

The Effects of Images of African American Women in Hip Hop on Early Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Physical Attractiveness and Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract This qualitative study was designed to identify African American early adolescents' subjective meanings of African American women's sexuality through an examination of Stephens & Phillips (2003) sexual images—the Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother, and Baby Mama. These eight sexual images both inform and reflect beliefs about African American women's physical attractiveness. Interpersonal relationship decision making processes also were influenced by these conceptual frameworks of African American women's sexuality. Findings from this study are important given the tendency of previous researchers to ignore race and intra-ethnic variations in studies of beliefs about attitudes toward sexuality.

Keywords African American · Adolescents · Images · Sexuality

Although researchers have greatly benefited from understanding how sexual images affect heterosexual European American adolescents (e.g., Alksnis, Desmarais, & Wood, 1996; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993) and gay men and lesbians (e.g., Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994) the research on African Americans' sexual images and their relationship to physical attractiveness and relationship patterns is limited. Psychologists and family scientists have traditionally

examined African American female adolescents' sexual outcome behaviors, such as unplanned pregnancy, early sexual onset, or sexually transmitted disease acquisition, rather than the meanings of sexuality that guide these behaviors (East, 1998; Gibbs, 1998; McLoyd, 1998; Rome, Rybicki, & Durant, 1998; Smith, 1997). Thus, negative developmental outcomes have been the dominant foci of studies of African Americans (McLoyd, 1998). Further, researchers commonly have (mis)represented the experiences of African American families and women through comparative quantitative data (Jones, 1991) collected from high-risk and convenience samples (Staples, 1994).

Research on images of African American womanhood by women's studies and African American studies scholars has informed our understandings of the ways in which we give meaning to visual cues through theoretical frameworks such as Black feminism, womanism, and racial identity development. Both disciplines have produced iconographic data that have led to the identification of the promiscuous Jezebel, the asexual Mammy, the emasculating Matriarch, the disagreeable Sapphire, and the breeding Welfare Mother as the foundational images of African American womanhood (see Collins, 1991; Morton, 1991). The addition of a psychological lens to the analysis of this developmental process can increase our explanatory power for outcomes of African American female adolescents' sexuality. For instance, Erikson's theory of identity development provides an appropriate framework for how environmental factors (e.g., family, peers, community, media) influence the evolution of adolescents' sexual identity and their exploration and adoption of specific sexual images. The integration of ecological frameworks and iconographic data has created a qualitative body of work that has become a starting point from which to explore African American women's sexuality within the context of African American youth culture (Stephens & Phillips, 2005).

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Eight Women: Sexual Images of African American Women's Sexuality

The details that qualitative data impart about African American women's sexuality not only provide descriptions of images, but also give clues into the meanings of sexuality for this population. Further, the socio-historical frameworks of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender embedded within sexual images highlight the distinctive identity processes unique to African American women. Remnants of the Jezebel, Mammy, Welfare Mother, and Matriarch images remain, as exemplified by the similar, yet more sexually explicit images of the Diva, the Gold Digger, the Freak, the Dyke, the Gangster Bitch, the Sister Savior, the Earth Mother, and the Baby Mama sexual images (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). These eight images were found to be widely accepted frameworks used to illustrate beliefs about African American women's sexuality in the heterosexual, male-dominated, African American-based, youth culture known as Hip Hop.

The Diva image projects a woman who has sex to enhance her social status, even though she may already be financially independent and middle class or above. The Gold Digger image, particularly when cues of economic disadvantage are included, illustrates a woman who intentionally has sex for money or material goods. When an African American woman is portrayed as desiring and engaging in "wild and kinky" sex with a multitude of partners for her own gratification, the Freak image is being enacted. The Dyke image projects a self-sufficient and "hard" woman who has rejected sex with men and may have adopted masculine postures. The image of the Gangster Bitch shows a "street tough" woman who has sex to demonstrate solidarity with or to help her man; she may also be involved in gangs or gang culture. The Sister Savior image is that of a pious woman who rejects all but marital, procreative sex for religious reasons. In contrast, the Earth Mother image portrays a woman who has sex for spiritual or nationalistic reasons to show her support for "the race" or "the nation." Finally, a woman who has had a child by a man but is no longer his partner is projected as the Baby Mama image; she has sex to maintain a financial or emotional connection with the man through the child.

The everyday consumption of cultural and interpersonal messages regarding sexual images has a direct impact on young African Americans' sexual self-identity, behaviors, and experiences. In an earlier study of African American adolescents' responses to these sexual images, we (Stephens & Few, 2007) found that the descriptive titles and associated behaviors were universally identifiable and understood. This negotiation of these eight cultural images and interpersonal level messages relies on individuals' understanding of their own identity's rela-

tionship to the sexual images and the internalization messages (Stephens & Phillips, 2005). This is because the construction of an identity not only shapes individuals' sexual identity, but also informs their decision-making and behavior outcomes.

Identity Development among African American Early Adolescents

Identity development has been argued to be a pivotal crisis in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Worrell, 2000). "Who Am I?" and "Who do others think I am?" are the key identity development questions that Erikson (1968) argued are important to answer during this phase of the lifespan. Erikson (1968) believed that peer relationships were particularly influential in this phase of self-definition. To achieve peer approval, adolescents may adopt or strive for an admired trait or behavior elicited by the group (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997). The desire to conform to behaviors viewed as acceptable by peers is common during adolescence (Clasen & Brown, 1985). Adolescents develop perceptions of their sexuality and beliefs that address desired sexual needs by using self-comparison and relying on messages about appropriate or desirable sexual and physical traits from peers, family members, and other cultural influences (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996).

African American adolescents must recognize their value and worth not only in terms of their gender, but also their race, if they want to develop healthy identities. African American adolescents' ideas about the self as a racial minority are developed through the understanding of symbols and meanings of their position within their family, community, or society. For example, prior research has shown that parents are the primary socialization forces for developing African American adolescents' positive attitudes toward physical attractiveness and cultural beliefs or norms (see Stephens & Phillips, 2003, 2005; Stephens & Few, 2007). Peers are also important for shaping ideas about racial and cultural norms. African American adolescents are not only inclined to have peers of the same race, but also tend to compare themselves to those who are most like them rather than to the majority culture (Botta, 2000). Similarly, studies on racial identity development indicate that self-awareness as a member of a racial minority is based on self-evaluations and group comparison in terms of others' perceptions of one's racial group (see Cross, 1995; Helms & Parham, 1990). Thus, we argue that it is important to examine both gender and racial identity factors that moderate African American adolescents' use of sexual images to give meaning to physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships.

Physical Attractiveness

Skin tone as beauty Colorism, or discrimination based on skin tone within a racial group, is one of many legacies from American slavery (Lake, 2003; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). African American children learn about the significance of skin tone when and if they see people treated better or worse based upon having lighter or darker skin (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). Although lighter skin has been highly valued (Hudson, 1995), people whose skin tone is “too light” or “too close to White” have been stigmatized by some within African American communities (Pinderhughes, 1995). A lighter skin tone may be seen as a lack of racial purity or solidarity, whereas a dark skin tone may be viewed as more beautiful or “real” (Hall, 1992, 1995; Keenan, 1996; Wade, 1996). A medium skin tone has been seen as the ideal within some African American communities (Hall, 1992).

Body image Women are socialized to be interested in maintaining an attractive physical appearance for potential mates. In contemporary Western societies, to be considered physically attractive is to have a thin body (Seid, 1994). The research on African American women’s body image and self-esteem indicates that this is not true for all African American women; class may be an important mediating factor in determining within group differences of body ideals. High- and middle-income African American women appear to be more susceptible to unhealthy views of thinness and more likely to suffer from eating disorders than are African American women from low-income backgrounds (Lott, 1994; Root, 1990). Working class and low-income African American women seem to be less influenced by European American cultural standards of beauty. In fact, among these women, a full-figured body is more acceptable or desirable than a slim body (Thomas, 1989; Thomas & James, 1988). African American girls and women tend to be more satisfied with their body size, weight, and overall appearance than European American women are, despite the fact that they are, on average, heavier (Akan & Grilo, 1995; Parker et al., 1995; Story, French, Resnick, & Blum, 1995). However, one cannot extrapolate from these findings that working and low-income African American women do not experience high body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

Interpersonal Relationships

The relationship between dating preferences and physical attractiveness in the African American community should not be ignored. Distinctions made about skin tone and what is considered beautiful or physically attractive is a gendered

experience that has implications for the dating context among African Americans (Baynes, 1997). Researchers have proposed that successful African American men, regardless of their skin tone, can “exchange” their wealth for a woman of lighter skin tone (Hall, 1995; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987). Hall (1995) has described this exchange as evidence of a kind of pathological self-loathing rooted in colorism. Hall (1995) and Okazawa-Rey et al. (1987) have used phrases such as “color struck” and “bleaching syndrome” to indicate a preference among some African Americans for lighter skinned mates as a means to “lighten up” the family and achieve social status. However, in a study by Wade (1996), dark-skinned men rated themselves as more attractive than lighter skinned men did. In this sense, skin tone may be more valuable for light-skinned women and dark-skinned men because men are able to exchange their wealth for marriage partners, and men are judged less by their physical appearance than are women (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). If individuals believe that they have an attractive partner, their self-esteem may be raised because they may believe that they must have desirable qualities to attain such an attractive mate (Murstein, Merighi, & Malloy, 1989).

The meanings of racialized and gendered messages about physical attractiveness have been found to affect women’s self-esteem directly. For example, Frederickson and Roberts (1997) found that women who were high in appearance orientation were more likely than women who were low in appearance orientation to internalize harmful cultural standards of beauty and attractiveness. Women high in appearance orientation tended to be very self-conscious about how their body appeared to others, in particular, to men. Men’s attention, especially their sexual attention, was the gauge of women’s self-esteem and self-perceptions of attractiveness or desirability. This type of behavior, known as self-objectification, indicates low levels of self-esteem or self-worth.

Research indicates that adolescent girls and adult women carry their evaluations of self-esteem and body image into their dating relationships. Self-esteem and body image are molded by both internal and external sources of validation. In adolescence, external validation (e.g., peer response) is particularly important in shaping girls’ self-evaluations (Zimmerman et al., 1997). Thus, among sources that guide girls’ and women’s perceptions of self (i.e., identity) and competence at being herself (i.e., self-esteem) are the positive, negative, and inconsistent feedback received from boyfriends or potential mates.

The goal of the present study was to identify African American early adolescents’ subjective meanings of African American women’s sexuality and how their experiences as members of marginalized groups may influence their understandings. Culturally-based sexual images are projected in

African American Hip Hop youth culture, and variations have been identified by Stephens and Phillips (2003). As visual cues used to categorize norms regarding appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors, these sexual images are useful for identifying the meanings and values African American youth give to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, beauty, and interpersonal relationships in the context of sexuality (Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). For instance, the internalization of racialized sexual images may influence ideas about the physical attractiveness of potential mates and how individuals should interact in intimate interpersonal relationships.

To explore these phenomena, we examined the following research questions about African American adolescent girls' sexuality:

1. In what ways do the eight sexual images reflect attitudes and beliefs about African American women's physical attractiveness and subsequent assumptions about sexuality?
2. How do these beliefs about physical attractiveness inform attitudes toward and beliefs about interpersonal relationships?

Method

We employed qualitative data collection techniques in the present study. Qualitative research is rooted in a phenomenological paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definition of the situation (Firestone, 1987), and it requires an examination of the processes by which individuals and groups construct meaning and a description of what those meanings are (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The use of qualitative methods, particularly interviews or narrative documents, has been instrumental in informing researchers of the various dynamics that shape sexuality, race, and gender interactions (Bell-Scott, 1998; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003). For example, Brooks-Gunn and Paikoff (1997) suggested that interviews with youth provide the most direct window into adolescents' sexual experiences through rich descriptions that can detail facts that are not easily quantified.

Participants

We employed purposeful sampling, which involved identifying participants who might give the most comprehensive and knowledgeable information about sexual images in African American youth culture. Fifteen African American early adolescents aged 11–13 participated in the study (seven boys and eight girls). Data were gathered from both

boys and girls as the frameworks for African American adolescents' sexual images are informed through heterosexual relationship expectations. Further, collecting data at this phase of the lifespan highlights the changing meanings given to men's and women's roles and interactions, as prior to this point African American children experience unisex socialization. Black family scholars have found that African American children have been socialized with fewer gender role constraints until pubertal onset, as reflected by family structure (McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985; Staples, 1994; Weddle-West, 2000).

Participants were recruited from a federally funded after-school program designed for low income families. All attended public middle schools and had resided in the large southeastern college town all their lives. None of the participants were currently involved in a romantic or sexual relationship. The majority had never experienced any form of sexual activity; all reported that they had not experienced sexual onset, specifically sexual intercourse. Only four boys and two girls indicated that they had ever kissed or "made out" with a member of the other sex. No participant reported currently being involved in an intimate relationship with a person of the other sex, although several discussed having had "boyfriends" or "girlfriends." The participants described themselves as "brown" or "dark-skinned;" none viewed themselves as "light-skinned."

Procedure

Three data collection techniques were used: (1) semi-structured focus group interviews, (2) written feedback documentation, and (3) the researchers' notes. These multiple sources of data were collected in order to triangulate the data and to confirm emergent themes and inconsistencies in the data. The focus groups coincided with the open period of the after-school programming schedule. Participants were brought to a private classroom in the academic area of the facility. Boys and girls were interviewed on separate days. After some initial discussion, the questioning process focused on sexuality. A questioning route provided a framework for developing and sequencing a series of focused, yet flexible questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Some questions included: What kind of messages have you received about African American women's sexuality? What kind of messages in the media, particularly videos are being shown about African American women? Are African American women portrayed in the same way as other racial groups when it comes to sexuality? Probes were prepared for each question to elicit further information from the participants if the responses given were not comprehensive or failed to provide understandable information.

In addition, each participant was given a handout with an image of a female Hip Hop artist who personified the image being discussed. The purpose of the handout was for participants to list beliefs about these images as they related to sexual behaviors and attitudes from the perspective of (a) themselves, (b) their female cohort, and (c) their male cohort. The images were introduced individually, so that participants were not made aware in advance of what images were to be discussed.

Finally, throughout this process, the researchers made notes about participant-researcher interactions and salient issues that emerged through the focus group discussions. Participant-researcher interactions, body language, subsequent interview questions, and outlines of possible categories, themes, and patterns were also included in the researchers' notes. Pseudonyms are used to identify the participants' voices.

Data analysis

Principles of the constant-comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used to guide data analysis. An integration of Simon and Gagnon's (1984, 1986, 1987) sexual scripting levels and symbolic interaction theory were used to develop the coding schemes. Reissman's (1993) levels of representation model guided our continuing attempts to represent and interpret the data. Before coding, transcripts were read three times by the researchers. The analysis process began with open coding to develop categories of concepts and themes that emerged from the data. Selective coding, where first level codes were condensed and recategorized, followed. Prior research and the body of literature on African Americans' sexuality were integrated into this process, during which core categories about the phenomena being studied were devised. Once these coding techniques were completed, the transcripts were further triangulated with the researchers' notes and participants' written documentations.

Results

Two significant themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented here. The data from three sources (focus group transcripts, participants' notes written on the handouts, and the researchers' notes) were integrated into this overview of two questions that served to guide the present study:

1. In what ways do the eight sexual images reflect attitudes and beliefs about African American women's physical attractiveness and subsequent assumptions about sexuality?
2. How do beliefs about physical attractiveness inform attitudes toward and beliefs about interpersonal relationships?

Physical attractiveness

The eight sexual images provided cues regarding values given to African American female physical attractiveness. Hair texture, skin color, and body image were central to participants' descriptions of appropriate sexual image characteristics. However, dominant culture ideals about physical attractiveness were not expressed. These young women gave less value to Westernized standards of beauty than expected.

Crystal: No, I think Mary J [dark-skinned artist] is a Diva. You can be darker skin and be beautiful. Like all light-skinned girls are not pretty. People think they are. But not all are. A Diva is about how you carry yourself.

It is important to note that the girls often referred to what men found physically attractive in conjunction with what they themselves considered attractive. This was a pattern that did not emerge among the boys' responses. For example, although some of the girls expressed how beautiful they thought representations of the Earth Mother image were, they also acknowledged that men may not perceive that image as attractive for a potential partner. The girls themselves did not like the idea of shaving their hair short or putting in dreadlocks for fear of how unattractive and unfeminine they would be perceived by others, namely boys and men.

Tracy: I think [Lauryn Hill] is beautiful. Even with her dreads. Yeah, she is. I like her hair. Yeah, [Lauryn Hill] is beautiful. But I wouldn't put in dreads. I don't want it for me.

Researcher: What about shaving your hair off short?

Tracy: No, oh no, no. No, Erykah [Badu] looks good. But no. My dad wouldn't like it.

However, this awareness did not undermine their beliefs about their own physical attractiveness. All of the girls in our study were comfortable with their appearance, and none expressed any dissatisfaction. They all expressed happiness with their overall appearance.

Leesa: I'm not super pretty but I'm not ugly. I'm happy, and I think my body is nice.

Crystal: I'm happy. Even if you don't like something... you can get your hair done up nice if you don't like it and feel good.

The girls' comments regarding men's beliefs about attractive physical traits were accurate. Five of the boys mentioned that they liked women with long hair and shapely bodies; the Diva was viewed by seven of the boys as the most beautiful and desirable image. Traditionally,

this image is projected as having Westernized features: long, straight hair, slim nose, slender body, and lighter skin (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). These features were all cited by the boys as attractive, and they also influenced boys' beliefs about the Diva's sexual health. On their handouts boys wrote that the Diva is sexually "clean," meaning that they assumed she did not have sexually transmitted diseases. Four noted that "no condoms" were necessary for engaging in sexual relations with Divas. In contrast, the Afrocentric Earth Mother was not labeled as attractive or seen as desirable by the boys in the present study. For example, although they did not make specific comments about the value of skin color, six boys wrote that Earth Mothers are dark-skinned. Some boys harshly viewed hairstyles and textures typical of women projecting this image.

Tyrone: [The Earth Mother] is bald headed or has braids. I don't like girls like that. She's got to have a fat booty and nicely kept hair.

Shawn: Those Erykah [Badu] girls are all right. I would get with them—they're alright. Just their hair...

Anthony: Like Lauryn Hill looks good. But Erykah Badu—heavy is all bald and looks crazy. India [Arie] look too rough.

Curtis: If she has nice skin...that's important. Smooth and clean. You want her to look clean before you get with her. Then you want to touch her...all over (laughter).

Wayne: Especially if she's shaped nice-round.

This discussion about the physical development of girls and women continued for approximately 30 minutes after the time originally allotted for the focus groups. This participant-driven divergence from the main discussion reinforced the value and importance given to physical appearance by boys, even among those of the age of the study's participants.

Interpersonal relationships

It was clear that ideals about potential partners drew on traditional ideas about African American women's sexuality as it relates to the physical attractiveness beliefs, gender expectations, and sexual permissiveness discussed in previous sections. All eight girls acknowledged that women's appearance is what initially attracts men and is used by men to determine who they choose to pursue. Similarly, six of the seven boys listed physical traits before personality traits to describe ideal sexual partners. They noted that women's physical attributes were key components in their mate selection decision-making processes:

David: You want to be with a girl that looks good... because then you'll like to see her and be around her with your friends.

Michael: What you see is what you get, so you pick the prettiest girl.

Both male and female participants tended to view men as "sexually-driven" and knowledgeable about sexuality. It

was conveyed that men would experience sexual activity with a variety of women before marriage. However, all seven of the boys planned to marry a "good" woman. A good woman was perceived as highly feminine and physically attractive. The specific images that boys described as a "good woman" were the Diva and the Sister Savior. Three boys noted that they would never have casual sex with a Sister Savior but would be willing to have a long term relationship with one in the future. As one boy wrote, a Sister Savior is "not a good person to have sex with" but he would marry her.

Shawn: You want a girl who is really nice and would be good to you.

Researcher: Which of these women would be like that?

David: [points to Diva and Sister Savior] They don't want trouble and go to church.

These two sexual images were also selected to identify other women whom the boys held in esteem. When asked which of the eight images they would expect to be associated with their sisters or mothers, all of the boys selected the Diva, and Sister Savior images. These two images were acceptable due to their apparent lack of sexual aggressiveness and their attractive appearance. It is interesting to note, however, that boys also liked the Gangster Bitch image.

Michael: I like girls like that. They are fun to be around and just hang out with.

However, the Gangster Bitch was only liked in the context of a platonic relationship, not as an image for a sister or mother. The boys wrote that Gangster Bitches were "cool," "funny," "nice," and "just like another boy." Only one girl acknowledged that she saw similarities between herself and this image, although she rejected the usage of the term "Bitch." Instead, she thought that her desire to hang around and play with boys was because she preferred their forms of play (namely basketball) and the boys lived in her area. She was not interested in a sexual relationship with them. It is interesting that the boys did not have the same reaction to the Dyke image, which also does not project a highly feminine sexualized persona. Instead, the boys viewed the Dyke as unattractive, or useful if she were engaging in same-sex interactions that they could watch or join in (see Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Stephens & Few, 2007). The acceptability of the Gangster Bitch image for boys and the one girl was due to its asexual persona grounded in a specific heterosexual context.

The ideology of heterosexuality or *heteronormativity* (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005)—within the context of men's desires—guided these girls' understandings of appropriate sexual behaviors. As was found among the boys, seven of the eight girls stated that their fathers, brothers, or uncles would want them to be a Diva or a Sister Savior. Again, the lack of an overtly sexual persona appeared to

influence this attitude. These girls stated that their male relatives would accept their utilization of these images because they represented what is “good” and “nice” in terms of sexual behaviors and general decorum. All of the girls rejected the possibility of using the Dyke or Freak images around their male relatives due these images’ projection of sexual deviance. Girls were particularly negative in their assessment of the Dyke’s sexual behaviors, and referred to them as “nasty” in their written feedback comments.

Despite the positive and high status given to these “good girl” sexual images, girls thought that men could potentially cheat with women who would entice them sexually. The girls unanimously agreed that the boys’ favorite images for non-monogamous intimate relationships would be the Freak and the Diva.

Keisha: They want the girl who will give them sex and looks good, too. Boys like girls like these and want us to be like them.

Nicole: I really don’t like being friends with [Freaks] because they give you a bad reputation. If they’re your friend and they do something nasty [others] might think that you do that. It just gets all out of a hand and people get to asking you to do stuff...they’ll think you are like her when you not. But like her more than you still.

Pam: To me, it might matter, if I have a friend that is a Freak and we go shopping and stuff or to the club. The way she dress or the way she acts when she sees a fine boy that might make me dislike her because maybe he wanted to talk to me.

Leesa: If she is going around boys and being nasty anywhere...disturbed me because there she is trying to go and be with the boy that I may like.

Clearly the majority of these eight images do not promote positive woman–woman platonic relationships. Only the Sister Savior was noted by one girl as “easy to make friends with.” It is interesting that boys were aware of the tensions these images could create among girls. Boys thought that their female cohort used these sexual images to accept or reject peers. They indicated that girls would be jealous of other girls who enacted highly sexualized or physically attractive images (e.g., Diva, Freak).

Wayne: I think they really want to be like Diva and hate the girls that do dress like that.

Anthony: Girls get jealous of other girls just because we’re not paying attention to them, but another girl instead.

Discussion

The results of the present study in regard to perceptions of physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships provide evidence that identity development does not occur in a vacuum. In this study, a space was observed where social

constructions of race and gender intersected to create, maintain, and reproduce sexual identities. Erikson (1968) believed that peer relationships were particularly influential during adolescence. Although for some adolescents, peer influences may override the influence of parental and community processes (Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Conger, & Smith, 1997; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), the preadolescent girls in our study were additionally influenced by perceptions of their fathers’ approval in regard to physical attractiveness and attributes (e.g., hair, body type, skin tone), women’s platonic relationships, and nonparticipation in certain sexual behaviors. These adolescents used self-comparison and relied on messages about appropriate or desirable sexual and physical traits from peers, media, and parents to develop perceptions of their sexuality and beliefs about their own sexual needs (Buzwell & Rosenthal, 1996).

In addition, the comments of both girls and boys reflected how the developmental processes of racial identity influenced African American adolescents’ beliefs about and attitudes toward physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships. Wheeler, Jarvis, and Petty (2001) argued that individuals who have a positive racial and self identity are successful in overriding the effects of external stereotyped messages about their own racial group. The degree to which an individual uses social comparison processes depends upon how secure that person is with her or his racial identity. Although the preadolescent girls and boys in our study displayed an African American orientation in terms of self-identity, their perceptions of sexual images revealed a conflicted internalization of Eurocentric standards of beauty. This discussion of the influence of sexual images on perceptions of physical attractiveness and mate selection in interpersonal relationships provides a framework for understanding “the marriage” of African American and Eurocentric values and its influence on African American women’s sexuality.

Physical attractiveness

In the present study, physical attractiveness was central to how the images were given values. Physical traits associated with African Americans and cultural attitudes expressed within the Hip Hop culture together informed how physical appearance was validated across the sexual images. In particular, hair texture and skin tone were two phenotypic traits central to participants’ descriptions of appropriate sexual image characteristics. This is not surprising as these two characteristics have historically been used as measures of social, political, and economic worth for African Americans (Collins, 1991; Hooks, 1992, 1995). Traditionally, those who possess hair or skin color that more closely resembles that of European Americans

have been given higher status in American society. This attitude trickled down into the psyche of African Americans and created a system of beliefs and values that informed social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships (Herring, Keith, & Horton, 2003; Hill, 2002; Morton, 1991). This reality continues to shape the beliefs and attitudes of individuals today, as was made evident through the results of our study and in prior research (e.g., Banks, 2000; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001; Herring et al., 2003; Jones, 1994; Makkar & Strube, 1995).

In both the boys' and the girls' groups, it was found that lighter skin was viewed as more attractive in this southeastern African American community. As has been found in prior research, this skin tone differentiation was thought to be externally imposed as well as an internally-driven process aided and abetted by African Americans themselves (Herring et al., 2003). This reality is grounded in the historical value given to Whiteness in American society. The lighter people's skin, the more likely they were to receive privileges afforded European Americans (Herring et al., 2003; Hill, 2002; Morton, 1991). Although the girls in our study acknowledged that men often view lighter skin as more attractive in general, they thought that darker skin was just as beautiful. African American girls may attain additional messages about beauty that simultaneously reaffirm a positive racialized and gendered identity from familial sources, particularly mothers (Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). These informal cultural "interventions" that resist and deconstruct exclusive Westernized notions of beauty are conveyed by African American mothers, female role models, and female significant others. This informal intervention, in the form of conversations or consumption of select media, validates African American physical attributes over European American attributes and teaches that European American beauty is neither an attainable nor desirable goal. For example, successful female rap artists who are not light-skinned provide African American girls with a standard to emulate and to contribute to their own definitions of what is beautiful.

In contrast, the comments of boys in the present study about what they found attractive indicated their preference for lighter skin. However, it is important to note that the boys considered skin tone as just another commodity that could be disembodied or partitioned from the whole, as were breasts, buttocks, and hair. In these preferences, the legacy of sexual hierarchies maintained by the ecopolitical institution of American slavery to the psyche of contemporary youth is made evident. Skin tone is still a social commodity with privileges that can be attained by courtship or marriage and passed on to one's progeny/children. Sexual hierarchies or preferences from the American slavery era are also replicated by representations of women

(e.g., background dancers, sexual partners for male performers) in Hip Hop music and videos for male preadolescents to internalize as a "golden standard" of beauty. The Hip Hop music industry and the cultural niche it reproduces is predominantly an extension of European American patriarchy within a racialized context of racial identity (Henderson, 1996; Wahl, 1999). Thus, African American boys internalize cultural messages of what constitutes beauty in a different way than African American girls do.

Body size and shape also emerged as important aspects of physical attractiveness. The boys in our study spent a considerable amount of time discussing the shapes and sizes of African American women's bodies. It was clear that traditional European American body shapes were not considered the most attractive. Rather, these boys preferred the more curvaceous body types typically associated with African American women (Arogundade, 2000; Willis & Williams, 2002). Buttocks that were "large and round," "big breasts," and "thick thighs" were listed as ideal in the comments written by the boys. Within the African American community and other communities of color, this attitude is common among men (Becker, Yanek, Koffman, & Bronner, 1999; Fraser, 2003; Jackson & McGill, 1996; Nasser, 1988; Simeon et al., 2003).

However, in the context of our study, the boys further partitioned the female body, such that it was discussed in terms of individual parts. They could be attracted to a woman's large breasts, for example, but have no interest in her flat buttocks. As one boy explained, "If her [buttocks] is nice and round, who cares about the rest—you don't have to look at it." Thus, her body was viewed in pieces, not as a whole person. As has been found in research on pornography (e.g., Cameron & Frazer, 1996; Dworkin, 1996; Jackson, 1996; Walkowitz, 1996), this objectification of specific female body parts has been normalized in Hip Hop culture's projections of female imagery. This male-directed focus on parts of women's bodies, rather than the whole, disregards a woman's identity as a person. This process makes it easier for men to sexualize and objectify women without consideration of their feelings or desires.

The discussion of body type ideals was not as extensive or as detailed among the girls. This may be because, unlike European American women, African American women often report that "looking good" is related more to public image and personality than to weight (Demarest & Allen, 2000; Wade & DiMaria, 2003), a belief that was articulated by two participants in the present study. This may explain why African American women are more positive and flexible in their ideal body than European American women are (Henriques, Calhoun, & Cann, 1996; Parker et al., 1995; Rand & Kuldau, 1992). Still, one cannot ignore the importance given to body type among African American women. Parker et al. (1995) noted that African American

women did not evaluate their bodies in relation to the European American ideal in the media, but rather in comparison to other African American women. Furthermore, Frisby (2004) found that, even though they were not affected by images of European American women, African American women reported lower levels of body satisfaction after they viewed media images of other African American women. Thus, the continued consumption of these sexual images may affect girls as they move into adolescence and start giving even more value to appearance.

African American body types, skin color, and hair texture clearly served as an identifying racial marker about beauty. Overall, it was found here that the boys gave more value to Westernized standards of beauty than the girls did by selecting those sexual images that embodied such traits as long hair and lighter skin as more attractive. The girls indicated that all skin shades and textures of hair can be attractive; the personality of the individual is what is most important.

Thus, when not directly questioned, the traditional value given to more European American phenotypic features appeared to dominate the thoughts of the girls in our study. Previous researchers have found similar patterns with African American young adults whereby men were more likely than women to view lighter-skinned potential mates as more attractive (Bond & Cash, 1992; Breland, Coleman, Coard, & Steward, 2002; Coard et al., 2001; Hill, 2002; Hughes & Bradley, 1990; Ward & Robinson, 1995). However, these young men's beliefs affected the women's views of themselves. This may explain why girls in the present study often referenced what boys liked in conjunction with what they liked, a pattern that did not emerge among the boys' responses. This phenomenon may occur because of the added value men give to physical traits over psychological traits when considering dating processes, findings that have been consistently found in mate selection research (e.g., Feingold, 1990; Perlini, Marcello, Hansen, & Pudney, 2001; Regan & Joshi, 2003). Studies of African American populations have shown that men's interpretations of women's physical appearance, including body shape and dress, are an important part of mate selection and relationship quality (Landolt, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1995; Lundy, Tan, & Cunningham, 1998). Thus, to remain competitive in the dating market, women must try to meet men's standards of beauty. Although the girls in our study were not as yet dating, it was evident that they were knowledgeable about and gave value to boys' opinions. Future researchers should examine the degree to which men's values regarding physical attractiveness increase or decrease in importance as girls age.

Overall, it is clear that traditional Western standards of beauty continue to be normalized and valued among these participants despite changing role models of attractiveness

in general society. Those sexual images that embody these traits (e.g., long hair, shapely yet slender build, lighter skin) were generally viewed as the most attractive. The ways in which Hip Hop culture specifically promotes these ideals must be explored further in future research. This is particularly important given the centrality of and value given to women's physical appearance in music videos and other Hip Hop culture expressions.

Interpersonal relationships

Sexual images not only provide individuals with appropriate frameworks for their own behavior, but also inform them about others' behaviors and how to respond to them. African American cultural critic bell hooks has pointed out that the messages of the Hip Hop culture do not promote healthy intimate interactions: "As much as I enjoy hip-hop, I feel there is not enough rap out there embracing and affirming love that is about communication and accountability" (Jones, 1995, p. 190). Similarly, Hip Hop feminist Tara Roberts explains, "If you are a woman in Hip Hop, you are either a hard bitch who will kill for her man, or you're a fly bitch who can sex up her man, or you're a *****d-up lesbian" (Roberts & Ulen, 2000, p. 70). The implications of these scholars' assertion are clear: These current culture frameworks of African American women's sexuality do not project women as empowered beings with identities outside of male-defined desires. Instead, there is a focus on utilizing interpersonal relationships for achieving material gain and social success (Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

The limited research on values given to personal and material factors in adolescents' dating has garnered mixed results (e.g., Buss, 1984; Goodwin, 1990). However, it appears that the degree to which adolescents focus on personality traits versus status markers is affected by the stage of the relationship. In long term relationships, personality traits are rated higher in importance for both men and women (e.g., Bolig, Stein, & McKenry, 1984; Hansen & Hicks, 1980; Smith, 1996). However, the limited research on African Americans' dating patterns during early stages of dating does not support this. For example, Herold (1974) found that, although African American college students ranked personality characteristics high in dating relationships, prestige factors—namely charm and good looks—had more influence at the initial dating stage. Also, Hansen (1977) found that African American high school students ranked materialistic factors more highly than personality factors, whereas European American students ranked personality traits higher than materialistic factors. This trend among African American may be due to the various barriers and limited access to material resources. In the present study, the boys tended to focus on factors clearly

associated with the sexual images' physical appearance and allusions to sexuality when they identified which factors would initially attract them to a woman they want to "be with." As this was a study of women's sexual images within a heterosexual context, girls' assessments of how these images would affect their dating choices were not addressed.

It is important to consider these initial dating-stage values in an examination of early adolescents' dating values. Both the girls and the boys in our study made comments that they were not ready to be in a stable, long-term relationship. Rather, they understood that who they "liked" today might not be the same person to whom they would be attracted next month. A sense of fluidity in relationships is common at this age, when adolescents are beginning to seek out non-platonic relationships with the other sex (Miller, Notaro, & Zimmerman, 2002).

Even beyond the realm of potential intimate partners, beliefs of their male family members influenced the ways in which the girls in our study perceived the sexual images and their own attitudes toward sexuality. Several girls stated that their fathers' disapproval of certain sexual behaviors, dress, or physical traits (particularly hair styles) was extremely influential. This observation fits with prior research findings in the area of African American fathers' influence on adolescents' sexuality whereby their opinions have a more direct impact and immediate impact than maternal communications regarding sexual risk taking (Jaccard & Dittus, 1997; Nolin & Petersen, 1992; Noller & Callan, 1990). Jemmott and Jemmott (1992) found that African American adolescents who perceived their fathers as strict reported using condoms more consistently than did those whose fathers were lenient. In light of the importance that the preadolescent girls gave to their fathers' opinions about these sexual images, there is a need for future research to move beyond focusing on the mother-child dyad; fathers need to be more directly targeted in sexual imagery research before findings regarding the importance of parental relationships with their adolescents can be definitively stated (Miller, Forehand, & Kotchick, 2000).

Although the girls in our study did not comment on how these images would affect their dating choices, the influence of their male peers' and family members' attitudes cannot be ignored. As was found in prior research, boys' opinions regarding girls' appearance directly impact the quality and stability of the relationship when determining the value given to a partner (Landolt et al., 1995; Lundy et al., 1998; Schooler & Wieling, 2000). This means that the boys' interpretations and acceptances of sexual images illustrate their beliefs about the women with whom they will enter intimate relationships. For girls transitioning into adolescence and learning to negotiate what it means to be a sexual being, the influence of self-approval versus men's

desires and expectations could potentially be important in determining which sexual images they choose to follow or reject (Washington, 1995). Thus it is imperative that researchers identify ways in which African American preadolescent girls are able to ensure that they are empowered in their relationships to debunk the myth of self-fulfillment through relationships with men. Future researchers can build on our findings to focus on positive adolescent dating processes in the African American community in order to move away from the current deficit approach that focuses on partner violence and abuse (e.g., Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Sheidow, & Henry, 2001; Weisz & Black, 2001; West & Rose, 2000).

However, these eight sexual images do not promote or illustrate healthy female-female relationships, either platonic or sexual. The girls did believe the sexual images were applicable to their own friends or other girls they interacted with. However, excluding the Sister Savior image, these girls thought that these images illustrated the ways in which their interactions with other women were negative. The most disapproved of image was the Freak. These girls thought that peers enacting the Freak image would damage their own reputations through association, and they feared the possibility of losing a man's attention. In both cases, the potential of friendship was measured against the sexuality risks associated with these images.

It is interesting that the boys commented on how these images would influence girls' relationships with one another. They noted that girls could potentially be jealous of those who enact sexual images viewed as attractive to boys. Similarly, girls' statements illustrated their potential resentment toward other girls who might use the sexual images to gain attention from men. There is a need to explore how sexual images affect girls' relationships with one another. Future researchers will need to identify how sexual images can help girls or hinder them from building strong, healthy relationships with one another as a means to buffer the effects of negative sexual image associations.

Research implications

There are some limitations to the present study. Generalization of the results from our study to a different population should be done with careful consideration of the contextual and socio-demographic factors involved. The African American preadolescents in our study were all young (ages 11–13) and living in a large college town in the southern part of the United States. Clearly, issues of age, geographic norms and beliefs—particularly as they relate to music preferences, race, sexuality, and gender—are important to consider. Whether African American preadolescents in another part of the country that is more or less urbanized would assign the same meanings and values to the

sexual images reviewed by our participants is an important research question that should be addressed in future studies. Further, only 15 respondents participated in this study; a larger sample would provide even more detailed information about these phenomena that could be generalized to the broader population.

Despite these limitations, findings from this study contribute to the existing body of literature on African Americans' sexuality. They provide new evidence of the importance of sexual imagery in the understanding of the role of physical attractiveness and interpersonal relationships and provide valuable insights into African American adolescents' sexuality beliefs that have not been fully explored in previous research.

Critical analysis of qualitative data collected during adolescence is of great importance due to the psychological and physiological changes taking place in this population, including the onset of pubertal development, first sexual initiation, and changes in self-concepts, particularly concerning sexual and racial identity (e.g., Debold, 1995; McCluskey, Krohn, Lizotte, & Rodriguez, 2002; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Wade & Olayiwola, 2002). Further, only a few studies of African American adolescents' understandings of sexuality do not involve high risk populations (e.g., Brody et al., 2001; Xiaojia, Conger, Simons, Brody, & Murry, 2002).

Although exploratory, information gleaned from our study of early adolescents is valuable to those seeking to improve the quality of African American adolescents' sexual health. Intervention programs and projects about sexuality must acknowledge and integrate discussions about sexual images. Programs that seek to achieve changes in the attitudes toward and beliefs about African American sexuality but fail to recognize the unique cultural messages that influence these processes are likely to fail (Whatley, 1994). Including discussions of sexual images can increase individuals' comfort with sexual topics and their sense of general empowerment. Furthermore, discussions of sexual images provide a safe area to engage in explicit talk, which can commonly keep women from being as open as they truly want to be. Early adolescent African American girls require tools, such as these sexual images, to help them to visualize and identify sexual behaviors within a specific gender and racial context.

Conclusion

The African American female body has been a site of beauty and malicious contention. It continues to be so in the cultural context of Hip Hop. In the present study, the ways in which working class African American preadolescents relate to African American women's sexual images and

negotiate constructions of race, gender, class, age, and sexuality within the framework of interpersonal relationships were examined. Although the girls and boys in our study displayed an African American orientation in terms of self-identity, the perceptions of sexual images revealed a conflicted internalization of Eurocentric standards of beauty. In other words, boys and girls placed different values on skin tone, hair, and body type in their perceptions of women's physical attractiveness. The responses of female participants indicated that African American women may receive a unique cultural intervention from their mothers, female role models, and female significant others that bolsters a positive racialized and gendered identity. This informal intervention, in the form of conversations or female hip hop role models, emphasizes and validates African American physical attributes over European American attributes and that European American beauty is neither an attainable or desirable goal. This racialized and gendered consciousness may also develop in such a way as to protect some African American girls from unhealthy body image issues. Although boys combined both Eurocentric and Afrocentric physical attributes to define physical beauty, European American standards for skin tone and hair texture were preferred most often. However, it is important to note that skin tone and hair texture were just as likely to be compartmentalized as separate commodities as to consider the female body as a whole. Thus, an extension of European American men's sexual preferences emulated to an extent by African American male preadolescents is made evident. African American men's sexual images would need to be studied and identified to explore further these choices.

In summary, racial and sexual identities bidirectionally influence the development of one another and are indeed a gendered process that has complex implications for intervention strategies. The use of sexual images may be a novel approach to research the quality of African American adolescents' sexual health. We suggest that, through the use of sexual images, creative programming that taps into culturally relevant imagery of this Hip Hop generation may produce effective intervention tools. Early adolescent African Americans' need such tools to help them to identify healthy and unhealthy sexual behaviors within a specific gender and racial context. Otherwise, we will continue to see traditional programs that do not address unique cultural nuances fail to achieve desired behavioral outcomes.

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