

‘Emotional and spiritual and every other thing but not sexual’ – An exploration of the dating experiences of Black women practising faith-based secondary sexual abstinence

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ABSTRACT

Sex is no longer seen as being reserved for those in marital relationships, rather it is seen as an integral part of most adult dating and romantic relationships. Currently, literature in the area of romantic relationships and sexuality largely focuses on women who are sexually active. There is limited research on the experiences of those who choose to practise sexual abstinence; of the research that does exist, the experiences of sexually abstinent Black women often remain unexamined. Religious belief is one of the reasons some Black women choose to practise sexual abstinence even when they are sexually experienced; this is known as secondary sexual abstinence. In view of the general sexual expectations relating to adult relationships, the practice of secondary sexual abstinence is likely to have a profound impact on their dating experience.

Considering the race-based sexual stereotypes Black women are subjected to, the decision to practise sexual abstinence and the subsequent impact on their romantic experiences may differ from that of women from other racial backgrounds who choose to practise sexual abstinence. This study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to gain insight into the lived experiences of eight sexually abstinent Black women who were practising faith-based secondary abstinence. The women’s narratives highlighted various challenges and triumphs on the journey of dating while practising sexual abstinence, and the way in which being a Black woman shapes such experiences.

Background

Secondary abstinence, the decision to refrain from premarital sex after being sexually active, is significantly under-researched in psychological literature. Discourse relating to secondary abstinence has increased within popular culture (e.g., Franklin & Good, 2015), with the practice seemingly becoming more prevalent. Those who hold religious beliefs may choose to practise secondary abstinence. The particular focus for this

study is how racial identity may impact that experience due to both internalised and external perceptions. Through exploring lived experiences, insight into the realities, benefits and challenges of sexual abstinence can be gained, which has implications for a broad range of areas from psychological therapy to health education.

The present article focuses on the dating experiences of Black women practising faith-based secondary sexual abstinence. The data draws on

findings from a research project which explored the unique intersection of faith, sexuality, race and interpersonal relationships.

Dating

Dating is a practice found throughout most Western cultures, and increasingly in non-Western cultures (Scott & Blair, 2017); it is perceived to be a common part of forming romantic relationships. Rooted in the Western approach to courtship, dating developed around the turn of the twentieth century as norms regarding romantic rapport shifted (Ogolsky et al., 2013). Courtship revolved around the promise of marriage, with social and economic status being the biggest deciding factors of relationship pursuits. It was a formal process, with distinct rules and expectations; however, this method did not work for working-class individuals, which led to the emergence of dating (Ogolsky et al., 2013). Dating offered freedom and flexibility. Romantic pursuits moved into the public domain through unsupervised activities. There was no expectation of marriage from the outset, instead the focus was on getting to know different people until relationship exclusivity was expected (Bailey, 1989).

Although the origins of dating are clear, there is no unified definition of dating today, especially as the term has been adopted throughout, and among, different generations, communities and societies (Quah & Kumagai, 2015). Nevertheless, it can broadly be categorised as individuals with potential or definite romantic interest becoming well acquainted. Within dating, expectations are expressed or develop, with one such expectation often being sexual intimacy.

Today, the mainstream Western conceptualisation of sex is perceived as a fundamental part of relationships and general normal adult functioning, throughout the world (Alo & Akinde, 2010; Bhatta et al., 2013; Gipson et al., 2012; Lehmillier et al., 2014). Trends in premarital sex have changed tremendously since the 1960s, with more people engaging in premarital sex (Finer, 2007; Wellings & Field, 1996) in both Western societies and

societies that have traditionally held a strict conservative view towards sex before marriage (Ghuman et al., 2006; Majumdar, 2018). Such views are also held throughout different age groups, with sexual engagement being a common aspect of adolescent (Manning et al., 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008), adult (Herbenick et al., 2010) and older adult non-marital relationships (Malta & Farquharson, 2014; Ševčíková et al., 2021). Moreover, casual sexual relationships have become more prevalent (Manning et al., 2005; Stinson, 2010). This illustrates the extent to which sexual expectations have become a deeply engrained feature both before the inception and during the development of romantic relationships (Sassler, 2010).

Sexual abstinence

A commonly cited reason for sexual abstinence is religious belief (Ashley et al., 2013; Bradley et al., 2012; Rostosky et al., 2003; Sprecher & Treger, 2015). Within Abrahamic religions there is a notion that sexual expression should not be practised outside of marriage (Leeming, 2003). Religious beliefs impact the sexual decision making of both males and females (Ashley et al., 2013; Sprecher & Treger, 2015). However, research suggests that it is the sexual choices made by women that are given greater attention within these religious communities. This is seen in instances where religion is heavily intertwined with culture.

Within Somali culture which is heavily influenced by Islam – the state religion – premarital sex is forbidden for women, but not for men (Salad et al., 2015). It is also seen in the way that sex is communicated in religious establishments (Claney et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2013). Eriksson et al. (2013) found rare discussions of sex in South African church communities were led by women and aimed at young women in the church. This suggests that within Abrahamic religions, women may be posited as the gatekeepers of sex, thus there is a greater expectation placed on them to act in accordance with beliefs related to sexual expression and to choose to practise abstinence. This is likely

to impact how they navigate dating and romantic experiences.

Sexually experienced women of faith who internalise the religious view of sex as sacred may choose to practise secondary abstinence, especially if they feel as though the benefits of having sex no longer outweigh the costs of premarital sex (Sprecher, 1998). Although they are practising faith-based sexual abstinence, their sexual history may mean they are likely to face challenges that differ to those practising primary abstinence. For instance, Clancy et al. (2020) explored how evangelical Christian women understood, experienced and navigated sexuality in the face of conflicting sociocultural and religious narratives. Participants believed women are viewed as ‘saints’ or ‘whores’ – a saint being linked to virginity and purity, and a ‘whore’ being linked to sexual experience. One sexually experienced participant expressed her fears regarding how others in her faith would see her because she had engaged in premarital sex, and discussed her fears around potentially engaging in premarital sex again. Such double standards relating to the sexual experiences of women in contrast with men, perceptions and fears are all likely to play a role in the romantic relationships of women practising secondary abstinence. Moreover, it raises the question of where women who are sexually experienced, but actively choose faith-based abstinence, fit in to such paradigms of ‘saint’ and ‘whore’, and worthiness being linked to sexual experiences, and what it means for their romantic experiences.

For some women, abstinence has been viewed as beneficial. A study conducted by Poppi (2021) examined the narratives of sexually experienced women who had chosen to practise sexual abstinence. The middle- and upper-middle-class European women interviewed found that abstinence was seen as a form of liberation from societal pressures surrounding sex and a means of additional safety against relationships potentially involving gender-based violence. However, these perceived benefits and experiences may change depending on

the rationale for abstinence and the demographic of women who practise it.

Studies exploring African American women’s reasons for abstinence have found reasons such as religion, health and reputation (Haglund, 2006; Long-Middleton et al., 2013), but these studies have often taken a health-based approach, again failing to probe the sociological dimensions of their experience. Although existing studies offer some insight into individual experiences of abstinence, they fail to explore the impact this has on dating and the formation of romantic relationships, especially from the perspective of women who are sexually experienced. Moreover, they fail to take into account the impact that race may have in such experiences.

Race and sexual abstinence

Black women are often subject to race-based sexual stereotypes (RBSS) (Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 1995). Black women have often been portrayed as ‘mammies’ – maternal, self-sacrificing and asexual; ‘sapphires’ – loud, rude, angry and argumentative; and ‘jezebels’ – hypersexualised, seductive and promiscuous (West, 1995). Such stereotypes have attempted to limit Black feminine sexuality through the application of crude labels, with Black women being either completely desexualised or hypersexualised. RBSS impacts how people perceive and treat Black women, including in interpersonal contexts (Bany et al., 2014; Collier et al., 2017; Flores, 2020; Watson et al., 2012).

For some Black women, greater awareness of the influence of RBSS during the transition into adulthood enables them to actively reject such narratives (Kahn, 2006), instead recognising the challenges of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and begin to see themselves as sexual agents (Crooks et al., 2019, 2020). Therefore, the practice of secondary abstinence among religious Black women may not only be an act of faith, but also an act of self-empowerment. Nevertheless, with RBSS being ingrained in Western perspectives, it raises the question of how Black women in Western societies practising faith-based secondary

abstinence navigate the landscape of dating where preconceived notions and expectations are held.

The present research

With sexual interaction being positioned as a crucial element of non-marital romantic relationships within Western society, and an increasing media focus on dating and romantic relationships, it is important to understand the experiences of those who do not fit into the mainstream narrative of what such relationships typically look like. Moreover, it is important to understand how race impacts such experiences. Hence the purpose of this article is to focus on the dating experiences of Black women who have practised faith-based secondary sexual abstinence.

The findings presented here are part of a wider research project that focused upon Black women's experiences of dating, sexuality and religion through the lens of intersectionality. The research offers a unique opportunity to holistically understand these lived experiences by considering how different dimensions interact to shape Black women's experiences. This research will not only contribute to furthering the understanding of the experiences of Black women in different contexts, but it will also contribute to wider discussions on women's sexuality, the role of faith in personal relationships and the way sexual abstinence is framed in a religious context.

Research aims

The research aims of the wider study was to explore the dating experiences of Black women who have become sexually abstinent for religious reasons.

Specifically, this project was designed to explore the lived experiences of Black women, with a focus on the implications of secondary sexual abstinence on their dating lives, and their perception of the role their race has played in their experience.

Methodology

Data collection

Semi-structured individual qualitative interviews were employed to collect data. As the topic area was potentially sensitive, individual interviews created a dynamic where participants could feel more comfortable speaking about their experiences free from the concerns of others' thoughts and judgements, which may have been a concern in a focus group for instance. It also enabled rich, detailed data to be collected, which was necessary for exploring the research aims and analysis method (Smith et al., 2009).

The semi-structured approach enabled flexibility in exploring both what was important for the research aims and what was important to the individual in their own interpretation of their lifeworld (Alase, 2017; Gander, 2017).

An interview schedule was developed based on the research aims, and questions asked in relevant studies (e.g., Poppi, 2021). Questions asked during the interview covered key areas including perceptions of abstinence; the relationship between abstinence, faith, sexuality and race; dating while abstinent; and the challenges and benefits of abstinence. The flexibility of the semi-structured approach meant that the research was focused but questions did not need to be asked if they had already been discussed by a participant in a previous part of the interview.

Eight individual interviews were conducted via Zoom. This number was deemed appropriate for the analysis method as it enabled a manageable data load for the scope of the research.

Prior to starting the formal interviews, each participant was asked three demographic questions, focusing on age, location and religious affiliation (no potentially identifying details were captured). Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.

Participants

Eight participants were recruited to the study. They were all aged between 23 and 33, with a mean age of 28.4 years. This age range formed organically through recruitment, rather than being intentional for the purpose of the study.

One participant was in a long-term relationship, one participant was engaged, two participants were married (therefore they discussed their experience retrospectively) and four of the participants were single.

In terms of religious affiliation, all participants, except for one who identified as Hebrew Roots, identified as Christian.

Participants were located across three countries with one residing in the United States (US), two residing in Canada and five residing in the United Kingdom (UK).

Sampling

In keeping with the aims of the study, strict eligibility criterion was developed. Eligibility criteria were shared with participants during the recruitment process. The criteria were:

- participants had to identify as a Black woman,
- participants had to have experience of practising sexual abstinence for faith-based (religious) reasons with the view of remaining sexually abstinent until marriage, and
- participants had to have a sexual history and experience of dating while practising sexual abstinence.

These criteria enabled the recruitment of participants who could offer insight into the experiences of practising faith-based sexual abstinence as a Black woman who is interested in developing romantic connections.

Participants were recruited via a post on social media, mainly Instagram and WhatsApp. Purposive sampling was employed, with participants chosen based on meeting the eligibility criterion. There was also one instance of snowball sampling (Noy, 2008), whereby one participant recruited someone she knew to take part in the study. These methods of recruitment enabled wider reach, increasing the chances of recruiting eligible participants (Valerio et al., 2016) and enabled the recruitment of women across countries as a means of gaining insight into experiences across Western countries.

Ethical considerations

Prior to conducting the interviews, ethical approval was sought from the University of Huddersfield Psychology Department ethics panel. Ethical considerations were made in line with the British psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics (Oates et al., 2021). Both written and verbal consent were obtained prior to the interview, and to further ensure informed consent throughout the interview, participants were verbally reminded that they were not obliged to discuss anything they were not comfortable with.

There were no instances where participants disclosed information beyond relevancy. However, two of the participants did share concerning experiences in relation to other people's actions towards them. These experiences occurred long before the present research, and participants expressed that they felt comfortable discussing those experiences. At the end of the interviews they were informed of relevant organisations that could offer support should they need it. This information was also included in the debrief for all participants.

Data was stored on a password protected computer to ensure confidentiality. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned at random by the researcher to further ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw period, and that their data would

be destroyed upon official degree confirmation via the project information sheet.

Analytical methods

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) focuses on the lived experiences of individuals, enabling insight into how they interpret and understand their experiences. As the aim of the study was to explore Black women's experiences of sexual abstinence in the context of faith, dating, race and sexuality, IPA offered the most suitable method to focus on these individual experiences, while accounting for similarities and differences between those experiences.

Once the interviews had been transcribed, they were analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009). This approach focuses on the individual experiences of the participant while exploring differences and similarities between all participants within the sample. This approach begins with the analysis of each individual transcript. To facilitate data immersion, the transcript was read while the audio recording was listened to. Exploratory comments were made regarding the data itself and reflexive comments were made. Based on these notes and the data itself, emergent patterns and themes were devised. Related themes were then clustered into groups so sub-themes and superordinate themes could be established and summarised. Once these steps had been completed for each interview, a cross-case analysis was completed. Similarities and differences were identified and further conceptualised; themes and hierarchy were refined by considering the research aims.

Findings

The two themes explored in the present article are Dating and Battling sexual stereotypes. Once the women had decided to practise sexual abstinence, the way in which they experienced dating and romantic relationships shifted. Intrinsicly linked to their experiences of dating was the stereotypes the women had to face in relation to their race, hence the focus of the present article.

Dating

With sex often being associated with dating within the Western context, the women interviewed found their experiences of dating while sexually abstinent ranging from 'funny' to 'tough' and 'frustrating'. The women's experiences and feelings towards sharing that they were abstinent were mixed. Half of the women were confident in sharing that they were abstinent with people they were interested in. For example, Amara likened telling someone she was sexually abstinent to telling them her name, with an 'it is what it is' casual approach.

The idea of sexual abstinence being seen as a normal part of these women's lives rather than a grand topic of discussion. This was shared by Jade who believed that her abstinence should be a given when she proclaims she's 'no longer living in sin'. Autumn and Melody felt comfortable sharing it as they predominantly dated people who 'have the same values' as them, with Autumn stating that it is something she brings up within the first week 'to make sure they are on the same page'.

In contrast, the other four participants did not find disclosing the fact that they were abstinent comfortable or easy. Feeling 'anxious' and 'nervous' was commonplace. This was particularly evident for Nia, who was already in a sexual relationship with her partner when she decided she wanted to practise secondary abstinence:

'I had to meditate and pray on it for months before I plucked up the courage to have the conversation and talk about it.'(Nia)

Nia's fears of sharing her thoughts with her partner highlight how worrying it can be to share the decision. Primarily, the concern is about how the decision will be received regardless of how well they know the person, and that the decision to become abstinent can have significant implications for one's romantic life.

For Willow, it was less about the implications for her romantic life and more about the ‘push back’ she would receive from people because ‘it’s outside of the box’, especially because she had been sexually active previously. This highlights that people may be less understanding of women who choose secondary abstinence than those who have completely refrained from premarital sex. These negative feelings about speaking about their abstinence, in a dating context, led both Nicole and Esther to be very selective about telling people:

‘I didn’t feel comfortable, so I wasn’t disclosing it until I was pretty sure that it was going somewhere.’ (Esther)

‘I basically cut it off before it even got to those difficult conversations and moments.’ (Nicole)

Both women appeared to have experiences that seem to re-affirm that their apprehension was warranted. Esther encountered a man who interacted with her in a physically inappropriate manner and asked her to go to a strip club once he learned she was abstinent. Esther’s experience highlights a broader sentiment experienced by most of the women, with their decision to be abstinent being taken as a ‘joke’, seen as a ‘challenge’ and not being respected by a lot of the men they encountered. Ironically, Nicole, Nia and Willow said that some of the men that were least respectful of their decision shared their faith, which sheds light on the double standards relating to sex that exist within many religious groups.

‘Temptation’ seemed to be one of the biggest challenges faced by each of the women. Many of the women felt as though this ‘temptation’ was intensified by their sexual experience. Knowing what it was like to be sexually intimate with another person sometimes left the women yearning for that ‘feeling’:

‘There are days and times, because you have been sexually active, you do have that feeling and emotion of I miss this, or I miss that, or I miss having this feeling.’ (Willow)

‘It’s like I have a warm feelings towards them and I’ll want to be intimate but then I still have to pull myself back from doing that.’ (Autumn)

Although the women actively chose not to have sex, it did not change their desire for sexual intimacy, especially when dating. Nicole and Nia both expressed how that temptation could almost become a source of internal conflict:

‘it very much is that weird challenge of the mixture between the fact it feels good, the fact that in some situations I wanted to do it, but then I didn’t want to do it because I felt like I would have let myself down’. (Nicole)

Competing desires were not the only internal challenge the women faced while dating. The way in which some of them saw themselves as being attractive or worthy, within the context of dating, was especially difficult for three of the women.

In the absence of sex, Nicole questioned what she could ‘bring to the table’. That self-doubt was amplified when she was rejected because she was abstinent. Willow struggled with ‘feeling attractive’; similarly, Amara felt more confident when she was sexually active saying, ‘I thought I was Beyoncé and Rihanna at the same time’. This highlights how trying to date while rejecting ‘expectations’ relating to sexual intimacy is not only challenging outwardly, but can also cause internal challenges and impact self-image.

Aside from the difficulties, the women found that being sexually abstinent enhanced their dating life in numerous ways. Having greater ‘clarity’ or being ‘sober minded’, as Jade put it, was something all of the women discussed:

‘you’re a little bit sharper because you’re not sleeping with anyone, your intuition is a lot sharper, and you can really see through the rubbish that the person is saying’. (Amara)

'it helps me like it helps me see flaws more clearly or red flags more clearly and gives me time to think about whether that's something that I want to deal with the rest of my life'. (Autumn)

All participants believed they were making better choices in their dating life because they were not engaging in sex. Moreover, they found it easier to 'cut ties' with anyone they did not feel was 'meeting their standard' in comparison to when they were sexually active. The time and energy they would have spent having sex was spent building better 'emotional' and 'spiritual' connections. The four women in relationships discussed how abstinence had led to better communication in their relationships, with Willow and Esther stating that:

'communication literally comes at the top of your list without you even realising it, because you're not going to just kiss that person; because some people communicate like that you know. Physical touch, make-up sex is their communication, "we're fine now" [i.e. some people have sex as a way of resolving an issue rather than addressing it directly with verbal communication]. It's not that, you literally have to talk about it'. (Willow)

'When you look at the patterns that you have, you think that sex is going to fix everything, by having that type of intimacy with your boyfriend or fiancé, but it's not. So you have to talk and discuss now.' (Esther)

The absence of sex seemed to be an opportunity for the women to examine their approach to relationships. Sex could not be used to mask issues; instead participants had to develop their self-awareness and their ability to articulate and empathise. In turn, they believed this made room for deeper connection and 'love' with their partners in a way that they did not view as possible if sex was a part of their relationship from the inception.

The experience of dating while sexually abstinent seemed to be a 'rollercoaster' for the women.

Challenges lay in both the external world, and within their own psyche. Regardless, there seemed to be an underlying sense of empowerment in their dating lives, and ultimately, those who had experienced having a romantic partner while practising abstinence seemed to feel more deeply connected with the romantic partners.

Battling racial stereotypes

Only one participant did not feel as though her race had impacted her experience of sexual abstinence so far. The other seven participants believed that racial stereotypes had played a role in shaping their experience, with their refusal to engage sexually a 'disappointment' to men who were interested in them. They believed this stemmed from the way that Black women are often portrayed and viewed:

'I think probably some of the reasons I got the reactions I did is because I do feel that Black women are oversexualised more than white women are.' (Nicole)

'You telling somebody, especially someone who is not of your race, if you're dating somebody outside of your race, it's almost like why are you sexually abstinent? This is not the stereotype, this is not you, you're meant to be a freak, you're meant to be hypersexual.' (Amara)

'I got a lot of a certain type of guy thinking I'd be good in bed or something, without them knowing who I am, and that I'm serious in my faith.' (Willow)

Nia described her experience differently:

'I know there are some white women out there who are sexually abstinent, but for some reason it genuinely feels like I have to be because I'm a Black, if that makes sense.' (Nia)

The women's experiences highlight the juxtaposition whereby Black women are either hypersexualised or completely desexualised. In Nia's experience, her abstinence was seen by others as something she 'had' to do because of her culture and race, rather than something that she had chosen

to do, which she found frustrating. Interestingly, Amara felt that coming from a predominantly Black country, she did not necessarily think about being Black in the same way as someone raised in a predominantly White country. Yet, dating in the UK she saw that stereotypes and fetishisation played a part in her dating experience, especially when dating outside of her race. More generally, it seems as though the women did not perceive themselves to have the same liberty when it came to their sexual range as white women. Instead they had to fit in to one of two categories. Willow exemplified this notion, saying:

‘I just think we’re not seen to be trendsetters. If another race did the exact same thing, they would be trendsetters. Like the Kardashians, Black women have had that body forever...’

For Jade, being a ‘light-skinned’ Black woman was central to how she saw race impacting her abstinence:

‘The one that I was talking about earlier, his first impression of me, he thought I was somebody that didn’t take God seriously just by the way that I look, and I don’t dress provocatively, I dress quite modestly but I think it’s just because of that stigma of “she’s a light-skinned girl”.’ (Jade)

Jade’s narrative highlights the role of colourism with the Black community. Colourism can be understood as discrimination within a racial group based on skin tone (Craddock et al., 2022). Jade’s experience illustrates how additional sexual stereotypes may be assigned based on an individual’s complexion. Black women face stereotypes both within and outside of their race. Amber also talked about how it was hard within her predominantly Black faith community to not be approached with the preconception that she was a ‘baby mama’. This reference to ‘baby mama’ refers to a stereotype that carries connotations beyond just being an unmarried or single mother. It is often

used to suggest negative characteristics such as being problematic and irresponsible.

For Jade and Willow, combatting these stereotypes meant considering how they presented themselves to the world in both the way they dress and how they behave. Jade no longer took part in any ‘carnival’ celebrations, distancing herself from that aspect of her Caribbean culture as she did not want to be ‘misjudged’. Due to RBSS, some Black women may feel the need to reconstruct their identity in order to feel as though their sexual choices are valid and respected in the eyes of others, especially those they are romantically interested in. This is clear from some of the perspectives shared by participants, as evidenced here.

Discussion

This research provides insight into the experiences of Black women who choose to date and form romantic relationships while practising faith-based secondary sexual abstinence. It also highlights the way in which RBSS impacts Black women’s experiences, especially in the context of their romantic lives.

The notion of premarital sex being an expected element of dating (Lehmiller et al., 2014; Sassler, 2010) was experienced by all participants. Their deviation away from this norm led to instances of rejection, which in some cases negatively impacted their self-esteem and perceptions of their worth and attractiveness. This served to demonstrate that the implications of practising sexual abstinence can result in negative psychological effects. For participants, rejection was seen as a useful way of determining who was interested in them beyond the prospect of sexual engagement, especially in instances where romantic interests saw their abstinence as a ‘challenge’. The participants’ experiences with men who proclaimed to share their faith and values yet challenged their decision to be abstinent supports findings about sexual double standards within religious and sexually conservative communities (Claney et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2013). Further, this study offers

unique insights into what it is like to develop romantic relationships in the modern, Western context when sex is not involved.

Aside from believing their increased desire to engage sexually with their partners before marriage stemmed from understanding what it felt like to be sexually intimate, being sexually experienced seemed to only be problematic in the context of other people not understanding why they had made the decision to be abstinent after being sexually experienced. Regardless of the challenges, the women saw benefits that included greater clarity in romantic decision making, better communication and deeper connection within relationships, and time and energy to peruse other interests. The latter benefit reflects the findings from Poppi (2021); however, the aspect of abstinence enabling safety and reducing the chances of gender-based violence found in Poppi (2021) diverged quite drastically in the present study. Two of the women in the study discussed being physically and verbally violated once they had told men they were sexually abstinent. This may suggest that the historical sense of entitlement to Black women's bodies, rooted in Western colonialism and white supremacy, and perpetuated by institutional racism and RBSS (Holmes, 2016; George & Martínez, 2002; Williams, 1986), means that disengaging from sex does not afford Black women the same sense of protection or safety that it may afford their white counterparts.

Most participants discussed dealing with RBSS in a way that aligned with West's (1995) discussion of the historical portrayal of Black women. There was a collective sense of their abstinence not being taken seriously, and assumptions made that they would be sexually active 'freaks', which demonstrates the 'jezebel' stereotype. Yet, when participants were assertive about their abstinence, they were seen as being 'difficult', which is related to the 'sapphire' stereotype. One of the participants experienced shock at the fact that she had been sexually active at all, which fits with the 'mammie' stereotype, as assumptions were made that she wouldn't have any sexual experience, thus de-sexualising her. The

disrespect towards the participants' choices to be abstinent, by those who were sexually and romantically interested in them, and the idea that it was not taken seriously because they were Black women emphasises how far RBSS does impact the way that Black women are treated (Bany et al., 2014; Collier et al., 2017; Flores, 2020; Watson et al., 2012).

Limitations

Although the study exhibited many strengths, there were some limitations. All but one of the participants identified as Christian, and there were many theological similarities between the belief system of the non-Christian identifying participant and Christianity. Although this supported the similarities across experiences, it limits the extent to which insight is gained into the experiences of Black women practising a variety of faiths. Moreover, there was no account for the cultural differences among the Black women in the study. Black people and culture are not a monolith. Therefore, there are various aspects of culture that may have impacted the women's experiences, for instance being from the Caribbean as opposed to West Africa, or being from West Africa as opposed to East Africa.

Although the findings supported current literature, new insights were also uncovered. This includes what it is like to date while being sexually abstinent and sexual abstinence through the eyes of Black women.

Reflexivity

As a Black mixed-race woman of faith who has a particular interest in the relationship between theology and sex and interpersonal relationships, reflexivity was a key aspect in this process (Engward & Goldspink, 2020).

My religious upbringing, in an environment where conversations related to sexuality and sexual expectations were rare, meant that much of my personal understanding of the relationship between

sex and religion came from the media and personal study. As I moved from my teens into adulthood, I often found that sexual assumptions were made about me based on my physical shape and the connotations within my community that came with not only being of mixed heritage, but having a sense of identity that was strongly rooted in the Black community I grew up in.

Alongside my general interests, my personal experience played a role in my interest to research this area, which was further fuelled when I realised there was an absence of research that looked at such topics from an intersectional approach.

I was aware that my personal experiences were likely to shape how I approached and understood the participants' experiences. This became evident when I internally found myself relating to some of the experiences and sentiments shared by the participants throughout the data collection. Reflexive notetaking enabled me to critically reflect on my thoughts and feelings throughout the research. This not only developed my awareness of how my own preconceptions could play a role in the research, but it also created a boundary between being the researcher and an individual who saw some of their own experiences within the data.

Nevertheless, my personal experience was beneficial to the research in some ways.

It enabled the development of questions and probing that may have gone unrecognised otherwise, and it also facilitated better rapport building with participants. Aside from the reflexive notetaking, adhering to all the steps of IPA, ensuring the analysis was rooted in the data and regular supervisions throughout the project helped achieve credible and trustworthy research.

Recommendations for future research

The present research explored faith-based secondary abstinence, race and dating in an unprecedented way, through recruiting a diverse, international participant group. Additionally, the findings create a solid foundation for understanding some of the lived experiences of sexually abstinent

Black women. Future research would benefit from exploring secondary abstinence among Black women from different faith backgrounds to gain deeper insight into how dating experiences may differ. There is also the potential to explore the transition from abstinence to forming romantic relationships, methods of meeting potential partners and greater exploration of both transitioning from sexually active to sexually abstinent and the benefits of sexual abstinence.

Conclusion

The present research is important in its contribution to the literature on faith, interpersonal relationships, race and sexuality. Through understanding lived experiences of sexually abstinent Black women, the importance of dismantling RBSS and general stereotypes due to the dangerous real-world implications they have for Black women, and women in general, is truly seen. Moreover, the present research highlights why, from both an experiential and psychological standpoint, religious communities need to address the disparities in sexual expectations of men and women. It is evident there is a need for open and honest dialogue about sexuality in a way that is supportive, informative, healthy and still respectful to the theological principles of the respective religion. Not only does this support agency, but it enables people to receive the support and encouragement needed on their sexual journey, which is important for mental and emotional wellbeing. More broadly, this research indicates the potential benefits for both individuals and couples who may choose to intentionally practise sexual abstinence, whether or not it is related to religious belief. Ultimately, this research, and subsequent findings, highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of Black women, and seeing their voices and experiences as necessary for the development of both psychology as a discipline and society as a whole.

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