Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Soc Media Soc. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2021 December 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Soc Media Soc. 2021 July 01; 7(3): . doi:10.1177/20563051211033823.

How Black Teen Girls Navigate Social Media to Form Romantic Relationships

Veronica U. Weser[1,2], **Ijeoma Opara**[3,4], **Brandon E. Sands**[1,2], **Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes**[1,2], **Kimberly D. Hieftje**[1,2,4]

[1]Yale School of Medicine, USA

[2]Yale Center for Health & Learning Games, USA

[3]SUNY Stony Brook University, USA

[4]Yale School of Public Health, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of social media within the context of heterosexual Black teen girls' romantic partner selection processes. To better understand Black teen girls' experiences, five focus groups ($N = 27$; aged 14–18 years) were conducted over Zoom. An inductive thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) the use of different platforms to gather different types of information, (2) the rules of social media scouting, (3) detecting partner qualities through social media, and (4) exploring Black teen girls' experience with social media and dating. Participants in our study primarily used Instagram to understand a potential partner's true self, while Twitter was used to assess a potential partner's political leanings. Our participants shared numerous "rules" related to the partner-scouting process. Black teen girls in our study explained that photos index a potential partner's style and hygiene, while memes were used to gauge sense of humor compatibility. More specific to Black teen girls, across all focus groups, participants shared their experiences of racism and bias, such as being associated with Black stereotypes, cultural invalidation, and being accused of "acting White." Although teen girls of various racial and ethnic groups may use social media to vet romantic partners, findings reveal that Black teen girls navigate social media in a unique way, including being highly attuned to signs of bias. Our findings suggest that in the first few months of COVID-19 social distancing had little impact on our participant's practice of using social media to vet potential romantic partners.

Keywords

Black; teen; online dating; qualitative methods; social media

---

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).

Corresponding Author: Veronica U. Weser, Department of Pediatrics, Yale University School of Medicine, 2 Church St South, Suite 515, New Haven, CT 06520, USA. veronica.weser@yale.edu, Twitter: @play4rlab.

Author Manuscript

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing measures have been put in place throughout the world, which has led to an increase in dependency on online platforms. Even before the pandemic was declared, social media has become a ubiquitous aspect of American teen life. Recent Pew Research data report that 95% of teens have a smartphone and 45% of teens say they are online almost constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2020). Teen girls have been found to outpace teen boys in using social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat to share information about themselves (Wade, 2019). Studies have indicated that teen girls use social media as a potent tool for finding potential dating partners, determining compatibility, initiating the dating process, and ultimately maintaining a relationship with day-to-day communication (Howard et al., 2019). Moreover, teens use social media sites to engage in online flirting, which typically consists of comments, private messages, innuendo emojis (i.e., the eggplant to signify a "penis" or the peach to represent "buttocks"), or liking someone's photos (Lykens et al., 2019). Since 72% of US teens use Instagram and 69% use Snapchat (Anderson & Jiang, 2020), these are the platforms most frequented by teens seeking to find others who have similar interests and to communicate with a current partner.

Although cyberintimacy via social media among adults is a burgeoning area of research (Kwok & Wescott, 2020), less research has investigated how this technology has shaped teen dating and romance (Rueda et al., 2015). Research investigating the adverse effects of social media on teen romance has documented problematic dating behaviors, including digital dating abuse (Reed et al., 2016, 2017) as well as an increase in interpersonal surveillance and social comparison (Ho et al., 2016), which likely contributes to teens' self-sexualization (Trekels et al., 2018).

However, the constantly changing landscape of social media platforms, especially with platforms considered *en vogue* by teen users, contributes to difficulties in evaluating the utility of social media for teen romance. Indeed, the published literature surveyed focuses mostly on teen Facebook use (Howard et al., 2019; Lucero et al., 2014; Lykens et al., 2019; Rueda et al., 2015; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016, 2019), which has largely dropped out of style with today's teens: 2018 data from Pew Research Center showed a drop from 71% of teens reporting Facebook as their preferred platform in 2015 to just 51%, a number that is likely to have fallen further in the intervening years (Anderson & Jiang, 2020).

According to the Pew Research Center, Black teenagers are more likely to have smartphones than their White or Hispanic counterparts, with 34% of Black teenagers going online "almost constantly" (Lucero et al., 2014). Notably, previous research indicates that social media is used extensively by teens seeking to learn about potential romantic partners (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Although there is ample literature describing the demographics of social media users (Lucero et al., 2014), very few studies have explored how social media facilitates dating and partner selection processes, specifically for Black teen girls.

Investigating the use of social media by Black teen girls in processes associated with evaluating potential romantic partners may provide researchers with a better understanding of decision-making processes regarding dating. Moreover, social media has been found

Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

to be useful in disseminating sexual health education to teens due to its ability to share information on a larger scale (Selkie et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2017). Understanding how Black teen girls use social media to evaluate potential romantic partners may allow prevention researchers to leverage technology to better serve this group. Bull et al. (2012) state that there are few settings solely devoted to educating youth about sexual health. Even fewer spaces have been created for Black teen girls to discuss and learn about forming healthy romantic relationships. Thus, social media can provide a safe space for youth to express themselves.

Because the role of social media in the dating lives of Black teen girls is understudied relative to their White peers, the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Black teen girls using social media to cultivate romantic relationships. We conducted five focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of how Black teen girls navigated different social media platforms and the purpose of various platforms in choosing a romantic partner. Focus groups were conducted at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Recruitment

This study is a part of a larger study funded by the National Institute on Child and Human Development (NICHD) to support the development of a multiplayer videogame HIV prevention intervention that is gender- and culturally tailored for Black teen girls and expands upon an existing card game intervention (Hieftje et al., 2019). The study was approved by the university’s institutional review board, and the focus groups were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent stay at home orders. To recruit our target population, we designed an advertisement that linked to an eligibility survey hosted on the online data collection platform, Qualtrics. This ad ran simultaneously on both Facebook and Instagram and was displayed nationally to individuals who self-identified on those platforms as (1) Black, (2) female, (3) between the ages of 14 and 18 years, and (4) identify as heterosexual. Of the 173 individuals who completed the screening survey, 72 were eligible to participate in the focus groups based on self-reported sex, race, age, and sexual orientation.

We emailed each of the 72 eligible participants a personalized message explaining in greater detail the study and their potential involvement. The institutional review board (IRB)-approved consent and information form was included as an attachment. Consent forms were emailed to parents/guardians of participants who were interested in being in the study. All participants consented to the audio recording of the focus groups, as well as to the collection of typed messages sent through Zoom’s text chat function.

Participants

Twenty-seven teen girls aged 14–18 years ($M = 16.22$ years; $SD = 1.25$) who self-identified as Black were recruited through advertisements in Facebook and Instagram ($n = 19$). Friends of focus group participants ($n = 8$) contacted the research team, requesting to be involved in the study, and were thus recruited through snowball sampling. Since Zoom displays the

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

names of all participants, these display names were changed to codenames by the focus group facilitator prior to participants joining the call. Participants were instructed to use these codenames to refer to themselves and other participants and not to disclose any personal information. Overall, our participants hailed from 12 US states.

Data Collection

Five audio-recorded focus groups were conducted (see Table 1 for composition of each group) through Zoom video conferencing software. A phenomenological framework (Kevern & Webb, 2001) was used to guide the discussion according to the semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix 1). Although disparities in power relationships between researchers and respondents always exist, the phenomenological framework ensures that priority is given to the participants' experiences by centering the lived experiences of the participants. Focus groups provided insight and understanding of phenomena, examining interactions among participants (Patton, 2014). Focus groups can empower vulnerable youth, particularly Black teen girls, and allow them to develop rapport in a group setting while also becoming comfortable in expressing their opinions and thoughts. Two co-facilitators (V.U.W. and B.E.S.) conducted each focus group. During focus groups, both also took virtual field notes to facilitate the development of an audit trail (Rodgers & Cowles, 1993); however, one primarily served as the interviewer, as the other served as the observer to detail any physical cues, gestures, and behaviors. The co-facilitators met with the senior author (K.D.H.) after each focus group to debrief and note any initial salient themes that emerged as well as talk through potential biases. The focus groups ranged from 90 to 120 min, and each focus group consisted of four to six participants. Typically, three to four focus groups yield saturation; we conducted five focus groups to enhance the rigor of our study (Patton, 2014).

At the end of each focus group, participant mailing addresses were collected through Zoom's private chat function, and the principal investigator mailed all participants prepaid Visa gift cards in the amount of US$30.

Data Coding and Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service and reviewed by the research team for accuracy. Field notes and Zoom chat messages sent by focus group participants either privately to the facilitators or publicly to all participants were aligned with focus group transcripts to aid in clarifying the context of the conversations. To reduce individual bias and increase rigor, investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970) was employed in the development of the codes. As such, four of the authors (V.U.W., I.O., B.E.S., and K.D.H.) coded all transcripts in a confirmability audit. An inductive thematic analysis was used, beginning with each member of the research team reading the transcripts to obtain a sense of the whole and then generating initial codes, related to the research, without a preexisting coding frame (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then sorted and organized into themes and subthemes, whereby themes are recurring patterns that occur across all transcripts and contain subthemes organized around these central concepts (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Once the initial code sheet was agreed upon, the research team began coding each transcript sequentially, meeting weekly to review each transcript.

Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

New codes representing distinct subthemes were added to capture nuance in the ways participants described their experience using social media. The initial codes developed by each researcher and applied to subsequent transcripts were reviewed and discussed until a consensus was reached by all coders. The final codes selected for each transcript were then compiled and organized with Dedoose (2020) mixed-methods analysis software. Because new codes were developed during the discussion of each individual transcript, authors V.U.W. and B.E.S. reviewed previously coded transcripts after each weekly meeting to apply newly agreed-upon codes to prior transcripts. The team agreed on the process of coding before analysis occurred.

During the preparation of the manuscript, the research team consulted with an advisory board consisting of seven Black teen girls who had previously participated in the focus groups to obtain respondent validation of the data (Torrance, 2012). These seven Black teen girls provided feedback on the selection of themes and quotes to ensure that their experiences were represented authentically. The data source triangulation (Denzin, 1970; Torrance, 2012) resulting from the combination of field notes and observational data recorded during the focus groups, focus group transcripts, and input collected from the Black teen advisory board further ensured study rigor.

Researcher's Positionality

The research team consisted of the principal investigator (K.D.H.), a specialist in qualitative research methods (C.F.F.), and a postdoctoral researcher (V.U.W.) who identified as White women. In addition, the team included a post-baccalaureate research assistant (B.E.S.) who identified as a Black man and an assistant professor (I.O.) who identified as a Black woman. I.O. was not involved in the data collection but was involved in the data analysis stage. C.F.F. worked with V.U.W. and K.D.H. to develop the interview questions and to aid V.U.W. in the construction of the research audit trail to enhance study rigor. Prior to data collection, V.U.W. shadowed C.F.F. in preparing and conducting focus groups, and met with C.F.F. to discuss strategies to remain unbiased during focus group facilitation. After the third focus group, V.U.W. and B.E.S. met with I.O. to discuss the emergence of themes related to Black experience, such as colorism, racism, and gendered racism, that were not part of the initial focus group guide. These discussions with individuals who were aware of the study but not involved in data collection contributed to researcher reflexivity during data collection (Barrett et al., 2020).

Results

Four themes emerged: (1) the use of different platforms to gather different types of information, (2) the rules of social media scouting, (3) detecting partner qualities through social media, and (4) exploring Black teen girls' experience with social media and dating. Table 2 presents themes with definitions, frequency of occurrence, and exemplary-related quotes.

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript

Different Platforms for Different Information.

Although Facebook was rarely mentioned, participants reported using multiple different social media platforms to find out different types of information about teen boys. Participants referred to this process as "scouting" and emphasized the utility of Instagram for this process:

> Instagram [is best] since you can go back. Because guys, they never delete stuff. . . . A big advantage [is seeing] what they're tagged in by everyone. On their Instagram, that's the image of their best self. But if you go through their tagged [photos], their friends might post something, and they don't look their best. I [find an] accurate description of them by going through their tagged photos. (B01, age 16)

While the majority found Instagram to be the most useful for scouting, participants agreed that Snapchat provided a less curated presentation:

> Snapchat is pretty low-grade stuff where you talk to the person and you see pictures on the stories. On Instagram you check out everything, who their friends are, what they are liking, what type of hashtags they're liking. And what they're commenting on. (D02, age 15)

Finally, Black teen girls agreed that Twitter was ideal for learning about a potential partner's political views, explaining, "I like to use Twitter because Twitter can be a really political place. I'll stalk it to know if we clash there" (A05, age 17). Twitter was also thought to provide a window into the unfiltered thought process of potential dating partners:

> I feel like if you can find their Twitter account, then you can see their real selves. Because people post crazy stuff on Twitter. They can be at night tweeting whatever thought crosses their mind. That's where you find the true information. (B04, age 17)

In addition to describing what social media platforms the teens used, they also shared their rules and guidelines for how to go about the social media scouting process.

Rules of Social Media Scouting.

Across the board, participants emphasized the particular "do's and don'ts" of social media scouting, which boiled down to the most important principle: "don't seem thirsty" (D03, age 18). According to a recent *New York Times* article, "thirst" describes "a graceless need for approval, affection or attention, one so raw that it creeps people out" (Chocano, 2017). Participants told us about how they have to proceed with caution to avoid giving a teen boy the wrong idea and to make sure that they are not the first to "go into the DMs" (D02, age 15), as most preferred the boy to initiate the first direct line of communication through the DMs, or direct messages, a feature ubiquitous in social media platforms. One participant described in detail the scouting process:

> Okay, so the process . . . You go through all of their pictures. You start off with the most recent ones and then you go all the way down . . . you don't like any pictures, first off. You don't like any pictures. You wait a while to like the pictures to see if, once you start following them, if they immediately follow you back in the next three days, then it's good to start liking pictures. But if they don't follow you back

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

> in a good amount of time, then you wait to start liking pictures because you don't want to seem thirsty. (D02, age 15)

Another participant confirmed that restraint in picture-liking was key to avoiding appearing thirsty:

> Only [like] the latest 10 pictures, 10 is a good amount. If you want to be cool about it, you like the 2 most recent ones or just the last one that they post. But never go back to pictures from like 2013. (D03, age 18)

As participants described their process of scouting, they shared stories about particular characteristics that can be inferred through social media.

Detecting Partner Qualities through Social Media.

In addition to the usefulness of pictures for judging a potential dating partner's hygiene and style, our participants also use teen boys' photos to identify and rule out "F-boys" (boys who only want to have sex with people without being in a monogamous relationship) and "thirst-trappers" (boys who post sexually explicit pictures of themselves to gain attention) (C04, age 17), boys who, as one participant explained, "only talk to a certain girl because they want to get something from her. They don't really actually like her as a person" (E04, age 15). For "F-boys" and "thirst-trappers," the reason they might talk to a girl is usually sexual:

> If a guy has too many thirst-traps to me it's just like kind of like F-boy thing. . . . If the majority of their pictures is just them without a shirt or something like that, then I'll just be like, nah, I'm going to go to someone else. (E01, age 16)

Moreover, our participants judge compatibility with a boy's sense of humor based on his "meme game" or the type of captioned image he shares and the context in which he shares it:

> I feel like a meme can really tell you a lot about a person and their sense of humor if they have a weird, bad sense of humor that you're laughing about something that shouldn't be laughed about, [then] I'll definitely feel off. (C01, age 15)

Participants use Twitter retweets as a means of judging whether or not a potential partner meets the all-important standards of "not racist, not sexist, not homophobic":

> Someone retweeted something that was like 'women are so emboldened by the fact that they can go to school and get an education. And they don't listen to their boyfriends or husbands in their relationships.' I was like, "Cancel. Never hearing from me again." (B04, age 17)

Our participants also spoke about performative activism and the red-flag behavior of supporting a cause like Black Lives Matter because it is trending on social media while not living up to the behavior in person:

> But if he's like, posting advocacy stuff on his story even though like, maybe in school he would have been quiet, but he's like posting donate to this. . . even if he just posted a black square on his story he's advocating. (E02, age 16)

Author Manuscript

The participants debated whether or not a black square was sufficient evidence of advocacy and discussed the importance of consistent and in-person support, rather than transient digital actions preformed to keep up with prevailing trends. As the conversations shifted form general strategies for social media scouting, participants began to share stories of particular interactions with boys in which the race of the interlocutors was at the forefront of the exchange.

Black Teen Girls' Experiences with Social Media and Dating.

Across all five focus groups, participants articulated how their race came into play during their interactions with boys on and off social media. Many participants expressed that they felt as though they were being held to the prevailing Eurocentric beauty standards and discussed differences they perceived between their dating concerns and the lack of similar concerns expressed by White peers:

> I even put a poll on my story the other day of like, 'to my non-Black followers, have you ever had to think, "does he even [like] **insert race** when you have a crush on a guy?'" And most of the people who said "yes" were either Asian or Latino, but everyone who said "no" was White . . . . you never have seen a White girl be like, "hmm, does this White guy like White girls?" No, because they're the beauty standard. (E02, age 16)

Even when interacting with Black teen boys, participants shared experiences of colorism and backhanded compliments:

> [A guy might say] 'oh, you're pretty for a dark skin.' Like what? I'd rather you not say anything to me. Don't compliment me at all if you're going to say 'you're pretty for a dark-skinned girl.' Or 'you're pretty when your hair is straight.' (B01, age 16)

Across all focus groups, participants shared their experiences of blatant stereotyping and cultural invalidation:

> One thing that really annoys me is when I'm talking to someone and obviously, I'm African American. I start telling them my interests in music, for example, and then they tell me "you're the whitest Black person that I've ever met." (C03, age 16)

Participants also recounted instances of being accused by Black teen boys of using their "white voice" (C01, age 15):

> When people say you talk White, they just mean that you talk articulately. And by you saying that that's a White characteristic, you're saying . . . to talk eloquently is something that is reserved for White people and cannot belong to you. And that's just another example of self-hatred in the Black community. (E02, age 16)

Finally, participants pointed out the ways in which they were stereotyped, explaining, "we get labeled with angry Black girl. We get labeled as a bitch" (A01, age 18) when speaking their mind online or rejecting a teen boy's advances in the DMs.

Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

Discussion

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared that COVID-19 would be classified not as an epidemic, but rather a pandemic. In the wake of the social isolation procedures adopted in the United States and much of the world, the Internet became the primary means of social interaction. However, Black teen girls who participated in our study reported that even before the start of the pandemic, social media played a vital role in the scouting of potential dating partners. Thus, it appears that the first few months of COVID-19 had a minimal impact on the scouting behaviors of the Black teen girls in our focus groups.

Social media is used extensively by Black teen girls to evaluate whether a teen boy could be considered as a potential dating or romantic partner. Black teen girls reported that they rely heavily on Instagram for this process, since Instagram provides ample photographic evidence of important traits such as hygiene, style, and appearance. This aligns neatly with a long tradition of literature indicating that physical attractiveness is the largest determinant of how much a person likes, wants to get to know, and attempts to date a potential target (Walster et al., 1966). Participants also discussed the value of Twitter for assessing a boy's political views. Recent experimental work has demonstrated that initial impressions of a likable target change upon the discovery of politically dissimilar traits, dramatically reducing romantic interest (Mallinas et al., 2018). This highlights the utility of political tweets for evaluating potential romantic compatibility. The girls in the focus groups stated that they rarely use Facebook, and they said they find Snapchat most useful for seeing a boy's daily life and standard patterns of behavior. Black teen girls followed various idiosyncratic "rules" of social media scouting, including a proscribed number of photos to "like" on a boy's account, to avoid appearing "thirsty." By looking at potential partners' photos, both tagged and posted, Black teen girls described how they learn about the teen boy's sense of style and hygiene; they explained that they use memes to judge a potential partner's sense of humor. Since shared laughter is known to be an important indicator of romantic attraction between potential mates (Hall, 2015), the participants' emphasis on evaluating a boy's sense of humor through posted and shared memes fits well within the established literature on romantic attraction and partner selection.

Across all focus groups, Black teen girls experienced instances of racism and colorism from boys they interacted with on social media, and they described their awareness of a constant comparison to Eurocentric standards of beauty. Although teen girls of various racial backgrounds in the current generation may use social media to scout romantic partners, Black teen girls appear to navigate social media differently as they take into context racism, sexism and political views of potential dating partners. Since perceived political ideology has been revealed to be one of the best predictors of prejudice (Brandt, 2017), Black teen girls' focus on social media activities with political ramifications is highly adaptive.

Several participants articulated the importance of scouring a potential partner's social media presence to identify signs of racism, sexism, colorism, or homophobia prior to engaging in any sort of interaction. This finding suggests that Black teen girls are highly attuned to signs of bias. Black teen girls also described difficulty in navigating the online dating

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

scene due to experiencing within-group discrimination such as being accused of “acting white” from Black teen boys. Durkee et al. (2019) defines this phenomenon as “cultural invalidations,” which most often targets people of color who demonstrate behaviors or traits that are perceived to be normative for White culture. This accusation has been found in the literature to affect Black teen girls more than boys and can result in poor mental health outcomes among this group (Davis et al., 2018; Durkee et al., 2019; Durkee & Williams, 2015). Furthermore, Black teen girls in the study also described being worried about being labeled as “aggressive” for being outspoken while interacting with potential dating partners. These findings are consistent with research on gendered racist stereotypes that uniquely impact Black girls and women, which can have serious negative impacts on their overall well-being, including increased risk of engaging in sexual risk behaviors (Abrams et al., 2019; Opara, 2018; Walley-Jean, 2009).

Findings from this study are important for prevention researchers who must understand the unique social location in which Black girls are positioned, which leads to how these teens are perceived and treated on social media. By acknowledging this, prevention researchers can tailor interventions and programs to teach Black teen girls how to respond to inappropriate social media messaging that may target them due to their race and gender. These interventions and programs can also encouraging Black teen girls to feel confident in themselves as a way to avoid engaging in behaviors that may otherwise place them at risk. Since Black teen girls’ dating experiences are unique, interventions for encouraging healthy romantic relationships should be developed specifically for this group. In particular, Black teen girls’ aptitude for uncovering signs of bias in potential romantic partners should be celebrated and cultivated. Prevention efforts that harness the social media partner scouting skills employed by Black teen girls may aid in encouraging high-quality partner selection and empowering girls to make healthy decision around sexual health, which could decrease the HIV/STI (sexually transmitted infection) disparities that affects Black girls. Moreover, exploring the lived experiences of an understudied population (e.g., Black teen girls) offers insight into how to culturally tailor interventions that support self-esteem development and promote positive identity development (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014).

While this study has strengths as it contributes significantly to the social media and cyberdating literature on Black teen girls, we acknowledge several limitations in the study. Our participants represent a subset of Black teen girls who were recruited primarily through Instagram. Participants who self-selected to participate in an online study about dating and relationships through a social media platform may be more likely to assign greater utility to social media in dating than other members of the population. Though we recruited nationally, our participants are not a representative sample of the United States as a whole. We also recruited only those participants who self-identified as heterosexual, further reducing generalizability to sexual minority identifying Black teen girls. In addition, the findings of this study cannot be generalized as it represents only the thoughts and experiences of our focus group participants. More research among a broader sample of Black teen girls is needed to fully understand the scope of social media use in teen dating relationships. This work is also limited in scope in that it addresses only the subset of social media behavior related to partner scouting, not the boarder influence of social media on the socialization and identity development of Black teen girls. Future targeted focus

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

group research should also include Black teen boys and self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) teens in conversations about the role of social media in teen partner scouting behavior. As social media use increases, it is important for researchers to consider its role in teen dating, as well as to examine the unique experiences of Black teen girls and other underrepresented populations.

Acknowledgments

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (1R21HD098031-01; PI: Hieftje) and Women's Health Research at Yale. Dr. Hieftje was supported, in part, by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (K12HL138037). Dr. Opara received funding from the National Institutes of Health, Office of the Director (1DP5OD029636) and received partial funding from the National Institute of Mental Health (R25-MH087217).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Dr. Hieftje is the Principal Investigator for this study and has a significant relationship with the videogame prototype company, PreviewLabs, Inc. that is currently developing the videogame intervention based on the findings of this research study. All other authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author Biographies

Veronica U. Weser (PhD, University of Virginia) is a researcher at Yale School of Medicine. Her research interests include virtual and augmented reality, serious games, and videogame interventions for adolescents.

Ijeoma Opara (PhD, Montclair State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social & Behavioral Sciences at the School of Public Health. Her research interests include HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention, substance abuse prevention, adolescent girls of color, youth empowerment, intersectionality, and community-based participatory research.

Brandon E. Sands (BA, Vanderbilt University) is a researcher at Yale School of Medicine. His research interests include legal and health care system outcome disparities, substance abuse prevention, and criminal recidivism for drug -related offenses.

Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes (EdD, LPC, Columbia University Teachers College) is a researcher at Yale School of Medicine. Her research interests include technology-based adolescent interventions, the implementation of mental health services in school-based health centers, and the translation of policies into practices. She aims to use evidence-based research to inform policies and to provide support to schools in implementation of best practices.

Kimberly D. Hieftje (PhD, Indiana University) is a researcher at Yale School of Medicine. Her research interests include health behavior psychology, adolescent health behavior, videogame interventions for adolescents, and implementation science.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Appendix 1

Interview Guide

Focus Group Guide

Protocol: 2000026487

Meeting guys:

1. Where do heterosexual teen girls your age meet guys?
2. How do boys typically approach girls who they like?
   a. How do guys ask girls out?
   b. What are some examples of what this might look like?
   c. Where does this happen?
3. How do girls your age show that they like a guy?
4. How do girls your age ask guys out, if at all?
   a. What are some examples of what this might look like?
5. Would you rather meet a guy on social media or in person? Why?

Communicating with guys (on social media):

Imagine someone you know is chatting with a guy she just met.

1. What social media platform is she using (Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, etc.)?
2. What would the conversations look like? Can you give me a play by play?
3. How are these conversations different depending on how she met the guy? (e.g., met in person, met through a dating app, met through a friend)

Social media:

1. How do girls learn more about a guy they like? How do they use social media?
2. How much do you trust someone's social media presence when you are trying to find out more about them?
3. Give an example of a time you searched for information about a guy. What did you find out?

What to find out about a guy:

1. If you just met a guy, what would you want to know about that guy before you agree to go out with him?
   a. If you could only choose three things to know about him, what would they be?

2. If you had to create a list of must-haves and deal breakers for a guy you wanted to date, what would be three for each?

Dating:

1. What do teens your age do for fun with people they like?
   a. What does a typical date look like?
2. If you go on a date with a guy, does that mean you two are exclusive?
   a. How might someone talk to a guy about being exclusive?

Sex:

Okay, now we are going to shift gears and talk about sex. You don't have to share anything personal that you don't feel comfortable talking about. You can always talk about general things you think are true for people your age. You can also write anything down that you want to share with me, but that you don't necessarily want to say in front of the group.

1. Do girls your age want to have sex with a guy they like?
2. Who usually initiates sex? Girls or guys?
   a. Can you give an example of what this might look or sound like?
3. What might make a girl say yes to sex? What might make a girl say no?
4. What are some situations that teens your age might get themselves into where they make poor decisions about sex?
5. What kind of tactics do guys use to convince someone not to use protection during sex?

Concluding questions:

1. Is there anything that you would like to add or share about what we've discussed today?
2. And, finally, do you have any questions for me? If you think of any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.

References

Abrams JA, Hill A, & Maxwell M. (2019). Underneath the mask of the strong Black woman schema: Disentangling influences of strength and self-silencing on depressive symptoms among U.S. Black women. Sex Roles, 80(9–10), 517–526. [PubMed: 31086431]

Anderson M, & Jiang J. (2020). Teens, social media & technology 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/

Barrett A, Kajamaa A, & Johnston J. (2020). How to . . . be reflexive when conducting qualitative research. The Clinical Teacher, 17(1), 9–12. [PubMed: 31970937]

Boyatzis RE (1998). Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development. SAGE.

Brandt MJ (2017). Predicting ideological prejudice. Psychological Science, 28(6), 713–722. [PubMed: 28394693]

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Braun V, & Clarke V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

Bull SS, Levine DK, Black SR, Schmiege SJ, & Santelli J. (2012). Social media–delivered sexual health intervention: A cluster randomized controlled trial. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 43(5), 467–474. [PubMed: 23079168]

Chocano C. (2017). It's easy to be called "thirsty" on social media: What about on capitol hill?. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/magazine/its-easy-to-be-called-thirsty-on-social-media-what-about-on-capitol-hill.html

Davis M, Stadulis R, & Neal-Barnett A. (2018). Assessing the effects of the acting White accusation among Black girls: Social anxiety and bullying victimization. Journal of the National Medical Association, 110(1), 23–28. [PubMed: 29510839]

Dedoose. (2020). Web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (Version 8.3.35). Sociocultural Research Consultants. www.dedoose.com

Denzin NK (1970). Unobtrusive measures: The quest for triangulated and nonreactive methods of observation. In Denzin NK (Ed.), The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods (pp. 260–293). Aldine Publishing.

Durkee MI, Gazley ER, Hope EC, & Keels M. (2019). Cultural invalidations: Deconstructing the "acting White" phenomenon among Black and Latinx college students. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology.

Durkee MI, & Williams JL (2015). Accusations of acting White: Links to Black students' racial identity and mental health. Journal of Black Psychology, 41(1), 26–48.

Hall JA (2015). Sexual selection and humor in courtship: A case for warmth and extroversion. Evolutionary Psychology, 13(3), Article 598918.

Hieftje K, Duncan L, Florsheim O, Sawyer B, & Fiellin LE (2019). One night stan: Feasibility study of an HIV prevention and sexual risk reduction social card game for young Black women. Games for Health Journal, 8(2), 112–120. [PubMed: 30964717]

Ho SS, Lee EW, & Liao Y. (2016). Social network sites, friends, and celebrities: The roles of social comparison and celebrity involvement in adolescents' body image dissatisfaction. Social Media + Society, 2(3), Article 664216.

Howard DE, Debnam KJ, & Strausser A. (2019). "I'ma stalker and proud of it": Adolescent girls' perceptions of the mixed utilities associated with internet and social networking use in their dating relationships. Youth & Society, 51(6), 773–792.

Kevern J, & Webb C. (2001). Focus groups as a tool for critical social research in nurse education. Nurse Education Today, 21(4), 323–333. [PubMed: 11339876]

Kwok I, & Wescott AB (2020). Cyberintimacy: A Scoping Review of Technology-Mediated Romance in the Digital Age. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 23, 657–666.

Lucero JL, Weisz AN, Smith-Darden J, & Lucero SM (2014). Exploring gender differences: Socially interactive technology use/abuse among dating teens. Affilia, 29(4), 478–491.

Lykens J, Pilloton M, Silva C, Schlamm E, Wilburn K, & Pence E. (2019). Google for sexual relationships: Mixed-methods study on digital flirting and online dating among adolescent youth and young adults. JMIR Public Health and Surveillance, 5(2), Article e10695.

Mallinas SR, Crawford JT, & Cole S. (2018). Political opposites do not attract: The effects of ideological dissimilarity on impression formation. Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 6(1), 49–75.

Okeke-Adeyanju N, Taylor LC, Craig AB, Smith RE, Thomas A, Boyle AE, & DeRosier ME (2014). Celebrating the strengths of black youth: Increasing self-esteem and implications for prevention. The Journal of Primary Prevention, 35(5), 357–369. [PubMed: 25053261]

Opara I. (2018). Examining African American parent-daughter HIV risk communication using a Black feminist-ecological lens: Implications for intervention. Journal of Black Studies, 49(2), 134–151. [PubMed: 31341331]

Patton MQ (2014). Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice. SAGE.

Reed LA, Tolman RM, & Ward LM (2016). Snooping and sexting: Digital media as a context for dating aggression and abuse among college students. Violence Against Women, 22(13), 1556–1576. [PubMed: 26912297]

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Reed LA, Tolman RM, & Ward LM (2017). Gender matters: Experiences and consequences of digital dating abuse victimization in adolescent dating relationships. Journal of Adolescence, 59, 79–89. [PubMed: 28582653]

Rodgers BL, & Cowles KV (1993). The qualitative research audit trail: A complex collection of documentation. Research in Nursing & Health, 16(3), 219–226. [PubMed: 8497674]

Rueda HA, Lindsay M, & Williams LR (2015). "She posted it on Facebook": Mexican American adolescents' experiences with technology and romantic relationship conflict. Journal of Adolescent Research, 30(4), 419–445.

Selkie EM, Benson M, & Moreno M. (2011). Adolescents' views regarding uses of social networking websites and text messaging for adolescent sexual health education. American Journal of Health Education, 42(4), 205–212. [PubMed: 22229150]

Stevens R, Gilliard-Matthews S, Dunaev J, Todhunter-Reid A, Brawner B, & Stewart J. (2017). Social media use and sexual risk reduction behavior among minority youth: Seeking safe sex information. Nursing Research, 66(5), 368–377. [PubMed: 28858145]

Torrance H. (2012). Triangulation, respondent validation, and democratic participation in mixed methods research. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 6(2), 111–123.

Trekels J, Ward LM, & Eggermont S. (2018). I "like" the way you look: How appearance-focused and overall Facebook use contribute to adolescents' self-sexualization. Computers in Human Behavior, 81, 198–208.

Vaismoradi M, Jones J, Turunen H, & Snelgrove S. (2016). Theme development qualitative content analysis thematic analysis. Journal of Nursing Education Practice, 6, Article 100.

Van Ouytsel J, Van Gool E, Walrave M, Ponnet K, & Peeters E. (2016). Exploring the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships and dating experiences. Computers in Human Behavior, 55, 76–86.

Van Ouytsel J, Walrave M, Ponnet K, Willems AS, & Van Dam M. (2019). Adolescents' perceptions of digital media's potential to elicit jealousy, conflict and monitoring behaviors within romantic relationships. Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 13(3), Article 3.

Wade A. (2019). When social media yields more than "likes": Black girls' digital kinship formations. Women, Gender, and Families of Color, 7(1), 80–97.

Walley-Jean JC (2009). Debunking the myth of the "angry Black woman": An exploration of anger in young African American women. Black Women, Gender & Families, 3(2), 68–86.

Walster E, Aronson V, Abrahams D, & Rottman L. (1966). Importance of physical attractiveness in dating behavior. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 4(5), 508–516. [PubMed: 6008393]

World Health Organization. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2020 (COVID-19): Situation report 67. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200327-sitrep-67-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b65f68eb_4

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Table 1.

Focus Groups.

Date	Duration of group (min)	No. of participants	Ages of participants (years)
30 April 2020	91	4	16, 17, 17, 18
4 May 2020	105	6	14, 16, 16, 17, 17, 18
6 May 2020	105	5	15, 15, 16, 17, 17
8 May 2020	118	5	15, 15, 17, 18, 18
17 June 2020	126	7	14, 15, 15, 15, 16, 16, 18

Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

Table 2.

Themes Related to Partner Scouting Using Social Media.

Theme	Frequency	Definition	Exemplary Quote
Different Platforms to Gather Different Types of Information	23	Black teen girls rely on different social media platforms for different types of information	A05 (age 17): I use Twitter a lot . . . I'll stalk it to know if we clash there.
			A03 (age 17): I agree. I was going to say Twitter too. People tweet things that are going through their minds.
Rules of Social Media Scouting	34	Black teen girls discussed "rules" of social media scouting that were remarkably consistent across focus groups	D03 (age 18): The worst thing you can do is like all of his pictures immediately after you start following him. That just comes off as too much. You don't do that. You wait a little bit
Detecting Partner Qualities Through Social Media	187	Black teen girls described how particular characteristics can be inferred through social media, such as hygiene, style, humor, and underlying racist, sexist, or homophobic tendencies	B03 (age 17): Oh my gosh, this one guy I was talking to him for the longest time. I was feeling him. He was cute. We were talking. And then . . . one day he retweeted something about women being dishwashers and making sandwiches. I was like, "yeah, you're done."
Black Teen Girls' Experience with Social Media and Dating	285	Black teen girls experienced instances of racism and colorism from boys they interacted with on social media	E06 (age 15): when he tries to demean you like say, "oh, you're not Black, you sound White, you don't talk Black, you don't act Black." Ugh E03 (age 18): Yeah, or say Oreo, uh-huh. E06 (age 15): [Or he talks about an] "Educated Black person." That's annoying. E02 (age 16): Yeah, because, you know, there isn't one specific way on how to act or be a race.