lifestyles, etc. (Tiffany 2018).
Rhea’s experience was not unique. A quick scroll on Twitter showed women with similar experiences. Figures 5 and 6 below show a woman who complained about men’s profiles with pictures of dead animals and “yee yee trucks” with confederate flags on her Tinder app in Oklahoma. She also
lamented that she would remain single until she left the state, presumably because these images characterized many of the profiles she saw on the apps and she had no interest in dating these men.

*Figure 5: Tweet about Dead Fish and Yee Yee Trucks*

Although racism was not always as explicit in the profiles that Rhea browsed, there were undertones of it which made Rhea less likely to pursue a match. Within the locational context of the South, specifically in American Evangelical churches, there is an underlying narrative of whites saving the lost souls of Black and Brown heathens (Schneider 2018). Thus, men with profiles that featured pictures of them with Black or Brown children with references to
God, Jesus, or missionary work were a turn-off to Rhea. Figures 7 and 8 are examples of such profiles Rhea sent me in another text conversation. Because she felt these profiles implied a belief in the narrative of the “white savior” (Schneider 2018; Cammorata 2011), she refused to show interest in these men.

**Figure 7: Male Bumble Profile with “White Jesus” Implication**

**Figure 8: Male Bumble Profile with Black Children**
Rhea also prepared to face racism offline as a Latina searching for romantic partners in Columbia, SC. She explained:

I know that I’m going to encounter things that aren’t nice. I know I’m going to be segregated; I know that I’m going to have to prove I’m a smart person; I know I’m going to get asked about my immigration status; and all of these things that aren’t pleasant or things I don’t want to think about when I’m thinking of whether I want to date someone or not.

In Columbia, Rhea anticipated negative attitudes and stereotypes about Latinos that could stymie her in the search for a romantic partner. However, like some of the other Latinas in my study, she could not ignore this reality as she engaged in her romantic partner search, not only in a location with few Latino men, but white men whom she did not want to date.

At other geographical locations, women of color experienced limited opportunities to date interracially because men, mainly white men, were not interested. Luna, a 25-year-old Asian-American woman who resided in Harrogate, TN, a predominantly White town, was interested in dating white men. Luna, however, found it difficult to meet men who were interested in dating interracially in Harrogate. She explained:

Back where I’m from, in California, interracial dating is really common. Here, it’s not so much. I’ve looked around and it’s not super common. I do think that it’s a deterrent sometimes. I mean I do find Caucasian men attractive. But it seems the people from around here, I feel like they
may not be as comfortable with the idea of having an interracial relationship. There’s a lot of Caucasian people in this area where I live.

White-Asian interracial coupling is one of the most common types of interracial couplings (Wang 2012). California, particularly in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego, boast the lion’s share of these interracial marriages (Livingston 2017). But in the South, a region where thirteen percent of adults’ state that interracial marriage is not good for society (Livingston 2017), Luna found herself excluded as a romantic partner. Luna also explained how living in a predominantly white area in Tennessee made her romantic partner search harder than she expected. She stated, “I didn’t expect to end up in Tennessee for school. I do think that if I had gone to a school in like a larger area, I’d probably to be able to meet more people. I do think, I expected things [finding a romantic partner] to be a little easier, but then now, the way things have taken a turn, it’s a little harder.”

Sandy’s experience in Meriden, CT, was similar to Luna’s. Sandy, a 31-year-old Black woman, was also open to dating men outside of her race. She used dating apps in the past but was not using them at the time of the interview. Like Luna, she felt there was a general reluctance towards interracial dating relationships with Black women in Meriden. She noted that in “certain areas of Connecticut I do see interracial couples, like in maybe Meriden, Hartford, and New Haven areas.” However, she also stated that, “I feel that maybe some people are not open to it [dating interracially] ...I don’t get hit on much out here.” Sandy’s feelings were based on her experiences in Newport
Beach, CA. She explained, “I went to California last summer, and I felt like I got more flirting from guys out there in person and on the apps. It was mixed too, like different races. So, it felt like people were more open and saw me as a human and not a Black female.” Her search experiences in Meriden, on the other hand, made her feel as though being a Black woman was undesirable.

Sandy’s thoughts about her experience of searching for romantic partners in Meriden and Newport Beach also powerfully illuminate the importance of location for relationship formation for Black women, even in an age when digital technology seemingly erases its significance.

Numerous findings show that Black women are the least likely to be seen as potential romantic partners because of gendered racial stereotypes (Lin and Lundquist 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Feliciano, Robnett, Komaie 2009). However, Sandy’s experience demonstrates that the degree to which they feel and experience this exclusion on- and offline may vary from place to place.

Addressing Locational Barriers

Women of color utilized various strategies to address or alleviate the locational barriers to relationship formation they encountered where they lived. These strategies included aligning their career plans with moves to another city that could offer them more opportunities to meet college-educated men of color, altering their self-presentation on- and offline, and including white males in their partner preferences. Factors that determined whether, when, and how the respondents employed these strategies
depended on their use of dating technology and/or what strategy best fit at that particular moment in their lives.

**Aligning Career Plans**

Nacine, a 27-year-old Black woman living in New Orleans, LA, did not use or desire to use dating technology in her romantic partner search. She felt New Orleans was not a city where she could easily find Black men who were also college-educated, even though there were a few Black men at her medical school. She had recently ended a casual relationship with one of them. Nacine mentioned that staying in New Orleans for residency would likely continue to limit her potential for relationship formation. She recently decided that it would be necessary to move to another city for residency if she wanted to find a long-term romantic partner. She explained that, in five years, “I think it could potentially be difficult to find this person if I was still in New Orleans.” Instead, Nacine considered residency programs in Chicago, Pittsburg, Atlanta, and Houston—places with large populations of Black college-educated men (Frey 2018). Luna, mentioned above, also planned to return to California or another state where there was greater openness to interracial dating for her medical residency.

Monique was one of the very few white women in my study who employed a locational strategy to address limited opportunities to meet men and the mismatch in relationship expectations. In one of our follow-up interviews, she stated firmly that she planned to leave Lubbock:

I’ve made it clear to my boss that I don’t want to stay here. [By]
approximately 2020 he should be getting me back to the DFW (Dallas-Fort Worth) metroplex. I actually bought some property outside of Dallas. And while I live out here, I’m paying on that property and eventually, I hope to live out there. It’s actually still pretty country. It’s an hour outside of Dallas, but I’ll be working in the city. And that should happen in the next year and a half.

Including White Males in Partner Preferences

Yolanda, a 27-year-old Black woman living in Harrogate, TN, stated she wanted to date a college-educated Black man. She had used dating apps in the past, but stopped using them after she started medical school, as she found them time-consuming and distracting. Yolanda described her experience in Harrogate as, “You know, I’m the minority in everything.” She not only experienced being Black in a majority white space, but also the lack of exposure to men of color because she saw so few of them in her daily life. Yolanda decided to expand her racial partner preferences to include white men. She explained, “I feel like I may be more open to dating out of my race because I just see more white people—I see more non-minorities, obviously, in my daily life and stuff.” Because she recognized that her current racial preferences would likely hinder her relationship formation in Harrogate, Yolanda compromised on her partner preferences to alleviate the barriers that living in the town posed. It is important to note that white women in my study never mentioned changing their racial preferences to include men of color as a locational barrier strategy. Asian women also often already included white men
in their ethno-racial partner preferences. Thus, this particular strategy was one that only Black and Latina women in my study performed.

Yolanda’s strategy to include white men in her romantic partner preferences, which about 14% of Black women in the study utilized, also defied both popular and scholarly opinion that Black women do not adjust their racial/ethnic partner preferences in the face of a shortage of marriageable Black men (Banks 2011). Proponents argue this is why they were more likely to be single than women of other ethno-racial groups (Judice 2018; Banks 2011). This claim is not supported by the evidence in this study. Another study found that college-educated Black women sometimes changed their sexual preferences and dated Black college-educated women as an alternative to finding and dating educated Black men (Massey et al. 2003).

Altering Self-Presentation

Women of color sometimes altered their online or app dating profiles or their offline appearances as a locational barrier strategy. Although Rhea was open to dating white men in Columbia, SC, due to the racist undertones she encountered on the apps, she curated her self-presentation in her dating profiles. She explained, “No, I never put any information about my political beliefs on my profile. It was on purpose. I think that putting that out there has the potential of drawing attention from trolls.” Rhea curated her profile to avoid being harassed or “trolled” on the apps because of her views on immigration, women’s rights, and Black Lives Matter. Being trolled could happen on any dating or non-dating online platform in the United States,
given the current political climate (Desmond-Harris 2016). Yet, it was especially important for Rhea to avoid becoming a target because she was a Latina living in a southern city.

Amariah, a 32-year-old Latina living in Grand Rapids, MI, had stopped using dating apps for about a year when I interviewed her. Consequently, she was doing more activities such as going out to clubs and bars with friends to meet potential romantic partners. She also tried going out alone to cafes and coffee shops to meet men, but was deterred by the lack of Latino men she saw in public. Additionally, she felt she could not fully engage with the white men she encountered in public because of her ethno-racial status as a Latina and the negative rhetoric surrounding this group. She explained:

I think I have trust issues lately especially because of political stuff and how people feel about immigrants. It’s huge and you can’t really gauge that from just bumping into someone at a coffee shop or whatever. So, I distrust a lot of people or mistrust... And that’s hard because I don’t want to randomly bring up the topic. I’ve done that before, just randomly say something like, ‘Immigrants are amazing’ or whatever and then they just look at me like, ‘What are you saying?’ And then they are offended because of something I said. I don’t want to bring up topics that are going to offend people and deter them from getting to know me as opposed to just getting to know me first and then figuring out what their stand is on things.

Amariah adjusted the ways in which she presented her beliefs and opinions to make herself more approachable to men who may be interested in her. She also, however, did not want to lose the opportunity for someone to get
to know her, have more context for her beliefs, and understand who she was as a Latina. For Amariah and other women of color in my study, these weighty considerations that concerned political issues, but that were also deeply personal, forcefully came into play in their romantic search, especially in places where they encountered locational barriers.

*Utilizing Niche Apps*

Among women of color who used dating technology, another way they dealt with the limited exposure to college-educated men of color was to utilize dating platforms that catered to Black and Brown users (e.g. Badoo, Black People Meet, or SoulSwipe) or individuals interested in dating interracially (e.g. AfroRomance, Beyond Black and White, and Interracial Cupid). These niche apps could potentially facilitate the search for users who have racial/ethnic preferences with which they did not want to part. For example, Shiloh, a 26-year-old Black woman living in Newark, DE, met her current boyfriend on Badoo because she wanted to date men of color. However, there were few of them on Tinder in Newark. She noticed that “the white people here [Newark] are using Tinder, and then there are more Black and Latino men on Badoo.”

Niche apps, nevertheless, were not a complete solution to locational barriers for three reasons. First, many of the men that were on the niche apps were also on mainstream apps like Tinder, OkCupid, Coffee Meets Bagel, and Hinge. Respondents explained that they rarely used niche apps exclusively in their romantic partner search because male users, like their female counterparts, also utilized both mainstream and niche dating apps and websites. In fact, Shiloh
learned about *Badoo* from a man she met on *Tinder* because he also had a profile on *Badoo*. Second, mainstream dating apps and websites also tend to have a greater number of users than niche apps (Priceonomics 2016). Thus, users could potentially limit themselves if they only utilized niche apps. Lastly, recent data show that the use of apps, including niche apps, varies by region. In the South for instance, individuals use *Black People Meet* more often than mainstream apps like *Tinder* or *Coffee Meets Bagel* (Priceonomics 2016).

This finding is not surprising given that there is a large population of Blacks in the South, including Black millennials (Frey 2018; Hunt et al. 2008). Therefore, in some locations, niche apps may be better for meeting people of color than in other places, as Shiloh discovered. *Coffee Meets Bagel*, on the other hand, is much more popular in the West and Midwest (Priceonomics 2016). Using a niche app in cities in these regions may not facilitate making romantic connections because most of the users are on mainstream platforms.

*Changing Distance Preferences*

Women who use dating technology could also increase their distance preferences in order to include locations that have larger populations of men, men of color, or men willing to date interracially. However, similar to findings in other studies, neither white women nor women of color wanted to travel too far from home to find love, whether it be for a casual or long-term relationship (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). On average, women set their distance preference to twenty miles. Some women set it as low as one mile. One woman set hers at 250 miles, but this was because she lived in a small city with two cities to the
south and north of her which were easily accessible by train. In general, however, respondents preferred to search for partners within a distance that encouraged meeting potential romantic partners in person. This evidence, along with data that shows that the use of niche and mainstream apps varies by region, further demonstrates that location remains important for relationship formation in the digital age.

**No Locational Barriers: Alternative Experiences of Race and Place Among Women of Color**

Regardless of whether or not they used dating technology, women of color who lived in cities with a large demographic of educated men of color often found it was easier to meet and date these men. Rhonda and Shani’s experiences illustrate this point. Rhonda, a 32-year-old Black woman, had a career that took her from New York to San Francisco and then to Philadelphia. She searched for Black college-educated men using dating technology in all three cities. Therefore, she could speak confidently about similarities and differences in the opportunities to meet college-educated single men of color in each city. She explained:

I think Philly just doesn’t have enough large industries to attract enough educated, eligible bachelors. So, I just feel like cities like San Francisco and New York just have higher numbers, and that’s really what it boils down to. Especially Black men.

Rhonda noted that she had little trouble finding Black college-educated men in both San Francisco and New York because there was a
large population of them there. She felt, however, that it was more
difficult to do so in Philadelphia. Rhonda’s experiences align with data
that show that New York and San Francisco are in the top ten cities with
the largest numbers of college-educated millennials. San Francisco,
additionally, had the second highest number of college-educated Black
millennials (Frey 2018). Rhonda’s experiences demonstrate that the
potential of a particular online dating platform may not be fully reached
if the city in which one uses it does not have a large demographic of the
partners that fit specific criteria. They also illustrate that favorable and
unfavorable marriage markets for Black women vary by location. Some
cities may be better than others for college-educated Black women who
desire racial and educational homophily in their romantic relationships.

Shani, one of my follow-up respondents and a 27-year-old Asian
American woman, had also lived in and searched for romantic partners in
multiple cities: Boston, New York, and currently San Francisco. Shani did not
use online dating platforms or apps to search for romantic partners. She relied
heavily on her friend networks and her church to meet men. Shani also
preferred that her romantic partner be college-educated, Asian, and a Christian
who not only attended church regularly, but whose values and beliefs were
informed by their faith. While it helped that Shani had a friendship network
primarily made up of college-educated Asian Americans, San Francisco has a
large, diverse Asian population. Shani’s description of Asian television
programming in San Francisco also depicted this reality:

The Bay Area, as a whole, tends to have more Asians. It’s really telling
that in the Bay Area, you have a lot of just regular [TV] network channels that are Chinese or that are other Asian language channels and you don’t require a separate cable system to access those channels, which I don’t think is the case in a lot of other places. It speaks to the fact that there is such a large Asian population here that regular network TV will also cater towards those groups and have...Asian programming.

Shani attended church regularly, was involved in a small group where other church members met weekly to study the Bible and attended church activities that facilitate meeting other young adults at her church. Shani stated that while she purposefully found and went to multi-ethnic churches in San Francisco, she still found that “even at multi-ethnic churches, there are so many young adults that are Asian... I think it’s super interesting because even if they are not a majority, they are still a very sizeable population.” This exposure to Asian men who fit her partner criteria helped Shani to meet three men within the first six months of moving to San Francisco. Shani stated that while she felt pressure from her friends to join an online dating platform, she did not feel that she needed it at this time. If she lived in a city with fewer college-educated Asian young adults like Fresno, CA or San Antonio, TX (Frey 2018), it may have been much harder to meet men who fit her preferences, even if she were going to church or meeting men through friends.

**DISCUSSION**

Regardless of race and use of dating technology, college-educated women searching for romantic partners find that location could pose a potential barrier
to making romantic connections. Respondents note that some places do not provide ample opportunities to meet men regularly or the dating norms and/or expectations of relationships in some places are a mismatch. This finding is similar to research that shows how geography contributes to young adults’ perceptions of and desires for marriage. Maria Kefalas and colleagues (2011) find that young adults who live in more rural locations (e.g. rural Iowa) are more oriented and motivated toward marriage than those who live in large cities like New York, San Diego, and Minneapolis/St. Paul. Additionally, respondents feel that these barriers made their search for a romantic partner more difficult. This finding further expands to research on geography and relationship formation as it demonstrates that dating and marital norms/expectations that govern a particular location also influence users’ perceptions of the ease or difficulty of finding a romantic partner.

There were, however, ethno-racial differences in how women experienced locational constraints on their romantic partner search. Women of color experienced location as a barrier in two ways: some locations did not provide ample opportunities to form romantic connections with men of color or some locations constrained opportunities for interracial dating. In general, however, Asian women’s experiences of race and place were more similar to white women’s than to that of Black and Latina women. If they resided in a place with few Asian men, white men were usually open to dating them. These findings support other research that shows that college-educated Black and Latina women have difficulty meeting and forming romantic connections with men of color, specifically college-educated men of color (Reeves and Guyot 2017; Muro and
Martinez 2016; Sawhill and Venator 2015; Crowder and Tolnay 2004). These findings are similar to studies that show that some ethno-racial groups, particularly Blacks, have limited opportunities for interracial dating compared to other ethno-racial groups (Bany et al. 2014; Lin and Lundquist 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Feliciano et al. 2009). This study further contributes to research on assortative mating because it considers how a woman’s ethno-racial status in a particular location may facilitate or hinder her opportunities to date intra-racially, interracially, or meet men with the same educational level as herself.

Women of color in my study were also more likely to employ locational strategies to address the locational barriers unique to them. They actively considered career moves to places that would decrease the constraints they experienced in their romantic partner search, used niche apps, adjusted their self-presentation on- and offline, and broadened their racial preferences to include white men. This last finding supports other scholarship that shows that individuals can change or exchange their assortative partner preferences to “balance out pluses and minuses” (Schoen and Wooldredge 1989:466; Torche and Rich 2017; Kalmijn 2010). White women were less likely to utilize these strategies to alleviate their locational barriers because it was not usually necessary. The locational barriers that women of color faced were exclusive to them because of their status as ethno-racial minorities. If white women were interested in dating men of color but lived where there were few of them, they could simply date white men.

While the romantic partner search was difficult for white women, it was
far more difficult for women of color. This finding supports scholarship which maintains that due to a racial system that rewards and privileges whiteness, ethno-racial minorities must often do more than their white counterparts to address the adverse impacts of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Steinbugler 2012; Feagin and Sikes 1994). The burden of adaptation often falls on these marginalized groups as the system does not change (easily) to accommodate them (Romano 2018). This study also supports research that treats race as a hierarchical variable in explorations of ethno-racial variation in relationship formation trends (Han and Choi 2018; Orne 2017; Torche and Riche 2017; Lin and Lundquist, 2013; Kalmijn 2010).

Most significant, my findings suggest that location remains relevant for relationship formation in the digital age. This conclusion is also supported by emerging literature on modern dating. Courtney Blackwell and colleagues (2015) compared the experiences of Grindr users who lived in Chicago, IL and Ithaca, NY. Grindr was the first location-aware dating app; and it was primarily for men who have sex with men. The researchers found that not only did men in Chicago make new romantic connections more easily because it was a larger, denser city, but they were also more likely to see and connect with men of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds on the app than users in Ithaca. Additionally, the study reported that men varied in how open or guarded they were about their sexuality on Grindr depending on the neighborhood in Chicago. Users in Ithaca, on the other hand, were more likely to see the same users on the app no matter where they were in the city.
CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrated that place still matters for relationship formation and potentially for ethno-racial variation in relationship formation trends among college-educated women in the digital age due to the locational barriers women of color may face. While this chapter examined women’s experiences of searching for romantic partners at a particular location, the next chapters explores how women’s interactions with men on and off dating platforms also influences their potential for making romantic connections.
CHAPTER 3: The Role of Cyberaggression, Men’s Intimidation, and Sexual Racism on Relationship Formation

“Why men great ‘til they got to be great?”
—Lizzo, “Truth Hurts”

Digital technology has become an important part of daily life. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as blogs, online support groups, and gaming platforms, permeate individuals’ lived experiences. We also find love, romance, and sex online. Pursuant to this rise in use, psychologists, sociologists, and media scholars examine how individuals’ experiences in the digital space collide with and inform their offline experiences. This research historically focused on abuse and harassment (such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, revenge porn, and videos shared without consent) among adolescents (Bossler Holt and May 2012). However, researchers now also explore these experiences among adult users of digital technology (Jane 2017; Powell and Henry 2017; Thompson 2016; Mantilla 2013; Nussbaum 2010). Much of this research shows that while abuse and harassment are part of the digital experience for everyone, women and people of color—especially Black women—are more likely to be targets of technology-facilitated abuse and harassment (Amnesty International 2018). While this research is important to our understanding of how participation in digital life is gendered and racialized, more work is needed to demonstrate the consequences this gendered and racialized digital experience has for other aspects of daily life such as relationship formation.
This chapter examines the experience that heterosexual, college-educated women of varying ethno-racial backgrounds have while searching for romantic partners in the digital age, how they cope with adverse experiences, and how these experiences may contribute to racial/ethnic variation in relationship and marital formation in this population. This chapter focuses primarily on experiences women have while utilizing dating technology in their partner search. However, I will also provide examples of offline experiences to highlight what respondents face in general as they attempt to make romantic connections in the digital era. I find that women’s experiences of dating in the digital age share similarities but vary in other significant ways. Regardless of ethno-racial background, respondents encounter men who were intimidated by their educational and/or career accomplishments and cyberaggression. Women of color, however, also experience sexual racism (Orne 2017). Black women additionally face exclusion as potential romantic partners by Black and non-Black men. Lastly, respondents used various strategies I conceptualize as emotion work and emotion repair to overcome the barriers to relationship formation these experiences created.

These findings are important for three reasons. First, given that dating technology is now the most common method of finding a romantic partner (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen 2019), it is important to understand individuals’ experiences of dating technology, how those experiences differ, and what those varying experiences tell us about inequality in the social world, both on- and offline. Second, relationship formation trends among college-educated heterosexuals have long been ignored in relationship and family formation
literature. Despite evidence that Black college-educated women are the least likely to be married compared to their non-Black counterparts, (Clarke 2011) this variation is overlooked. Lastly, given that being single or unromantically linked is increasingly a significant part of the relationship landscape, how do the women’s experiences of online and app dating contribute to decisions to remain single?

Singlehood and the Dating Landscape

“Single” is an increasingly used relationship status among Americans. Of adults between the ages of 18 and 34, 51% state that they are not in a “steady romantic relationship” (Bonos and Guskin 2019:1; Fry 2017). This shows a 33% increase from 2004 (Bonos and Guskin 2019). Whites and Asians are additionally less likely to be unpartnered than Blacks and Hispanics (Fry 2017). Data also show that the falling rates of marriage and increasing rates of cohabitation do not fully explain this uptick in unpartnered individuals. As the digital age that provides convenient methods of finding romantic partners, this appears to be a paradox. Those who have never been married are also the most likely to use dating technologies in their partner search (Anderson 2016). However, it is also possible that in an increasingly interconnected world, people’s experiences of the digital world, including dating technology, may actively contribute to their decisions to go solo. Feminist media scholars additionally find that cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and online sexual harassment characterize individuals’ lived experiences, especially that of women, women of color, and sexual minorities, and spill into their offline worlds (Bailey and Trudy 2018). Sociological research has yet to explore how individuals’ experiences of dating technology and their
strategies to deal with those experiences facilitate decisions to remain single or shy away from exclusive long-term relationships, and perhaps contribute to unequal patterns of relationship formation among ethno-racial groups.

_Digital Technology and Gender Inequality_  

Research on the earliest forms of interactional digital technology and dating technology demonstrates that offline gender inequality norms were also reality in digital spaces. Scholars explored different modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as list-serve discussions, Internet Relay Channels, and bulletin board systems (BBS). They found that men not only dominated these spaces, but also “flamed” female users (DeVoss 2007; Herring 2000). Flaming is the earliest form of “gendered cyberhate” (Jane 2017:5), and it includes the verbal abuse, vilification, being ignored, and sexually harassment of women as a way to silence and decrease their participation in digital technology (Jane 2017; Brown 1996; Chapman 1995; Schwartz 1994). Women who wanted to participate either deferred to men, simply stayed silent, or they risked being ignored or verbally abused (Herring 2000; Sutton 1994). As other forms of digital technology such as gaming, blogging, and social media became more popular and integral aspects of our daily lives, feminist media research demonstrated that the ways in which women experience digital spaces remain gendered. For instance, well-known female gamers, media critics, and writers whose work were featured on blogs, webzines, Twitter, and Facebook were frequent targets of cyberbullying, cyberstalking, threats of sexual violence and harassment, and misogyny (Jane 2017; Powell and Henry 2017; Mantilla 2015). This was not the case for men who
frequented these spaces and/or wrote content users found controversial.

Bulletin board systems were one of the earliest forms of dating technology. As part of their profile description, users could state if they were looking for a romantic partner and what traits they desired in that partner (DeVoss 2007). Similar to the research on CMC, researchers found that men utilized inappropriate sexual language in their interactions with women who posted about searching for partners (and those who did not as well). However, there was no research on how these interactions impacted women looking for relationships and if there were any racial/ethnic differences in how this sexual harassment affected them. This was likely because users did not often reveal their names, race/ethnicity, or contact information on the boards. Thus, it would have been difficult for researchers to examine these issues. This anonymity also protected the men who sexually harassed female BBS users (DeVoss 2007).

Women and their Lived Experience of Digital Technology

Feminist media research also examines the lived experiences of women at the intersections of their social locations to explore how they experience the online world. For instance, Moya Bailey and Trudy coined the term misogynoir in 2008 to describe how queer and straight Black women experience racism in various digital spaces (Bailey and Trudy 2018; Ging and Siapera 2018). Raman and Kamarraj’s (Ging and Siapera 2018) research on digital technology in India demonstrates how current apps reproduce misogyny and control of female bodies. Helen Wood (2018) explores how class and misogyny intersect to recreate and intensify bias against white working-class women online. There is also
emerging work on the impact of the online abuse and gendered cyberhate on women. Emma Jane (2018), for instance, writes about the “economic vandalism” (p. 575), women experience if they utilize digital technology to make a living. They are robbed of economic opportunities as they are often forced to cancel speaking engagement due to threats, experience limited work productivity, and permanently leave the digital space to remain safe and to protect their physical and mental health. Nonetheless, more research is necessary to illustrate how women experience specific digital spaces, such as online dating platforms, and the impact it has on their lives, including their opportunities for relationship formation.

*Dating Technology and Relationship Formation*

Dating technology evolved from BBS to applications that users can use on their mobile phones. It eclipsed social networks and institutions to become the primary method individuals use to search for and find romantic partners (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen 2019; Thomas 2019). As such, sociologists have explored how dating technology contributes to ethno-racial differences in relationship formation. Although dating technology presents opportunities to expand one’s partner preferences, individuals’ real world and online preferences are remarkably similar (Henry-Waring and Barraket 2008). In fact, racial preferences remain the most persistent in the transition from real world to the digital dating world (Hwang 2013; Lin and Lundquist 2013). Black female exceptionalism is the norm online as well as offline. Studies demonstrate that while Latina, Asian, and white women may have to deal with the burdens and/or
joys of having many options, Black women experience rejection more often than not by potential suitors (Bany et al. 2014; Hwang 2013; Lin and Lundquist 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011).

Gendered racial exclusion theory, which researchers use to explain the exclusion that Black women face online, explains how men’s employment of gendered racial stereotypes, such as assumptions of Black women’s promiscuity or the angry Black woman trope (Collins 2009; Childs 2005), influences them to exclude Black women as romantic partners. However, this scholarship fails to examine how Black women actively experience exclusion in their use of dating technology. Moreover, intersectional scholarship also demonstrates that Asian, Latina, and Black women often experience and worry about fetishization in their romantic relationships, especially those with white men (Vazquez 2015; Serna 2017; Nemoto 2009). This fetishization is defined as the sexual objectification of women of color—due specifically to their racial/ethnic status—as a “preferential lust object” (Serna 2017:1). Because this objectification is rooted in white sexual conquest of women of color, fetishization reveals colonial and white supremist perspectives (Nagel 2003). It is also problematic condition upon which women of color are included as potential romantic partners. It remains important to examine how women experience fetishization on- and offline and what it may mean for ethno-racial variation in relationship formation trends and perhaps singlehood.

Furthermore, feminist media scholarship shows that men use cyberbullying, cyberstalking, verbal harassment, and image based sexual harassment in their encounters with women. How do men use these tactics,
either to include or exclude women, and in spaces that are for the purpose of finding heterosexual love? How do women of varying ethno-racial backgrounds experience these tactics and how do those experiences differ? How do they cope with these experiences? How can differences in how women experiences and cope with these tactics contribute to ethno-racial variation in relationship formation? This exploration of women experiences with dating technology further expands feminist media research on how women experience the digital world differently from men, and how those digital experiences shape their on- and offline worlds. It also increases our understanding of how women’s experiences of the digital world may influence ethno-racial variation in relationship formation outcomes.

**FINDINGS**

This section first outlines the women’s experiences of men’s intimidation by their educational background and/or career accomplishments and male cyberaggression. The next section illustrates how women of color endured sexual racism in their romantic search. The final section describes the strategies, which I conceptualize as *emotion work* and *emotion repair*, that respondents used to address these experiences they encountered as they searched for romantic partners.

**Men’s Intimidation by Women’s Educational Background and/or Professional Accomplishments**

Women perceived that men were intimidated by them because they had a college, had and/or were pursuing a post-college degree, earned these degrees from prestigious or Ivy League schools, or excelled in their careers. Respondents
observed that men often hid these feelings within compliments that implied that they felt they did not measure up or match the woman’s intelligence and/or accomplishments. For example, Paulette came across men, especially Black and white men, on dating apps and websites who told her that she was “too good.” They explained they could never have imagined that someone with her intelligence, educational attainment, prestigious job, and composed self-presentation would be romantically interested in them. 26-year-old Somme, a white woman, told a funny yet sobering story about how women’s educational accomplishments and career pursuits created barriers for romantic partnership:

I remember one time I was at a bar in L.A., and I was with three of my friends. Me, my friend Karen, and then two of her friends, and these guys approached us. They were like ‘What do you girls do?’ I was working at a talent agency at the time, which was in L.A. and it was a big deal in L.A. Karen says, ‘I’m at med school in at UCLA.’ The other person was like ‘I’m starting law school at Stanford in the fall.’ Then the fourth woman said something about work for a PR company. Those dudes shrank. They stopped talking to us. They didn’t even try ... [I]t was so noticeable.

Somme and her friends experienced a barrier; once the conversation was over, the opportunity to explore a romantic connection was gone. We can infer these men were no longer interested in getting to know these women romantically, as appeared to be their original intention. Consequently, their intimidation and subsequent silence created a barrier to forming a romantic connection at that particular moment.
While this study did not explore the maintenance of romantic relationships once women entered them, it is important to note that men’s intimidation could also be a barrier to achieving marital or long-term relationships desire that women may have. Two respondents—both Latinas—reported that their previous relationships ended because the men were intimidated by their partners’ intelligence and/or educational pursuits. One of them, 28-year-old Serena, described her ex-boyfriend as ending their relationship because he felt that she was “just too smart”:

My last boyfriend was a director for American Express. He would act like everything was okay. I thought it was because he had achieved a certain level of success in his own right ...Towards the end of our relationship, he had said, ‘No, I think one of our problems is that you’re just too smart.’

Serena’s intelligence was the primary reason her former partner cited for leaving. He also took the potential for an exclusive, committed long-term relationship—one of Serena’s desires—with him. 26-year-old Amanah was pursuing an MBA while dating her previous boyfriend. He explicitly informed her that, “he was holding me down, and that he didn’t want to stand in my way. Then he left and we stopped dating.” Amanah recounted that it was not concerning to her that he did not have the same educational level as herself; but it seemed to be an issue for her ex-boyfriend.

A minority of respondents who discussed gender and education mentioned that not all men they encountered had issues with their degrees, career pursuits, and/or accomplishments. Some women felt that men were impressed. Gaia, a 26-
year-old Latina, also felt that it was an advantage for her if men wanted to date a college-educated woman. Given that both college-educated men and women often desire partners of the same educational level (Schwartz 2013; Kalmijn 1998), this finding was not a surprise. Nevertheless, stories of men welcoming women with college and post college-degrees were often mixed with stories of men who did not.

**Cyberaggression**

Drawing on Powell and Henry’s (2017) definition of technology-facilitated sexual violence\(^\text{11}\), I define cyberaggression as any behavior or aggressive demeanor which causes harm or discomfort or fear in women on online dating platforms. The respondents typically experienced cyberaggression as sexual solicitation (Powell and Henry 2017), image-based sexual harassment (Thompson 2018; Powell and Henry 2017), and gendertrolling (Mantilla 2013). These forms of cyberaggression are defined and discussed in the following sections.

**Cyberaggression: Sexual solicitation and image-based sexual harassment**

The interviews revealed that respondents could encounter sexual solicitation at any point in their interactions with a man, including in the initial message on an app or website or when they took their conversation off the dating platforms and into texting. Powell and Henry define sexual solicitation as

\(^{11}\) Powell and Henry (2017:5) define technology-facilitated sexual violence as “diverse ways in which criminal, civil, and otherwise sexually aggressive and harassing behaviors are being perpetrated with the aid or use of digital communication technologies.”
“receiving unwanted requests to talk about sex, do something sexual, or engage in an intimate relationship. Solicitation can take place in a variety of online contexts, including via email, text message, social media sites, chat rooms, or online dating sites or apps” (Powell and Henry 2017:161). Roughly two-thirds of the respondents who discussed sexual solicitation reported they usually encountered it in the initial phase of messaging with a potential romantic interest. Bailey, a 26-year-old white woman, discussed how some men’s first, opening messages were sexually explicit and inappropriate:

They [the messages] were just sexual. I would be like, ‘Hey, I like your picture. What are you up to today?’ He’d be, like, ‘Hey, I’m looking for a girl who likes to, like, whatever, explicit, explicit.’ I’m, like, ‘Okay, delete.’

That’s our first response!

Connie, a 25-year-old Black woman, also stated that some initial messages described sexual acts men “want to do to her.” The respondents additionally felt that particular mainstream\textsuperscript{12} apps such as OkCupid and Tinder, famously known as the “hook up” app, were most likely to have male users who reached for sexual solicitation as their first attempt at showing interest. Nevertheless, it also occurred on other mainstream apps like Bumble and Plenty of Fish. None of the respondents who discussed sexual solicitation felt that this was an appropriate

\textsuperscript{12} Mainstream apps and websites are those that are well known and do not cater to any particular demographic or user group. Niche apps and websites are those that cater to individuals in specific demographic groups which include race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, hobbies, lifestyles, etc. (Tiffany 2018).
way to begin a conversation or the process of getting to know them for romantic purposes, even if they were interested in these men.

Five of my respondents discussed more serious issues which followed offline such as inappropriate touch and language and even sexual assault. Giselle, a 25-year-old Latina, described a deeply uncomfortable experience she had on a date with a man she met on a dating app. Her story demonstrated the experiences that some of the respondents encountered in their romantic partner search. Giselle recalled:

This was on the first date. He touched me, he kept looking at me up and down. He kept making noises, and he would go, ‘Mm ...’. I feel like he was more interested in the physical aspect of me, not really what I was saying or what I was thinking. And I wasn’t trying to go that route [having sex] because I felt disrespected.

Giselle blocked this man on her phone and the dating app immediately after the date. Women of all races also talked about “near misses” and ending dates with men they met using dating technology when they discerned that a man was being too eager about either coming home with them, or insisting they come home with him. 25-year-old Maia, one of the Asian respondents, recounted how she was raped on a first date, also by a man she met on a dating app. This represents the most severe side of sexual solicitation.

Men also practiced image-based sexual harassment, “the sending of unsolicited nudes, [or] sexually explicit or pornographic photos and videos” (Powell and Henry 2017:163); also known in both popular and academic
literature as “dick pics” (Oswald et al. 2019; Waling and Pym 2019). This could happen at any phase of pursuing a romantic connection but, again, usually happened early in respondents’ conversations with prospective partners. This too-early abruptness was typically the reason dick pics were a turn off to respondents. They were not ready for this type of intimate interaction at the time the men sent these photos. Therefore, it was not that women did not ever want pictures of men’s genitalia; it was that they did not ask for it in this circumstance. Annaliese, a 30-year-old Black woman, recalled with disgust, “This one guy kept sending pictures of his penis. Kept sending them. It would be like, ‘I’m a teacher during the day. I can’t have my phone on the desk and these dick pictures popping up. What is wrong with you?’ Even if I was ready …” Antoinette, a 29-year-old Black woman also reported that “someone sent me a picture of their penis, which I thought was disgusting. Then not long after, his page [on the dating website] got banned so that was pretty good.” While respondents were open to “sexting,” where both parties send sexually explicit photos of themselves, image-based sexual harassment was problematic because the women had not consented to it.

Cyberaggression: Gendertrolling

Men also employed gendertrolling in their interactions with respondents, especially when women did not reciprocate their romantic interest. Karla Mantilla (2013:564) defines a feature of gendertrolling as “specific gender-based insults, including the widespread use of pejorative terms that are leveled particularly at women—‘cunt,’ ‘whore,’ ‘slut’—and comments designed to insult
and humiliate women, especially in regard to their weight and physical appearance.” Angela, a 31-year-old white woman described her experiences with exasperation and frustration. She also noted that gendertrolling was a common experience in her use of dating technology:

The reason why I stopped [using dating technology] for a while ... is because I got tired of getting called a bitch so much. Because people would say, ‘Hey.’ That seems to be the most common message I get is ‘Hey’ or ‘Hi.’ I click on their profile, and then I might not respond. And then I would often get something back, being like, ‘Wow, you’re such a bitch,’ because they could tell that I had clicked on their profile and not said anything to them .... [I]n the online world, I suddenly found myself getting called a bitch pretty often.

Among respondents, being called a “bitch” also quite a popular form of gendertrolling. Additionally, the women in the sample who described themselves as “curvy” or “overweight” were particularly susceptible to attacks about their weight if they rejected romantic overtures while using online and app dating. This focus on their weight illustrates aspects of gender-based abuse captured in Mantilla’s conceptualization of gendertrolling. Gendertrolling illustrated a barrier to relationship formation as men who employed it were no longer viable potential romantic partners.

Sexual Racism

While women encountered men’s intimidation and cyberaggression as barriers regardless of ethno-racial background, women of color faced an
additional barrier in their romantic partner search: sexual racism. Charles Stember (1976) originally coined the term as a way to understand racialized sexual desires and the stereotypes about Black men and women that inform those desires while also discouraging romantic relationships between whites and Blacks (Han and Choi 2018). Jason Orne (2017) extended the concept to include the social levels on which sexual racism occurs: structural, cultural, and interactional. In this section, I focus on cultural sexual racism as it best explains the experiences, including fetishization, that the Asian, Latina, and Black women interviewed faced both on- and offline in their romantic partner search. Orne (2017: 69) defines cultural sexual racism as interacting with potential romantic partners based on “racial gendering”, which are “gender implications that connect to presumptions of sexual prowess” or sexual appetite (Collins 2009). Scholars also refer to this as gendered racial stereotypes (Robnett and Feliciano 2011). I also use gendered racial stereotypes to illustrate how women of color experienced cultural sexual racism in their romantic partner search. The primary gendered racial stereotype men utilized in their interaction with women of color was hypersexuality. This assumption of “excessive sexual appetite” stems from white imaginations of Africans and their enslaved descendants (Collins 2009:140). However, Asian and Latina women have also become targets of this stereotype as a way to idealize white femininity as pure, virtuous, and superior, with the ultimate goal of upholding white supremacy (Collins 2009; Nagel 2003).

**Cultural Sexual Racism: Women of Color and the Assumption of Hypersexuality**

This section illustrates how women of color experienced cultural sexual
racism as (primarily white) men presumed hypersexuality in their interactions with them. Caroline, a 33-year-old Asian woman, described some of the sexual solicitations she received on dating apps as being centered on her Asian womanhood as the point of men’s interest, attraction, and sexual desire: “I generally ignore ...the sexist ones, the fetishization ones ... If there was a filter for that I would appreciate it, because some of those things were very, very creepy.”

Niara, a 28-year-old Latina recounted that two men she knew groped her. She stated matter-of-factly: “They assumed because I’m Latina I’m hypersexual, I’m not.” Niara felt that these men touched her inappropriately because they assumed about her sexual appetite and/or sexual prowess because she is Latina. These experiences also demonstrate how sexual solicitations on and off dating technology often included the fetishism that can accompany cultural sexual racism.

(White) men also presumed hypersexuality among women of color because on they viewed them as exotic due to their racial/ethnic identity. They included these respondents as potential romantic partners because of this perception. These interactions also typically occurred as sexual solicitations on dating platforms. Some respondents additionally explained that because men sometimes could not racially identify them on dating apps and sites, they were more likely to get messages that mentioned their racial ambiguity as exotic.

Natasha, a 28-year-old Latina, talked about her experience and the added pressure of men asking her to send additional pictures of herself even though there were already pictures on the app:
Well, I think men in general think I’m exotic, which pisses me off. One thing that pissed me off about those apps also was like, ‘Send me a pic, send me a pic.’ I’m not going to send you a pic. There’s twenty up. This is how I look. So, I guess according to my race, I look different than other people. I don’t know what they’re looking for or their own biases or racism in their brains.

Figure 9 (see below) shows a screen shot of a text exchange that Genevieve, a 25-year-old Black respondent, sent me. It depicts an exchange between a white man, whom I will call Brad, and herself. Genevieve communicated with Brad via Bumble, the dating app she was using at the time of our interview. Genevieve attempted multiple times to inform him that she felt “fetishized,” but to no avail.
Not only was there sexual solicitation, but Brad also highlighted Genevieve’s race as one of the reasons he wanted to have sex with her (i.e., “I’ve never fucked a Black chick before”). This statement also implied that he felt that having sex with a Black woman would be different than sex with women of other ethno-racial backgrounds. He additionally viewed her Blackness as a site of sexual conquest, another box he could check off his list of races he’s “slam[med].”

Interactional Sexual Racism: Dating While Black

Even as they contended with cultural sexual racism from men who were interested in dating them, Black women simultaneously experienced interactional sexual racism (Orne 2017). That is, exclusion as romantic partners. Black women experienced interactional sexual racism from both Black and non-
Black men. Many mainstream and niche dating platforms give users the option to filter search results by the user's ethno-racial preferences. On some of platforms, such as Match.com, users can see which ethno-racial groups the other users have chosen to include or exclude in their preferences. Alice recounted her experience of being discounted as a romantic partner on Match.com:

Certainly online. I think that’s a place where you start to feel it more intensely ...I would go onto these platforms like Match ... and on Match you can actually list your racial preferences for a partner, the preferences you’re interested in. And there were many times where guys will list every racial background except for Black woman, which I always found so striking. How can you completely discount a whole group of people? That was just amazing to me. That was the first time where it was ever really in my face.

Another way Black women experienced interactional racism was by observing who did and did not initiate or respond to their messages. Tabitha, a 32-year-old Black woman, experienced exclusion in terms of how often men with her educational, professional and religious preferences responded to her messages. She explained:

If he was a white man, or if he had a Master's, or a PhD, or he was an engineer making a lot of money, or he expressed that he was Christian or Jewish and that was important to him, then I feel like my response rate from that type of person was not as high.
Tabitha’s experiences also support findings that show that college-educated Black women are the least likely to receive responses from the types of men with whom they desired romantic partnerships compared to non-Black college-educated women (Muro and Martinez 2016; Lin and Lundquist 2013; Feliciano et al. 2009).

A third way that Black female respondents experienced interactional sexual racism was when both Black and non-Black men stated on their profiles—explicitly and unprompted—that they did not date Black women. Below are two images that depict the kind of exclusion that Black women could encounter while engaging in a romantic search online or simply browsing social media. Figure 10 is from Rhea, who found this profile while browsing Bumble.

![Figure 10: Bumble Profile with Example of Interactional Sexual Racism](image)

Not only does this man compare women to meat, betraying a misogynistic viewpoint, he states clearly that he is not romantically interested in Black women. This image also demonstrates the explicit and unprompted nature of interactional sexual racism.

Black women reported that Black men specifically also used gendered
racial stereotypes to justify their decision not to date Black women. Kelly painfully described her experience:

I’m friends with a guy now who was explaining to me ... why he doesn’t date Black women .... His mother’s Dominican, his father’s Black, and he feels that Black women just have this power structure where they’re very strong and dominate. They make you not feel like a man. ...’ Black women need to be less loud, less aggressive, less dominating, less ambitious, less controlling .... That’s really frustrating because it’s everyone asking you not to be who you are to be someone that they can pursue.

As Kelly explained, Black women additionally they felt their racial status was a disadvantage to them while searching for a romantic partner because it required them to “tone down,” or at least acquiesce to some standard of acceptable womanhood, if they were to be more successful in their romantic partner search. Unlike other women, Black women could not assume that being Black would improve their opportunities for relationship formation or for homophily in their romantic connections.

White, Asian, and Latina women did not face interactional sexual racism. They could count on men of their same ethno-racial background, and sometimes even Black men, to be interested in them. The four quotes below illustrate this point:

“...all things being equal, if you had a room full of equal numbers of men in every race maybe more of the Asian men would be attracted to me than the other ones” (Liora, Asian, 32)
“The only way I think about my race ... if I was super interested, I think there are more [Asian male] options here. I’m just not interested in the kind of people who are here” (Athena, Asian, 30)

“Hispanic and Black men ... approach me more often than the other races, both in person and online” (Jane, Latina, 25)

“I think that there are probably more people who are open to dating a white woman who are not white than there are people open to dating a woman of another race who are not of that race. The culture that I live in has ‘normalcy’ that benefits me” (Jovana, white, 31)

Although Black men do form romantic partnerships with Black women, Black women do not have the same confidence as non-Black women about being unquestionably considered as potential romantic partners. Moreover, the privilege of being able to comfortably state that they had same race/ethnic partners as options but were not interested in them, as Athena did, was not part of the romantic search experience for Black women.

Coping with Barriers to Relationship Formation

Women used various strategies to cope with the barriers to relationship formation that men’s cyberaggression, intimidation, and sexual racism created. These strategies fell into two categories, conceptualized here as emotion work and emotion repair. Emotion work constituted any strategy that prioritized men’s feelings and from which men benefitted. This definition of emotion work
draws from Hochshild’s ([1983] 2012) concept of emotional labor from *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. She defines it as “labor [that] requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others— in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (Hochshild [1983] 2012:20). Hochshild further argues that emotional labor is done primarily by women, in both the private and public realms of social life, and that it “affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others ([1983] 2012:112).” Affirmation, enhancement, and celebration, then, are benefits that organizations, consumers, and family members alike gain from women’s emotional labor. In my articulation, emotion work involves performing actions that prioritize men’s feelings to produce a situation where men feel comfortable enough to pursue a romantic connection with a woman. This emotion work also benefits men as their social status as the dominant and superior gender is affirmed, enhanced, and celebrated as a result of this prioritization of their feelings. It is also important to note that emotion work potentially increased women’s opportunities for making romantic connections precisely because it benefitted men.

*Emotion Work: Prioritizing Men’s Feelings*

To address men’s intimidation, respondents downplayed or minimized their educational background and/or career accomplishments. Downplaying and minimization are behaviors that characterize conventional social constructions of femininity. These conventional or traditional constructions of femininity rely on beliefs of women inferiority and men’s superiority in every area of social life.
(West and Zimmerman 1987). Therefore, a performance of femininity must also necessarily include behavior that emphasizes women’s inferiority and men’s superiority, and which West and Zimmerman (1987:136) term “doing gender.” Thus, respondents’ work of downplaying and minimizing their professional and educational accomplishments was a way to do femininity. This particular display of femininity benefitted men, and thereby was emotion work. Because women downplayed and minimized their own accomplishments, men could not only pursue these high achieving women more easily, but they could also do so without having to confront why they were intimidated in the first place.

For example, after Somme recounted the story of the men who “shrank” when she and her friends described their professional and educational accomplishments, Somme immediately informed her friends, “We’re telling people we are nannies because we’re never going to get laid if we line up like this and go down the line.” This suggestion for the women to pretend to be nannies demonstrates a conventional construction of femininity. Minimizing and downplaying their accomplishments by pretending to do work that is constructed as feminine, instead of their actual jobs, which are construed as masculine (England 2010), could make men feel less inferior and thus comfortable enough to pursue a sexual relationship. As some of the respondents indeed entered exclusive dating relationships with men who started out as exclusively sexual partners (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), Somme’s plan was strategic for creating opportunities to form a short- or long-term relationship. Though the women may also benefit by making a romantic connection, it was at the expense of perpetuating gender inequality.
For Black women, men’s intimidation, especially from Black men, was often undergirded by the controlling image of the Black lady (Collins 2009). Black ladies are:

middle-class black women …who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much … have jobs that are so all consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them. Because they so routinely compete with [black] men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated black ladies are deemed to be too assertive (Collins 2009:89).

This controlling image relies on both conventional constructs of femininity and racial struggles amongst Blacks that often-pitted Black women against Black men in social, political, and economic realms so as to fortify white supremacy (Collins 2009). A consequence of these racial struggles was that Black men’s masculinity was, in some ways, dependent specifically on Black women’s inferiority, not simply women’s inferiority in general, to legitimize them as fully human in a society that racialized Blacks as sub-humans. Therefore, Black women’s emotion work was necessarily intersectional in its attempt to address both gendered and racial conceptions of femininity. Kelly, a 30-year-old Black woman, noted that to prevent her Black ex-boyfriend from feeling “emasculated” or “inferior” because she had college and post-college degrees from an Ivy League institution and he did not, she was “constantly walking on eggshells” and felt that she had to “tone [herself] down.” Kelly’s management of her partner’s intimidation amounted to doing a gendered performance of femininity also has racial impact. She is a
woman who tended carefully to her partner’s emotional needs to facilitate maintenance of his gender dominance in the relationship and wider society (Collins 2009; Tichenor 1999). Furthermore, Black women in this study are in a unique bind as the intersection of their race and gender cast them into a controlling image they may or may not fit into and which limits their opportunities to meet partners.

None of these methods, however, guaranteed that women would avoid intimidating men. First, I did not observe any differences in race/ethnicity, educational attainment, income, occupational, or political values among the men women perceived were intimidated or ended relationships because of the respondent’s educational or professional achievements. Second, women recounted that even when some men found out later about their educational background and/or professional accomplishments, these men still felt intimidated.

Emotion Repair: Prioritizing Women’s Feelings

Emotion repair characterized the other strategies women utilized to address constraints to forming relationships. I derived this term from psychology’s concept of emotion regulation, or, “the attempts individuals make to maintain, inhibit, and enhance emotional experience and expression” (Roberton, Daffern, and Bucks 2012:73). Emotion repair is different from emotion regulation, however, because it focuses on the work that women do to inhibit or reduce the internalization of the negative emotions associated with the adverse interactions they had. Unlike emotion work, emotion repair prioritized women’s
feelings and, in doing so, benefitted women. Unfortunately, however, emotion repair strategies could also potentially limit women’s opportunity for making romantic connections.

90% of women in the study practiced emotion repair by eliminating men as potential partners if they were intimidated by their education and/or professional accomplishments or utilized cyberaggression or sexual racism. Elimination included ceasing communication via the dating app, phone or text conversations, and in person. This elimination could happen at any point in the romantic partner search. For my respondents, however, it was most likely to happen after the first few messages online or after going on several dates and discovering the men’s unhealthy preoccupation with the women’s ethno-racial status, their educational/professional accomplishments, or attempts to demonstrate their intellectual superiority. The important consequence of this elimination, nonetheless, was that these men were no longer viable romantic partner options for respondents and, thereby, opportunities for forming romantic connections and relationships were limited.

Annette, a 32-year-old white woman who used dating technology on and off in her romantic partner search, expressed impatience at men’s intimidation when they learned she had a college degree from Princeton University. She saw this intimidation as a “weakness” and as evidence of a “complex”:

I feel like the Princeton label, people get scared fast, you know? They’re just like ‘Oh, Princeton girl,’ and I just don’t have any patience for that kind of intimidation. Even if my husband didn’t go to an Ivy League school, I don’t want him to have a complex about it. To me, a complex is
weakness. I don’t want to be talking to anyone who has a complex. I hate when people call me out and, like, ‘Oh, Princeton girl using the big words. Oh, Princeton girl using the big concept.’ When you do that, I’m never going to date you.

Annette eliminated men from her romantic partner search who perseverated on or were intimidated by her Ivy League education.

Given the frequency of cyberaggression and sexual racism, another primary strategy of emotion repair was to permanently or temporarily leave online dating and/or to deprioritize engagement in the romantic partner search. These strategies not only helped women to escape the adverse consequences and frustrations of searching for a romantic partner, but also to reflect on the process and its emotional costs. Antoinette, the 29-year-old Black woman I spoke to who was sent a dick pic, permanently stopped using dating technology shortly after that incident and relied on friends and family to facilitate meeting potential romantic partners. Angela, the woman who discussed being called a bitch, retreated from using dating technology for six months because of the incessant gendertrolling. It was also not uncommon for my follow-up respondents to leave online dating for a few weeks or months during the 13-month follow-up period.

To deal with sexual racism, many women of color not only eliminated potential partners in the ways described above, but they also excluded white men as potential romantic partners as they were the most likely to be perpetrators of sexual racism. These respondents explained that they had to be cautious of white men who showed romantic interest. It was not always clear to respondents if
these men included them as romantic partners specifically because they were ethno-racial-minority women or because of some personality trait that humanized them. Red flags included men who exclusively dated Asian, Latina, or Black women or who pressed women about their ethno-racial partner preferences and the race/ethnicity of men they had dated in the past. Caroline, a 33-year-old Asian woman, recalled an interaction she had with a white man on a dating app that ended with her blocking him:

I got into an argument with someone one time—he was a white man—because he said something racist. But he immediately was very curious about what kind men I dated, preferences, how many. I did answer. My preferences all have to do with personality. And then he asked me had I dated other men of different races, and I said I have. Then he said something racist about Black men. I blocked him.

After a few similar incidents, Caroline simply refused to include white men in her search parameters any longer. Other women wavered between including and excluding white men depending on what they felt they could handle emotionally at the moment or based on the selection of men of color who met their other partner preferences. Women of color respondents, across the board, desired romantic relationships with men who saw them as fully human, not simply as a desirable object based on the intersection of their race/ethnicity and gender.

DISCUSSION

The findings discussed here support much of the literature that examines how women experience relationship formation in the digital age. For instance,
studies find that cyberaggression characterizes male interactions with women on dating apps, websites, and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (Thompson 2018; Jane 2017; Mantilla 2013). Research additionally shows that sexual solicitation and image-based sexual harassment are a common experience of women who use dating apps and websites, and that sexual solicitation also describes the majority of messages that women receive while using dating technology (Oswald et al. 2019; Powell and Henry 2017). Moreover, men’s intimidation of women with college and post college degrees and/or professional accomplishment also garnered national attention in mainstream and social media (Pincott 2017; Steinberg 2012).

Connell’s (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity—defined by Messerschmidt and Messner (2018:41) as “masculinities constructed locally, regionally, and globally that legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women”—helps to make sense of cyberaggression, men’s intimidation, and sexual racism. The persistent theme in these behaviors is male domination through the prioritization of their feelings and desires over that of respondents in this study. This prioritization therefore characterizes and perpetuates the “unequal relationship” between men and women. Furthermore, when respondents utilize emotion work, this strategy benefits men precisely because it prioritizes their feelings and desires and relies on the subordination of women’s agency or control over how they present themselves or do femininity. Hegemonic masculinity can also provide insight into how the strategies of emotion work can increase opportunities for forming romantic relationships while emotion repair may reduce them. When men feel less threatened by or inferior to the women in
question, they may also feel more confident, encouraging them to pursue a romantic relationship.

Through dating technology, men exercised hegemonic masculinity, knowingly or unknowingly, when they initiated a conversation with a respondent using sexual solicitation, sent a nude or images of their genitalia without consent, or interacted with women of color because of an assumption of hypersexuality. These behaviors suggested that the men did not care about the respondents’ interest or agency, only their own sexual desires. Moreover, research finds that heterosexual men who sent dick pics did so because they wanted the women to feel sexually aroused or attractive (Oswald et al. 2019), but this and other studies show that it often had the opposite impact. This is because research also finds that dick pics and sexual solicitation are more appealing to men than to women (Waling and Pym 2019; Vitis and Gilmour 2017). Thus, in sending unsolicited, sexually charged photos, using unwanted sexual language or touch, or assuming hypersexuality, men, at best, misunderstood how women felt about these behaviors or, at worst, prioritized their own sexual desires and assumptions over the women’s feelings. When men sent messages that described the sexual activities they desired to do with or to respondents, they objectified or reduced respondents down to their bodies or body parts (Nussbaum 2010) and, thus, similarly negated the women’s sexual agency. These actions demonstrated hegemonic masculinity as they intentionally or unintentionally assumed male dominance over women. Sexual racism, which, more often than not, relied on fetishization and stereotypes about the hypersexuality of women of certain racial/ethnic groups, presented an even more insidious form of hegemonic
masculinity because of its racial overtones. White men were the main perpetrators, here. Thus, their implied dismissal of women’s sexual agency and desires was not only an assertion of male dominance but of white male dominance, a prevalent tool of white supremacy (Collins 2009).

Similarly, gendertrolling showed men’s prioritization of their emotional experience of anger and rejection of women’s agency to accept or reject potential romantic partners. Moreover, men used gendertrolling to assert dominance, with shaming as part and parcel of this assertion. Nussbaum (2010:73) defines shaming as “giving someone a stigmatized, spoiled identity,” which is exactly what men did when they called respondents “bitch,” “fat,” or maligned their character. It was hard for respondents to ignore this gendertrolling as the verbal abuse and name calling—and resulting shame—struck at the core of the women’s beliefs about both themselves and their worthiness to be loved. Respondents’ decision to permanently or temporarily step away from dating technology and/or to reduce their engagement in their search for a romantic partner further demonstrated the power of male gendertrolling.

Men’s prioritization of their feelings and desire for dominance was additionally illustrated in their reluctance to romantically pursue respondents they deemed as being “too good” because of their educational background and/or professional accomplishments. This aversion to high achieving women persisted despite the continuing increase in the number of women earning college and post college-degrees (Reeves and Guyot 2017) and entering male-dominated fields such as science, medicine, law, and talent. These men have been exposed to dual-earning families, women in middle-class professions, and female family and
friends with college and post-college degrees, and perhaps even went to Ivy League or prestigious schools with women similar to these respondents themselves. They are what Gerson (2010:3) describes as “children of the gender revolution.” Therefore, a reluctance to pursue a romantic connection with women with these educational and/or professional background suggests that although men may accept women’s entrance into these public domains, they still expect to be dominant and superior in their private, romantic lives (Valenti 2018).

Finally, respondents’ strategies of emotion work to mitigate men’s reluctance to date them further reveals the presence, power, and persistence of hegemonic masculinity. First, the burden of accommodation falls on the women because they strategized around men’s discomfort of their educational background and/or professional accomplishments rather than their own desires. This finding supports research that shows that women, not men, often do the work of adjusting in the face of women’s professional or career advancement, whether that be in the workplace or at home (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Blair-Loy 2003). Emotion work also necessarily included performing behaviors that highlighted or signaled their female gender. Behaviors, which when recognized as acceptable performances of gender, implied male superiority and female inferiority. Sociological literature demonstrates that performing actions that support male dominance is a common way that women deal with men’s discomfort with women’s educational or professional superiority. For example, Tichenor (1999) finds that in households where women either earned more money than their husbands or were the sole breadwinner, they still completed the lion’s share of household chores and did not always possess veto power in
financial decisions even when they were the expert in a specific area. Similar to my argument, Tichenor (1999) contended that much of this behavior constituted wives doing female gender—performing the traditional roles of femininity in the home helped to maintain the husband’s power in the home and marital relationship. Lastly, respondents’ realization that prioritizing men’s discomfort over their own could increase their chances of making a romantic connection or moving one into a marital relationship further revealed hegemonic masculinity as integral to the gender order in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates that heterosexual women encounter barriers as they search for romantic partners in the digital age. Some of these barriers also differed by ethno-racial background. While women of all races experienced male cyberaggression and intimidation, women of color also faced cultural sexual racism. Black women encountered the greatest number of barriers as they were also the only ethno-racial group excluded as potential romantic partners by Black and non-Black men. To alleviate these barriers, women utilized emotion work and emotion repair. However, given that emotion work perpetuates gender inequality and emotion repair can limit opportunities for making a romantic connection, I conclude that engaging in a romantic partner search in the digital age comes at the cost of perpetuating gender and racial inequality. Moreover, I argue that college-educated Black women endure this cost to the greatest degree compared to their non-Black counterparts. Gender and racial inequality may ultimately contribute to lower rates of relationship formation and increased rates
of singleness in this population.

College-educated Black women generally search for partners in marriage markets where there are more Black female college grads than Black male grads (Cohen and Pepin 2018). Thus, if they decide to practice emotion repair by eliminating men who are intimidated by them or utilize cyberaggression and cultural sexual racism, their opportunities for forming relationships—already limited by race-based exclusion by men—can become more constrained than for non-Black college-educated women. Emotion work is not a viable solution for this population either as it relies on beliefs in Black women’s inferiority. Therefore, we cannot ask Black women to address these barriers themselves through their emotion work or repair. Rather, we must continue working toward a just and equitable society where technology does not reify and perpetuate gender and racial inequalities.

The next chapter examines one more barrier that women encounter in their romantic partner search: gender inequality in the form of gendered courtship initiation scripts. It focuses primarily on women who utilized dating technology in their search to explore how respondents cling to traditional initiation norms of waiting for men to initiate and women to expect and wait for that initiation. It also explores how dating technology both facilitates women’s agency in their romantic partner search, but also fails to decrease their reliance on these cultural scripts.
Chapter 4: The Reification of Gendered Initiation Norms on Dating Technology and Relationship Formation

So wrap your arms around my chest
And I’ll put my hands around your neck
‘Cause nobody wins these waiting games
You push you pull, but you should stay
—Elley Duhé and Gryffin, “Tie Me Down”

Traditional heterosexual courtship initiation scripts dictate that men be the first to explicitly indicate romantic interest and women wait for men to do so (Weigel 2016; Bailey 1988; Cate and Lloyd 1992; West and Zimmerman 1987). However, dating technology offers men and women searchers an opportunity to deviate from this norm. Some dating platforms, such as Bumble, even actively challenge these initiation rules. This chapter explores how conventional meeting and mating scripts manifest on dating websites and applications and the persistence of traditional initiation for heterosexual women despite the opportunity to practice alternative initiation courtship behaviors that dating technology provides.

There is a significant body of social science research on gender norms and relationship formation in the offline world (Lamont 2020; Weigel 2016; Eaton and Rose 2011; Sassler and Miller 2011; Ehrenreich and English 2005). However, parallel research on initiation behaviors on dating websites and apps is at a more nascent stage (see Lamont 2020; Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). As dating

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13 I use the words conventional, traditional, cultural, and gendered to describe these standard initiation behaviors.
technology has become a significant part of the romantic cultural landscape in the last fifteen to twenty years (Rosenfeld, Thomas, and Hausen 2019; Thomas 2019; Schwartz and Velotta 2018), this exploration is important for three reasons. First, it provides a window into what being the first to indicate romantic interest looks like on dating technology. Research on gendered initiation behaviors often discusses initiating messages and first dates, but rarely mentions that there are a variety of other ways to be the first to signal interest online and on dating apps. How do users utilize these signals? How does having numerous ways to signal interest facilitate or diminish the use of conventional courtship rituals? How does their utilization fit into current conceptualizations of conventional courtship practices? Second, if and how does dating technology facilitate or diminish the adherence to or use of traditional initiation scripts? Third, why does dating technology sometimes fail to live up to its potential to liberate users from practicing traditional initiation norms?

Furthermore, research that explores gender dynamics in courtship primarily focuses on white women, even though intersectional theory demonstrates that gender inequality impacts women of color differently than white women (Chou 2012; Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1990). There is a need for research that considers how non-white women experience and navigate gender norms in their relationship formation process, especially in an age where women have greater agency in their sexual lives. There are also ethno-racial differences in intimate romantic relationship formation among heterosexual women. Black women are the least likely to be married or in romantic relationships compared to their non-Black counterparts (Cohen and Pepin 2018; Clarke 2011). If traditional
initiation rituals play out in the digital space, how do they contribute to ethno-racial variation in romantic relationship formation?

Important historical and demographic changes have contributed to a historical moment where women can deviate from traditional initiation scripts both on- and offline. These changes include convenient and reliable contraception (Eig 2014); an increase in women’s participation in higher education and formerly male-dominated professions (England 2010); greater freedom and expression of sexuality (Weigel 2016); and the advent of dating technology. However, do women deviate from these scripts given the opportunity? Why or why not? Drawing on interviews with 111 women of varying ethno-racial backgrounds, I find that 84% used dating technology at least once in their romantic partner search. Regardless of racial/ethnic background, respondents additionally wait for and expect men to initiate the first message and the first in person meeting. Respondents named a variety of reasons for waiting, including past experiences of being rejected when they initiated. Lastly, I find that while dating technology facilitates women’s agency in their partner search, it does not diminish their adherence to or use of traditional initiation scripts. Based on these findings, I conclude that despite opportunities to deviate from conventional initiation scripts that dating technology provides, gendered initiation scripts are a barrier to relationship formation among heterosexual college-educated women. This research further broadens our knowledge of how traditional initiation scripts play out in online and app dating; and it deepens our understanding of how gender inequality persists, despite the liberating potential from these scripts that dating technology offers women.
Historical Overview of Courtship Norms

Historical research shows that our current understanding of cultural gender scripts that govern heterosexual men’s and women’s roles in the wooing or initiation phase of relationship formation began in the late 19th century, and it is based on behaviors practiced among middle-class whites (Weigel 2016; Coontz 2005; Cate and Lloyd 1992; Bailey 1988). Most significantly, courtship norms reflected the economic relationships between white, middle-class men and women as well as the reality that although working-class women of all races worked outside of the home, their wages were low compared to white and co-ethnic men’s wages (Weigel 2016; Ehrenreich and English 2005). The idea was that because men were the primary breadwinners, they should initiate romantic relationships. Women stayed at home or earned lower wages when they worked outside of the home; thus, they were economically dependent on men (Weigel 2016; Coontz 2005; Ehrenreich and English 2005). Their role in the formation of the heterosexual romantic relationship, then, was to wait for the man to initiate interest to which they would respond. Consequently, men’s initiation of the courtship relationship became associated with a strong indicator of romantic interest and was considered more significant and legitimate than women’s initiation within the US gender order (Weigel 2016). Whether it was “treating” among the working class or “calling” among the middle-class, a man’s invitation to spend time with him was an unmistakable sign of his romantic interest (Weigel 2016:15).

These conventions continue into the 21st century, even as women’s increased participation in higher education and the labor force has contributed to
their greater economic independence and diminished reliance on men for their financial well-being (Gerson 2010; Oppenheimer 1994). Research demonstrates that women who earn high incomes desire egalitarian relationships, but practice behaviors that emphasize limited female agency in relationship formation and maintenance (Lamont 2020, 2014; Sassler and Miller 2011). Women with financial power are still waiting for men to take the lead in all phases of the relationship formation process. Despite significant advances in women’s rights, modern cultural artifacts such as self-help books, magazines, and media also advise that “he’s just not that into you” if men are not the first to explicitly indicate romantic interest. That interest must also be followed by their initiation to spend time together (phone calls, texts, dates, etc.) (Schneider and Fein 2012; Harvey 2009; Behrendt and Tuccillo 2004). Men’s initiation remains more highly valued and legitimate than women’s in the relationship formation process (Lamont 2020). Moreover, men’s initiation and women’s waiting were and remain bound up in meanings and performances of heterosexual masculinity and femininity (Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987). Put simply, to ask first is “doing” masculinity; waiting to be asked is “doing” femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). These are “the ways of living” in what Connell (1987:179) calls the “gender regime” of heterosexual romantic relationships.

Individuals are also more open to egalitarian gender roles in the domestic realm, and there has been an increase in men’s participation in the home (Sullivan 2012). Yet, men and women also still hold more traditional attitudes toward gender roles in the initiation phase of forming a romantic relationship. For instance, Eaton and Rose (2011) examined sex roles from the 1980s to 2010s
and found that heterosexual women continued to wait for men to ask them out and pay for dates, even when alternatives such as women initiating dates or splitting the check became more acceptable. Lamont (2020) and Sassler and Miller (2011) also found this to be the case when they examined who initiates cohabitation and engagement.

**Dating Technology and Initiation Scripts**

Dating technology increasingly provides opportunities for men and women to challenge gendered initiation scripts and practice alternative initiation norms (DeVoss 2007). The rise of computer-dating began in the late 1990s into the early 2000s. Websites like Match.com were trailblazers for other mainstream sites such as Plenty of Fish (POF) and OkCupid (Schwartz and Velotta 2018; Whitty 2007). Computer dating evolved into dating applications (apps), which are used on mobile phones and have further increased the convenience of searching for a romantic partner. Most importantly, either men or women can be the first to show romantic interest and in a variety of ways depending on the dating platform. The most direct way to indicate interest is to send a personalized message. The research on dating technology, nevertheless, shows that women wait for men to initiate messages and dates. Men still feel pressure to be the initiators (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Lamont 2013). However, this research typically ignores how gendered initiation scripts manifest on dating technology and how dating technology cannot always overcome the practice of utilizing these traditional initiation scripts. This chapter examines these questions to fill current research gaps on dating technology and the use of gendered initiation scripts.
Theoretical Framework: Dating Technology as a Crisis Tendency

I use Connell’s (1987:159) theory of “crisis tendency,” to argue that dating technology presents a challenge to traditional initiation norms that characterize interactions between men and women in the initial phase of courtship. These norms which additionally dictate acceptable performances of heterosexual masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual gender regime. I also use the theory to show why the use of conventional initiation norms persist within dating technology. Connell maintains that there are four structural features of the gender order within which the gender regime of the heterosexual romantic relationship operates:

(a) the gendered separation of domestic life from the money economy and the political world; (b) heavily masculinized core institutions and a more open-textured periphery; (c) institutionalized heterosexuality and the invalidation or repression of homosexuality...(d) the major pattern of sexual politics, the overall subordination of women by men.

She further defines crisis tendencies as “dynamics which have the potential to transform these four features [of the gender order], and thus change in fundamental ways the conditions of future social practice.” Crisis tendencies also have to hold the promise of “improvement in the conditions of practice for women generally...” (p. 159). Dating technology is a crisis tendency for heterosexual femininity and masculinity, which are enacted through gendered initiation norms within the heterosexual romantic relationship gender regime, because it can facilitate dynamics to potentially alter the features of the gender
order.

First, dating technology has the potential to transform the gendered separation of domestic life from the money economy and the political world. In these worlds, women’s confidence, ambition, strategic decision making, intelligence, initiative, and other traits or behaviors that are considered “masculine” are championed (Sanders 2013). Dating technology provides women the opportunity to utilize their agency in the domestic world, which in this case is their love life, in the same ways the ways they would use it in the money economy or political world. Women can be the first to show romantic interest and in a variety of ways depending on the dating platform. On Match.com, for instance men or women users can click the “heart” button to like a profile; they can click the “star” button to add this profile to their list of favorite profiles; they can send a “wink” using the smiley face button, or they can send a direct, personalized message (which can range from something as simple as “Hi” to something more elaborate) (see Figures 11 and 12 (Murray 2018). On apps such as Tinder which have a “swipe” function, users can indicate romantic interest by swiping right. If users swipe right on each other’s profiles, they are matched and either a man or woman can start a conversation by messaging (Stephenson 2020; Preston 2018; Tinder.com) (see Figure 12).
Bumble, with its women first approach, mandates that women approach dating in an assertive rather than passive manner. Women swipe right to be matched with a male user. Women have 24 hours to send the first message once
they mutually match with a man. Men have no way to send the initial message. By creating a space for women to perform masculinity in the private sphere, dating technology thereby challenges the separation between the domestic life and the money economy and political world.

Second, dating technology has the potential to transform heavily masculinized core institutions. Dating technology offers searchers the opportunity to forego courtship behaviors that reflect the man-as breadwinner and woman-as-economically dependent arrangement. That either men or women can initiate the first message or meet up on dating apps and websites more accurately depicts the reality that women (especially those with college- and post-college degrees and/or in high-income earning professions) are no longer economically dependent on men. Consequently, dating technology provides women the opportunity to do gender—femininity—in ways that do not reflect this dependence.

Third, dating technology has the potential to alter institutionalized heterosexuality precisely because it offers users an opportunity to perform masculinity and femininity in ways that do not conform to gender norms of the heterosexual romantic relationship gender regime. Within institutionalized heterosexuality, heterosexual masculinity dictates that men should be the first to explicitly indicate romantic interest. Heterosexual femininity dictates that women wait for men to do so. Online and app dating alter these aspects of institutionalized heterosexuality because men and women are not subject to these rules. They perform masculinity and femininity however they desire in the initial phase of making romantic connections.
Lastly, traditional courtship initiation scripts reflect a gender order and sexual politics where women are subordinate to men—women’s desire to initiate is overruled by the expectation that men begin the romantic pursuit. Dating technology does not bind individuals to these norms because men or women are free to initiate conversations, meetups, and even sex. Consequently, dating technology as a crisis tendency to heterosexual femininity and masculinity poses a challenge to the “system of male domination” (Connell 1987:117).

Drawing on interview data, I maintain however that despite being a crisis tendency, dating technology has not altered the gender order and cannot in its current state change how men and women interact in the beginning stages of the heterosexual romantic relationship. I further demonstrate that dating technology does not currently provide the certitude and security that hegemonic masculinity can via t gendered initiation norms. Consequently, it remains risky for women to deviate from gendered initiation scripts even when they utilize technology in their romantic search. Gendered initiation scripts are therefore a barrier to relationship formation that dating technology cannot fully overcome.

FINDINGS

Dating technology offers a variety of ways to show interest and to be the first to do so. I categorize these ways to showing romantic interest into what I conceptualize as “low-risk” and “high-risk” signals. I define low risk signals as ways of showing interest that do not require much time or emotional investment, can be used to show romantic interest to numerous users simultaneously, and most importantly, allows users to indicate interest without committing to
initiating contact. While these signals vary from dating platform to platform, they include “liking” profiles or pictures on a profile, sending “winks,” “favoriting” a profile, or sending one-word email messages (e.g. “Hey,” “Hi,” “What’s up”) via the dating platform. These signals can usually be done with the click or swipe of a button.

I define a “high-risk” signal as a direct, personalized message via the dating platform which commits users to initiating the first contact. In terms of online and app dating, this is the only kind of high-risk signal. I define it as such because it requires time, some emotional investment, hope that the recipient will respond, and cannot be easily copied and pasted to other users. This message says more than “Hi,” “Hey”, or “What’s up?” and perhaps refers to something in recipients’ profile that piqued the searcher’s interest, or even asks questions that enable conversation. An examination of the tips that personal and relationship coaches and bloggers give for crafting an online message that encourages a response demonstrates the time and emotional investment involved in sending one. For instance, Elizabeth Entenman (2017) on “The Date Mix” blog and Vidaselect.com (2020) give users tips on how to write effective messages (see Figures 13 and 14). These suggestions require some thoughtfulness and time investment on the part of users. Complimenting profiles, asking questions, or being straightforward about their romantic interest means that the user has actually read the profile, has thought about their message, and is hopeful for a response. It is also more time consuming to write a meaningful message to every user in whom an individual was interested than sending a like. There is also the risk of rejection. The recipient of the message may not respond despite the
amount of time and effort the interested user spent on their message.

THE datemix

1. Start with “hi,” but give it a spin.
When you meet somebody in real life, chances are you do two things: say hello and tell them your name. So why not employ the same greeting tactic online? Saying hi and introducing yourself is polite, easy, and effective—and you’d be surprised by how few people actually do it in their online dating messages. But instead of just saying “hi,” “hey,” or “hello” like everybody else does, make things interesting.

Examples:
- How’s it going? I’m Elizabeth.
- Fancy meeting you here. I’m Elizabeth.
- Hola, bonjour, ciao, guten tag, hello. I’m Elizabeth.
- Come here often? I’m Elizabeth.
- Oh, hey, I didn’t see you there. I’m Elizabeth.

2. Comment on their profile.
Commenting on someone’s online dating profile shows that you actually read it and that you’re a good listener. When you meet a new person online, it can be tempting to compliment their looks. And while physical compliments are nice, they can sometimes be, well, empty. Most people would rather receive a compliment about something they wrote in their profile. Bonus points if you add a little information about yourself. It keeps the conversation going and gives them something to respond to.

Examples:
- I see that you like to cook. I’m trying to be better at cooking myself. I made a great vegetarian lasagna a few nights ago.
- I like that you’re into sports. My favorite is baseball. I’m a lifelong Yankees fan.
- Your dog is very cute. I’m a dog person too. I have an Australian Cattle Dog named River.
- I have some friends who went to Cornell. I wonder if we have any friends in common.

3. Ask a question.
One of the best ways to start a conversation is by asking a question. Again, it gives them something to respond to. Even better if this can also relate to something they wrote in their profile.
Examples:

- What’s your favorite dish to cook?
- Where were your profile pictures taken?
- What’s it like being a surgeon?
- Have you read any good books lately?
- What’s your favorite hidden gem in your neighborhood?

4. Cut to the chase.
Be honest and say what you feel. That doesn’t mean you have to be overly forward or aggressive; it means that if you’re interested in somebody, it’s okay to be clear about it. After all, isn’t that what you signed up for when you joined an online dating site?

Examples:

- Your profile made me smile.
- I’d like to get to know you better.
- Based on your profile, I think we’d hit it off.
- I’m interested in learning more about you.
- I think we make a great pair.

5. Suggest meeting for a date.
Is it bold? Yes. Is it risky? Maybe. Is it effective? You bet. One of the biggest complaints about online dating is that people spend too much time messaging and not enough time actually dating. It’s gutsy to ask someone out right away, but it sends the message that you’re serious about your level of interest. Be bold! And have a plan. Are you free? doesn’t give someone much to respond to. But Are you free for coffee on Thursday? does.

Examples:

- I’d like to meet for a drink sometime if you’re interested.
- Are you free for a date soon?
- Let’s grab coffee sometime next week.
- Want to have dinner on Tuesday?
- Let me know if you want to go for a walk in Central Park.

Figure 13: “5 Online Dating Messages: Examples of What to Say”
In the following sections, I show that regardless of race, respondents were more likely to use a low-risk rather than a high-risk signal to be the first to show romantic interest. They typically waited for men to send the first direct message and also waited for men to initiate the first date. Next, I describe the reasons respondents elected for men to initiate messages and dates. Lastly, I give examples of women who practiced alternative initiation scripts and explain why they did so. Throughout, I demonstrate how dating technology can facilitate women’s assertiveness (agency) and passivity in their romantic partner search.

Waiting to Send the First Message

About 90% of the women in the study who utilized dating technology at least once in their romantic partner utilized low-risk signals in their romantic partner search. They were also reluctant to send a direct message that said “Hey” or “Hi,” precisely because they wanted the man to message back. Annaliese, a 30-year-old Black woman stated that, “On some of them, you can wink at them or send a flirt. I would do that sometimes.” Jamilah, a 26-year-old Asian woman,
also stated, “I’d usually like them [their profile first].” Amanah, a 26-year-old Latina who found her current boyfriend while on Hinge, explained that on the app conversations typically started when users liked a profile, a picture, or a users’ response to a prompt question. While Amanah had no qualms about liking profiles or pictures, she always waited for the men to start a conversation about what she liked on their profile.

On the other hand, respondents were much more reluctant to send the first direct message. Instead, respondents waited for men to initiate a direct message. This finding is similar to other research that shows that women still wait for men to initiate romantic interest via conversations in the age of dating technology (Lamont 2020; Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). The interaction below with Rhea, a 29-year-old Latina, captured how the majority of the women in my study who utilized dating technology responded to the question of initiating messages online.

**Sarah:** Are you someone who messages first, or do you wait for men to message you?

**Rhea:** I usually wait for men to message me.

Within the heterosexual romantic relationship gender regime, romantic interest does not take on significance or legitimacy in the gender order unless the man is the first to indicate his interest via initiating some type of contact (Lamont 2020; Schneider and Fein 2012; Harvey 2009; Behrendt and Tuccillo 2004). In dating platforms, the equivalent of a man initiating contact is sending the first direct, personalized message. Low-risk signals do not carry the same weight as a
man sending the first message to show his interest precisely because they do not require initiation of contact, which is why respondents used them. These signals are convenient, intended to break the ice, and motivate users to send a message once they are alerted that a user has interest in them (Murray 2018; Singleton 2011). They also, however, allow respondents in this study to be the first to indicate interest, but without committing to initiating contact. Much like dropping hints in real life through flirting (Lamont 2020, 2013) or other indirect behaviors, respondents relied on these low-risks signals to drop hints about their interest but waited for men to take the interest to the next level, so to speak, by initiating a message. Thus, dating technology allowed women to be the first indicate interest but without compromising a proper performance of femininity.

Why Wait to Send the First Message?

There are four major reasons respondents waited for men to send them the first message: upbringing and tradition; negative experiences associated with initiating a message; avoiding rejection; and how men utilized dating technology. About a quarter of my respondents who utilized dating technology stated they waited for men to send the first message because this is how they were raised or that it was “tradition” for men to be the first to directly indicate their romantic interest. In both cases, women refused to challenge their upbringing or these conventional norms. Amanah explained that her upbringing influenced why she was reluctant to send a high-risk signal in her online dating. She stated, “I was raised with a conviction that guys should woo girls.” Giselle, a 25-year-old Latina explained that she was “just a victim to conditioning” in her
upbringing. This was why she waited for men to send the first message. Eventually, however, this conditioning evolved into an essentialist belief about who should take the initiative in pursuing a romantic connection and what it meant for a man to do so. Giselle concluded that she does not send the first message “because I just feel like the guy should take the initiative. It’s a gentleman thing to do that.” For Giselle, sending the first message signaled respect and courtesy on the man’s part.

Other respondents explained that waiting for a man to initiate contact was simply a cultural norm that they followed. Janica, a 27-year-old white woman stated that she did not send men the first message because “I guess it’s a great [meaning big] tradition that guys will message first.” Janica acted out of tradition and did not question why she should wait while men had social permission to initiate. Moreover, that women regardless of their ethno-racial background mentioned these reasons demonstrated the hegemonic nature of gendered initiation scripts.

A third of my respondents stated that their past, negative experiences of initiating contact via messaging on dating technology taught them that they should wait. They found that men did not respond to them and this was not optimal for making romantic connections. Karmela, a 26-year old-Black woman explained that she initiated messages when she first started using dating technology in her romantic search. However, she found that not many men responded; and she did not go on very many dates using this strategy. She decided to start waiting for men to initiate as a result and noticed that she received more messages and went on more dates.
I feel like I would get maybe one message back, but it really wouldn’t go that far, which was so interesting to me. I have heard people say, ‘Oh, you want the guy to message you first, you want the guy to chase you.’ That is honestly what I found, too. Very rarely would I message someone first and it would pan out into anything.

Jovana, a 31-year-old White woman, echoed these sentiments, “Well, I just noticed that all the relationships I've had from online or app dating were initiated by the guy. I've been more successful to just wait.” It was possible that these men never saw the messages or declined to respond because they were not romantically interested in Karmela or Jovana. However, the women interpreted the men’s non-response as sanctioning for their initiating and as a consequence of not appropriately performing femininity. This sanctioning then was a social cost of using their agency to express interest in a non-traditional way. Men’s positive response to them waiting further reinforced their interpretation of men’s non-response and encouraged continued adherence to cultural initiation rituals.

Some respondents desired to be more assertive in their romantic partner search, but not at the cost of what they viewed as rejection via non-response. Michaela, a 27-year-old Latina asked, “Am I supposed to wait for him to ask for my number? Do I take initiative and ask for his number? But at the same time, some people don’t like it when women take the initiative or are a bit more forward.” 28-year-old Masey, a white woman, explained that she would initiate a message if she could tell from the profile that “me messaging them first would be seen in a positive light...it would be attractive to have a girl approach you [the
Masey states that she ascertained this from a man’s profile by observing if the person was “a guy that is a little more forward...or kind of more like an alpha guy.” While she did not specify what clues would indicate this characterization, Masey assumed that this kind of man strictly adhered to the rules of normative masculinity within the heterosexual romantic relationship gender regime. Consequently, he would reject her via non-response and her chance at making a romantic connection would be lost. Masey was not willing to take that chance. These respondents wanted to utilize their agency and deviate from gendered initiation norms, but not if it encroached on normative masculinity and resulted in men ignoring or dismissing their attempts to initiate contact.

Masey and Michaela’s statements, more significantly, demonstrated the current confusion and tension about women’s role in the pursuit of a heterosexual romantic relationship (Lamont 2020 and 2013). While there is a growing acceptance of egalitarian gender roles in the home and public life (Eaton and Rose 2011; England 2010; Gerson 2010), these examples show that women wonder if these changes apply to the initiation scripts for making romantic connections. If so, how would they know which men would accept and respond to it without taking the risk of being rejected?

Lastly, respondents explained that how men utilized dating technology contributed to their decisions to wait instead of sending the first direct message. Respondents observe that men often send the first message to indicate their romantic interest. Jane, a 25-year old Latina states frankly, “I didn’t have to wait long for messages.” Masey, adds, “There were a lot of matches, so going through and actually messaging everyone, it was just so time-consuming.” Respondent’s
experiences reflected general trends about men’s initiation behaviors and utilization of dating technology. Men are more likely to send messages than women (Moses 2018; Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; OkCupid 2015). Men are also more likely to use dating technology in their romantic partner search. E-harmony found that in 2018, 52.5% of dating technology users were men, compared to 47.6% women (Tottham 2018). On Tinder, currently the most popular mainstream app in the United States, 67.8% are male (Statista Research Department 2019). The number of women who have never used online dating sites or apps is 70% compared to 60% of men (Statista Research Department 2019). That men are more likely to use dating technology and initiate messages did little to dissuade (and likely reinforced) beliefs that it is tradition for men to initiate and that women should wait. In this context, there is essentially no incentive for women to practice alternative initiation scripts even though dating technology provided the means to do so.

Instances of Sending the First Message

There were two circumstance under which respondents sent the first message. Regardless of ethno-racial background, respondents were more likely to initiate a message if a man’s profile was especially intriguing or interesting to them. The quotes from Luna, Rhonda, and Martha illustrated this exception to waiting for the man to message first. Luna, a 25-year-old Asian woman stated, “If there was someone who had a really interesting profile or I found the picture really attractive like in personality based on their information, I would definitely message them first. Otherwise, I’ll just wait and see.” Rhonda, a 33-year-old
Black woman explained that 80% of the time she waited for men to message her, but “20 percent, I was just like ‘Whoa! this person seems really interesting.’ Or there was something I read that was really funny, and I had a funny or witty comment to respond, and I just spit it out before I forget it.” Lastly, Martha, a 29-year-old white woman stated, “If I’m like, ‘Oh, I really want to find out more about this person,’ then I’d probably be sending them a message.” The women further explained that they did not want to “miss a chance” to connect romantically with someone in whom they were very interested which is why they decided to send a message. Dating technology gave women an opportunity to use their agency as it allows them to deviate from gendered initiation norms when they chose too. Nevertheless, respondents reiterated that coming across a profile that propelled them to deviate from traditional initiation norms was “rare” and “occasional.” Therefore, given that there were so many male users, few of whom they found attractive enough to send a direct message, they were able to safely practice alternative initiation rituals without making it part of their normal romantic partner search behavior or experiencing an uncomfortable amount of rejection.

The other circumstance under which women initiated the first message was again due to a feature of dating technology. About 85% of my respondents who utilized dating technology described being flooded with messages when they first joined a dating platform or returned after a brief hiatus. Eventually the messages dropped off, they saw fewer and fewer men with profiles that interested them or were repeatedly shown profiles of men with whom the romantic connection had fizzled. Vesta, a 28-year-old white woman, explained this
I paid for a six-month membership right off the bat. But what I found is that after about a month or so, my matches really dried up. For a month or maybe two, I had a decent amount of people who were really interested, chatting, different things. After that...there were just like a whole lot fewer in general new people coming through, which seems pretty consistent for a lot of people. Like a lot of apps, it seems like they will stack the deck in the beginning...and they'll throw all these options at you so that you think that it's a robust, good platform to use. Then suddenly, a month or two later, everything starts drying up, once you already have a routine of using it.

This feast-to-famine feature of dating technology sometimes motivated respondents to initiate messages because they found this aspect of dating technology frustrating. By and large, respondents typically started out their search with waiting for men to send the first message, but once the number of messages and new matches dwindled, they then decided to message men first. Alice, a 32-year-old Black woman, described her initial approach to online and app dating and then the switch to initiating to improve her opportunities to make romantic connections:

I had this idea that a guy sees a girl in a coffee shop and like approaches her and you know chats her up, but that has never been my experience. So, I think for whatever reason, I kind of kept with that idea in my mind, that this is how things are supposed to go, and kept operating under that sort of understanding. It took me a while before I was finally able to say,
‘Okay maybe I should be a little bit more proactive about this because I’m not meeting too many people this other way’.

Monique, a 30-year-old white woman, yearned for men to initiate messages and dates. She spent a year on dating apps and websites, going from one to the next, hoping that she could increase her number of meetups before she decided to start initiating both messages and meetups. She explained with anger and exasperation that she was forced to initiate messages and meet ups because she was not having any success from waiting:

I was more just frustrated. I still wanted to stand firm and say the guy needs to ask me out, so I was very stubborn in that sense. It wasn’t until later, more recently, that I kind of came to terms with the fact that if I don’t put in some effort or make the first move, literally I’ll go nowhere in life with dating. So, there really wasn’t any strategy. It was more of just a frustration.

For Vesta, Alice, Monique, and the majority of my respondents who utilized dating technology in their romantic partner search, sending the first direct message to indicate romantic interest was rarely out of a sheer desire to do so. They viewed it as a risk worth taking when the occasional intriguing profile crossed their path and/or when waiting for men to initiate was not yielding the desired result. Thus, practicing alternative initiation scripts was not normative, but exceptional behavior in their search for a romantic partner.
Waiting to Be Asked to Hang Out (or Meet Up)

Regardless of ethno-racial background, women were reluctant to initiate the first hang out or meet up. The reluctance in my respondents’ case started with the word “date.” They bristled when I used it to describe doing an activity with a man in whom they were romantically interested. Giselle told me frankly, “no one uses the word date when they want to ask you to hang out.” She and other respondents suggested I use the word “meet up” or “hang out” to describe doing activities which gave them an opportunity to explore the potential for romance. Respondents further explained that the word date held more connotations of commitment or intent than they were willing to ascribe to these meet ups. Instead, they used the word date or dating when talking about a long-term, monogamous romantic relationship.

Although respondents used the words meet up and hang out, these activities took on some significance as they were reluctant to initiate them. The way Liora, a 33-year old Asian woman, described her process of arranging a meet up with men she met online captured the interactions of over 90% of my respondents. Liora explained, “Usually we’ll just text back and forth on the phone [or app] and then usually they’ll say, ‘Hey do you want to meet up?’ and then we’ll just meet up. I wait for them. I usually don’t offer to meet before they ask.” As Lamont (2020, 2014) also found, respondents dropped hints or strongly suggested meeting on the dating platform, over text, or via a phone call about their desire to meet up but drew the line at being the first to explicitly ask. 32-year-old Tabitha said, “I would be like, ‘Oh, it'd be great to put a face and person to your wonderful comments,’ or whatever, and then like clockwork, they do what
I tell them to. Usually, they take the hint.” If men did not respond to the hints, Tabitha simply eliminated them from her romantic partner search. She explained, “If they didn't take the hint, I just keep it moving. I did have one guy who was really bad at that. I just had to let him go.” Because dropping hints was typically successful, Tabitha did not even consider asking men out even though she was interested enough in them to drop hints about meeting in person. More significant, both Liora and Tabitha reinforced the gender inequality embodied in traditional initiation scripts by waiting. However, Tabitha further reinforced it by eliminating men for her dating pool who did not pick up these hints. She effectively sanctioned them for not properly performing heterosexual masculinity.

As with initiating a direct message, the only time respondents initiated meet ups or hang outs was when they felt frustrated with their search. They resorted to asking men to hang out first particularly if they felt that too few of the conversations were leading to connecting in real life. They also avoided the word date when they asked. “Do you want to hang out?,” “Do you want to get coffee?,” or suggesting going to a local event were the ways in which they asked men to spend time with them. Again, this was not the norm, but a result of being frustrated with their romantic partner search.

*Why Wait to Initiate a Hang Out (or Meet Up)*

There were three notable reasons that respondents mentioned for their reluctance to initiate the first hang out or meet up: fear of rejection, desire to ascertain men’s genuine romantic interest and relationship desires, and to
manage their emotional labor in the romantic partner search.

_Fear of Rejection_

One third of respondents mentioned fear of rejection as a reason for not initiating meet ups. In all cases, this fear of rejection was explained as not being fully confident that a man was interested in them enough to accept their initial offer to meet up. Yara, a 27-year-old Latina put her reluctance in these terms, “Because I’m not sure if they are going to have any interest; and also if I’m not 100% sure, and I don’t know exactly how the other person is, I just give it time to see what’s going on.” Respondents needed complete assurance of a man’s romantic interest before they would initiate a meet up because of the greater cultural weight given to men’s romantic interest. This significance is rooted in the heterosexual romantic relationship as a reflection of the breadwinner-housewife arrangement. Because men held the financial and gender status to support women through marriage, their romantic interest was more highly valued. Women often could not offer their financial power, and in cases where they could, they did not have social power due to their gender, thus their romantic interest did not mean as much as men’s (Coontz 2005; Ehrenreich and English 2005).

A consequence of this gender dynamic is that women who indicate their romantic interest through initiating meet ups risk being perceived as “overeager,” “desperate,” or colloquially, “thirsty” (Schneider and Fein 2012). They are viewed as such because initiation is a masculine performance of courtship rituals. Therefore, if a woman perform masculinity to make a romantic connection, she is somewhat deviant or strange, and ultimately, not feminine enough (West and
Zimmerman 1987). As these are not generally desirable traits in straight women, a woman could be rejected as a potential romantic partner as a result. Iris, a 26-year-old woman alluded to being seen as “eager” if she initiated a meet up online. She stated, “I will let them do it, and I’ll decide. It’ll be in my court and I can decide either way. I don’t want to be that eager. I don’t really see the need for that.”

Interestingly enough, it is not that men do not have this same fear of rejection. In fact, they are at greater risk of experiencing rejection because they initiate meet ups and messages more often than women (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015). It is that the rejection that women face within the context of initiation is inextricably tied to their performance of heterosexual femininity—being judged and possibly sanctioned for not performing it accurately. Traditional initiation scripts remain hegemonic; and respondents observe that men overwhelmingly adhere to them, even on dating technology. As Yolanda, a 25-year-old Black woman explains, “I notice that guys, if they wanted to do something, they’ll express it.” Therefore, there is no need to risk hindering an opportunity to explore in real life a romantic connection by initiating meet ups or hang outs.

The only precise way to know that a man was interested then, without risking rejection, was to wait for him to initiate the meet up. Respondents interpreted men’s initiation of the first date as a signal or proxy for what Lamont (2020) calls genuine interest. Liora explained that, “I think it’s more efficient. If someone’s really interested in you, then I think that they would want to meet with me. So, in a way it’s a nice way to screen for people who are or aren’t as interested... I found that it saves a lot of time just to wait for them. That’s how I’ll
Ironically Liora could also save time by asking men on a date. If they refused or ignored the message, she would also know that they were not interested. That Liora does not even consider this alternative is quite telling of the power of gendered initiation scripts, and the resulting fear of rejection that it facilitates. Bella, a 26-year-old Black woman, went a step further. She felt that if the man deviated from the courtship norm and met a woman in person at her initial suggestion, the woman could still not be fully certain he was romantically interested if he did not initiate it.

...if they want to hang out, then there’s an added layer of interest that the guy has for me. If he wants us to hang out, I will put in the effort. I will take some time to make sure I studied a lot the night before or whatever, to make sure I can go out. But if I were to reach out and say, ‘Let’s hang out.’ Then I feel like the guy would feel he needed to say, ‘Yeah, sure.’ Even if he really wasn't interested in me. I would never know if the guy really liked me or not.”

In the digital world of dating, men’s initiation served as a proxy for ascertaining what kind of relationship they desired. Most dating app and websites, with the exception of OkCupid, do not give options related to what relationship types users are seeking (e.g. hook ups, new friends, short-term dating, long term dating, monogamous, or non-monogamous) (see Figure 15 from OkCupid.com 2020a).
The implicit assumption among most users, and certainly among my respondents, is that individuals on the platform are single and desire a long-term, monogamous relationship. If users stated on their profile what kind relationship they wanted, it did not always mean that was what they still wanted when they messaged or indicated interest in another user.

To address this unknown, respondents in my study interpreted men’s initiation of a first date as a signal that they were not on the platform to find friends, digital pen pals, or texting pals—they were interested in something romantic, even if it was hooking up. Yolanda stated, “Sometimes, guys are just looking for a texting pal or something like that, but not actually meeting up with the person.” Respondents also observed that sometimes men who did not initiate may have had no interest in anything romantic, even if they had stated so on their
profile. Kollette, a 30-year-old white woman recounted, “I’ve had conversations where there’s never been an ask to go out on a date. So, I’m like ‘Well, I don’t understand why you’re on here [dating platform].’” It is possible that these men did not see Kollette and Yolanda as potential romantic partners. However, respondents typically experienced lack of romantic interest as non-response or “ghosting”—failing to respond or ignoring messages or texts after initially being responsive. Consequently, if men kept communicating without asking to meet up with them, respondents had reason to question their romantic relationship desires. Men’s initiation of meet ups or hang outs was no guarantee that they were interested in something romantic. However, it did demonstrate genuine interest to respondents and a chance to explore in person the potential for romance. As dating technology has no rules regarding who can initiate meet ups or hang outs, respondents could have initiated them as a way to address unknowns about men’s genuine interest and romantic relationship desires. They overwhelmingly declined to do so.

“I don’t want to do all the work:” Emotional Labor and Initiation

Another significant reason women explained they waited for men to initiate the first date was that they wanted to manage the time and emotional investment they expended in their romantic partner search. More specifically, they wanted to make sure that men put as much labor into making the romantic connection as they did. This was a theme for respondents regardless of their race/ethnicity. My respondents described men on the dating apps and websites that they encountered as “lazy,” “passive,” and “insecure” to express their
frustration with men who relied on them to start and maintain meaningful conversations and initiate meeting up. In fact, they complained that dating technology made it all too easy for men to sit back and wait for women to take the lead. This was a salient complaint among women who utilized Bumble. Astride, a 26-year-old Asian woman explained with palatable disgust why she was typically not the first to ask a man to meet up with her on Bumble or any other dating platforms:

I think guys still have the advantage in these dating apps. Even though people say it is supposed to be more equal and women can make the move, but I still feel like it is easier for guys to find someone to hook up with or whatever. I feel like I want to see them make some effort. I feel like it is very easy for these guys to just continue swiping right and just wait for whatever woman messages him.

Kollette felt similarly about dating technology influencing men’s lack of initiative. She explained:

It just feels like women now have to do everything. I just feel that way. You know, like all of the sudden like men are chicken and they don’t want to ask. They can’t ask people out in the real world, and now even on the app [Bumble]. You’re [the men] not even asking people out here.

Nadia, a 25-year-old Asian woman, and Octavia, a 26-year-old Black woman felt that if women were responding to messages, either via the app or text, and maintaining conversation, it was only fair that men do their part by initiating
meet ups. Nadia explained, “If I’m interested in doing something, I would make the effort; and if I’m not, I’m not going to make the effort, right? So, if I’m texting a guy, there has to at least be a balance. I can’t be the one doing all the work.” Octavia utilized Bumble and other dating platforms and also felt that men relied on women to initiate everything. She stated with frustration:

In terms of the way we start, I am not a fan of being the first one who makes that plunge. I also think the way the dating world is, particularly at Bumble where the woman is making the first move, I’ve already done that. The fact that we are talking, I have already put myself out there so it’s time for you to do the same. And at some level, I think a lot of men are very—or at least those that I’ve interacted with online dating—are extremely passive. And again, talking about self-confidence and your ego that starts to wear on your sense of self as a woman. If I am constantly initiating the conversation, initiating seeing you in person, initiating the flirting, it starts to get to the point of, ‘Am I begging for you?’ I have so much going for me that I don’t know why I would even begin to think that’s okay.

Online and app dating was challenging, not least because of the feast to famine cycle, fear of rejection, and confusion about men’s genuine romantic interest and relationship desires. Therefore, waiting for men to initiate was indeed a valid way to save mental and emotional energy by ensuring that men pulled their weight.

Given that women often do the most emotion work in heterosexual relationships (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Blair-Loy 2003; Tichenor 1999), utilizing their agency in this manner was understandable and notable.
At the same time, this strategy also relied on reinforcing gender inequality inherent in gendered initiation norms. Dating technology allowed men to wait for women to initiate meet ups, but respondents also viewed it as giving men an excuse to live the labor of pursuing a romantic connection to them. Interestingly, respondents felt that dating technology facilitated men’s laziness even as it facilitated their ability to utilize their agency in their romantic partner search. This is likely because in the heterosexual relationship gender regime, men’s initiation of meet ups or hang outs still carries more weight and significance than women’s initiation. Although dating technology facilitated respondents’ agency, it could not preclude men from seeing them seen as “begging” for a man as Olivia stated. Being seen as such put them at risk for being rejected as potential romantic partners. Not only was this strategy of waiting for men to initiate hang outs a way to balance the labor in the romantic pursuit, it was also a way to perform femininity in a recognizable and acceptable manner. As Octavia alluded to, this acceptable performance of femininity was about preserving one’s “sense of self as a woman.” In the heterosexual relationship gender regime and greater gender order, that sense of self for women is often tied to how men (and women to some degree) judge a woman’s performance of femininity (Jones 2009; Pyke and Johnson 2003; West and Zimmerman 1987). Therefore, women could not initiate meet ups or hang outs without being concerned about how much labor they expended as it could invite negative judgments about their femininity and hinder the path to making a romantic connection.
Premium Features of Dating Technology and Initiation

As the evidence illustrates, for women searching for a romantic partner, the process can be fraught with confusion and uncertainty because genuine interest is hard to ascertain without risking rejection. Dating technology attempts to intervene by providing free and paid methods to ascertain genuine interest. In terms of free services, some dating platforms limit the number of profiles to which users can send likes or swipes. That number however is often not disclosed to users and varies from user to user based on their swiping or liking habits (Bockneck 2018). In 2015, three years after it launched, Tinder started to limit the number of profiles on which users could swipe right. Using an algorithm that monitors users’ utilization of the app, those who swipe right too many times in a period of 12 hours run out of swipes (Bedi 2015; Crook 2015). Tinder users are additionally allotted a free, daily Super Like (see Figure 16) and these do not accrue. A Super Like notifies the recipient that the user is especially interested in them. Even on platforms such as the League or Coffee Meets Bagel where users are sent a limited number of profiles per day, users can like every profile sent to them to increase their chance of matching with other users. The idea is because likes and swipes are scarce, users are supposed to feel special if they receive one and motivate them to send the first message. However, individuals may still swipe right or send likes on every profile until they run out. Other platforms such as Bumble do not have a limit on the number of profiles on which users can swipe right. It can be difficult to ascertain genuine interest on this app because men can swipe right on as many profiles as they desire. Even though women must message first, they cannot be sure they mutually matched with a man who is genuinely
interested in them and not simply increasing his opportunity to make a romantic connection. The majority of my respondents, over 80%, utilized only the free version of dating platforms. Therefore, they only had whatever services were available for free to determine if a man was genuinely interested in them.

![Super Like feature on Tinder](image)

*Figure 16: Super Like feature on Tinder*

Dating platforms also offer “premium features” for which users can pay to help them ascertain genuine interest more confidently. These features typically allow both men and women users to amplify their interest in other users and preview who has liked them before they decide to match with them. For instance, users who purchase a Tinder Plus\(^\text{14}\) or Tinder Gold\(^\text{15}\) membership are given an additional five Super Likes per day. Similarly, Bumble users can purchase a

\(^{14}\) Tinder Plus costs $9.99/month for users under 30 years old and $19.99/month for users over 30 (Vidaselect.com).

\(^{15}\) Tinder Gold costs $29.99/month. Users pay less if they subscribe upfront for period of time (e.g. $10/month if users subscribe for a year) (Vidaselect.com).
“SuperSwipe” with Bumble Coins. Both Super Likes and SuperSwipes let users who receive them know that the sender is very interested in them. Because additional Super Likes and SuperSwipes require purchase, the idea is that recipients will recognize that receiving one is quite significant. This will motivate users to swipe right and/or send a message because they are confident the sender is genuinely interested in them. One flaw with Tinder’s premium feature, however, is there are no obvious ways to discern if the user has sent a Super Like is using their allotted daily one, or if the they are using one of the five that they purchased. The same is true for SuperSwipes. Did the user only buy one to send to the recipient? Or did the user purchase $10 worth of SuperSwipes and the recipient is one of five? These flaws are similar across platforms and do not fully alleviate the issue of ascertaining genuine interest. Tinder Gold and Bumble Boost also allow users to preview who swiped right to indicate romantic interest (Tinder.com 2020; Preston 2019). This feature is especially helpful for users who are only interested in swiping right on people who they know are already interested in them. In my study, few of my respondents purchased premium services like Tinder Gold or Bumble Boost.

It is not clear if purchasing a la carte upgrades and/or memberships that offered premium services empowered women to send the first personalized message or initiate the first meet up. Only one respondent in my study, Kelly, the 26-year-old Black woman, purchased a premium service. She bought a one-month subscription of Tinder Gold. Kelly, however, still refused to initiate

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16 Bumble Coins cost $1.99/coin (Carman 2019).
17 Bumble Boost ranges in cost from $10 to $25 per month depending on the particular premium feature users are interested in purchasing (Kay 2018).
messages and meet ups. She stated, “I don’t message guys first. I never initiate meeting up with a guy. I don’t even initiate asking for numbers.” Although she knew who had swiped right on her and matched with some of them, she still did not initiate. Also important, it was not clear if these features could address the larger issue of greater value associated with men’s initiation and explicit indication of romantic interest or the resulting fear of being seen as desperate that women have if they initiate. If a woman receives a Super Like or sends one and a man responds by matching with her, will this motivate her to message him first? On Bumble, will a woman who received a SuperSwipe initiate a hang out if the gendered initiation rules are still the state of play? How can women know whether or not a man subscribes to normative masculinity without risking being rejected via a non-response to their message or suggestion to hang out?

Anecdotally, the effectiveness of these features on increasing opportunities to make romantic connections is mixed. Relationship coaches and blog writers actually advise that users decline paying for these services as they do not feel they are better than the free services the dating platforms offer (Kay 2018).

“Just Do It!”: Practicing Agency in the Romantic Partner Search

While they were in the minority, about 10% of respondents initiated conversations\(^{18}\) and meet ups. Asian women were the most likely to initiate meet ups, though the difference did not seem to be pervasive. Similar to what Lamont (2020, 2014) found, the women who stated that they were the first to send messages or ask men to hang out cited their personality traits as the reason they

\(^{18}\) Excluding women who used Bumble as women have to initiate conversations to begin communicating with men with whom they have mutually matched.
did so. For example, Letitia, a 26-year-old Latina explained:

I think something that is characteristic of me is that I don’t like to wait...I don’t mind asking. Honestly, with my current boyfriend now, I was the one who asked him out for the first time.

Athena, a 32-year-old Asian woman who also described herself as impatient explained, “I think I might do it more [initiate meetups] just because I can’t stand the idea of having to text someone that I don’t know with inane stuff and talk for days on end before anything happens.” Rita, a 28-year-old white woman stated that as a “forward” person initiating meet ups was part of her personality. Lastly, an Asian woman, 26-year-old Amira, explained that as an extrovert who tends to be attracted to introverted men, it was easier for her to initiate meetups. She said, “I found that for me as an extroverted person, it’s just better when I initiate it first because men who are more naturally introverted tend to respond to that and be excited by a woman asking them.”

Although roughly half of my sample used Bumble at least once in their romantic partner search, the only woman who felt that the app emboldened her to be the first to ask men to hang out with her was 25-year-old Janna, a white woman. She stated, “I feel like it’s definitely me. I’m very forward. That’s also why I like Bumble. I can just be like, ‘Hey, let’s meet up.” And it’s not weird that I’m the one initiating it.” Similar to the other women, she explained that Bumble allowed her to express her already “very forward” personality online.

*Ethno-Racial Background and Reluctance to Initiate*

Although ethno-racial background was not directly related reluctance to
initiate messages or hang outs or initiate the first hang out, there are unique experiences of being a female minority, that may undergird their decision to use low-risk signals more often than high-risk ones. First, studies show that both college and non-college educated Black women are the least likely to receive a response from men, except Black men, if they initiate a message compared to women of other ethno-racial backgrounds (Lin and Lundquist 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011). Thus, Black women in this study may be shielding themselves from rejection that comes from both being Black and being a woman who is the first to send a message.

Second, gendered racial stereotypes differ across ethno-racial groups. Controlling images such as the Black Lady and the Black matriarch, for instance, deem Black women as more masculine or emasculating when they assert themselves (Clark 2011; Collins 2009). These are traits that heterosexual men may interpret as unattractive. Men may consequently perceive attempts to subvert conventional initiation norms negatively. To appear less threatening, less emasculating, more feminine, and ultimately, more attractive to potential romantic partners, Black women may wait for men to send the first message and wait to be asked to hang out. Furthermore, that Asian women are the most likely to initiate messages and meet ups in this study compared to women in the other ethno-racial groups further demonstrates that women of color do not experience gendered racial stereotypes in the same way. 25-year-old Sol, for instance, initiates messages and meet ups because she wants to counter stereotypes of Asian women as passive or hyperfeminine (Chou 2012; Nemoto 2009; Pyke and Johnson 2003) as she does not fit these tropes. She is also very wary about dating
white men who see Asian women as “cute” and “virginal.” Thus, when Asian women initiate, men may be more open to it and not perceive their initiation as emasculating, threatening, or an improper performance of femininity. Asian women’s agency is thereby rewarded, and they may feel more emboldened or confident to initiate.

Lastly, although Black women in my study were not significantly more likely to resist initiating messages or meet ups, they showed signs of adhering to other more conventional dating norms in other areas of relationship formation compared to Asian, Latina, and white women. They were the least likely to report having sex on the first date, or to having sex before they and their partner clarified what type of romantic relationship they desired. This adherence to traditional norms of dating may be a form of respectability intended to counter long held stereotypes and narratives of Black women as domineering, masculine, and hypersexual (Collins 2009).

DISCUSSION

To summarize, the majority of women in this study who used dating technology at least once in their romantic partner search were reluctant to be the first to show their interest in men using a high-risk signal: sending a personalized message. They were even more reluctant to initiate the first meet up, even when they used apps such as Bumble which encouraged women to break from using heteronormative rules to guide their romantic search behaviors. Respondents named fear of rejection, their childhood upbringing, past experiences of what they perceived as being rejected when they initiated, not being completely certain
of the man’s romantic interest in them, desire for equal labor and involvement in
the romantic pursuit, and various features of dating technology as the reasons for
waiting to initiate messages and meet ups. Women who initiated often did so
because they felt stalled and frustrated in their search or they saw doing so as
part of their personality.

These findings show that while dating technology provided women an
opportunity to practice alternative initiation norms, they largely declined it.
masculinity “diffuses and appropriates” challenges to male domination that crisis
tendencies present to the gender order. Hegemonic masculinity, via the vehicle of
heterosexual gendered initiation norms, co-opted opportunities that dating
technology provides to liberate women from practicing conventional initiation
scripts. It is able to do so because dating technology has not fully addressed the
question of genuine interest that is common in the relationship formation
process. It also does little to address the cultural significance attached to men’s
initial and/or explicit indication of romantic interest. Consequently, it remains
unable to address the fear that women have of appearing desperate or overeager
if they make the first move.

On the other hand, hegemonic masculinity provides more certitude and
security about men’s genuine interest. And it does so for free. Most of the
respondents fell back on gendered courtship norms as a strategy for navigating
the confusion and uncertainty they encountered in their romantic partner search
while using dating technology. These norms also alleviate concerns of being
rejected due to an unacceptable performance of femininity, which could
potentially limit a women’s opportunities for forming a romantic connection (even if temporarily). Respondents noted that men followed the traditional initiation norms as well. They could then interpret—with little doubt—that a man’s direct message or his offer to meet up as genuine romantic interest. It also meant that they could interpret a non-response to their initiation as sanctioning of that behavior, especially when practicing conventional initiation norms had proven successful. These “rewards” or incentives for waiting have no parallel in dating technology that women can access for free. While the security and certitude hegemonic masculinity provide come at a cost to women’s agency, a decrease of gender inequality, and fail to challenge male domination, they provide a powerful sense of assurance in a process already rife with uncertainty and confusion.

**CONCLUSION**

There were some slight ethno-racial differences in terms of who was least reluctant to initiate messages and meet ups as Asian women initiated more than counterparts. The evidence suggests that this is because Asian women may be trying to counteract stereotypes of being hyperfeminine and passive. They are able to do so because these actions may not be interpreted negatively as they are for Black women. While women in all ethno-racial groups are at risk for being perceived as masculine or emasculating when they utilize their agency in their romantic partner search, this stereotype is especially pernicious for Black women. Waiting to initiate on dating platforms not only alleviates uncertainty and confusion, but potentially safeguards Black women’s femininity, which is
generally more scrutinized compared to women of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Collins 2009; Roberts 1997). At the same time, this safeguard may limit Black women from exploring potential romantic connections via dating technology that are available to non-Black women and may contribute to ethno-racial variation in intimate relationship formation trends.
Chapter 5: Alternative Explanations, Limitations, and Implications of the Study

She got her own house
She got her own car
Two jobs, work hard, you a bad broad
—Lil Boosie and Lil Phat, “Independent”

This study explored the experiences that heterosexual, college-educated women of varying ethno-racial backgrounds have as they search for romantic partners in the digital age. Drawing on initial interviews with 111 women, and follow-up interviews with 10 women who self-identified as Asian, Black, Latina, or white, I found that women faced three specific barriers in their romantic search that could hinder their path to forming an intimate romantic relationship: 1) locational barriers; 2) barriers that come from experiencing and addressing men’s intimidation about their educational and/or professional accomplishments, cyberaggression, and sexual racism, and 3) gendered courtship initiation scripts. How women experienced these barriers sometimes differed by ethno-racial background. On some matters, such as waiting for men to initiate messages and dates, gender was more salient than race in women’s experiences of barriers. Nevertheless, differences in gendered racial stereotypes informed similarities of outcomes across race/ethnicity.

I found that dating technology reified, and in some cases, facilitated race and gender inequalities that exist offline. This finding supports research that shows that inequalities that plague humankind in the real world—gendered racial tropes and hegemonic masculinity—often plague us online as well. This scholarship, consequently, challenges optimistic visions of technology as neutral
or democratizing. It also complicates emerging data that shows that couples who met online are more likely to be interracial, interreligious, and have different college education backgrounds than couples who met offline (Thomas 2019). Yet these results still beg the question of who is finding romance online, and who is coupling across ethno-racial, religious, and educational lines? This study suggests that it is more likely to be Asian, Latina, and white women than their Black counterparts. Therefore, the experience of finding a romantic partner on- and offline matters for who is coupled and the characteristics of that coupling.

Lastly, in this study, Black respondents carried the weight of these barriers. While non-Black women did not fully escape the adverse experiences of living in locations that limited opportunities for making romantic connections, dealing with and addressing men’s intimidation, cyberaggression, and sexual racism, or living with gendered initiation scripts that could limit their ability to practice alternative initiation norms, the evidence showed that Black contended with greater barriers in their romantic partner search than other women. These barriers may then contribute to lower rates of romantic relationships among college-educated Black women compared to their non-Black counterparts. Fewer intimate romantic relationships, including marriage, among Black women is a real possibility given that research shows that Blacks’ ethno-racial status remains significant for influencing their life chances and outcomes. Although the impact of the color line has faded for other ethno-racial groups, it remains a bright line for Blacks (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Bean et al. 2013; Lee and Bean 2004).
Alternative Explanations for Ethno-Racial Variation in Relationship Formation Trends

This study examines ethno-racial differences in how women experience location, interaction with men on dating technology, and to a lesser degree, gendered initiation norms as barriers to relationship formation. However, there could be ethno-racial differences in other variables that require closer examination as barriers which may also impact racial/ethnic variation in relationship formation patterns.

Personal Issues

Respondents mentioned personal issues as a potential barrier to making a romantic connection. Personal issues included spending time doing activities that respondents felt were more fulfilling to them such as buying a house, or pursuing career and/or educational opportunities, being too selective in their partner preferences, recovering from a recent break up, or being unsure about if and whether or not they desired a short- or long-term romantic relationship at the moment. Natasha, a 28-year-old Latina, explained that although she has been searching for romantic partners, she did not feel it had been a robust search due to her recovery from a toxic relationship:

I got in a really bad relationship and it lasted...on and off for four years. For me the healing process has been really important. I’m not the type to jump into relationships to cope from a destructive one. I don’t feel like I’m fully healed from that relationship yet. Natasha felt she needed more time to cope with the trauma of that
relationship before devoting time to finding a partner or using another
relationship to cope with her failed one. Janica, a 27-year-old white woman,
struggled with prioritizing a romantic partner search and “putting herself out
there.” This meant spending time on dating technology or going to events or
places where she could meet men. Instead, she wanted to invest that time on her
health, education, and friendships. Janica explained:

Am I actually putting myself out there enough? Right now, no. I haven’t
gone on one of these app dates in over a month. Before that, it was not
since April. So, there’s part of me that’s like, am I not trying hard
enough? At the same time, ...I also want to make sure all the parts of my
life are developed and happy, and that means friendships and school
and working out and all the other things.

The personal issues mentioned here also support research that shows that
young people often want to feel personally fulfilled before entering a romantic
relationship (Kefalas et al. 2011; Cherlin 2009).

Lack of Time

Respondents also explained that they were simply too busy and did not
have the time to search for partners. Part of the busyness included having
demanding jobs, pursuing post-college professional or academic degrees, or
transitioning from one city to another—an increasingly important part of young
adulthood for college-educated individuals (Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Kefalas
et al. 2011). Jada, a 26-year-old Black woman and one of my follow-up
respondents, was finishing her last year in a social work program in Chicago
when I initially interviewed her. She wondered whether or not she would remain there after graduating in June:

My transition after June is up in the air. I don’t know where I’m going to be, so there is definitely some instability with my future goals. I know I want to end up working in the FBI and that can call for a lot of traveling, so that could be a barrier. I’m also looking at the Army Social Work Internship Program, which is four years long, and that could call for traveling as well as me getting deployed.

Jada put her search for a romantic partner on hold because she wanted to finalize her transition. After graduation, she accepted a job in Washington, DC and resumed her partner search there.

Additionally, respondents felt that prioritizing career, education, or other personal goals left them too busy and exhausted to do activities that facilitated making romantic connections such as going to bars or clubs, social gatherings and parties, volunteer activities, or browsing for potential dates on dating apps and sites. The quotes below from Victoria and Lacey capture the sentiment about busyness and exhaustion among my respondents. Victoria, a 25-year-old woman explained, “I have a very busy schedule. Like I said previously, I could imagine that there might be people who would put off by the fact that I can’t see them, or I can’t talk to them as often.” Lacey, a 31-year-old Asian woman, stated:

Everybody’s so busy, myself included. We just have become—we just go from one thing to the next and don’t take a lot of time to slow down. It’s hard to slow down to meet people to date or make time to go out on a date and make that sacrifice of time and energy to go attempt
something that might turn out to (be) nothing.

As Lacey suggested, it was also hard to prioritize searching for partners, because more often than not, respondents felt they had to spend a significant amount of time and energy exploring potential connections that did not result in a short- or long-term romantic relationship.

*Physical Attraction*

Another personal variable that was not explored, but which studies demonstrate are somewhat important for women and their mate selection, was physical attraction (Buss 1989; Meltzer et al., 2015; Schwarz and Hassebruck, 2012). No women in my study noted that a lack or abundance of physically attractive men influenced their opportunities for relationship formation. However only two women, who were white, mentioned that men may not find them attractive enough to date. These women described themselves as “bigger” or “overweight” and explained that this perhaps contributed to their barriers for making romantic connections. 33-year-old Ada living explained sadly, “My weight, cuz I’m on the bigger side, so that plays a big part in things.” Laney, a thirty-two-year-old woman, stated something similar. She noted that because men value physical attractiveness in women, they may be uninterested in her because, “I think that I’m overweight. In my mind that seems like a barrier. Men are so visual. It feels like a barrier, how I physically look.”

Studies on sex differences in mate selection have consistently demonstrated that men prioritize physical attractiveness when choosing romantic partners more often than women (Meltzer et al. 2015; Schwarz and Hassebrauck
2012; Buss 1989). These findings were especially important as photos are one of the very first profile items users utilize to make a judgement about their romantic interest when using dating technology (Elderfield 2018; Graff 2018; Murray 2017). Consequently, it is possible that how ethno-racial differences in how physically attractive men find women could influence women’s opportunities for romantic connection.

Women-Heavy Social Networks

Respondents mentioned that their social networks and where they spent most of the hours in a day (jobs and/or graduate program) were dominated by women. This also meant there were fewer hours available to be in spaces where men primarily and regularly congregated. 25-year-old Maia, an Asian woman, explained with disgust that there were not enough men in her social work program while she was searching for a partner as a student. Despite graduating, her friendship network remained primarily female:

We talked about how a lot of this is app bullshit because I don’t have guy friends anymore. I think that is really just kind of the biggest factor. Yes. I feel like if I had been in a different program at [Ivy League] things might have happened more organically.

Laney also mentioned that although she used online dating, she felt that she needed to spend more time where there were men. She explained:

I’ve been noting places where boys are. I went to a basketball game with a friend the other night. I was like, ‘This is where all the boys are!’ The other day I stood in line at a BBQ restaurant and it was all
men. I was like ‘This is where the men are!’ I’m noticing places where men are. I was like, ‘I could start noticing that more and trying to frequent those places, being in the spaces they are.’

These quotes support findings that show that individuals often operate in social networks with people who share the same gender as themselves (Thelwall 2008; McPherson et al. 2001). These same-gender networks may also impact their opportunities to make heterosexual romantic connections.

**Men’s Preferences for Younger Women**

Respondents also explained that their age could limit opportunities for relationship formation. This is a viable explanation given that heterosexual men tend to prefer and date heterosexual women who are younger than themselves (Bech-Søreson and Pollet 2016; Buss 1989). Thus, it is possible that respondents were also searching for partners at locations where they have “aged” out of the preferred age category for heterosexual men seeking romantic partners or resided places where there were more married than single men their age.

Ada felt this was also a potential barrier to finding a romantic partner. She stated frankly, “I mean, age is kind of a factor because I am thirty-three, so the pool [of single men] starts to shrink a bit.” 25-year-old Victoria anticipated that in five years when she turned thirty, it would be much harder to find men to date. She explained, “I think it’s like a numbers game. It’s the ability for you to even find someone in a smaller and smaller pool.”

**Religious Beliefs**

Lastly, another barrier to forming romantic relationships that women
mentioned was finding a partner who shared the same religious beliefs. Respondents ranked religion as the primary characteristic they wanted to have in common with a future long-term partner. This is not surprising given that the majority of my sample, both as a whole and within ethno-racial groups, identify deeply with the Christian tradition. Regardless of race/ethnicity, Christian and Muslim women who saw their religion as central to their identity struggled most with this constraint. One major reason these respondents noted this barrier was that they did not practice pre-marital sex. Niara, a 29-year-old Latina stated plainly, “I am waiting until marriage to enter a sexual relationship.” They additionally expressed difficulty in finding men who were willing to wait for sex, even if they shared the same religious background as the respondents.

Navigating both on- and offline dating was additionally challenging because these women were often conflicted about whether or not they should put their views about abstinence on their profiles or at what point in their search to tell potential dates about their views. Vesta, a white 28-year-old woman, and one of my follow-up respondents, was firm in her belief against premarital sex. Similar to the deeply religious women in my study, Vesta vacillated between putting this information in her profile and risking reducing her chances of meeting a potential date or meeting a man who later rejects her because he is not practicing abstinence. Vesta ultimately decided not to put on her profile that she is waiting until marriage to have sex. Similar to women who practice abstinence, she talked about her faith in her profile, chose Christian as her religious preference, and stayed vigilant about weeding out men who seem eager to her about sex. Below is an image of a text she sent to me on July 22, 2019 about a
man she matched with on Coffee Meets Bagel, but whom she declined to meet in person using the clues she describes in the text.

He tried to get flirty very quickly, wasn’t so much for the small talk, was quick to make plans to meet up with little preamble, and put relatively little info into the convo, enough so that I thought he was a non native speaker...though English is def his first and probably only language

Little effort, not info ^

Figure 17: Text from Vesta

These strategies, however, were not free of barriers as they posed other challenges that could constrain opportunities for romantic connections. Vesta also often met men who were upset that she had not notified them ahead of time about her stance and found she had to explain herself:

I had this conversation [with a date] where I felt like I needed to be more explicitly clear that I do not have sex outside of marriage and that I’m not sexually active with partners and that can’t be an expectation for moving forward.

Racial/ethnic differences in these variables as potential barriers to romantic relationship formation may also influence ethno-racial differences in relationship formation patterns and should be further explored in future research.

Limitations of the Study

There are four other important limitations of this study. First, the sample is limited to heterosexual women and cannot account for barriers that LGBTQ+ women and men and individuals who identify as non-binary may face in their
relationship formation. Furthermore, while varying expressions of sexuality are increasingly accepted, LGBTQ+ and non-binary identified individuals of color still encounter sexual racism, discrimination, and pressure to conform to heterosexual norms (Han and Choi, 2018; Orne 2017) in their partner search and relationship formation. Future research to that end should examine the intersection of race, place, and sexuality, the experiences of sexual minorities on dating platforms, and how dating technology reinforces heterosexual gender norms among this population in the digital age. Future research may also illuminate how dating technology both expand and constrain opportunities for forming romantic connections, especially on platforms that cater to both cis and queer users. Future research should also explore what strategies individuals employ and how much they alleviate these barriers.

Second, this study demonstrates that women of color utilized various strategies to address the barriers to relationship formation they faced. Future research should examine the effectiveness of the strategies discussed in this study for creating greater opportunities to form relationships or if they created additional constraints.

Third, this study focuses exclusively on women, much like the literature on relationship and family formation. The ethno-racial variation in marriage rates among college- educated Black and non-Black heterosexual men, however, are similar to that college-educated women (Reeves and Guyot 2017). Furthermore, expressions of masculinity are also in flux and may influence how men experience their romantic partner search. At the same time, due to the #MeToo movement, there is increased discourse about consent and harassment.
Therefore, how men show romantic interest both on- and offline, and how that interest is interpreted, may impact their search for a romantic partner. Future research should explore college educated heterosexual men’s relationship formation process to examine men at varying social locations experience, enact, and/or perpetuate gender, racial/ethnic, and other forms of inequality and the implications for ethno-racial differences in relationship formation and marriage patterns for both college-educated Black men and women.

Lastly, this study subsumes the different Black, Latino, and Asian ethnic groups under one “Black,” “Latina” and, “Asian” monolith. Studies show Black, Latinos, and Asians from different countries of origin have varying racialized, gendered, and classed experiences, some of which are due to phenotype and colorism (Telles and Ortiz 2016; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993;). Future research on relationship formation should not only explore broadly relationship formation of heterosexual and queer individuals within these groups, but also how colorism, gender and racial/ethnic inequality, and perhaps immigrant status influence the process of being partnered.

**Implications of the Study**

Despite the limitations of this study, there are three implications for understanding relationship formation outcomes and inequality as a whole. First, agentic solutions or advice that require Black women to abandon desires for racial or educational homophily in order to find romantic partners should be given with caution. This study joins other scholarship to reiterate that Black women’s relationship formation patterns are not simply an issue of individual
choice, preference, or action. Structural factors such as racial/ethnic demographics of a city or town, the byproducts of racial and gender inequality such as gendered racial stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity, constrain Black women’s agency. While marriage market, marital attitudes, and gendered racial exclusion explanations also suggest that this is the reality for Black women, this study, with its focus on barriers, further demonstrates how Black women experience these structural factors. This examination is also especially important in an age when gender and racial inequality in the relationship formation process persist, despite the opportunity that dating technology provides for users to move away from making decisions that are steeped in negative beliefs and ideologies concerning race and gender.

The second implication of this study is that technology matters for how racial and gender inequality are reproduced in the social world. Early sociological and communication studies demonstrated an optimistic view of the internet as a tool to bring people of diverse demographic backgrounds together and into productive conversation, create a space where varying voices can be heard, and where one’s social location is neither relevant or necessary for how they participate or for how they experience the consequences of their participation (Powell and Henry 2017). Years later, it is apparent that the inequalities that plague us offline are also acutely present in the digital world (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018; Roberts 2011). They sometimes even loop back to negatively impact our offline world (Amnesty International 2018; Jane 2017; Powell and Henry 2017; Nussbaum 2010). Even as technology brings diverse users together via social media, dating, online support groups, and even gaming, it can also be used
to reinforce to some groups that they are “other” and be mobilized to wreak symbolic and/or physical violence on the marginalized (Bailey and Trudy 2018; Powell and Henry 2017). This study’s examination of how dating technology reifies and perpetuates gender and racial inequality in the romantic search process joins others to contribute to scholarship that illustrates how technology can facilitate the maintenance of white supremacy, hegemonic masculinity, and potentially impact life chances. More importantly, it demonstrates that because technology can facilitate, exacerbate, or create diverse forms of inequality, how it does so remain a significant question for sociological inquiry and social justice activism. This examination especially important in a society that is increasingly stratified by race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and ability.

Finally, this study suggests that examining how women deal with the constraints in their relationship formation process is as important as examining those constraints. This study shows that some of the ways in which women address barriers in their romantic partner search, particularly emotion work, not only requires unequal labor from women compared to men but may also reify gender and racial inequalities. While a long-term or marital relationship may be the successful outcome, what are the consequences for creating a society free from gender and racial inequalities in the long run? An examination of how women respond to the barriers they face in their partner search gives us a glimpse into how the process itself helps to maintain hegemonic masculinity, and perhaps more importantly, the cost of gender and racial inequity that white women and women of color pay.
Chapter 6: Towards a Liberated Black Womanhood

somebody/anybody
sing a black girl’s song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/struggle/hard times
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty
—Ntozake Shange, “For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf”

This study demonstrated that searching for a romantic partner in the
digital age is challenging. It is especially challenging for heterosexual college-educated Black women. Consequently, Black women may decide to only utilize strategies that reflect a prioritization of their feelings or opt out of the romantic partner search entirely to deal with the barriers they encounter in their search. An important potential consequence of opting out of the search is that Black women’s chances for intimate relationship formation, including marriage, drastically decline. Another equally important consequence, however, in choosing these options, they are exercising their agency. Choosing emotion repair strategies or opting of the romantic partner search can be seen as a refusal to participate in a system that demands that the marginalized to address its own marginalization, even though they did not create the marginalization. This is a form of resistance that Black women are often denied. Instead, the media, dating
platform blogs, academics, and even family and friends offer advice that ask Black women to be more attractive as romantic partners: “Date outside of your race;” “Don’t be so picky;” “Don’t be so intimidating;” or “Don’t be so angry.” These agentic solutions are far more enticing and easier than holding individuals and institutions that promote and maintain an unequal and unjust societal structure accountable for the havoc they wreak on Black women’s lives.

The media and creators of dating technology must play a significant role in addressing and/or eradicating these structures of oppressions and aiding in the work of a liberated Black womanhood. The media should eliminate uncritical portrayals of real-life Black women’s human emotions as “angry,” “loud,” emasculating or other characterizations that depict the Black Lady and Black Matriarch tropes. These portrayals are immensely unhelpful for countering the pernicious gendered racial stereotypes that plague Black women in their private and professional lives. Furthermore, the media should use its various platforms (television, radio, social media, blogs, webzines, etc.) to call out individuals who use gendered racism to abuse Black women, especially those in power. For instance, news outlets repeatedly show President Trump speaking in a condescending and demeaning manner to Black women reporters Yamiche Alcindor and April Ryan. This behavior is rarely criticized as unacceptable, inappropriate, or used to reflect on the inequalities Black women face in the US. These actions would disrupt the normalization, acceptance, and perpetuation of poor treatment of Black women.

Creators of dating technology can also address these systemic issues in two ways. First, dating platforms can eliminate the ability for users to search for
potential romantic partners by ethno-racial background as often inherent in these preferences are racial/ethnic biases. Belivr, a dating app for LGTBQ Christians, does not allow users to sort potential romantic partners by ethno-racial background. Dating platforms can also make statements that explicitly express preferences or dislike for individuals from a particular racial/ethnic group a violation of their community standards. Users and creators alike argue that it is preferable for users to know others’ preferences upfront rather than to find out later. However, this perspective dismisses the jarring experience of feeling excluded that Black women face when they encounter this information on users’ profiles.

These changes (and more) are needed to create a society where Black women’s options for resistance and a liberated womanhood no longer come at the expense of opportunities to form intimate romantic relationships. Until that society is a reality, we have to accept and listen to Black women’s personal and collective lament about these systems of oppressions that impact their lives.
APPENDIX

Table A1: Never Married College-Educated Women by Race/Ethnicity at age 40

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>% Never Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2015 American Community Survey

Table A2: Comparing the Means of Never Married College-Educated Women by Race/Ethnicity at age 40

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black vs. White</td>
<td>0.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian vs. White</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino vs. White</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian vs. Black</td>
<td>-0.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino vs. Black</td>
<td>-0.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino vs. Asian</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2015 American Community Survey

p<0.05*, p<0.01**, p<0.001***

Appendix B: Recruitment Blurb

Dear Single Women Ages 25 to 33,
My name is Sarah Adeyinka-Skold and I’m a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. I’m doing a research project about the experiences of college-educated, single, never-married women. I’d love to hear about your dating and romantic search experiences. If you are interested, please complete this survey (https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HZD8VJ5) to determine eligibility. You can also email Sarah Adeyinka-Skold (adeyinka@sas.upenn.edu) or text or call me at 484-469-8788. Thank you!
Appendix C: Follow up Respondents by Utilization of Dating Technology and Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Not Utilizing Dating Technology</th>
<th>Utilizing Dating Technology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Shani</td>
<td>Mina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Iris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Cadence</td>
<td>Jada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Rhea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>Jovana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vesta</td>
</tr>
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</table>
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