

Racism and Sexuality: How Women of Color Learn about Sex and the Body

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of *Racism and Sexuality: How Women of Color Learn about Sex and the Body* is to explore how women and female-assigned people of color are taught about sexuality and sex-negativity through the lens of race. Sex negativity is described as the perception of sex being dangerous, harmful, or deviant; those who grow up in sex-negative cycles believe sex and therefore their body is shameful. Participants were nine women and female-assigned people of color aged 18-20 interviewed through Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. The results showed a triple jeopardy of youth, race, and gender as significant factors in how participants viewed body image and sexuality. Participants resorted to self-regulation in order to combat certain perceptions and sex-negative roles in their daily lives as a result of their intersecting identities.

METHODS

Participants were selected via social media using a recruitment message calling for women and female-assigned people of color over the age of 18 to be interviewed for a study. A total of 9 individuals responded and were emailed consent forms. Interviews were held over Zoom and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Data was audiotaped, transcribed, and coded. Analysis involved finding similar patterns in answers and noting connections between race and gender in participants' experiences.

RESULTS

Religious beliefs create different values. Cherry, a bisexual participant out to her family, says "We grew up very not religious... then we started going to a Christian church - it was Pentecostal. That's when everything changed," indicating that she was unsupported by her parents. Others with religious families reported not having a fear of retaliation: "We all respect each other's opinions no matter what," said Sun, a religious bisexual participant - though closeted, says it is "[her] business". Other participants echoed this sentiment, not wanting their sexual orientation to be spotlighted or taken out of their own control, recalling misogyny-affected people of color whose experiences are seen as something for others to comment on and take advantage of.

LIT. REVIEW

Recognition of sex-negativity in the lives of women of color is not a recent discovery. Collins (1999) speaks on the little privacy Black women are granted when it comes to their bodies and sexual preferences - "In a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount" (pg. 125). The intersection of race and gender for LGBTQ+ identities is where "dynamics become even more complex", Meyer (2015) states, because of marginalization based on "different dimensions of inequality" rarely taken seriously (pg. 12). Parts of these dynamics include youth, where women and female-assigned individuals of color are often taught their bodies are there for the taking. Chmielewski's (2017) study on young, queer Black and Latina women who've experienced sexual objectification finds that "...adolescence is a moment of heightened surveillance in which they... silence their desires for the sake of maintaining relationships, safety, and security" (pg. 534).; she investigates the self-regulation of these young girls who are subjected to the inherently racial hypersexualized perceptions from society. Focusing on the experiences of individuals who live at these intersections creates a space that aims to hear and understand stories that are not given attention or media because of America's history of classism, racism, and homophobia.

Participants felt sex should be **secretive or shameful**. "...my mom telling me about my period and stuff like that. That was the most she ever spoke to me about stuff like that," said Red. She later spoke on her abstinence-only, heterosexual education throughout high school - "could've avoided so many other things." As a result of **poor sex education**, several participants recalled turning to pornography. They indicated the troubles of the industry and stigma of sex work. Luci, who revealed that girls talking about pornography in school would disgust boys, spoke on how "you can't feed into something that you hate", regarding how men will insult sex workers but watch porn, supporting the industry.

RESULTS (CONT.)

Others brought up the unrealistic body standards and racial stereotypes that degrade and categorize women of color in porn. Respondents delved into pro-sex work beliefs, with a positive response towards "pay for your porn" movements, but still recognized its faults, the normalization of violence, and critiqued big pornography industry for its negative impact on women and female-assigned people, especially those of color.

A **triple jeopardy** at the intersection of youth, race, and gender became apparent when interviewing the participants about how they grew up. Participants recalled being harassed from a young age, many being in middle school. Rosa, a Black Latina, said Administration described her harassment as "not that serious". She recalled a time when she was groped - "...that was such a violation and I looked so young...". Jewel attributes this to the objectification of people of color's bodies - "I feel like as a woman of color, we have hypersexualization... that's something I wish I could change - not being sexualized all the time." Val recalls how they were socialized to believe their body matured faster, "Especially being a person of color... you need to start being cognizant of it." Participants discussed ways to avoid street harassment, i.e.: wearing looser clothing, ignoring comments thrown at them, walking faster to exit the area quicker, but Cid embodied another form of **self-regulation**: "I expected nothing more from you because you're useless other than the way you presented yourself to the world." They present another reality: harassment is not a reflection of yourself.

CONCLUSION

Representations of women and female-assigned people of color in media that do not homogenize or hypersexualize BIPOC is an important part of fixing and recognizing the continuous cycle of sex negativity for misogyny-affected people of color. Sex education needs to put forth effort into being more inclusive of people of color and queer identities. Recognition of sex negativity in all aspects of life remains a factor in self-regulation and self-image issues for women and female-assigned POC.