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Are there really more fish in the digital sea?: An analysis of Black heterosexual men's experiences on dating apps

Literature Review

Swipe Right. Make the First Move. Designed to Be Deleted. These three taglines are from some of the most popular dating apps in the market: Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge, respectively (Laffner, 2021). Dating online has displaced other ways of finding significant others like meeting through friends, and as of 2013, become the most popular way that romantic partners meet (Rosenfeld, Thomas, & Hausen, 2019). Dating apps are becoming a mainstay for partner-seeking as researchers estimate there will be about 25.7 million U.S. dating app users in 2023 (Dixon, 2022). As people increasingly rely on dating apps to find opportunities to connect with others, some societal problems may permeate this digital ecosystem. For example, collaborative filtering algorithms are used to make recommendations for users on dating apps (Nader, 2020). Unconscious bias is amplified in a never-ending feedback loop and unintentionally, a racial hierarchy produces a social desirability bias on dating apps (Narr, 2021). There has been extensive research on racialized sexual discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community on dating apps (Wade & Pear, 2022; Stacey & Forbes, 2021), but few studies explore the experiences of heterosexual Black men. Racialized sexual discrimination (RSD) sits within a larger literature of sexual racism, which describes the structural ways in which society institutes a racial hierarchy of desire in which White/Eurocentric features are ideal, interracial partnership

is less welcomed, and the erotic capital of racial/ethnic minorities is minimized (Wade & Pear, 2022).

Research Question and Goals

Black people are the largest minority within Washington, D.C., roughly 45% of the district's population according to the U.S. Census. I wanted to see how people of the largest minority group in D.C. fared on dating apps. My overall research interest focuses on heterosexual Black men's experiences on dating apps. Data from OkCupid suggests that people of color receive less matches than their white counterparts (Brown, 2018). I've used dating apps before and always wanted to learn more about the opposing perspective to mine, i.e. a heterosexual man. As a woman of color, I aimed to ascertain whether men of color had similar experiences and perceived limitations to dating because of their race. My research question is "what are some of the common experiences of heterosexual Black men when using dating apps?" Dating apps advertise a larger pool of potential partners as a premier reason for singletons to use them. However, given research about how algorithms have amplified biases and influenced certain racial couplings on online platforms, I aim to explore how Black heterosexual men have possibly experienced these inequitable conditions on dating apps.

Method

Data were collected over two studies conducted in-person and over Zoom with Black heterosexual men in the fall of 2022 in Washington, D.C.. Each study included two semi-structured interviews that averaged around 45 minutes in length. Participants had to meet the following criteria to be eligible for this study: (1) identify as a man; (2) be assigned male at birth; (3) identify primarily as Black or African American; (4) use or have used dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge; (5) be within the ages of 18 to 29; and (6) reside in D.C.

Sampling

In the pilot study, I interviewed Hekima, aged 25, and Taner, aged 26. It is important to interview people around the same age because they presumably would have more similar life experiences at this point in time than people with a large age gap. Hekima is currently single, while Taner is partnered with a girlfriend whom he met on a dating app. I wanted to explore different perceptions of the apps based on someone's relationship status to see if the partnered participant had a vastly disparate experience than the non-partnered participant.

In the second study, I interviewed SaSteh, 26, and Ian, 25, making sure I followed the same age group as Hekima and Taner. In addition, SaSteh is single while Ian is partnered with a girlfriend whom he met on a dating app. Hekima, Taner, SaSteh, and Ian have common frames of reference in terms of living in urban areas as all currently reside in Washington, D.C. One notable difference between these participants is that Hekima, SaSteh, and Ian are darker-skinned than Taner, so experiencing colorism may be a factor in their respective dating app experiences. For example, Hekima may receive less matches than Taner because of people's unconscious biases against darker-skinned individuals.

Table 1. Participant Overview

Participant	Age	Race	Dating apps used	Hometown	Location
Hekima	25	Black	Hinge, Bumble, Tinder	New York, New York	Washington, D.C.
Taner	26	Black	Hinge, Bumble, Tinder	New York, New York	Washington, D.C.
SaSteh	26	Black	Hinge, Bumble, Tinder,	New York, New York	Washington, D.C.

			Black, Field		
Ian	25	Black	Hinge, Bumble, Tinder	Hartford, Connecticut	Washington, D.C.

Research instrumentation

My interview questions covered a wide range of dating app topics because I aimed to obtain a large breadth of information from my participants to see if there were any similarities in any of their experiences. Since the interviews were semi-structured, I picked up on what the participant shared and pivoted my line of questioning depending on their responses. In the pilot study, I spent a good amount of time in our conversations asking relatively easy questions before asking any probing questions about touchier subjects like those concerning racial bias. I learned from my interviews with Hekima and Taner that height and race are extremely defining factors in their dating app experiences. In the second study, I amended the questions to inquire less about whether they are defined by their height and race to immediately ask how they think they are bound by these factors. Below are the questions that I asked every participant with an arrow indicating how I amended the question in the second study:

1. Are you partnered or single?
2. Have you used dating apps? If so, which ones?
3. What are you looking for while using these apps?
4. When you talked about what you were looking for on the apps, do you remember which options you put? Short-term, long-term?
5. Did location factor in your decision to swipe left or right on someone?
6. Do you think the apps work differently based on your location? New York versus D.C.?
7. How do you think social media has influenced people's use of dating apps? And how they interact on the apps?
8. Did you feel more positively or negatively when you were using the apps? And explain why.
9. Do you think your height plays a role in how people perceive you on dating apps? If so, how?
→ How do you think your height plays a role in how people perceive you?

10. Do you think your race plays a part in how people decide whether to swipe left or right on you?
→ How do you think your race plays a role in how people perceive you?
11. Do you think you've had a different experience than your guy friends that were different ethnicities? If so, how?
12. How would you feel if you saw a non-Black person's dating profile had Black Lives Matter in it? Does it persuade you to swipe left or right? Or do other factors come into play more?
13. Have you ever felt pressure to exclusively date Black people?

It should be noted that these are not the only questions I asked each participant and each interview included tangents that were explored. Questions 1 - 5 served both as icebreaker questions to ease the participants into deeper conversation topics and to ascertain how they approached dating apps in general. Question 6 explores whether participants have different experiences on dating apps based on their physical location. Perhaps in cities that are more diverse, interviewees may have had more positive experiences. Questions 7 and 8 aim to ascertain the general sentiment toward the apps from the participants' perspectives. Questions 9 and 10 concern race and height, the two most prominent factors mentioned in the interviews. In the second study, I ask directly how they think race and height play a role in people's perception of them, rather than asking about whether this phenomenon occurs. Questions 11 to 13 delve deeper into racial identity and how their dating app experiences may vary from peers of different races or ethnicities.

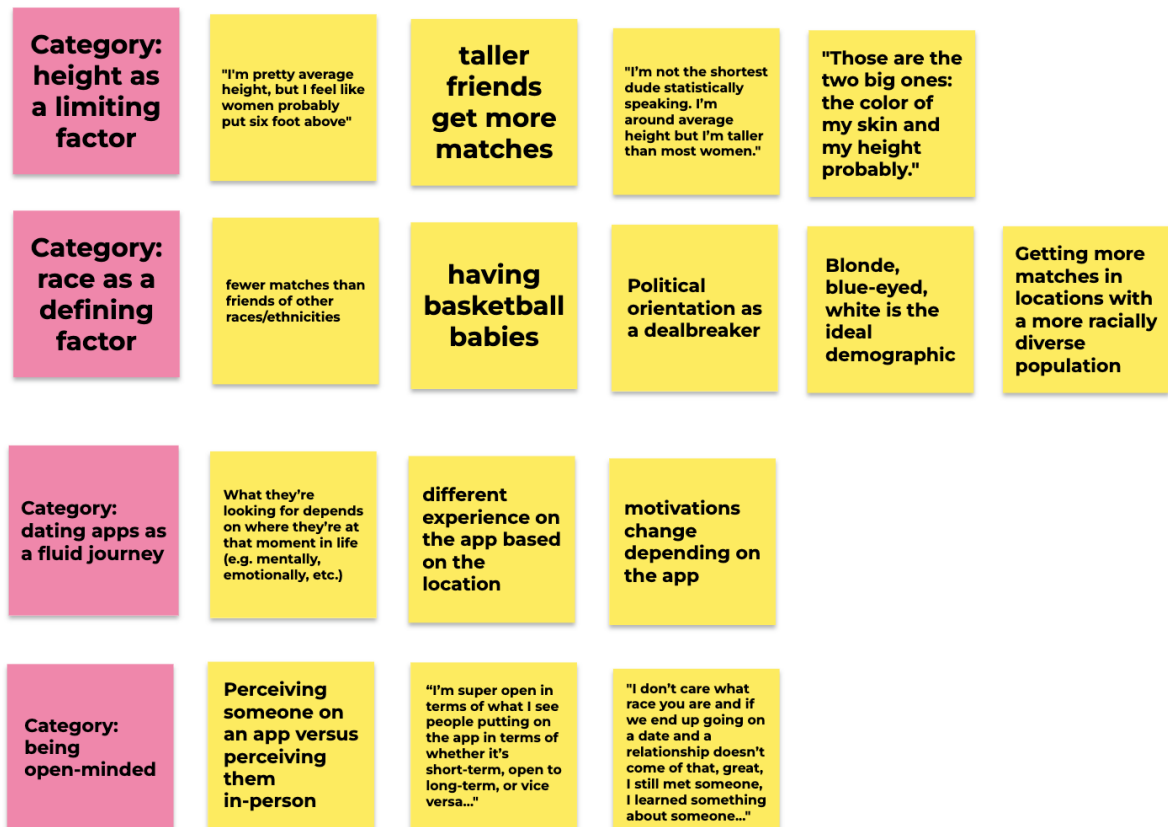
Analysis

To analyze the data, I transcribed all four interviews and re-read them three times to extract common themes. Employing a card sorting method of data organization, I wrote down key observations and quotes in a Jamboard to create an affinity diagram. I grouped the cards by their commonalities and created categories for the resulting groups. I performed this sort three times to ensure I captured all the patterns.

Affinity diagram - before sorting



Affinity diagram - after sorting



These categories emerged from the card sorting exercises: (1) race as a defining factor; (2) height as a limiting factor; (3) dating as a fluid journey; (4) being open-minded.

Findings

There were several common experiences between all the participants in their use of dating apps. Race and height were the topmost mentioned factors that interviewees believed affected their ability to receive matches. In addition, all the participants accepted that interacting on dating apps is a fluid journey with no strict rules of conduct, so their goals could change depending on the dating app and their match's motivations. Also, being open-minded when swiping on dating apps was a common position among the participants.

Height as a limiting factor

One common theme across all the participants was that they felt their height was a limiting factor in terms of their prospects on dating apps. Height is a commonly entered metric on dating apps, so it can serve as a brief way to check for compatibility with a potential match. The participants' heights ranged from 5'5 to 5'9, which they claimed fell short of women's ideal height range of 6'0 and above. One participant said:

I'm pretty average height, but I feel like women probably put 6'0 and above [as their preference]

Another participant compared his height to being average and alluded to how he is taller than most women:

I'm not the shortest dude statistically speaking. I'm around average height but I'm taller than most women.

Multiple participants reported that they had no problem dating women that were taller than them, but this opportunity was highly unlikely given societal ideals of a taller male partner:

I'm relatively short for a guy like i'm 5'5...but like you have a preference for dating taller guys...That's the society that we live in...I've gone on dates with people taller than me in-person like I just like I don't care.

In reflecting how other users on the apps may perceive and judge the participants, one interviewee said this:

“I guess just being short. I am 5’5...Those are the two big ones: the color of my skin and my height probably.” - SaSteh

Race as a defining factor

In addition to height, race was projected as a critical consideration when participants were asked how users might evaluate their profiles. One participant reported that they have a higher probability of matches in New York City than D.C., alluding to the higher amount of diversity in the former:

I feel like when I'm back home in New York...the amount of conversations that I have is definitely different than when I'm here in D.C. which is I think a result of being a person of color dating in D.C.

Several participants mentioned political orientation as a dealbreaker, especially within the context of their race. Race is so deeply intersected with political affiliation that one participant felt that putting conservative in a profile was a direct affront to their safety and human rights:

Anyone who puts conservative in their profile and any rhetoric that is harmful to my person, I'm not going to swipe [right] even if I find them physically attractive.

Another participant shared that they were racially stereotyped on a dating app:

And definitely one that I remember, and I know the other people that look like me have said it to white people, too, but I find it weird either way. That like we would make really good basketball babies and shit like that.

One participant reflected on the colorism that exists in the world and how it could affect people's perception of who is most desirable:

I know race probably is a component too. Colorism in a lot of countries is a big thing. We always put in front of you, on tv, that lighter skin is pure and darker skin is dirty or other. I'm not saying people are inherently racist. People inherently have biases and some of those biases could be directed toward yourself.

Dating apps as a fluid journey

One unexpected theme that emerged was that dating apps are a fluid journey in which one should learn to be as flexible as possible. One participant talked about how the relationship status that another user is looking for does not necessarily persuade or dissuade them to swipe right:

I'm super open in terms of what I see people putting on the app in terms of whether it's short-term, open to long-term, or vice versa...I'm just of the mindset that sometimes people have different seasons and that's just how it kind of goes with dating, especially in a major city.

Another participant said that their behavior shifts depending on the app and its connotations:

For Tinder, I feel like if you do go on a date with someone it's not that serious...you could possibly get dinner, hook up, and that's it. I feel like Hinge is more geared towards the dating scene regardless of what relationship structure you're looking for. Just because you have to put a little more in there.

Being Open-minded

Although dating apps have several filters that allow one to narrow their options to find the same kind of potential matches, the participants expressed their willingness to be open-minded on the apps. One participant shared that race does not come up as a factor for him when evaluating potential matches and how making an unlikely connection could be positive:

I don't care what race you are and if we end up going on a date and a relationship doesn't come of that, great, I still met someone, I learned something about someone. They're still a person at the end of the day.

Another participant echoed how he could still have enjoyable dates with unconventional matches:

I think there are people that I've met, that on paper, it makes a lot of sense why we would go on a date together, but then there are other people that may not make as much sense on paper, but I had a great time with...I think it's really cool to open yourself up to those kinds of dating experiences.

Strengths

One key strength of these two studies is that I knew all the participants personally as friends. I was able to get rich, deep answers to my questions about intimate details of their lives. Another strength of this study was that all the participants were in the same age group, so their frames of reference in terms of life stages were very similar.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it is difficult to pinpoint that collaborative filtering was detrimental to the participants' experience of dating apps. I was not able to use each participant's phone to swipe on their dating apps and ascertain whether they received certain archetypes of users. It is also nearly impossible to know how open-minded their counterparts may be because

the participants may not have swiped right on them, so it is possible that they did not detect a difference in their matches' characteristics.

Discussion

Participants shared that race played a huge part in their experiences on dating apps. They expressed that they are receiving less matches than their white peers and at times, other users fetishized their race. This demonstrates how racialized sexual discrimination can manifest itself in dating apps. However, it was difficult to pinpoint how exactly collaborative filtering may have affected their dating prospects. Participants did not report having the same kind of users appear on their dating apps. There was not an overt showing of only Black women or only women shorter than their height. However, if dating apps reinforce racialized sexual discrimination, then we may be developing a world of romantic relationships along the lines of a racial status quo built via algorithms and collaborative filtering. As an increasing number of people find their significant other online, we must continue to do research on algorithmic bias to ensure a more equitable experience online.

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