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The Adultification Of African American Girls: Perceptions, Experiences, And Impact On Behavior

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THE ADULTIFICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS: PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND IMPACT ON BEHAVIOR

A Dissertation

By

SHERIE SARA SAM

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies
Prairie View A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2024

Major Subject: Juvenile Justice

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ABSTRACT

The Adultification of African American Girls: Perceptions, Experiences, and Impact on Behavior

(May 2024)

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Adultification occurs when adults treat children like they are more mature than they are. This is particularly likely to happen to African American children (Pope, 2022). Adultification in homes is the result of deficits in the adult figures; however, adultification outside of the family, cemented with implicit biases, has negative consequences for young African American children (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). These biases can negatively impact their self-concept. Furthermore, it may jeopardize their health, education, experiences with discipline, and likelihood of contact with the justice system (Koch & Kozhumam, 2022).

This qualitative descriptive study utilized focus groups of primarily young adults between 18 and 26 to understand their perceptions, experiences, attitudes, values, and opinions regarding young African American girls and their possible adultification. The data were collected from 13 focus groups. There were five groups of young African American girls, three groups of young African American boys, two groups of Non-African American girls, two groups of Non-African American boys, and one group of older African American women.

Data were analyzed with manual coding and with the aid of Atlas-ti qualitative data management program to identify emic codes, patterns, and themes in the responses. The preliminary code list, called etic codes, included concepts such as victimization, coping behaviors, use of physical violence in self-defense, and the likelihood of adultifying others. The findings indicated that adultification was a source of underlying trauma, which in turn triggered a resistance response as a form of resilience specific to African American girls. Several themes were identified: Familial Expectations, Differential Treatment, Independence, Proximity and Contrast to White Femininity, Perceived as "Loud" and "Rowdy," Dichotomous Image – Mature Early yet Seen as Slow, A Need for Defensiveness, Coping and Resilience, and Intersection of Gender and Race. The results offer insights for re-educating parents, school, and justice system personnel toward improved trajectories and life outcomes for African American girls. The study adds to the literature on how to dismantle common misperceptions of African American girls because adultifying them has the potential of putting them into the "school-to-prison pipeline."

Keywords: African American girls, experiences, expectations, schools, white femininity, qualitative

THE ADULTIFICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS: PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND IMPACT ON BEHAVIOR

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all young African American girls in the United States who are not given a childhood, not heard for what they want to say, not seen for who they are, and most of all, not loved for who they are and who they could be.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Adultification is perceiving and treating children as older and more mature than their actual age or, in other words, as if they are adults (Epstein et al., 2017). It can occur across races and ethnicities due to family disadvantages. Still, it poses particular harm to African American children that can put them on a trajectory of involvement in the justice system. Historically, societal norms often did not distinguish children from adults in terms of expectations and treatment, with children viewed as smaller versions of adults, sharing the same characteristics and dispositions (Pisciotta, 1982). However, with the development of the juvenile justice system in the 1800s, this changed.

Nevertheless, unlike perceptions of White children, who have evolved to be seen as less responsible but innocent and in need of protection, African American children in the United States (U.S.) have not been afforded the same presumption of innocence which reflects deep-rooted racial biases (Goff, 2014). African American youths have historically been marginalized and viewed as highly susceptible and disadvantaged within American society (Gibbs & Huang, 1998). Research indicates that adultification—where children are perceived as more mature than they are—is disproportionately applied based on race, with African American children, both boys and girls, often seen as older than their White peers, a perception that continues from historical patterns of treating African American children as adults (Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020; Small et al., 2012).

This dissertation follows the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 7th edition.

African American girls often face stereotypes labeling them as aggressive, angry, and promiscuous, among other negative traits, which can undermine their self-esteem and increase scrutiny of their behavior in educational and community settings (Morris, 2016). This age compression, where they are seen as more adult-like, restricts their ability to experience childhood freely, pressuring them to adopt a maturity that aligns with stereotypes of African American womanhood (Morris, 2016). Dennis-Benn (2016) poignantly observed that for African American girls, innocence, when acknowledged, is considered a privilege, highlighting the systemic biases that rob them of their childhood. Epstein et al.'s (2017) study revealed that many adults perceived African American girls between the ages of four and 15, as less innocent and more mature than their White female counterparts.

The apparent disregard and lack of protection for the innocence of African American girls in comparison to their White counterparts has consequences for African American girls in criminal justice, education, and healthcare (Epstein et al., 2017). Examples include the case reported in the New York Times of a six-year-old African American girl who was taken into custody and led away in handcuffs in Orlando, Florida. The child was detained for throwing tantrums in school (Ardrey, 2021). In another incident in Rochester, New York, in 2021, a nine-year-old girl who was upset with her mother about a new custody arrangement separating her from her father threw a tantrum. Someone called the police. The girl was placed in the back of a police car and handcuffed. While still upset but not a violent threat in handcuffs, she was pepper sprayed to calm down and then taken into custody. The incident was captured on police body camera footage (Hong, 2021). Also, in 2021, a 10-year-old African American girl was taken into custody for sketching an unflattering picture of another student who was her bully (New York Times Daily, 2021).

African American individuals in the United States have historically been subjected to institutional racism, facing systemic barriers that hinder equal opportunities, including residential and educational segregation (Bleich et al., 2019). Despite the formal end of slavery in 1865, the societal valuation of African American women's dignity and worth remains compromised, with African American women facing systemic disadvantages, vulnerability to police brutality, and higher risks of violence (DuMonthier et al., 2017). Furthermore, the legacy of slavery and dehumanization continues to impact African American children who encounter both explicit and implicit racial biases from systems, individuals, and peers, which affects their treatment and perceptions in society (Scott-Jones et al., 2020).

Multiple instances of reported discrimination in various spheres of life indicate that African Americans in the U.S. are subjected to a pervasive pattern of mistreatment that transcends individual incidents. Disparities between African Americans and Whites are evident in virtually every aspect of interactions with public and private institutions, encompassing healthcare and law enforcement (Bleich et al., 2019). Discrimination against individuals of African descent is a significant concern that runs counter to the fundamental principles of impartiality and equal access to opportunities in the U.S. (Bleich et al., 2019). Based on a recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, a notable fraction of individuals of African American descent indicated experiencing incidents of discrimination or inequitable treatment due to their racial or ethnic background at various points during their lifetimes (Pew Research Center, 2016).

As early as the Classical Criminology era, Cesare Beccaria (1764) posited that White women represented the pinnacle of human virtue. This notion prevailed throughout Europe

and, by extension, across the ocean to North America. African American women, as persons on the opposite end of the color spectrum, have had lived experiences in the U.S. that are characterized by continuous oppression, marginalization, and objectification, perpetuating a subordinate status for them (Baalbaki, 2019). This systemic subjugation spans all life stages and is fueled by intersecting prejudices related to race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Rodgers, 2017). These societal biases have redefined African American womanhood in the U.S., portraying African American women as inferior in terms of humanity, elegance, and compassion and subjecting them to derogatory stereotypes related to their femininity, appearance, communication styles, socioeconomic status, and cultural practices (Baalbaki, 2019; Lewis et al., 2016). They also contribute to environments where African American women face verbal harassment and are treated as if they lack self-esteem, power, and worth (Bent-Godley et al., 2017; Hicks, 2015; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Williams & Lewis, 2019).

Consequences of Adultification, John Henryism, and Black Fatigue

The phenomenon of adultification involves perceiving African American girls as more mature than their actual age, leading to expectations of greater responsibility, less need for protection, and harsher disciplinary actions. This perception strips away the innocence typically afforded in childhood, subjecting these girls to a reality where they are less likely to be seen as needing care or support. The report *Girlhood Interrupted* by Epstein et al. (2017), sheds light on how adultification contributes to a range of adverse outcomes, including increased vulnerability to sexual harassment and reduced access to educational opportunities, as African American girls are often disciplined more harshly for the same behaviors as their non-African American peers. More education and greater socioeconomic status are not

protective from the personal harm to self that comes with stresses at the intersection of race and gender in the U.S. James (1994) used the tale of John Henry, a legendary figure from American folklore, who worked as a steel driver on railroads during the mid-1800s, as a metaphor to illustrate this point, referring to the elevated instances of high blood pressure amongst African Americans. John Henry was able to beat a steam drill in a contest but died right after.

Thus, John Henryism (James, 1994) is a coping mechanism where the constant struggle against pressures requires immense personal effort, which, while demonstrating resilience, can lead to significant health risks over time. This high-effort coping strategy, while initially protective, can contribute to the development of stress-related health disparities, particularly in African American communities. Traits like *always being strong* and *self-reliance* enforced in young girls can inadvertently lead to physical and mental health problems (Winchester et al., 2022).

Winters (2020) described and tagged the phenomenon of *Black fatigue*, characterizing the exhausting reality many African American individuals in the U.S. face due to the relentless need to navigate and counteract biases against them. This perpetual struggle is symbolic of broader societal perceptions that often relegate African American people, particularly women, to marginalized roles. For instance, Byrd and Solomon (2005) highlighted the demeaning experiences of African American female professionals who, even in professional settings, find themselves mistaken for servers, underscoring the persistent undercurrent of racial and gender biases that define and limit the societal roles deemed appropriate for African Americans.

For African American girls, the adultification experiences often involve their being misread and misunderstood when manifesting their distress in response to experiences of victimization or trauma (Epstein et al., 2017). The result can be a stay in child welfare or a trip down the school-to-prison pipeline via the juvenile justice system. African American girls in the juvenile justice system self-report more experiences of trauma than boys. African American girls are also three and a half times more likely to be incarcerated than White girls (Sickmund et al., 2021). Furthermore, African American girls are also the fastest-growing segment of the juvenile justice inmate population in the U.S., where 31% to 81% of girls report physical or sexual victimization (Davis, 2020).

The cumulative effect of these racial and gendered disparities, the experience of interpersonal discrimination and encountering racial slurs or microaggressions, significantly impacts African American women's physical, mental, and emotional health, as well as their self-concept and social identity, leading to adverse psychological and physical health outcomes (Anderson, 1989; Lewis & Neville, 2015; Martins et al., 2020; Wright & Lewis, 2020). Foster et al. (2008) found that adolescents who underwent adultification may encounter heightened levels of stress and psychological distress as they grapple with the challenges associated with assuming additional responsibilities. When it comes to young African American girls, such negative biases can have a profound effect on their mental health, educational experiences, and treatment (Blackwell, 2010). Williams and Mohammed's (2009) discussion on discrimination and health disparities revealed how systemic injustices contributed to a wide range of health issues, including hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and mental health disorders. Bleich et al. (2019) added to the list of maladies elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and other psychological distress.

African American females continue to face constraints as a result of these paradigms, which may foster increasingly negative perceptions of them among their peers, instructors, school personnel, and law enforcement. Furthermore, their influence can extend to the formation of African American girls' identities to the extent that some of them reject being African American girls for fear of being reduced to stereotypical figures or of giving in to self-fulfilling prophecies stemming from a lack of self-assurance (Burnett et al., 2022). After all, stereotypical perceptions have led to instances where African American females, merely waiting at a bus stop at night, have been wrongfully identified as prostitutes (West, 2008).

Furthermore, the frequent over-sexualization of African American girls, which stems from a prevailing societal belief that sexuality is an intrinsic attribute of African American women and girls, can significantly shape their perceived roles in society (Muhammed & McArthur, 2015). This trend of hypersexualizing African American females in the U.S. traces its roots back to the era of slavery. An example of this hypersexualization of African American women in history is the early 19th-century case of Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman, an indigenous South African woman who was exhibited in Europe under the pejorative nickname “Hottentot Venus” for profit. She was objectified for her physical characteristics. For years, she was displayed to European audiences who were fascinated by her physical features, especially her buttocks. She became an icon of racial difference, with her body used to emphasize stereotypes about African American women being hypersexual and different from European women. After her death, her body was dissected, and parts were displayed in a museum in Paris until 1974 (Crais & Scully, 2009).

While White women are idealized as models of *true womanhood* evidencing innocence, purity, deference, domesticity, passionlessness, piety, cleanliness, and fragility,

African American womanhood is commonly ascribed disgraceful qualities such as lacking sophistication, being beguiling, lascivious, physically dominant, unwomanly, and filthy. Thus, White girls are allowed to be little girls who will grow into White women, but African American girls are typically adultified early in their homes.

Racial and discriminatory depictions of African American womanhood in the U.S. have evolved around four central images: (1) the "loyal domestic servant" (the Mammy), as was celebrated in the Oscar-winning film "Gone with the Wind," where the Mammy played by Hattie McDaniel in 1939 was the first Back person ever to win the best supporting actress award, an Oscar for a dramatic performance; (2) the domineering matriarch; (3) the sex object, commonly referred to Jezebel or Sapphire; and (4) the tragic mulatto (Mgadmi, 2009). The historical example of Sarah Baartman and the stereotypes of "Jezebel" are echoed in the contemporary adultification of African American girls, who often face similar stereotypes about their bodies and sexuality. The adultification bias suggested that, compared to their White peers, African American girls are less innocent and more knowledgeable about sex, leading to harsher disciplinary treatment and higher rates of sexual harassment and abuse (Epstein et al. 2017).

Numerous schools that implement zero-tolerance policies are increasing the flow of African American children away from institutions of learning and into the school-to-prison pipeline. They are *the others*, subject to exclusion (Giroux, 2003). These schools' disciplinary actions further compound the gender-specific forms of policing that African American girls experience for dress code violations, talking back, and *unladylike* conduct. Historical prejudices and gender-based stigmas directed at African American girls include but are not limited to *aggression*, *hypersexuality*, *masculinity*, *laziness*, and *defiance/rude attitudes*.

These prejudices and gender-based stigmas contribute to the occurrence of sexual and physical violence targeting African American girls within educational institutions. Morris (2005) observed that to counter these realities, teachers in a working-class middle school promoted a type of femininity among African Americans and emphasized passivity, aligning with traditional notions of White *ladylike* behavior.

Statement of the Problem

Adultification refers to the process by which an individual perceives a young person as possessing qualities and characteristics often associated with older and more mature individuals than the child's actual age or stage of development (Epstein et al., 2017). This includes ignoring the limited capacity of children to make sound decisions, their susceptibility to adverse influences, and their stage of development (Cox et al., 2008). This can lead to the mistaken perception that a child does not need the safeguards typically provided to children in the present-day U.S. (Epstein et al., 2017). Pursuant to previous scholarly research and qualitative accounts, the empirical data support the notion that African American girls and boys are perceived as possessing greater maturity compared to White youngsters (King, 2005; Rattan et al., 2012). Skiba et al. (2002) found that adultification had the potential to hinder the normal development and experiences of African American children.

The issue of adultification of African American children is a significant concern, wherein detrimental stereotypes associated with African American men and women are applied to them as well. For instance, African American males are perceived as threatening and dangerous (Sommers et al., 2006; Thiem et al., 2019), whereas African American women are often stereotyped as being loud, aggressive, or furious (Morris, 2005). Furthermore,

African American women are twice as likely to be incarcerated compared to their White counterparts in the US (NAACP, 2024).

In 2021, the rate of imprisonment for African American women, at 62 per 100,000, was 1.6 times more than for White women, at 38 per 100,000 (Monazzam & Budd, 2023). African American girls, compared to Asian, White, and Latinx girls, are the fastest-growing population in the juvenile justice system in the U.S. (Sickmund et al., 2021). They make up only 14% of the population, yet 32% of those are arrested, 42% are detained, and 52% are transferred to criminal court (Jafarian & Ananthakrishnan, 2017; Killeen, 2019; NAACP, 2024; Puzzanchera et al., 2023), that is, their rate of placement for all girls is 35 per 100,000 girls who are between the ages of 10 and 17 (Sickmund et al., 2021). In 2020, African American girls made up 14.7% percent of all girls aged 10 to 17 who were involved in the juvenile justice system in the U.S. However, 34% were referred to juvenile court, 36.5% were placed in residential facilities, and 39.7% were transferred to adult court (Puzzanchera et al., 2021; Sickmund et al., 2021).

Hence, apart from the heightened demands and expectations that may be placed on African American children as more mature, they may also find it necessary to resist negative stereotypes typically associated with African American adults and, with it, a societal push in the direction of an increased likelihood of justice system involvement via the school to prison pipeline. This study explored the nature and effect of adultification of African American girls in a southern state, Texas. The Black population is a racial group encompassing people from the African diaspora/descent worldwide. African Americans, on the other hand, are the descendants of Africans who were enslaved in the U.S. until the 1800s. This researcher

speculated that the experiences and responses of non-African American Blacks would differ depending on when, from where, and how they came to the U.S.

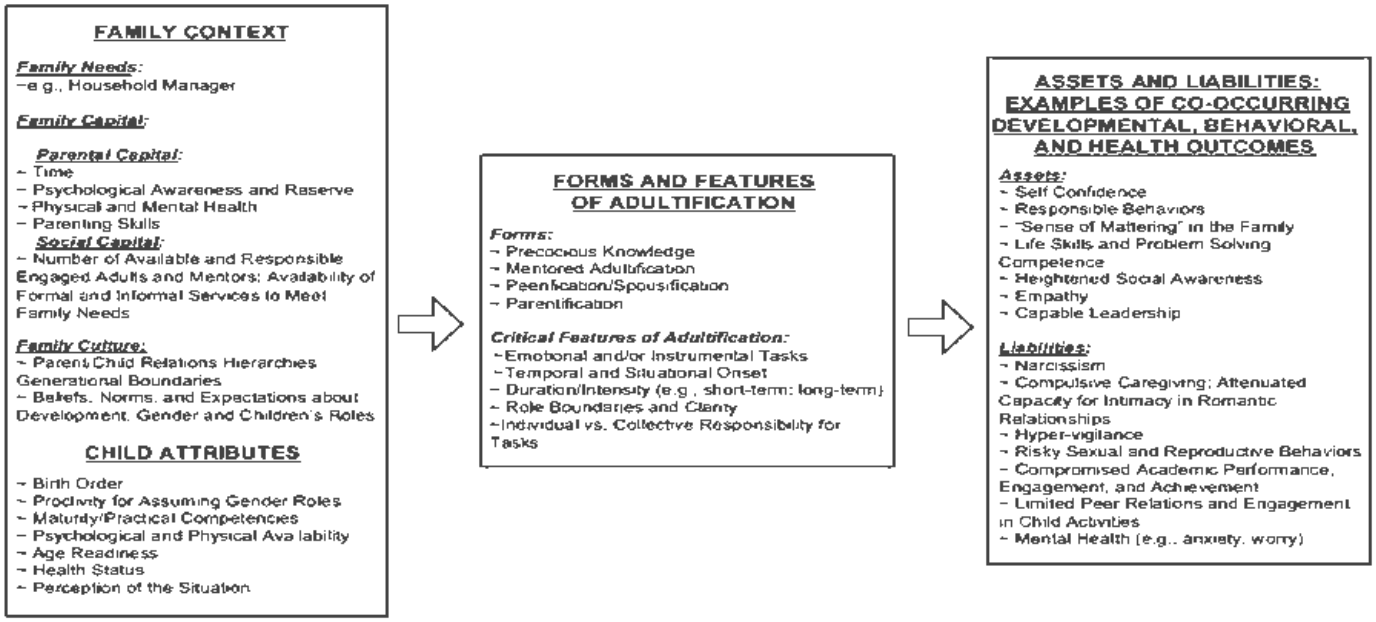
Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to explore and examine African American females' perceptions, experiences, attitudes, values, and opinions regarding the adultification of African American girls. It also described how other young African American males, non-African American males, non-African American young females, and older, that is, above the age of 50, African American women perceived African American girls. In addition, this study aimed to determine in the instances adultification seemed present, then how it might be connected to concepts like victimization, coping behaviors, the use of physical violence in self-defense, and their likelihood of adultifying others. Data came from a series of focus groups to elicit diverse voices on the issue of African American girls' experiences and perspectives about their adultification.

This study adapted the conceptual model from Burton (2007), as seen in Figure 1, who examined the adultification of children in general as a phenomenon that happens to the more capable children in disadvantaged families. The phenomenon of the child stepping up into adult responsibilities is a matter of necessity when the available adults fall short. Burton's model places the roots of adultification in the family. She described its effects as potentially both positive and negative. The positives include the child developing self-confidence, responsibility, problem-solving, and capable leadership. The negatives include the child becoming narcissistic, hyper-vigilant, anxious, worried, having poor grades, and engaging in risky sexual behaviors.

Figure 1

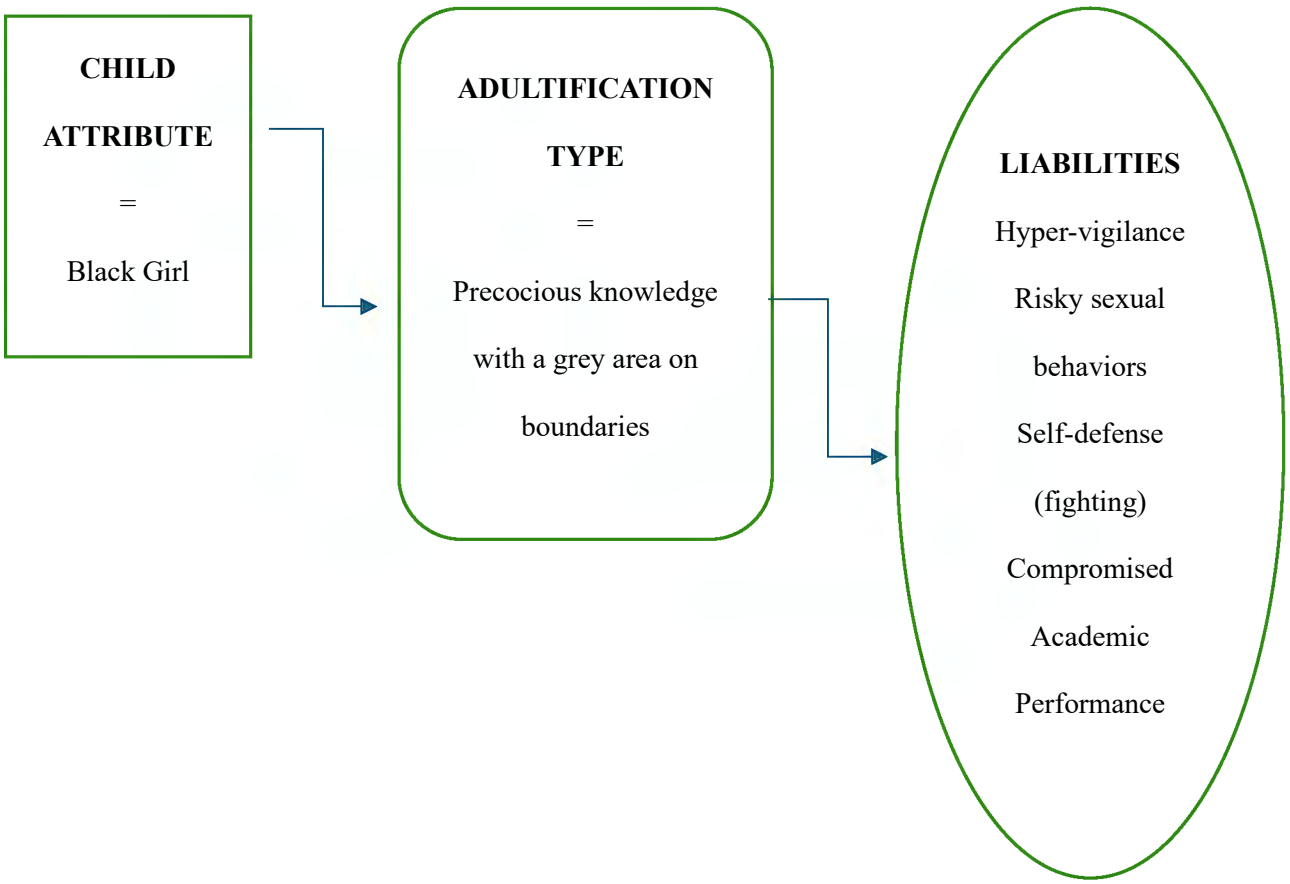
A Conceptual Model of Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families



While many African American young women do experience Burton's model of adultification, this study examines explicitly cases where adultification stems from implicit or explicit biases about African American girls. It focuses on the negative aspects of adultification, viewed through racist and sexist lenses. The concern herein is that when those who are adultifying them in the school system, justice system, or mental health profession, the impact on the girls' lives could be substantial, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Conceptual Model of Childhood Adultification of African American Girls External to the Family



Research Questions

To describe and understand experiences of the adultification of African American girls from external sources such as school personnel, peers, and other external actors, this study asked:

1. Do African American girls report that they have experienced adultification? If yes, how is adultification experienced?
2. To what extent do youth adultify their peers?
3. To what extent might adultification increase African American girls' vulnerability to dating violence or abuse?
4. Do African American girls perceive that authority figures treat them differently than other races or ethnicities? If so, how?
5. How do young African American girls defend themselves from perceived threats to their well-being because of adultification?
6. How do adultified African American girls cope with adultification?
7. Given any adultification, what do African American girls need?

This study explored these descriptions toward informing strategies to improve the experiences of African American girls and their navigation away from the school-to-prison pipeline.

Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of adultification concerning young African American girls. It encompassed perceiving these children as older and more mature than their actual age, leading to premature exposure to adult issues and responsibilities. Studies by Epstein et al. (2017) and Burton (2007) explored various dimensions of

adultification, from witnessing adult struggles to assuming adult roles within the family, noting its particular harm to African American children who face stereotypes that undermine their self-esteem and alter their treatment in societal institutions. The systemic devaluation of African American women's dignity and worth, alongside the hypersexualization and objectification rooted in slavery and racism, can significantly affect their mental health, educational experiences, and social identity. These impacts have been labeled in the literature as “John Henryism” (James, 1994) and “*Black fatigue*” manifestations, which contribute to a disproportionate representation of African American women in the juvenile justice system. This study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of persons relating to the adultification of African American girls, highlighting the possible need for a deeper understanding of its impacts and developing strategies to mitigate its effects.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I described the importance of the topic and its significance to juvenile justice. Chapter II offers a review of the recent literature. Chapter III presents the research design, including study procedures and analysis. Chapter IV provides the results, and Chapter V discusses the findings, including policy and practice recommendations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legacy of Slavery

The legacy of slavery has had long-lasting effects on American society, contributing to social, economic, and political racial disparities (Coates, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2019; Ward, 2022). One such lasting impact is how most African American women in the U.S. are perceived. The perception of young African American girls has been deeply influenced by slavery, which introduced and perpetuated harmful stereotypes that continue to affect how they are viewed in contemporary society. Slavery entrenched the hypersexualization of African American women and girls through the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes, portraying them as inherently sexual and promiscuous.

This stereotype served to rationalize the sexual exploitation of African American women and girls by White enslavers under the guise of assumed consent due to their perceived hypersexuality (Collins, 2000; West, 2008). Contemporary manifestations of these stereotypes, which are perpetuated in modern entertainment imagery, contribute to the over-sexualization of African American girls, affecting how they are viewed and treated in schools, the justice system, and healthcare (Crooks et al., 2020; Morris, 2016). The repercussions include increased surveillance, discipline, and criminalization, as well as negative impacts on their mental health and self-esteem (Epstein et al., 2017).

History and Race

The legacy of slavery also contributes to the adultification bias against African American childhood in general. During slavery, African American children were not afforded the innocence typically associated with childhood. Instead, they were assigned

adult responsibilities and subjected to harsh treatment (Burton, 2007). Modern instances of this bias are evident in educational and judicial systems where African American girls are perceived as less innocent, more knowledgeable about adult topics, and more culpable for their actions compared to their White peers (Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020; Epstein et al., 2017). This perception leads to harsher disciplinary actions and less protection under the law (Blake et al., 2022). The structural racism embedded in slavery has evolved but remains pervasive, influencing the societal structures and institutions that continue to marginalize African American girls. The intersectionality framework highlights how African American girls navigate compounded oppression based on race, gender, and age, facing unique challenges that stem from historical devaluations of African American womanhood (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). These challenges are reflected in disparities in education, where African American girls face disproportionate discipline (Morris, 2016); in healthcare, where their health concerns are often minimized or overlooked (Washington, 2006); in media representations that recycle perpetual misogynoir stereotypes (Coghill, 2022), and in the juvenile justice system.

Juvenile Justice in the US and Race

In 1899, the U.S. pioneered the establishment of the first juvenile court in Chicago, aiming to create a rehabilitative justice system distinct from that of adults. This innovative approach, rooted in the *parens patriae* doctrine, saw the state assuming a protective role over minors, nurturing the belief that children's malleable nature rendered them capable of reform (Platt, 1969). This separation of juveniles from adult offenders signified a progressive step toward recognizing the unique needs and potential for rehabilitation within the youth population.

However, as this juvenile justice system expanded nationwide, it became apparent that it harbored systemic inequalities. Notably, African American youth faced significant discrimination compared to their White peers. They encountered a justice system marred by racial biases at every stage, from arrest through sentencing, which disproportionately led to their detention in juvenile facilities (Piquero, 2008). This pattern of discrimination highlighted the pervasive issue of institutional racism within the justice system, affecting the lives and futures of countless children of color. African American children often suffered from the adultification bias, which increased their likelihood of being transferred to adult courts and facing severe penalties, including incarceration in adult facilities (Goff et al., 2014).

Consider the example of George Stinney, a 14-year-old African American boy, who in 1944 became the youngest person executed in the U.S. in the 20th century. Convicted by an all-White jury on flimsy evidence and without adequate defense, Stinney's execution after a brief and unjust trial remains a harrowing testament to the racial injustices that have plagued the juvenile justice system (LaChance, 2022; Equal Justice Initiative, 2016). The repercussions of Stinney's case and others like it continue to resonate, serving as a stark reminder of the dire consequences of a racially biased legal system. The *war on drugs* and *tough-on-crime* policies in the later decades further exacerbated these disparities, leading to an overrepresentation of African American youth in the juvenile justice system and contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003). The impact of racism in the justice system from its deep historical roots underscores a critical need for systemic reform (Banaji et al., 2021; Feld, 1999; Vera Institute of Justice, 2019).

Indeed, the late 20th century saw a shift toward ever more punitive measures, fueled by the "superpredator" myth (DiIulio, 1995, para. 25), which disproportionately affected minority youth, predominantly African American and Latino children. However, more recently, in the 21st century, there has been a renewed push for reform, with efforts focused on diversion programs, restorative justice practices, and eliminating zero-tolerance policies in schools. These initiatives aim to mitigate the racial disparities within the juvenile justice system, striving for more equitable treatment of all youth, irrespective of race (Equal Justice Initiative, 2016).

Adultification and Other Races

Adultification is not exclusive to African American children. For instance, White children, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, can also experience adultification stemming from family hardship where they must undertake adult-like roles (Lareau, 2003). Hispanic and Latino children may face adultification through stereotypes that paint them as being inherently more mature or responsible, particularly within their families. This can lead to expectations of taking on caregiving roles for younger siblings or contributing to household income at a young age (Burton, 2007; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; East & Hamill, 2013).

Puig (2002) studied Cuban children who were forced into adult roles, where parents relied on their children for language translation and handling daily interactions with institutions due to the children's English skills. The children often felt embarrassed by their parents' language barriers. Also, Asian American youth repeatedly contend with the *model minority* stereotype – adultifying them in academic and social settings. This stereotype suggests that Asian American children are more disciplined, mature, and

academically advanced, leading to undue pressure and the neglect of their needs for support (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023; Lee, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2023).

Adultification and Gendered Racism in Schools

Discrimination and oppression against African American children tend to start at a very young age. Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) used an intersectional framework to scrutinize the interplay between poverty, race, and gender bias as these related to African American girls who felt a need to resort to fighting as a survival mechanism. They concluded that a person's social position affects how they perceived and engaged in violence. Media portrayals of Blackness associated with dysfunction, hypersexuality, and criminality offer the public, including school personnel, a depiction of how African American girls are supposed to be. Thus, African American and White educators at times perpetuate preconceived notions of African American females as violent, boisterous, and aberrant (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

Ricks (2014) discussed the concept of “gendered racism” (p. 1), referring to the unique ways in which African American girls experienced racial discrimination in a gender-specific context in schools, highlighting the need for a reevaluation of the role of race within educational institutions. Comparatively, Hardaway et al. (2019) used an African American feminist framework to examine the issues of violence and erasure that African American girls and women face within education. They described how various forms of violence that African American girls and women encountered within the educational system, such as physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying, microaggressions, and other harmful behaviors, were often overlooked or ignored when they were the victims. In tandem, Andrews et al. (2019) found that the intersectionality of

race and gender affected schooling experiences, specifically focusing on the effect of preconceptions, prejudices, and social expectations. Young African American girls experience racial discrimination riddled with gender prejudice and socioeconomic inequities, resulting in overlapping manifestations of biases and differential treatment while navigating through various aspects of their lives.

The term *school-to-prison pipeline* refers to a concerning phenomenon in which children, particularly those from minority backgrounds, are subjected to harsh disciplinary measures, over-policing, and zero-tolerance policies that result in their exclusion from educational institutions and subsequent involvement in the justice system (Pelet del Toro, 2018). Although this matter is generally recognized, the experiences of African American girls within this framework have recently started to receive greater attention. For example, Hines-Datiri and Andrews (2020) examined zero-tolerance policies in schools for African American girls. They defined zero-tolerance policies as strict disciplinary measures applied to students for rule violations, regardless of the circumstances or intent. These policies often result in harsh consequences, such as suspensions and expulsions, without considering the students' broader context or individual circumstances (Pelet del Toro, 2018). According to Carter et al. (2014), students subjected to zero-tolerance policies exhibited a higher propensity for involvement in the juvenile penal system, demonstrated elevated rates of academic underachievement, and were more prone to dropping out. Although Cooke and Halberstadt (2021) found that there was no significant difference in the perception of age between African American and White children, it was observed that African American children were 1.27 times more prone to being misperceived as displaying anger.

There is a significant disparity in suspension and expulsion rates between African American and White students, with African American students suspended and expelled at a rate three times higher than their White counterparts (Rick, 2014). Based on a report released in 2014 by the United States Department of Education and the Office for Civil Rights, it was found that African American boys received a higher frequency of suspensions compared to African American girls across various racial and ethnic categories, surpassing the majority of male students in terms of suspension rates while comprising just 16% of the student population. African American students are disproportionately represented, accounting for 27% of referrals to law enforcement and 31% of arrests inside the school setting. As such, according to a study by Howard and Navarro (2016), there is evidence to suggest that the school-to-prison pipeline has a disproportionate impact on children of color. African American girls have experienced a disproportionately higher suspension rate, 12%, compared to girls from other racial or cultural backgrounds (Howard & Navarro, 2016). From 2017 to 2018, African American girls received 13.3% of out-of-school suspensions, according to data released by the United States Department of Education and the Office for Civil Rights (2021).

Systemic racism has continued to afflict African American girls and women in educational settings (Cabrera et al., 2016). African American females who demonstrate confidence, assertiveness, and leadership may face negative consequences or are perceived as excessively aggressive, unfeminine, or contemptuous (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). Thus, biases can lead educators and administrators to perceive African American girls' behavior as more disruptive or problematic than the conduct of non-African American girls (Annamma et al., 2019). Adverse repercussions may ensue because of

teachers' implicit biases, leading to harsher disciplinary measures for African American girls than their peers or the perception that they are less intelligent or capable (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). The results of these negative adultifications often mean that African American girls are expelled or suspended more often than others doing similarly.

Consequently, African American girls are at increased odds of experiencing victimization from peers and staff (Pelet del Toro, 2018; Tonnesen, 2013; White, 2018). Apugo et al. (2022), in their review of the literature on African American girls' school experiences, concluded that in addition to African American girls positioned more likely to face punitive measures, such as suspensions and expulsions for relatively minor infractions, they are also at risk of being rendered invisible. According to Morris (2016), African American female students expressed being subjected to punitive measures for behaviors such as dozing off, asserting their own opinions, seeking clarification, donning natural hairstyles, wearing revealing clothing, or occasionally engaging in disruptive conduct, none of which constitute criminal or delinquent behavior.

Specifically in predominantly White school settings, the term *outsider-within*, pioneered by Patricia Collins in 1986, refers to young women of African descent who, due to their race, are subjected to racial discrimination and, as a result, are forced to live on the periphery of their schools (Collins, 2000). When African American girls make up the racial minority in predominately White schools, they are often given more frequent punishments for dress code violations, higher levels of discipline for talking back to teachers in class, and more suspensions than their White counterparts (Blake et al., 2011; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Moreover, Crenshaw et al. (2015) found that African American girls who attended schools with a predominance of White students stated that their

instructors were more likely to be fearful of them, which resulted in a greater likelihood of receiving disciplinary action for behaviors that were also engaged in by White students. This academic setting creates experiences and outcomes that are difficult to navigate because of the oppressive social locations and cultural stereotypes about the personhood of African American girls and women (Ricks, 2014).

African American girls in various educational settings, particularly those in urban schools, encounter challenges in upholding their feminine identities rooted in resistance, survival, or kindness due to the dominance of White femininity, which undermines African American girls' value and significance. Their actions are often misconstrued as predatory or intentionally defiant rather than being recognized as forms of self-expression, ambition, or a rational questioning of teaching methodologies employed by educators (Morris, 2016). These biases have severe consequences for African American girls. They can lead to lower academic achievement, fewer opportunities for advancement, and an increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system (Cooke & Halberstadt, 2021). This *pushout* from school can also propel the African American girl into situations that will funnel her down the metaphorical school-to-prison (Annamma et al., 2019).

The Measuring Rod of White Femininity versus African American Girl Authenticity

Societal prejudices and stereotypes significantly shape the educational experiences of African American girls in the US. The construct of *womanhood* was established on White women. The expression *perfect and White* is presumably a reference to the notion that educational standards and norms prevalent in several Western cultures tend to be rooted in White, Eurocentric values. African American females may experience

societal expectations that compel them to adhere to established norms, resulting in a sense of insufficiency, which may be evident in behaviors like straightening their hair to appear more like the White female (Andrews et al., 2019).

Fordham (1993) examined the experiences of African American women in academic settings, particularly within the context of higher education. Her article, an ethnographic study of academic achievement, addressed the phenomenon of gender passing and the stereotypes and biases that African American women may face in academic and professional environments. Gender passing is a concept where individuals modify their behavior, appearance, or expressions to align more closely with societal norms and expectations of how a particular gender should behave. Their adjustments in mannerisms and appearance are to avoid the negative judgments and stereotypes associated with African American women, such as being seen as loud or aggressive.

The pressure to conform to gender passing and the silencing of African American women's voices can impact their academic progress and contributions. They may hesitate to share their perspectives, engage in critical discussions, or take leadership roles in educational and professional environments, limiting their academic and career advancement opportunities (Apugo et al., 2022; Fordham, 1993). This can be regarding school personnel overlooking their substantial potential for academic success or ignoring their vulnerabilities (Apugo et al., 2022). Harris and Kruger (2023), in their study of African American girls' experiences with sexual harassment in school, found the fear of peer retaliation, concerns about not being believed by authorities, or doubts about the school's commitment to addressing these issues as barriers students face when reporting sexual harassment.

The report by the Center on Poverty and Inequality (2020) highlighted the significant and wide-ranging effects of adultification bias and harsh disciplinary methods on the mental health and general well-being of African American girls as causes for concern. These encounters imposed substantial levels of stress, anxiety, and a detrimental self-perception, thus compromising their overall development (Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020). These norms potentially affect individuals' self-esteem and sense of belonging (Andrews et al., 2019; Seaton & Carter, 2019). It is vital, however, to see that African American females' resilience and empowerment in the face of challenges are recognized (Andrews et al., 2019). Psychotherapists may unknowingly reinforce normative stereotypes if they are not aware of their historical and contemporary impacts (Annamma et al., 2019).

Morris (2005), while examining perceptions and experiences of African American girls in classrooms, found that they were often categorized as either *ladies*, which may carry stereotypes of being polite and well-behaved, or *loudies*, which could involve stereotypes of being outspoken or disruptive. These categorizations influenced how they were expected to behave and how teachers and peers treated them. The racialized and gendered identities of African American girls were constructed in a manner that was both influenced by and tailored to their own experiences and perspectives. According to Lei (2003), African American girls inside educational settings actively resisted and redefined societal perceptions that labeled them as failures and abject beings.

Relatedly, Jones (2010) conducted a qualitative examination of the lives of urban African American girls by describing the experiences of African American females in some of these communities who, despite not being “fighters,” felt compelled to fight to

defend themselves or at the very least, to develop *street cred* to reduce the effects of being targeted for violence and exploitation. African American females who are forced to fight to survive on the streets while upholding societal norms of morality may face severe and far-reaching repercussions.

When an African American female is referred to as *ghetto*, it is sometimes regarded as a demeaning phrase that suggests that she is unrefined, uncivilized, and lacks social standing or sophistication. This is because the word "ghetto" also means "hood," a stereotype to stigmatize African American populations, associating them with poverty, criminality, and the deterioration of metropolitan areas. Being referred to as ghetto can have a devastating effect on the self-esteem and sense of identity of a young African American girl. It has the potential to generate emotions such as guilt, humiliation, and insecurity, and it can lead to a sense of being othered or a sense of alienation from mainstream society (Jones, 2010).

African American girls may develop *figured worlds* for themselves to thrive. Figured worlds represent the socially constructed and imagined spaces where individuals negotiate their identities and roles. Consider Beyonce's selective use of her created persona for herself, "Sasha Fierce," her imaginary version of herself who is braver than her dominant daily persona. Indeed, there is a question: how common is it for African American girls to create alternative imaginary worlds for themselves and alternate personas as tools for crafting a strong identity or merely as a temporary escape? In response to the question of just how the perceptions of African American girls are formed, Nuamah and Mulroy (2023) concluded that African American girls' portrayal in media communicated negative stereotypes and common biases held by the public. These

images continue to be the angry Black girl or the sassy stereotype, both personas that can lead to harsher judgments, punitive actions, or unfair treatment. Wun (2018) discussed how stereotypes, especially the stereotype of the angry Black woman, can influence the disciplinary practices directed toward African American girls.

According to Morris (2016), the desire to be heard is often expressed by being loud. Possessing an *attitude* might be interpreted as resistance against a theological framework that perpetuates invisibility and mistreatment. In another study by the Center on Poverty and Inequality (2020), the impact of media representations and detrimental stereotypes that present African American females as excessively sexualized, aggressive, and more mature than their chronological age was examined. The prevalence of deeply rooted and inaccurate stereotypes significantly influenced the collective understanding held by the general population, negatively impacting the experiences of African American girls and leading to discriminatory treatment from those in positions of power (Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020).

West (1995) identified three archetypes that have persisted throughout history and originated from slavery: the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the Sapphire. The Jezebel stereotype characterizes African American women as being sexually promiscuous, possessing animal-like qualities, and displaying violent behavior. They were also depicted as seductive figures who seek to seduce White males away from their pure and virtuous White spouses (Lomax, 2018). The Jezebel stereotype sexualizes African American women, portraying them as hypersexual and promiscuous. In contemporary times, the Jezebel stereotype has rendered African American girls as desired targets for

sexual gratification, inadvertently contributing to their vulnerability and sexual exploitation (Meshelemiah, 2022).

After the abolition of slavery, a significant number of African American women persisted in engaging in domestic labor. The asexual servant, the Mammy, came to embody the expectations placed upon the African American woman. The utilization of the Mammy stereotype had the purpose of mitigating the perception of slavery as being less severe than it was, given that the Mammy persona was often depicted as wanting to serve her White masters and was the sexually less threatening image of African American femininity, often depicted as overweight, dark-skinned, and self-sacrificing caretakers (West, 1995). Today, the Mammy stereotype can manifest in African American women feeling compelled to be selfless and caretaking, even to the detriment of their mental health (West, 1995). They may struggle to prioritize self-care and express their needs and desires, hindering therapeutic progress.

The Sapphire persona exemplified the prevailing stereotype of an assertive African American girl. This contrasted with conventional notions of femininity, encouraging women to suppress their feelings, refrain from articulating their opinions, and conform to societal expectations (West, 1995). The Sapphire stereotype portrays African American women as assertive, aggressive, and angry. This stereotype is rooted in racist and sexist portrayals of African American women as the angry Black woman. In psychotherapy, this stereotype can lead to the pathologization of everyday emotions, making it difficult for African American women to express anger or frustration without being labeled as confrontational. This can result in a lack of recognition and validation of their legitimate feelings in therapy. In therapy, this stereotype can contribute to the

stereotype threat, where African American women may fear being judged as promiscuous if they discuss their sexual experiences or desires. This fear can inhibit open and honest communication in therapy, preventing them from addressing issues related to their sexual health and well-being. Such disparities can contribute to unequal access to effective treatment for anxiety, potentially leading to different health outcomes among other racial and ethnic groups (Roca et al., 2023).

These experiences can negatively affect the girls' academic achievements and psychological well-being. Such impacts can manifest as lower self-esteem, reduced motivation to engage in school, and compromised mental health for girls (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). Winchester et al. (2022) analyzed how gendered racial socialization within families impacts the mental health of African American adolescent girls. They concluded that positive or negative messages and conversations influence self-esteem, self-concept, and overall psychological well-being. When these are not good, girls become at risk for unhealthy coping behaviors.

Injustice within the Legal System

The stereotype of the *loud Black girl* is a deeply rooted racial and gender stereotype that portrays African American women as overly assertive, aggressive, or vocal. It suggests that African American women are hostile and assertive beyond what is considered socially acceptable. This stereotype has historical roots in the dehumanization of African American people and the perpetuation of racial biases. It has been used to justify discrimination, exclusion, and even violence against African American women. The stereotype of the loud Black girl can lead to the silencing and marginalization of African American women in various contexts, including academic and professional

spaces (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). They may be less likely to assert themselves, express their opinions, or engage in leadership roles to avoid conforming to this stereotype and facing negative consequences. Thus, gender passing can lead to the silencing and marginalization of African American women's voices in specific spaces (Fordham, 1993).

The justice system includes law enforcement, the courts, and corrections. If system personnel hold negative implicit biases about African American girls, the girls can experience disproportionate engagement with the justice system. The notion of African American girls as less innocent and more adult-like contributes to their harsher sanctions (Epstein et al., 2017). For example, Ocen (2015) examined how various institutions, including law enforcement, child welfare agencies, and the justice system, responded to cases involving sexually exploited minors. Ocen (2015) found that African American and other minority youth were more likely to be arrested, charged, or treated as delinquents rather than recognized as victims in need of care and protection. This racial bias in the justice system can perpetuate further cycles of victimization and criminalization.

Moore and Padavic (2010) found that African American girls received significantly harsher dispositions than White girls, even after controlling for age, offense severity, and offense history. Both national and state-level data indicate that more African American girls are committed to detention and long-term secure facilities than White girls (Sickmund et al., 2021). For example, in a study of African American youths' experiences with the police, Brunson and Miller (2006) found that police officers often questioned young African American women and treated them as delinquent just for associating with young African American men. Likewise, Perillo et al. (2023) compared

such harsh treatment of children to dehumanization. In the context of policing, this dehumanization can result in a devaluation of the lives of African American children, police officers who are more likely to use excessive force, and a society at large that is less inclined to empathize with the experiences and struggles of African American children.

The Intersectionality of Race and Gender

Andrews et al. (2019) explored the notion of intersectionality, which recognizes that individuals may encounter many layers of prejudice and privilege simultaneously. Young African American girls are susceptible to violence both inside and outside of school. This violence can manifest in various forms, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Wun, 2018). For instance, the educational experiences of African American girls are characterized by the intersectionality of their identities as both African American and female. White (2018) noted that they not only face the racism directed toward African American individuals but also the gender bias aimed at women and girls. This intersectionality magnifies their challenges, making them particularly vulnerable to being caught in the school-to-prison pipeline, where stereotyping as defiant, aggressive, or disruptive can lead to unfair and biased disciplinary actions (Agupo et al., 2022).

The intersectionality between race and gender compounds the biases that African American girls encounter and results in more severe consequences when interacting with the criminal justice system (Perillo et al., 2023). West (1995) recognized the intersectionality of these stereotypes in that they can be influenced by multiple stereotypes simultaneously, making their experiences even more complex. For example,

an African American woman may simultaneously experience Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, where she feels pressure to be nurturing while also feeling judged for her sexuality.

Resilience and Self-Perception

Fordham (1993) suggested that students and school officials alike have stereotyped African American girls as loud, aggressive, and masculine. However, Fordham continued that many African American girls have embraced a loud and tough persona to be heard and not overlooked in classrooms and school buildings that tend to ignore them and marginalize them as students. The article acknowledged the importance of creating spaces that allow African American females to be their authentic selves without facing silencing or marginalization (Fordham, 1993). Burnett et al. (2022) concluded that parental guidance and community support help shape African American girls' experiences and identity development in educational settings, contributing to resilience and navigating societal biases. Thus, despite the intersectionality of gender, race, and economic factors, the resilience and empowerment demonstrated by African American adolescent girls as they navigate the disparities and biases within educational settings is remarkable, highlighting their efforts to overcome challenges and advocate for themselves (Griffith, 2023).

Smith (2022), in the essay, *Society Thinks Black Girls are Ugly*, wrote that “Black girls live in a paradoxical state where they are too ugly to be loved, yet too sexualized to be cherished” (Simth, 2022, para. 4). It is apparent that there is differential treatment of young African American girls in society, but what are the details of differential treatment? When does it begin? How is it experienced? This study aimed to give young African

American females a voice in response to these and related questions. It extends the existing literature that highlights the perception, attitudes, and experiences of adultification and the differential treatment of African American females in the US. This study described how various persons adultify African American girls and how this is experienced.

Summary

This chapter delved into the multifaceted and enduring impact of slavery on the perception and treatment of young African American girls in the U.S., noting the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of adultification and racial and gendered biases. Adultification and legacy of slavery mark young African American girls with premature maturity and culpability, perpetuating harmful stereotypes of hypersexuality and aggressiveness. This bias, deeply ingrained in American institutions like education, healthcare, and particularly the juvenile justice system, has led to the disproportionate disciplining, criminalization, and marginalization of African American youth. Despite these challenges, the resilience and self-perception of African American girls shine as beacons of resistance and empowerment against societal biases. This study addressed the need for more research on the intersections of adultification with systemic inequalities and the development of interventions to support and empower African American girls.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

This study employed an exploratory qualitative descriptive approach. It utilized focus groups of youths and adults of both African American and non-African American populations. Of interest in this study was whether the adultification of young African American girls had been observed or/and experienced and any subsequent associations with victimization, coping strategies, a perceived need to utilize physical violence for self-defense, and the propensity to adultify others.

Research Design

In qualitative research, focus groups are frequently used to explore phenomena for novel insights (Nyumba et al., 2018). Tewksbury (2009) defined qualitative research as "the study of the meanings, traits, and defining characteristics of events, people, interactions, settings/cultures, and experiences" (p. 39). According to Berg (2007), "Quality refers to the what, how, when, and where of a thing - its essence and ambiance. Meanings, concepts, definitions, qualities, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of objects are therefore the focus of qualitative research" (p. 3).

Qualitative research is ideal for exploring a topic (Urcia, 2021). In this case, respondents' subjective experiences or views of young African American girls' adultification and its impact on aspects of their daily lives were the topic. The best way to capture perceptions and experiences is to ask people to describe them. Another reason for a qualitative technique is to examine the phenomenon's specific context and distinctive elements, such as victimization, coping mechanisms, the use of physical violence in self-defense, and their potential to adultify others.

Sampling

The suggested sampling for focus groups was purposive. This is a procedure where the investigator selects respondents deliberately under preset criteria to obtain relevant information (Shaheen et al., 2019). The aim was to get insights into the views, experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of young people between ages 18 and 26, plus from an older cohort of African American females, on their observations, perceptions, or experiences with the adultification of African American girls. The idea was to be able to compare perspectives.

After approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board, potential participants were solicited by asking people in public places who fit the study criteria to volunteer. All participants were affiliated with either a community college or a historically Black university in Texas as either a student or an employee, as the solicitations were done in these vicinities. There were 13 focus groups: five groups of young African American women, three groups of African American young men, four groups of the non-African American population, and one group of older African American women (above 50), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Details of the Focus Groups

Demographics		
No. of Groups	Racial/Ethnic Identity	No. of Respondents
5	African American girls	15
3	African American boys	11
2	Non-African American girls (White and Hispanic)	8
2	Non-African American boys (White and Asian)	5
1	African American older women	5
13		**44**

Focus Groups

According to Nyumba et al. (2018), focus groups explore topics with limited or no previous study. They utilize group dynamics to freely examine problems in context, depth, and complexity without imposing a conceptual framework. Focus groups can garner their members' knowledge and experiences; thus, it is essential to select participants with care (Green et al., 2003; Morgan, 1988).

The researcher leading the focus group played the function of facilitator or moderator. Krueger (1994) advised that people participate in studies in which they are demographically comparable. It is widely agreed that six to eight individuals are acceptable (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Not everyone invited to participate in a focus group discussion shows up, which might be a problem. Rabiee (2004) suggested that this problem be solved by researchers over-recruiting by 10-25%. A group of 10 people is optimal for eliciting diverse viewpoints without devolving into chaos (Krueger, 1994). However, this was not a problem as individuals were solicited using an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved script, and they sat in public spaces, and the groups were completed at that moment. This eliminated the need to obtain contact information and follow up with group appointments. Most of the focus groups contained between two to seven participants each.

Due to the limited number of participants and the one-time nature of focus group discussions, it is impossible to cover a topic in depth within a single meeting. To get a comprehensive picture of an issue, researchers pursue the notion of theoretical saturation, which states that focus group discussion sessions should be repeated until a clear pattern

develops and further groups yield no new information (Krueger, 1994). This was achieved after 13 focus groups as patterns emerged in the responses of various groups.

Kitzinger (1995) stated that the data can be supplemented by documenting the general content of the discussion and observing non-verbal interactions and group dynamics. These focus groups were audio-recorded for accuracy. Non-verbal data were gathered through the observation of the actions of participants before, during, and after the focus group discussion. Within her capacity, the researcher noted as much as she could after each session to see if non-verbal actions aligned with verbal content.

According to Fonteyn et al. (2008), descriptions and interpretations are thicker when non-verbal data are utilized in addition to verbal data. The participants' behaviors as indicated by body displacements and postures (kinesics), utilization of interpersonal space to convey attitudes (proxemics), temporal speech markers including pauses, gaps, and hesitations (chronemics), fluctuations in volume, pitch, and quality of voice (paralinguistics), and Gorden's (1980) four sources of non-verbal communication data. The researcher documented her recollections of the participant's body language and posture during the sessions.

Rationale for the Focus Group Approach

The complexity of the topic necessitated the employment of a technique that offered flexibility and the opportunity for open questioning, which is more likely to result in novel insights. The inquiry focused on a complicated topic and was comprised of many different factors, such as personal and social. Using a focus group, the researcher could elicit a breath of perspectives in one setting (Powell & Single, 1996).

Group conversations provide vibrant and relevant pictures of their participants' reasons, interests, questions, and ideas (Merton et al., 1990). In qualitative behavior studies, focus groups are a standard methodology to examine vulnerable groups, such as issues relating to women and sensitive issues (Garcia & Lane, 2012). For instance, it has been used to explore the views of criminologists, the views of the general public and young people regarding crime and the justice system (Dirikx et al., 2012; Kaye et al., 2014; Klukkert et al., 2009). In this case, the researcher examined the intrinsic nature of adultification and how it was experienced and handled.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Focus groups often involve utilizing a variety of forms of dialogue among group members, such as stories about personal experiences intended to reveal previously unexplored dimensions of understanding (Ikeyi, 2021). Gibbs and Huang (1998) stated that emotional processes and perspectives were stimulated in focus groups, facilitating conversations with the group regarding attitudes and experiences and capturing multiple thoughts on one or more topics within a limited timeframe. This was seen in several focus groups where responses from one respondent promoted and encouraged others to speak and engage in the session.

One potential risk with focus groups is jeopardizing the reliability of the data, as focus groups can consist of actual experts and perceived experts, and their misinterpretation and misinformation can increase the likelihood of botching the data. In this study, various age groups were examined, and they spoke about issues similar to the point of data saturation, indicating that these data consisted of actual and real events rather than perceived ones. Tewksbury (2009) recommended that focus group

participants be equally positioned individuals. This helps to attain a well-rounded discussion on the topic.

Another limitation of focus groups is the possibility of systematic biases among interviewees or interviewers. These biases could influence interviewees to withhold complete information or manipulate their responses (McCrady et al., 2010). It is pertinent to employ qualitative research trustworthiness testing criteria to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately represent the content of the group participants' statements and not merely the researcher's subjective interpretations. These criteria include credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability, which can be established through audits, member-checking, and stepwise replications, all of which aim to validate the interview data.

Additionally, in specific circumstances, interviews should be conducted by individuals not well-known to the respondents to enhance the accuracy of the information provided (Ehrman & Robbins, 1994). This was the case here. Focus groups are highly laborious and time-consuming. Conducting interviews, preparing interview guides, and transcribing interviews all demand substantial focus from the interviewer (Fielding, 2009). This includes being knowledgeable of the process, monitoring the self, and standardization to handle and rate them correctly, all of which require a lot of time and resources (McCrady et al., 2010). The interviewer was nervous initially but caught on to the process quickly and was able to lead and provide prompt responses during the sessions. Miller and Rollnick (2012) stated that while focus groups facilitated holistic comprehension and detailed descriptions, they raised ethical concerns as other respondents in the focus group could potentially violate anonymity and confidentiality

(Gibbs & Huang, 1998). The data herein are not highly sensitive, so anonymity and privacy are less likely to be violated.

Data Collection

The focus groups were conducted on several different days in different locations, such as an empty classroom, student lounge, library, and chapel. Participants were offered a $10 McDonald's gift card and two scantron sheets. For data security, all documents were stored in a protected folder on a password-secured, single-user computer. Subsequently, data were imported into Atlas-ti to facilitate in-depth analysis.

While the researcher asked the questions and guided the discussion, her advisor served as a scribe for each group discussion, except for the one with older African American ladies. The data collection started on the 6th of February 2024, after getting approval from the Institutional Review Board, and continued for a month and a half. Most of the sessions with African American females, both young and older, took almost 30 to 50 minutes.

In contrast, it was around 10 to 30 minutes for other populations, depending on how much each respondent had to say. It should be noted that African American female groups were asked more questions than the others (see Appendix B). Almost all respondents spoke in most groups, whereas in some groups, one or two respondents did most of the talking while the others nodded along with them. The initial analysis phase focused on data organization and systematically arranging documents based on the research questions. Data sorting began with categorizing responses from each group, followed by a meticulous review and verification against audio recordings to ensure accuracy and resolve any discrepancies in the transcripts with the help of Atlas-ti.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) introduced a qualitative data analysis model that unfolds like a spiral, beginning with the organization of data and moving through stages including the noting of emergent ideas, coding, theme development, interpretation of data, and culminating in the visual representation of findings. This comprehensive framework guided this study's analytical process, which incorporated Saldaña's (2021) concept of holistic coding. Holistic coding involves examining each data piece individually before assigning codes that resonate with the essence of participants' responses. Saldaña (2021) highlighted the suitability of holistic coding for research endeavors where documents are meticulously prepared for analytical scrutiny.

Coding

There were two phases to data coding without restricting the number of codes (Charmaz, 2006). First, given the literature, a preliminary code list of etic or outsider codes, was prepared before data collection, reflecting what the researcher expected to hear in the focus groups. The list included a broad range of behaviors and perceptions, such as victimization, coping behaviors, use of physical violence in self-defense, and the likelihood of adultifying others (see Appendix C). There were also codes for understanding how individuals navigated their environments under specific circumstances, especially in scenarios that involved conflict, trauma, or societal expectations.

After data collection, the researcher added new emic or insider codes that emerged from the data. At this point, the researcher began sketching diagrams of the connections between codes and looking for keywords frequently mentioned by respondents as

markers of significant themes. This is called focused coding, as the researcher removes, merges, or further divides the coding categories that were initially established. It was essential to look for commonalities and more significant themes across the codes (Krueger, 1994).

The coding was done with the aid of Atlas-ti version 24, an advanced software application designed to assist researchers in qualitative data analysis. It possessed several qualities that facilitated systematic and efficient classification, organization, and comprehension of qualitative data. It helped with the importation and administration of qualitative data in numerous formats. This integrated data management system expedited the retrieval and organization of information and generated network diagrams that indicated how concepts were connected. It also enabled the rapid searching of the data with word searches and counts to assist in identifying patterns and themes in the responses. Atlas-ti employs a node architecture to establish a hierarchical structure for codes and categories. This provided latitude in coding and permitted the organization of codes into overarching themes and sub-themes.

The examination of noteworthy themes was structured into elements or motifs, then formulated into categories and classifications to illustrate the participants' understanding of adultification and their experiences with it. First, the data were coded according to the etic codes, then for the emic codes. After the coding procedure, the emergent motifs and links between codes were compared using axial coding. Axial coding facilitates the identification of themes and patterns within the data by establishing relationships and connections between distinct codes. This method involved multiple looks at the data and reclassifying points into more nuanced categories. The themes and

patterns emerging from the axial coding were utilized to comprehend the perspectives and experiences described. Connections between codes were classified in terms of categories and subcategories. The Atlas-ti network diagram feature facilitated the depiction of relationships between these codes and categories. Word clouds also indicated the prevalence of codes and themes in response to specific questions.

Initially, the researcher grouped all the codes that could fit into the overarching themes of the research questions. They included experiences of adultification in homes and schools by peers, their vulnerability to dating violence or abuse, responses to adultification, and means of coping with it. Later, the researcher connected the codes in each network to make sense of the relationships (see Appendix D). After further analysis and categorization, the author answered each question aptly.

Bracketing

This was a descriptive phenomenological study, where the essence of the lived experiences of people or phenomena are captured, examined, and described to the best of their ability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the researcher's interpretations can be entirely subjective in nature, and bracketing is a significant factor in this method. It is a technique to prevent the researcher's personal biases, assumptions, and expectations from clouding her interpretation of the data (Wadams & Park, 2018). This approach required the researcher to be self-aware and intentionally set aside her biases to the extent possible to understand the participants' points of view and experiences. The researcher was careful and modulated her voice and tone while asking questions that would be categorized as sensitive. She also tried to avoid any suggestibility to the respondents. To this end, the researcher kept a reflective notebook where she wrote her preconceptions, assumptions,

speculations, and points of view throughout the data collection and analysis as a self-check process. At the end of each session, she noted verbal and nonverbal cues that were presented along with her thought processes and ideas.

Transcription and Memoing

Each group session was recorded and then transcribed by the researcher with transcription software for accuracy. The researcher read and re-read the transcripts to assist in identifying codes, patterns, and themes. For example, when asked to describe a young Black girl in the first question, most respondents had similar images – chubby cheeks, hair, and happiness. Furthermore, while looking for emerging themes and patterns, she created memos at data points relevant to various themes. For instance, several young African American female respondents spoke about their affinity with the color pink. Given this, the researcher found a website discussing the psychology behind the color pink and its association with femininity.

Ethical Assurances

Institutional Review Board requirements were followed. Each participant was told what the study was about, and if they were interested in participating, they were asked to sign a consent form before participating. The identity of the participants is confidential, and there is no detail in the data with which respondents can be identified. Data were stored and analyzed on a password-protected computer. Identifiers were not attached to data files or mentioned in the results.

Reflexivity

The researcher is of Indian descent and a South Asian born and raised outside the U.S. As such, she expected to be able to give an objective perspective on the underlying

phenomenon called adultification experienced by young African American girls. While this researcher has not experienced adultification, she has experienced several incidents of discrimination. These experiences led to her interest in this study.
She is particularly fascinated by the experience of being regarded as lesser than others and its impact on a person's psyche and life trajectory.

In this study, young African American girls spoke about their feelings and thought processes and how adultification impacted their decisions. She expected to be able to interpret the participants' non-verbal cues as accurately as possible while being extra attentive to not engaging in transference in her interpretations of them. She approached the study primarily with a constructivist paradigmatic perspective as an outsider seeking to understand how people construct their experiences. To a lesser extent, the researcher's paradigm included a feminist and race-critical perspective. She deemed this necessary given the fact that African American Americans have experienced systemic and micro racism in the U.S. and the fact that African American females have had a history of being regarded as lesser than the White female standard of what is pure, good, and worthy of respect in society.

The subjectivities of qualitative research commonly included selecting a topic for research, how the population was chosen for study, the methodological approach, the questions asked, and how the data were analyzed. Amidst this, it was essential to understand the researcher's paradigmatic lens and then inform her conclusions. This transparency is a part of the authenticity of this work. With these points in mind, the researcher planned to be as objective as possible in her interpretations of the data.

Summary

This chapter explored the experiences of adultification of African American girls through a qualitative research design with a descriptive phenomenological approach, utilizing focus groups of youth and adults to probe the extent and experiences of adultification. By adopting purposive sampling, the research sought to understand adultification's associations with victimization, coping strategies, and the inclination to use physical violence or adultify others. The study emphasized the value of qualitative research in capturing the nuanced experiences and perceptions of adultification, highlighting the complex interplay of meanings, definitions, and symbols that qualitative methods, particularly focus groups, can unearth. With a focus on African American girls, the research aimed to uncover insights into how adultification is experienced and processed within this community by employing a detailed methodological framework that included rigorous data collection and analysis techniques, such as coding with Atlas-ti, to ensure a thorough exploration of the topic.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study sought to give voice to African American girls and others regarding the adultification of young African American girls in the US. Using focus groups, overarching themes emerged, encompassing areas such as familial expectations, experiences of differential treatment, and the navigation of visibility versus invisibility in trendsetting roles. Other themes included contrasts with White femininity, the necessity of defense, both physical and mental, and the dichotomy of being perceived as mature in some contexts but as mentally slow in others.

These themes, emerging from an intricate analysis of varied research questions, allowed the researcher to weave a detailed understanding surrounding the perceptions and stereotypes affecting young African American women in the US. The researcher constructed a nuanced portrayal of African American girls' experiences by employing a rigorous and holistic approach to data analyses, reflecting the complex interplay of societal perceptions and individual identities. The main themes that emerged from the data were:

1. **Familial Expectations**: this theme delved into how family dynamics and expectations shaped individuals' behavior and self-perception, the pressure to conform to specific roles within the family unit, the burden of responsibilities at a very young age, and the challenges faced when these expectations clash with personal desires or societal norms.
2. **Independence:** a recurring concept in most focus groups with young African American girls was independence or self-reliance. This researcher speculated that

this was a direct effect of familial expectations, where they are growing up early and given responsibilities at a very young age.

3. **Differential Treatment**: this theme represents how differences in treatment, based on gender, race, age, or other social categories, affected individuals' experiences and opportunities. It highlights the inequalities embedded in social interactions and institutional structures, emphasizing the impact of such disparities on personal growth and societal integration. For instance, several spoke about the experiences of African American girls in school, where they are seen as too mature for their age if they talk back.
4. **White Femininity**: given the perception of White femininity as reflecting purity, delicacy, and passivity, young African American females face a conundrum of whether to accept that concept of womanhood or to challenge this norm as authentic. Their decision affects their social treatment and well-being as women of color, that is, African American women, as seen in this study.
5. **"Seen and Not Heard"**: this theme captured the expectation for individuals, often children or those in subordinate positions, to remain silent and compliant. It reflects on the suppression of voice and agency, analyzing how such expectations stifle personal expression and development. Still, at the same time, these African American girls described choosing to be prominently visible, even if it meant being misunderstood.
6. **Perceived as "Loud" and "Rowdy"**: this theme addressed the stereotype often applied to African American girls as being inherently unruly or disruptive. It

explores the consequences of such labeling on self-esteem, social interaction, and the perpetuation of racial and gender-based stereotypes.

7. **Dichotomous Image – Mature Early yet Seen as Slow**: this theme focused on the contradictory perceptions of African American girls required to act as responsible adults as youth and yet, in the school context, being treated as if they are intellectually slow or less capable. It examined how these conflicting views impacted individuals' development, opportunities, and self-concept, particularly in educational and social contexts.
8. **A Need for Defensiveness**: this theme focused on how young African American girls are often on alert to thwart attacks. These attacks are deeply rooted in stereotypes and prejudices prevalent from the era of slavery in the US. They include being a target for sexual assault.
9. **Coping and Resilience**: connected to the previous theme, young African American girls have devised various ways to cope with and respond to the ongoing stress of being underestimated and devalued in society. This can include being a strong person in their imagination.
10. **Victim blaming and victimization**: this theme focused on how young African American girls are frequently victimized and are blamed for the disparity and biases that they face.
11. **Intersection of Race and Gender**: this is another reoccurring and underlying concept that is reflected in the experiences of young African American girls and others’ perceptions of young African American girls.

Research Questions

1. **Do African American girls report that they have experienced adultification?**

The researcher found that African American girls were often unaware that they had experienced the concept of adultification by these terms; however, they were very aware of certain stereotypes associated with young African American females, such as "loud," "obnoxious," "fast" as some young African American girls stated. Their experiences and perceptions can be categorized primarily into the theme of familial expectations, as the main arena in which girls described feeling adultified was in the home (see Table 2).

Table 2

Emerging Themes for African American Girls Experiencing Adultification

Research Question	Codes	Theme
Do African American girls report that they have experienced adultification?	community/family oriented expectations go-getters hardworking prepared for the world pressure to perform in school responsibilities self-sufficient single parent household strong-willed talk-back	Familial Expectation

a) Familial Expectations

Within their families, there was a significant emphasis on qualities like being hardworking, self-sufficient, and independent, fostering a sense of duty from a very young age and readiness to tackle life's challenges, especially outside of their homes. Many respondents stated that they were told they must perform well academically and

attend college. Many described feelings of often being under the watch of their families. The stress associated with academic expectations and familial roles points to the influential role of the family in shaping individual values and actions. These demands could create an internal conflict between personal and familial expectations. Aa an African American female, age 18, Group 5 put it:

> I feel like in some families they hold a higher standard for the Black girl…I'm the first person in my family to go to college. So now I feel like everyone's looking at me, like watching my every move… it's like all eyes are on me too, Like. Especially like, maybe this college thing isn't for me. And then I spoke with my family…you need to go to college because either that or you gone have to like prepare yourself for like actual real world things.

The African American females in the study reported that this was a common message in the house to ensure that they were prepared for the world. This often came from young girls being constantly told to do well in school and be academically outstanding. For instance, in one of the focus groups (Group 12), an African American young girl, age 19, said, “You know, everybody can’t do everything. . . you gotta be successful. You’ve got to get above a “C”.”

Several respondents spoke about the prevalence of single families, often headed by females, where they incorporated the attitudes of independence and self-reliance, which was further passed on to their children, irrespective of gender. Alongside this encouragement came the directive to be strong and fiercely independent. Moreover, they were frequently tasked with significant responsibilities, including taking care of siblings,

cooking, and cleaning, which further exemplified their expectation to mature prematurely and manage duties often beyond their years. Group 2, African American female, 18 said,

> I cannot give you an age cause it's like so programmed in the Black community. And especially if you're [an] older sister and you have younger siblings, you take responsibility for those younger. I don't think I'm not saying it's a problem to take responsibility for your younger siblings, but the way it is presented, it seemed like you're the first mother versus y'all [your] mother being the first mother …. [it is your] job like [to take care of the siblings] you ohh, your brother did that. You should clean that. Your sister did that. You should have cleaned that up versus leaving it there or something like that.

Group 5, African American female, 18 said,

> I feel like in some families they hold a higher standard for the Black girl just so they can see someone else like flourish. Often to like just for me, like for me example, I'm the first family, I'm the first person in my family to go to college. So now I feel like everyone's looking at me.

Group 5, African American female, 18, said,

> Yeah, from that what she said is basically comparing you because. Like, I know my, my parents try to give, my brothers like to 'the talk'. Like you're a Black man, so anything happens to you, you know, like if you get pulled over by the police and you're like done for, didn't get. I didn't get to talk. I just my mom was like, you know, can't be wearing stuff too flashy cause I am like I have other like genetic wise, I am way more than an average girl, but at the same time it's just like sometimes it's with from the parents and sometimes it's within yourself.

b) Assertiveness and Responsibility

Several young girls spoke about feeling that they had to grow up early and mature to take on gender-prescribed responsibilities in their homes from a very young age. Along with this, they were often told to be strong-willed, which highlights how African American girls have more pronounced assertiveness early on, which is usually misinterpreted as being loud and even obnoxious. This assertiveness, sometimes perceived as being aggressive or unapproachable, results from the resilience required to handle the greater responsibilities at a young age that come with adultification. To be outspoken is directly associated with these responsibilities, indicating that adultified African American girls are more inclined to express their opinions openly, making their presence known, and maybe even defending themselves. For example, when asked researcher young men asked what the first image is regarding "a young Black girl," most of them answered that most African American girls looked disgusted or mad or angry. Group 6, African American male 2, age 19 said, "They don't look happy. Sometimes they look disgusted." Similarly, group 4, African American male, age 26, said, "A lot of people with these mad facial expressions like something wrong with them or they just got cussed out or, you know, had a bad day."

When the same question was asked to a group of African American girls, Group 12, African American female 5, 19, stated, "I don't really have an expression. I kind of look mad. But in a sense that, like she knows like where she's going. Like she's happy she is, you know, confident in herself. Determined, yeah." In the group of older ladies (Group 13), one said that "Most come from single parent family homes, so they're pretty much like mom outside of the mom taking care of the other siblings within the household. So,

growing up way too fast, watching kids." Another older female commented that, "Had a lot of responsibilities. …. had to take care of everybody. They knew [the] house. They learned everything. They knew how to cook, how to clean, how to do things early in life."

The recurring theme of resilience, characterized by qualities such as always be strong and vigilance, is often enforced explicitly and implicitly. This also reflects the diverse forms of strength and preparedness cultivated by African American girls by their families, indicating that the adults are aware of how it would be outside their homes. Furthermore, their so-called hardened traits are also a product of the experience outside their houses.

One of the groups spoke about the importance of mental health and how it was often lacking in an African American household. *Always be strong* is something that is reiterated frequently. The girls perceived this to be the family's way to ensuring they were prepared for a world filled with negative stereotypes and academically, where they must get As and Bs. As Michelle Obama said in a speech at Tuskegee University in 2015, "You've got to be twice as good to get half as far." Parents realize that education is essential, and it is one of how they can help themselves. Indeed, this description left the researcher wondering whether African American girls were in a constant state of self-defense that pausing to do self-care mentally is squeezed out of their agenda. The first question in the focus group was for them to picture a young African American girl, and these were some of their responses; Group 12, African American female, 19, said, "I see someone beautiful. I see someone that is very confident… has some insecurities that is honestly the world's fault. And I also see [a] real hard worker. Doesn't take anything from anybody." Closely related is how they perceive themselves and how it is reflected in the

responsibilities that they have. When asked about the expectations they perceive that they have within the household, a young African American woman from Group 12, aged 18, commented that,

> My main thing in my household was mental health, so I feel like in a lot of Black households they don't know how to [deal with it] … they don't understand anxiety. They don't understand depression. They don't understand stuff like that…. I feel like the expectation is like you're not supposed to be depressed like you're not supposed to be sad. I think that's an expectation in there like you're not supposed to go through that. Like, why are you going through that? A lot of Black people don't know to do with that.

Similar concepts were reflected when interviewing the older African American ladies (Group 13). One of them stated that,

> We were raised to really believe in ourselves, in my environment. The females were always supportive… they were taught to go to school, go to high school, go to college, finish [it], not to get pregnant, things like that. They invested a lot in our girls when we were growing up."

Another respondent from the same group said, "We are teaching them (young girls) to be respectful and to depend on yourself. So, if something happens to them, they're able to take care of themselves. And they also take good care of their little brother."

2. To what extent do youth adultify their peers?

Peers adultify young African American women in terms of their looks and behavior, often with stereotypes about African American women regardless of their age. This was especially true for males, African Americans, and non-African Americans. A couple of non-African American females made it a point to state that getting to know some young African American females gave them a positive experience with their friends (see Table 3).

Table 3

Emerging Themes for Peers Adultifying Young African American Girls

Research Question	Codes	Themes
To what extent do youth adultify their peers?	independent	Independent
	different people/diversity differential treatment ghetto history/slavery inferior/less than racism/inequality scorn/disdain	Differential treatment
	fast aggressive being excessive emotional gold diggers ignorant immature look mature loud materialistic outspoken perception of anger promiscuous slow/ mentally slow ratchet beautiful	Contradictions Contrast and Proximity to White Femininity

cannot function with a partner	
RBF talk-back	A need for defensiveness
trendsetters	Coping and resilience
sexualized	Victimization
dark-skinned, brown hair/braids/locks	Physical characteristics

a) Physical Appearance Adultification

Besides repeated anecdotes across the young African American female groups that they seemed to reach puberty earlier than other girls, it appeared that expressive hairstyles that were culturally significant could be incorrectly interpreted as an indicator of maturity. Some of their peers, African American boys, see them as if they mature early physically, referring to their facial features or body shapes. This can lead to adultification, sexualization, and objectification of African American girls. When asked to imagine a young African American girl, a young African American man replied from Group 6, age 18, replied, “Girl with braids, independent, Black, and curly hair with beads on them.” A respondent from a group of African American men (group 4), aged 26, said,

> It's a lot like what you see on social media, where it's a very sexualized and sensualized culture that we live in today, where sex is always sold... the average woman here definitely has little to no clothes on, smells nice, looks nice, you know, and is attractive. Of course, my girl is all of those things, but she wears clothes. My girl likes to smile. But I know walking around campus you see, you know, a lot of people with these mad facial expressions like something wrong with them or they just got cussed out or, you know, had a bad day. That's what it looks like in a lot of cases when I see a lot of Black women.

The following response is from a woman from the non-African American focus group when they asked whether young African American girls are perceived as more mature than their actual age. Group 11, White female, age 18 said, “I would say they can dress older because of their parents. Sometimes their parents will dress them like they look older…. but they don’t necessarily act older or [are] looked at like they're older.”

Many young non-African American women who are friends with African American girls recognize them as peers, calling them “beautiful” and “pretty.” Furthermore, several young African American women described that they were perceived to have RBF (Resting B**** Face) or facial expressions that were often misread as stern or less innocent, leading others to think that African American girls were more mature and less childlike and innocent. For instance, a young African American girl stated that she always felt that the stereotype of anger is permanently attached to African American women. As seen in the following quote from a young African American respondent, age 18, in Group 10, “Stereotype of [being] mad angry Black women…like with RBF.”

When another group of non-African American women were asked whether African American girls are treated differently compared to their counterparts, a young White female respondent from group 10, aged 18 they stated,

> Yes, just because of their looks…I would say yes because there's certain features. And like hair like. Some people are like, oh, your hair is too big. You have to change it like schools have made people change their hair because it's too big to shrink.”

However, it must be noted that despite having certain negative stereotypes, some peers recognized that young African American girls were stylish and trendsetters. At the same

time, being a trendsetter, either in social or cultural trends, can also lead to African American girls being seen or perceived as more adult-like compared to their counterparts.

b) Behavioral Adultification

Several peers, especially young African American men, saw African American girls as independent and outspoken. One commented that they did not shy away from what had to be said. One young White male, age18, Group 11 kept saying that they had "big energy." Some participants indicated that African American girls often displayed behaviors that demonstrated autonomy and a willingness to speak out, which wsd seen as adult-like or even maturing too early. This researcher speculated that people might assume that it was unlikely for a girl or woman to speak out.

Furthermore, being assertive or showing strong emotions can result in African American girls being labeled as aggressive or overly emotional, which are adult qualities when interpreted negatively. Their readiness to defend themselves or respond swiftly is sometimes seen as mature behavior, talking back, or being fast, which further adds to the misinterpretation of young African American girls.

When asked how young African American girls are viewed in the US, a respondent from group 6, age 18, said, "… we hear people speak about that [Black] women's a certain idea of what they are and what they're supposed to be and most of the time, those negative connotations." Another respondent from the same group, aged 19, replied,

> I think that, yeah, they're looked at as less mature. Like immature in a sense, because like they are seen as maybe … loud and obnoxious to other people… I would think that they're looked at as immature, more immature than other girls.

However, a young African American from Group 4, age 19, said,

> I would say on the average like they are seen as loud or boisterous. But most of the time, they [are] just passionate - like my sister…She has a loud voice. But like, I see that as her being passionate about, like when she is dancing. She's smiling. She's loud when she's dancing, but that's because she's passionate about it. She wants people to see you [her]. That's how she shows herself, through dancing. And a lot of people are like her, that's how they know how to express them[selves]... They want to get themselves out there. They're loud about it. So that's what people say - they're loud or they're emotional because that's how they put themselves out there. They wanna show what they're passionate about and show that they love. You can't just be passionate about something and just be quiet and sitting there. Most people think that they are loud and boisterous but are misunderstood.

Many young African American girls claimed they were at a higher risk of being seen as promiscuous and sexual because they were sexualized and objectified, which often resulted in unfair treatment at the hands of people in authority. Several young African American men agreed that they think that all women, including African American women, were gold diggers and materialistic. It seemed their interest in material goods might lead peers to believe that African American girls were exhibiting adult-like behaviors associated with financial independence or manipulation.

Several young African American men associated derogatory labels with African American girls, such as ghetto, which is also described as ratchet. This stereotype is racially charged and tends to adultify African American girls. This is an explicit

internalization of societal biases that can lead to differential treatment, with African American girls misunderstood and misinterpreted even by African American men. Other views of perception of African American girls were also largely negative. For example, a Hispanic young female from Group 8, age 18, said, “They are viewed like objects…. They’re not viewed as a person.” A respondent from Group 11, a young White woman, aged 19, said, “Usually stereotyped as rude.” In the same group, another commented that African American girl, age 18 said, “Like loud and ghetto… [they are] unfairly treated.” To the same question, a Hispanic female, aged 20, replied, “I would say confrontational.” In another group (group 6) of African American population, a young male, age 18, said,

> I feel like it looked down upon and not respected. Especially in the US, people think they are obnoxious and bratty, and have the worst attitudes. Like when they think …. of like a woman. They think of like White woman. But like, that's not the case. I mean, a woman's woman…. no matter the color, you deserve respect… For like Black they don’t get the get the respect they deserve.

In the same group, three respondents, age 19, 18, and 19, stated respectively,

> Honestly materialistic. I think … younger people, a lot of them young Black girls, not just Black girls like men too… they just care about the clothing, and you know, and finer things. Not to bash them or anything yeah, in schools you know, they have phones, and they are teenagers.
>
> [how African American women are viewed] …the lower end, like when you think of like the typical female woman in the US… they always trying to be on social media trying to compare themselves to other one. They shouldn't do that. You are

> two different types of women… They said they always trying to get something more… Comparison is like the thief of joy or something like that.
>
> I can't name an example where they're Black Girls are treated differently from a White girl. You know, maybe in beauty standards like, you know, Barbie mostly made White Girl dolls before…. had to get diversified to represent the Black community, so I would just say. Maybe [in] media, TV … they portray White girls as normal rather than Black girls.

However, some young men had a different viewpoint. For instance, from the same group, a young male, age 18, stated,

> Black girls aren't more like, people don't see them as mature when they're 18... They're [seen as] ratchet, they're loud … but I feel coming from, like my mother's standpoint, I feel like Black women mature way fast and even like just no matter where you came from. I feel like they mature way faster than any other races…. my sister matured [when] she was 14. She was watching me and she was just becoming the woman herself and she was watching me. So that made me gain way more respect for Black women, especially for my sister because she didn't have to do that like she was just becoming a woman. (Group 6, African American male 7, 18)

One young African American male was quite aware of the intersectionality of race and gender. For example, in Group 4, an African American male, age 26 said, “They say it's like White man, white girl, Black man, that Black woman to the point where the Black woman is always last.”

3. **To what extent might adultification increase Black girls' vulnerability to dating violence or abuse?**

When asked whether they believe that young African American girls experience dating violence, several non-African American and very few African American respondents said that dating violence was not particular to any race. Some believed it could happen to anyone. However, some of the African American participants agreed that young African American girls were at a higher risk of dating violence (see Table 4).

Table 4

Emerging Themes of Vulnerability to Dating Violence among African American Girls

Research Question	Codes	Themes
African American girls' vulnerability to dating violence or abuse	experiences of abuse bullied/picked on fast fetish look mature novelty/unfamiliar/new objectified promiscuous sexualized	Victimization
	ghetto history/slavery	Differential treatment
	intersection of race and gender	Intersection of race and gender

a) Perceptions Leading to Vulnerability

Several of the respondents stated that they appeared mature and were victims of constant sexualization and objectification. As a result, they recognized they may exhibit an unconscious effort not to wear red-colored makeup to avoid negative attention. The perception of African American girls as looking more mature than their age can lead to early and unwanted sexual attention. Their appearance can be misconstrued as an

invitation to relationships, and they may be pressured into situations they are not developmentally prepared to handle.

Something that adds to these stereotypes is a negative bias that is associated with African American women, such as “fast,” which is another word for promiscuous, typically referred to young girls. These might contribute to the harmful myth that they are willing participants in sexual activities, potentially leading others to justify coercive or abusive behavior. Two of the respondents spoke about how young African American girls were seen as novelty or fetishized because of race, which can lead to objectification and mistreatment in dating scenarios. In such situations, African American girls are valued not for who they are but for the stereotypes attributed to them. When asked about the vulnerability of a young African American female being in an abusive relationship, an African American female from group 12, age 19, replied,

> I would say this is true, but I feel like it's really kind of normalized too… not everybody pretends, but I feel like a lot of…women are in, you know, like abusive relationships. And it's just like oh, my man loves me the whole time [but the truth is] he was beating the crap out of you.

From the same group, another respondent, age 19, replied,

> Especially in high school… because I've seen a lot of this… they (young girls) don't know what real love is. And they don't know what's going on. And he's pushing her to do stuff that she doesn’t wanna do. And she [will] still do that… at the end of the line, it just creates trauma.

This researcher pondered whether women of other races tended to acquiesce to the demands of men because they were taught not to confront them to avoid a possible

physical fight except for African American girls given their resistance to a long history of sexual violence dating back to slavery.

b) Social Dynamics and Their Consequences

Many African American females stated they were seen as ghetto. They often related to slavery and its association with how women were treated then, for example, the Jezebel stereotype. Now, it may contribute to a social environment where African American girls are treated with less respect and dignity, which then increases their risk of experiencing abusive behavior in intimate relationships.

c) Romantic Relationships and Communication

Several young African American men shared some African American women, including young girls, did not know how to function in a healthy romantic relationship. This researcher wondered if this belief stemmed from unrealistic expectations because they are perceived to be more mature. This can also be a byproduct of always appearing strong, where they know they cannot depend on anyone but themselves, something they have seen their mothers do. One might speculate that they are contending with stereotypes both within and outside their households. And consequently, severing ties with an individual detrimental to their mental health should not be considered problematic. For instance, the following statements from young African American men from Group 4, about 19 and 26 years old respectively, talked about teaching young African American girls to manage their relationships so that they could have healthy adult romantic relationships.

> I mean, if you teach them …. how to manage her relationships and how to like deescalate problems, she doesn't have to know how to fight because she won't.

> She won't put herself in situations where she has to act in a way of violence or she will make relationships with people who also have those type of skills. So, you don't have to teach younger [girls] how to fight, just teach how to manage your personal life and relationships.
>
> … I do wish Black women were more open minded… in a sense that, you know, they don't have to do everything independently because there's been this resurgence, at least in our generation, that the Black woman has to do everything on her own and she can somehow, some way, I mean a lot of women are forced to do that, you know, and lot of women are accustomed to it. They are constantly put into... Generations of single mothers... so of course they have to raise their child… [and] looking at that as an accomplishment.

Apart from this, they are also at higher risk of victim blaming and abuse, especially in their homes. This is where African American girls who are abused are held responsible for the violence against them because of the adult traits ascribed to them. This not only minimizes abuse but also discourages seeking help and can perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Moreover, they are often victims of bullying and are frequently bullied, especially in schools. Persons might argue that they will tend to believe that this is normal, making it harder for African American girls to recognize abuse as it occurs in dating. They might perceive it as an extension of the treatment they have already been subjected to.

4. Do persons perceive that authority figures treat African American girls differently? If so, how? How is adultification experienced (its impacts) and addressed?

a) Differential Treatment

The young women knew how they were perceived outside of their homes. Certain stereotypical labels, such as loud and aggressive, are often laden with other negative biases like materialistic and promiscuous, which seem to be deeply rooted in racial and gender biases, descriptions used to normalize the behavior of Whites against African Americans during slavery. For instance, the archetypes of Jezebel and Sapphire are notions of how African American females are promiscuous, sexual, and aggressive. These stereotypes not only exacerbate their adultification by others but also lead to a heightened state of vigilance and a defensive stance in social and educational settings where they must always be on alert and ready to fight, not physically but mentally (see Table 5). For instance, respondents from African American female groups provided some perspectives. In Group 2, an African American female, age 25, said,

> You're being a fast little girl versus a little girl with long hair and you want your hair straight, every once in a while. Most young girls have probably like little plaits and afros, but it is seen as you're being an adult when you flat iron your hair. But I've seen plenty of young girls in other races with straight hair or something of that sort and it's not an issue…

In group 3, an African American female, age 19, stated, "…[African American girls are seen as] very grown… Attitude very like angry and uptight…" Another respondent from the same group, age 23, said,

… seen as juvenile like delinquents. I think it just almost like the Jezebel like stereotype, Like the fact that Jezebel was a caricature of Black, I don't want to say Black women, but Black girls specifically, where they are seen as like bed warmers, are like only for sexual pleasure and that they're very like….. They're obviously danger like, they're obviously like…...I feel like a punching bag for everyone else in that sort of way and like. It's justified because she is seen as older than her other peers, or they're seen as fast, like sexually progressed…

Table 5

Emerging Themes for Adultification of African American Girls by Authority Figures

Research Question	Codes	Emerging Themes
Do persons perceive that authority figures treat African American girls differently? If so, how? How is adultification experienced (its impacts) and addressed?	ignored different people/diversity differential treatment inferior/less than racism/inequality	Differential treatment
	aggressive whiteness=ladylike/feminine talk-back	Contrast and Proximity to White Femininity
	ignorant immature irreverent look mature objectified perception of anger promiscuous rebellious slow/ mentally slow	Contradictions
	abuse/ experiences of blaming the victim bullied/picked on	Victimization

Adultification in school manifests through the scrutiny of African American girls' appearances and behaviors, prematurely ascribing to them adult characteristics and expectations. Despite being subjected to adult-like expectations, they are simultaneously underestimated and seen as less capable or mature in academic and social contexts. In educational environments, the observations were that authority figures often perceived young African American girls as loud, rowdy, aggressive, and emotional and tended to treat them a bit differently compared to their counterparts. These stereotypes indicate the prejudices that are associated with African American women, as a result of which they are often alienated or dismissed as persons with potential or value. They may be neglected, underestimated, overlooked, and teased. These dynamics seem to be a direct consequence of racism and inequality, serving as justifications for their unequal treatment.

Moreover, the prevailing standard of White femininity in schools creates a benchmark for behavior and appearance that often places African American girls' style and hair in direct conflict. This standard not only underscores the racialization of gender norms but also highlights the exclusionary nature of traditional femininity ideals, which often marginalize expressions of femininity that do not conform to a White-centric model. This further contributes to some African American girls' sense of alienation and differential treatment. This paradoxical situation is exacerbated by the contrast between identity and the dominant narratives of White femininity, leading to *bullied/picked on* experiences that often result in a "talk-back" defensive response.

Some young African American girls spoke about how they are treated differently in schools. For example, in Group 5, an African American female, age 18, said,

> Especially like some White teachers, they don't really understand sometimes…. because going to a predominantly White school… you're kind of like the outcast, and then you only have like this small group of people who can truly understand, like…And then, like sometimes you can find like another Black staff or teacher who can be like a family member…. can give you good advice and can actually do a little bit more than what (the respondent's) parents could do and tell you that some things are just like that is what they seem they are. You just have to go for it. I feel like a teacher of another race would automatically look at you and assume you need more help or that you're not smart enough. That's probably why in predominantly White school Black students come together and be there for each other. The school system is not that good on these days, especially for Black girls. They kind of just label you and just assume that you're not smart enough for the school system.
>
> Interviewer: What are the labels?
>
> … Like you're not smart enough or like you need help…they just automatically assume that from the jump.

In the same focus group, the other respondent, age 18 said, "People think that we're ghetto… all over the place, have no home training until I show you and I have to prove to you, and it doesn't take that much."

Some young men in Group 6, ages, 18, 19, and 18 respectively, when asked about young African American girls' experiences in schools, stated that,

> As in, maybe from, like an education perspective that they would maybe look down upon them…maybe not as smart as other races almost.

> I feel like Black girls are definitely held to a higher standard. Like, I feel like they automatically are expected to do better when they're like people already expecting to do worse. So, like if they're not being in a certain standard and then also from a culture[al] perspective like I know that sometimes schools like won't let girls get some hairstyles because it's like ghetto or not professional.
>
> Growing up in the school system, [African American girls] have to really just make sure they perform, really have to make sure they on top of the education [like] any other things such as like playing around with other people that. Make sure they're doing it right.

5. **How do young African American females defend (physically) themselves from perceived threats to their well-being because of adultification?**

Several African American girls noted they were warned against wearing red or black nail polishes or wearing clothes that were too revealing in the homes, including during periods when certain males would visit. As such, girls were conveyed the message that they had a responsibility to protect themselves from sexual victimization or unwanted attention. These messages were repeated as caution regarding how they carried themselves outside the house. The point was also made regarding the current popularity of pullovers and wearing oversized clothes or overalls amongst African American girls. This, some said, was to shield themselves from being sexually objectified for their appearance. It also included them appearing as unapproachable and RBF (Resting B**** Face) to deter others from accosting them. To illustrate this, a young African American woman in Group 2, age 18, said,

> We're all oversexualized. Completely. It doesn't matter what we do. Like if you're younger, you don't (the nerve) try to get your nails red. If you say you want red nails, are you trying to be fast? You're trying to be grown… Are people coming to the house? And you are in your home, you're in your pajamas. They could be like some pajama pants and a T shirt. You need to go put some clothes on. We have a house full of company. It's just like it could be simple somebody…not even important. But you have to change everything about yourself in your safe space…what is supposed to be your safe space because other people are coming into your space… because your parents try to shield you from them, "I don't want them to see you and think so.

When the researcher asked young men whether young African American girls were susceptible to dating violence or experiencing physical violence, one young African American man in Group 4, age 26 replied:

> I agree in the sense of physical violence. Not necessarily now, to speak from my aunties and my mom. You know, who are, you know, born 60s and up? They said they had to learn to fight, you know…. there's like back in the day [but] today not necessarily visible because our generation aren't really like physical fighters.

Several of the older participants spoke about how they would refrain from sending their children to sleepovers to prevent victimization and how when they were younger, they learnt to defend themselves at a very young age. For example, one respondent from Group 13, said, "We have to defend ourselves on more cases than the others…sometimes it doesn't have to be physical… It could be mind [games]…you can fight with words."

6. How do adultified African American girls cope with adultification?

African American girls respond to being adultified by (1) speaking up for themselves or verbal assertiveness; (2) becoming self-reliant; (3) reframing negatives into positives, for example, seeing themselves as trendsetters; (4) adopting standards of Whiteness; and (5) creating a more assertive imagery persona as an escape. They also respond defensively by being mature, completely aware of its consequences, and embracing another defensive posture in support of themselves, which may be tagged as aggressive and loud (see Table 6). Unlike the Model proposed by Burton (2007), this study did not reveal any risky sexual behaviors by young African American girls or the use of physical violence to defend themselves because of their experiences of being perceived as older than their actual age. Instead, experiences of adultification resulted in hypervigilance and varied coping strategies employed by young African American women. These said coping mechanisms depends on the situations they are in (see Figure 3).

Table 6

Emerging Themes for Coping with Adultification

Research Question	Codes	Themes
How do adultified African American girls cope with adultification?	go-getters grow up early hardworking independent outspoken prepared for the world self-sufficient strong-willed talk grown	Independent
	Whiteness=ladylike/feminine use of color pink princesses	Contrast and Proximity to Whiteness

intimidating mentally vigilant/fighting oversized clothes perceptive talk-back unapproachable vigilant/aware	A need for defensiveness
clapback trendsetters fantasy world/persona	Resilience and Coping

a) Preparedness and Maturity

The concept of "prepared for the world" is integral to how young African American girls cope with adultification. They are used to not being seen when necessary but are often objectified and sexualized. This preparedness is usually born from early experiences, both inside and outside the house, that necessitate early maturation, compelling them to grow up before their time. Such experiences instill in them a sense of readiness, defensiveness, and resilience so that they can confront and navigate the broader societal expectations and prejudices they come across in their lives, even in schools, from a young age. For example, the following quote from Group 12, a young African American female, age 19, said,

> I guess be seen and not heard, but really, they see us and then they try to make them us… we're the blueprint. Like we, we are the said standard really. Black women get handed like situations in life…. just get thrown at us and they were supposed to just roll with [it]. With different races, they're like – "OK, like, what's going on?" Like they get asked, I would say like they (other races) get noticed for like for like emotional wise like oh something wrong, what's wrong? versus a

> Black woman …we keep going. Something's wrong? OK, that's fine. Just you got a job to do. Do your job.

b) Independence and Self-Reliance

Both young and older African American female respondents described themselves as go-getters, hard-working, and self-sufficient and they emphasized the value of independence. The descriptions portray these young African American girls as ambitious and self-reliant. They are considered strong and resilient, in colloquial language, *ready to take on the world*. In other words, participants indicated they were prepared for the world, which directly reflected their readiness to tackle life's challenges, and thereby, fulfill their destiny. They are taught to be vocal. They are given the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings or other relatives from a very young age, which demonstrates they can care for themselves if necessary. This self-sufficiency is both a coping mechanism and a response to the early responsibilities and expectations placed upon them, showcasing a proactive approach to navigating adultification. These qualities not only show their response to societal expectations but also thwart the stereotypes that seek to undermine their abilities and worth.

A young African American man, age 18, from Group 4, when asked whether they believe that young African American girls are gold diggers, stated that:

> … most Black girls I know are go-getters. They go and get their own thing and they end up finding love. And like my mom, she went out and got one thing she end up finding my dad. And so, I wouldn't necessarily say she's a gold digger, she was making more money than my dad, but they stayed together.

c) Vigilance, Mental Alertness, and Verbal Assertiveness

Young Black girls are constantly in a state of being vigilant and mentally aware, which denotes a heightened state of alertness as a natural response to receiving continuous hostility and differential treatment, often outside of their homes. This vigilance, while a testament to personal resilience, is frequently a protective mechanism against the misunderstandings and biases they face, such as promiscuous, loud or ratchet. Young African American girls' verbal assertiveness includes the “talk-back” or even “talk fast,” and a state of vigilance and awareness that denote active, engaged strategies to defend themselves.

Assertiveness allows them to confront and challenge the adverse treatment they encounter directly, a reaction unlike other people’s interaction with women of different races. At the same time, their contact vigilance ensures they must always remain alert to potential threats to their well-being. This trait of mental vigilance safeguarding their well-being and dignity in environments, is often misinterpreted as aloofness instead of strength.

d) Resistance Through Self-Expression, Trendsetting, and Clapback

One significant coping mechanism adultified African American girls employ is the deliberate choice of clothing, such as oversized clothes, to confront and counteract unwarranted sexualization. Beyond this form of resistance, their role as trendsetters in fashion and cultural expressions is a powerful assertion of identity. This trendsetting extends beyond mere style. It is a bold statement against societal norms that often objectify them based on appearance, showcasing their capacity to influence and reshape cultural norms and expectations while resisting the set standard of White femininity. The

paradox highlights their significant yet often unrecognized contributions to shaping cultural norms and practices. One of the young African American man, age 23, in Group 7, said,

> I believe Black women definitely have the toughest battles. Day in and day out in society. And especially when you come from an area where you might have an accent. You might have a certain…headspace regarding like the environment that you grew up in. But I believe that Black women are a blessing. Black women are great and Black women set trends for the rest of the world.

Several non-African American populations had responses to the abovementioned concept of trendsetting among young African Americans. For instance, in Group 11, a White young male, age 18, stated, “I guess popular within Black culture, especially on TikTok…. I guess Black people, or I guess a lot more popular now than earlier because it's kind of like trendy…so everyone's kind of, I mean mimicking them, I guess.” Another respondent in the same group, age 19, added,

> There's a certain energy that… (I guess) some Black people have. A lot of people that … would be like a more of an ecstatic sort of energy that people try to match more… I feel like their culture tends to be a lot more upbeat. I guess so to try and match that, I guess people kind of mold their personalities…. try and match that, yeah.

Several young African American respondents spoke about clapback, a form of resilience against constricting and perpetual stereotypes and misperceptions about young African American girls in society. Clapback represents a verbal or social media response to criticism or disrespect, expressing a deliberate challenge to the expectations and

misinterpretations placed upon young African American girls. It signifies their refusal to passively accept derogatory stereotypes or biased perceptions which have existed for a very long time, instead opting to assert their dignity and perspective in the face of criticism (Coghill, 2022). This active form of resistance highlights their ability to navigate and counter societal pressures with wit, assertiveness, and a clear self-awareness. Most young African American girls are mostly cognizant of what others think of them. Their defiance reflects their inherent strength and resilience.

e) Emulating White Femininity

The adultification of African American girls starkly contrasts with societal expectations of how women should be, which is White femininity, often associated with the color pink and valorizing submissiveness and compliance. This racialized dichotomy places many African American girls in direct contrast to the ideals associated with White femininity but also contributes to a more profound misunderstanding and marginalization, highlighting the racial and gendered dimensions of societal perceptions. To illustrate the aforementioned concept, a young African American respondent from Group 2, age 22, said, “To be submissive. To stay quiet when instead we need to raise our voices.... Especially like in some Black family that like, you know? You can't be doing this because you ain't no find [a] husband.” In another instance, one respondent talked about how choosing pink nail polish over red and black nail polishes is ingrained in their minds. In group 3, an African American female, age 23, said,

> She's (an African American woman) very predatorial. It's like, I don't know, it's like a weird fascination and obsession with, like, Black women when it comes to our hair, our body, our figure, like everything about us, is either a trend or to be

> explored or taken advantage of…I feel like it's both ends of the spectrum. It's either seen as fast, like a little girl coming to school…. I remember I was told when I was younger that I wasn't allowed to wear red nail polish. And I still do like have a mental note of it. Just because red on a Black girl is seen as more like sexual than pink…. And then there's the other side of the spectrum where we're seen as undesirable, and we're seen as less than and we're seen as kind of a stepping stool for other people or for other races or for other girls

However, at times, unbeknownst to themselves, young African American females might adopt aspects of White femininity as a strategic form of defense that idealizes White femininity. The emulation can manifest in various ways, such as adopting mannerisms or styles that align more closely with traditional ideals of White femininity, for instance, opting for pink nail polishes instead of red ones. The same respondent from the previously mentioned group stated that,

> A lot of the times because of the media that I've been tuned… because I enjoyed rom com as a kid I like, love that cheesy stuff. So every time there was a like woman in the in the romantic comedy or whatever, she was always she depicted as a White person or someone lighter. And so when I was a child, I didn't imagine myself as lighter, but I imagined characteristics like I had longer hair… I was insecure about my nose. Now I like it, but I was insecure about my nose. So I imagined that I had a better nose of more predominant nose and I [am] looking back, that was obviously just because I had never seen someone like being a romantic comedy where the character is soft and again feminine and is allowed to

> be loved without it being like a constant struggle and involving gun violence or something like that.

Another example is the following quote by a young African American girl from Group 5, aged 18, who spoke of wanting to emulate a blond, White character in High School Musical, stated that,

> I was the main character and had long straight Black hair. And like I was like kind of like model looking but not with the model. I'm trying to be as normal as possible, to fit into the society standards.
>
> Interviewer: What's normal?
>
> …I don't know how to say it like normal being like - approval from society like trying to be not as myself, I would say I would try dress differently. I would talk differently. I kinda imagined myself like Sharpei off of High School Musical. That's how I would have measured myself. But like with dark skin with Black hair and that kind of like my own world and y'all are just living in it. But it's like I'm approved.

Some African American young women were aware of preferences shown for girls with a lighter complexion from persons in media, educational institutions, justice system,, and males. To illustrate the said point, in Group 3, an African American female, age 18, said, "I was glorifying like my skin tone… like looking down upon other [darker] skin tones …. I'm just trying to like, be honest, but that's how I was …I'm better…like I got lucky."

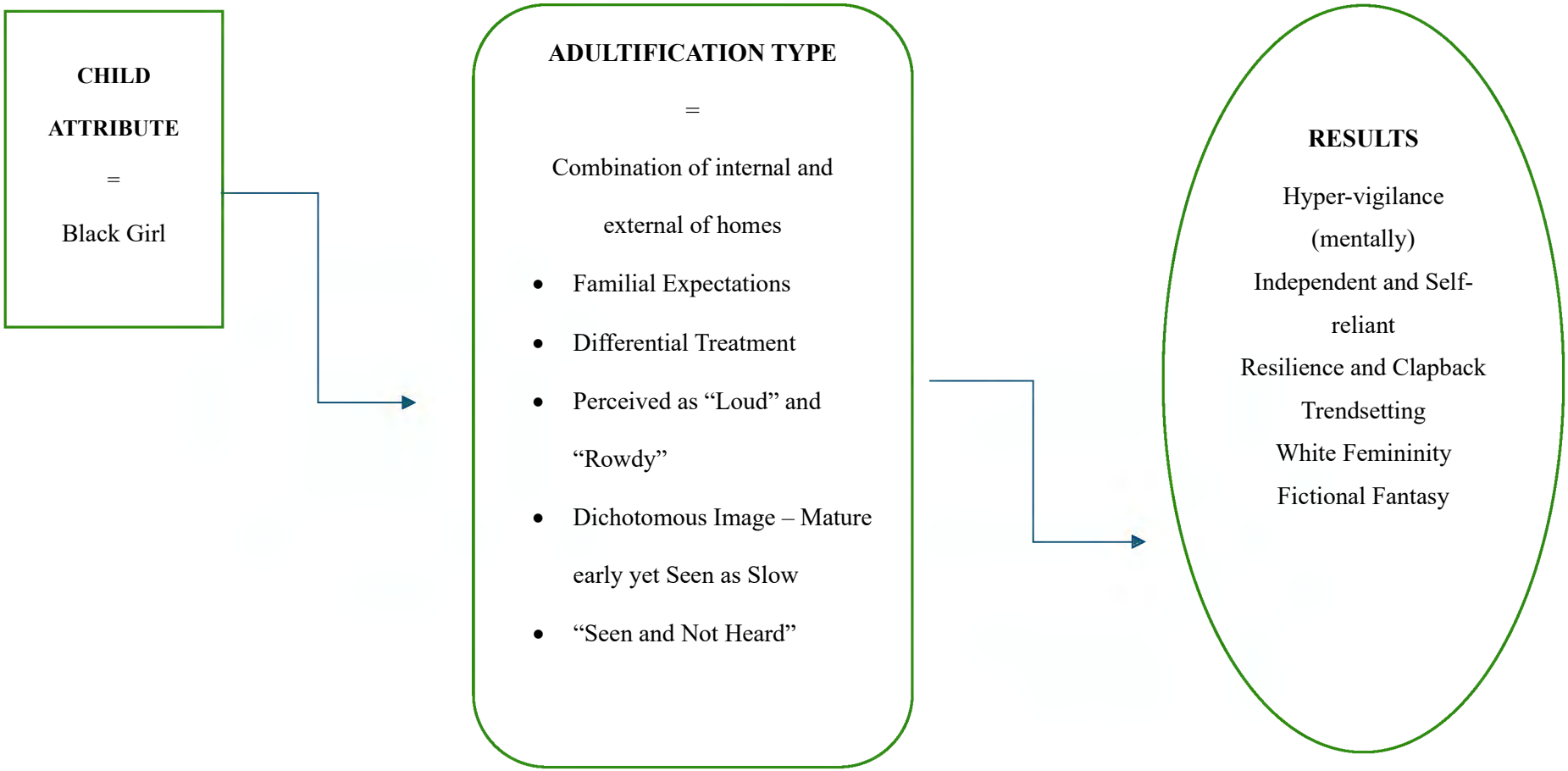
f) Fantasy world

Closely related to Whiteness and the color pink is how some young African American women, when they were younger, had imaginary worlds of their own where some of

them were princesses. At the same time, some lived in their worlds where they could be themselves, playing all day long, as children, something they could not be in the regular world. For example, when the researcher asked Group 1 whether they had an imaginary world when they were younger, African American females, both aged 18, stated that, “I see myself as a Princess and I still do to this day like you know how princesses live.” When asked by the interviewer how do they live? The young woman replied, “It’s my world and you are just living in it.” The other respondent in the same group added, “It's not really you just living in it yeah you know they live large... they have everything they want… they love pink just like me do since it’s my world.”

Figure 3

Model of Adultification of Young African American Girls and Coping Behaviors



7. Given adultification, what should be done?

According to the respondents, African American girls emphasized the importance of unity and solidarity among African American girls in combating adultification. One example included recognizing their shared experiences, which could lead to remarkable collective strength. Talking about personal growth from elementary school to higher education, the girls reflected on the evolution of their aspirations and those of their peers. Initially, there was a societal expectation to conform to certain stereotypes, but now, surrounded by ambitious individuals in a historically Black university setting, they felt empowered to pursue significant goals. They observed a transformation in their community, where African American girls were determined to define their paths and achieve professions traditionally viewed as unreachable for them, such as doctors, lawyers, and scientists. From internalizing limitations to embracing ambitious career goals, the potential of these African American female respondents emphasized achieving greatness. For instance, the following are quotes from young African American girls who claim that with the right environment, they are unstoppable. In Group 12, an African American young woman, age 19, said, “We are low key [but] could be very unstoppable.” In other instances in Groups 12 and 3, young African American women, aged 18 and 23 respectively, stated,

> I really just feel like a lot of like Black girls need to like to realize that like you'll be stronger as a whole because I really feel like even then, like Black girls. I feel like actually they want don't believe in competition for like other races… Go do the same thing… we're all in the same boat [and] like we can come together and be happy.

> .... I love being around people that look like me, that [who] want to be somewhere in life and doesn't wanna just be… depending on someone or it's just like just standing around or just feeding into the stereotypes... because we're here and we're getting the education, so we could be one of the most influential people. You know, maybe somebody that you see here walking around probably be president or be the Supreme Court [judge] or something like you never know what you're expecting because growing up like elementary school… I was around, still around Black people, and they weren't as hard as they were in school. But it's still had an expectation of just like you need to do this because you're Black. If you don't, then you're just going to be like every other Black girl who just doesn't do anything with her life… And here I'm seeing Black girls who want to do something with their lives and not just let people tell them what to do because they're getting their own path to their own destiny. [You can be] friends with, [someone who could be] like, doctors and lawyers, like psychologists and police officers. Like the right like I've my majors [is] in chemistry. But my career, I wanna be a serologist or oncologist. If I continued with the path that I was going through, I wouldn't have thought that that was the option for me. I would have just limited myself and I'm glad that those limits [are not there anymore].

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the analysis. It revealed overarching themes related to the experiences of African American girls in the US, such as familial expectations, differential treatment, White femininity, the seen and not heard dynamic, perceived as loud and rowdy, and the dichotomous image of prematurely matured yet

seen as slow. These themes reflect deep societal and cultural undercurrents, highlighting issues like family pressure, racial and gender-based inequalities, stereotypes, and conflicting perceptions affecting African American girls' personal growth and societal integration.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Historically, African American youths have been marginalized and perceived through lenses shaped by slavery, and systemic oppression that has involved dehumanizing and adultifying them in the U.S. These historical mischaracterizations have resulted in an ongoing diminished sense of innocence and an increased assumption of responsibility for many African American boys and girls (Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020; Small et al., 2012). Indeed, many contemporary challenges faced by African American communities are deeply rooted in a legacy of racism, sexism, and economic marginalization. Given this heritage, it is vital to understand when external stimuli become risk factors for youth versus when and how these youth manage to overcome the external challenges of navigating biases, including adultification. The study's findings depict the complex interplay of historical, societal, and personal factors that shape the experiences of African American girls and women. It highlights the importance of addressing systemic racism and sexism, fostering resilience, and supporting avenues for self-expression and defense against adultification and its associated stereotypes.

The adultification of African American girls in the U.S. involves perceiving them as fast, mature, or simply older than they are. This often results in their being unfairly labeled as promiscuous and overly sexualized. Such stereotypes contribute significantly to the objectification and sexualization of African American girls and women, highlighting the dire consequences of adultification on their personal development and physical and mental well-being. These are some of the stereotypes that were associated

with young African American girls by their peers. Both within the African American girl's family and from persons outside of the home, there was an element of blame for the African American girl, who may be perceived as inherently less innocent than her White female counterpart, who, through conduct or attire, may bring victimization upon herself.

While answering the research question regarding the experiences of adultification within the home, parents and guardians will try to counter these possibilities by encouraging their girls to be self-reliant, responsible, and hardworking and also to dress modestly to avoid unwanted sexual advances. Although done with the best of intentions to be protective of their African American girls, the African American females herein described a negative aspect of the in-home adultification.

They described it as a specific type of strain to have extra in-home duties and the pressure to be mature and responsible early. Those in homes with male siblings mentioned that the males were not expected to be as mature and that such was unfair to them. They also noted a belief in mental health and self-care. Many believed that the older members of their families could benefit from therapy and that if the adults in the home were more mentally healthy, then they may adopt a more lenient attitude towards them. This researcher speculated whether this act by the parents to engage their daughters in household chores was to emulate the "Mammy" stereotype, which symbolizes an asexual being, and, by extension, moves them away from the "Jezebel" stereotype, which personifies sexuality.

In response to the research question regarding the experiences of adultification in school and by authority figures, the respondents agreed that African American girls had been adultified in schools. Many of the African American girls stated that their bodies

developed sooner than their peers, which seemed to contribute to their adultification by peers and school personnel. Thus, in schools, it was described as typical to be perceived as less innocent, hypersexualized, loud, and aggressive. Many of the African American girls described being taught at home to speak up for themselves; however, when African American girls were assertive in defense of themselves at school in response to being underestimated, overlooked, or thought poorly of, it was not viewed positively by many others. It was characterized as disagreeable, loud, boisterous, and complex, which could lead to disciplinary sanctions.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a disturbing phenomenon where punitive disciplinary practices disproportionately target African American students, pushing them out of educational settings and toward the criminal justice system (Pelet del Toro, 2018; White, 2018). This system is particularly aggressive toward African American girls, who face overt discrimination from school personnel in the form of biased disciplinary practices and microaggressions amidst stereotypes of being loud, aggressive, or promiscuous (Morris, 2016; Tonnesen, 2013). These experiences highlight a pressing need to address the underlying racial and gender biases fueling disparate treatment.

The concept of racial and gender intersectionality emerged as a critical lens through which to view the compounded experiences of discrimination faced by African American girls, acknowledging how social experiences intersect to create unique modes of disadvantage (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Wun, 2018). Andrews et al. (2019) delved into the concept of intersectionality, highlighting how African American girls face compounded forms of discrimination and violence, both within educational settings and in broader society. This intersectionality not only amplifies their vulnerability to biased

disciplinary actions and entanglement in the school-to-prison pipeline but also exacerbates their victimization through physical, sexual, and psychological violence. The researcher concluded that these multifaceted identities lead to more severe repercussions in encounters with the criminal justice system and inadequate responses to their victimization because of the failure to address underlying causes. West (1995) further elaborated on the complexity of these experiences, noting how African American women navigated conflicting stereotypes, such as the Mammy and Jezebel, which pressured them to conform to nurturing roles while simultaneously facing judgment over their sexuality.

As for coping with adultification, the study found that these African American girls were resilient. Their responses to being adultified outside of the home included an African American girl having an epiphany and deciding to be her authentic self despite the consequences of straying from the standards of White femininity. While the literature indicates that older African American females in the workplace might respond to adultification by adopting the traits and appearance valued in White women to conform (Fordham, 1993), young African American girls in school have more latitude to express themselves, and they do. This involved embracing more Afro-centric styles, such as wearing their hair in braids or locks and seeing themselves as trendsetters in style and fashion.

Nevertheless, another form of adultification resistance for African American girls was having a persona or fantasy life. During childhood, this would be an imaginary alter ego representing whatever the African American girl perceived as missing. This could be long flowing hair like a White girl or viewing herself as the ultimate princess…in her

imagination… as a break from reality and responsibilities, a moment to be a child in childhood.

Young African American girls defend themselves with varied forms of resistance and self-protection, such as wearing oversized clothes, like pullovers, as a shield against sexual objectification on days when they wanted to avoid dealing with the objectification or rendering the clapback, a verbal direct defense of the self when unjustly targeted or adultified. A contemporary pop culture example of clapback is the response of hip hop celebrity Megan Thee Stallion, who defended herself against critics, namely African American male performers, who thought that she wrongly sought justice after being shot in the foot by a Black male rapper. One could argue that, apparently, the lesser-valued African American female is expected to suffer in silence—stallion clapback by verbally defending her right to report the violence and to seek justice in the matter.

Relatedly, the African American girl respondents in this study were also aware that, as was the case during slavery, some non-African American males tended to hypersexualize African American girls. They described this as being fetishized, a perception of them as exciting sexual objects but not as valued people. They seemed wary of such people. These people seem to have a sexual type – them, the African American women. Overall, the findings indicated that African American girls are commonly adultified in the home, as Burton (2007) posited, and that this may be more prevalent for African American girls than White girls, given the challenges that many African American families still endure after familial decades of systematic discrimination.

Regarding the initial conceptual model of the childhood adultification of African American girls, this researcher expected to find references to risky sexual behaviors and

fighting as a form of self-defense, but such was not the case. As expected, there were descriptions of hyper-vigilance and having compromised academic performance due to adultification circumstances. However, novel points included being adultified at home as a matter of routine, encouraged to do more than male siblings, and expected self-reliance at an early age. Other responses to adultification included seeing the self as a trendsetter, a leader of sorts, resilient, and utilizing the clapback in assertive defense of the self. The lack of deviant coping activities such as risky sexual behavior and fighting could reflect the fact that all of the youth participants were either university or college students and essentially a middle-class group less prone to these coping choices.

Policy Implications

The adultification of African American girls is culturally ingrained, quite profoundly, so reversing it requires deliberate action and time to reeducate families, the public, and institutions. A comprehensive approach, informed by historical contexts that champions the rights and dignity of African American girls and women at every societal level, is necessary to attain justice and equality for young African American girls. Policy changes should involve re-education regarding adultifying tendencies in child welfare, school discipline practices, and law enforcement interactions. These efforts must be culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices to address the specific needs of vulnerable girls (Meshelemiah, 2022; Morris, 2005).

The study *Girlhood Interrupted* (2017) offered steps to support young African American girls with a series of implementable points. These included implementing policies emphasizing African American girls' welfare, respect, and their overall well-being. It called upon policymakers, educators, advocates, and communities to collaborate

in a collective endeavor to confront stereotypes, dismantle systemic bias, and foster an inclusive atmosphere that enabled African American girls to fully enjoy their childhood without being burdened by the effects of racial and gender discrimination (Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2020).

Within schools, policies and practices must be reformed to address the unique challenges African American girls face. This could include implementing more culturally sensitive and responsive curricula, training educators on recognizing and mitigating bias, and more effective disciplinary practices that empower and support African American girls in their formative years. This involves creating safe spaces to express their experiences and feelings, involving them in decision-making processes, and providing access to counseling and mentorship opportunities to help them navigate their challenges (Tonnesen, 2013). Pelet del Toro (2018) suggested that zero-tolerance policies should be reevaluated and replaced with more restorative disciplinary practices. Restorative justice practices focus on repairing harm, fostering a sense of responsibility, and rehabilitating students rather than punishing them.

One primary legislation implemented in all public schools is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a federal legislation reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act to mitigate discrepancies young African American girls face in education. ESSA prioritizes accountability and equality in the field of education, intending to enhance assistance for children who belong to underprivileged groups. It requires holding schools accountable for disparities in discipline and educational outcomes. An improvement in educational outcomes can disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and attend to the often-overlooked experiences of African American girls within this system (White, 2018).

School policies need to better address sexual harassment, including improving reporting mechanisms, providing better support for victims, and educating both staff and students about their rights and duties (Harris & Kruger, 2023). African American girls and women employ empowerment and resistance strategies to combat violence and erasure by raising awareness, advocating for change, and promoting inclusion and diversity in education (Hardaway et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Burnett et al. (2022) investigated the role of parental guidance and socialization in shaping African American girls' experiences and identity development in educational settings. The study explored how African American girls demonstrate resilience and empowerment in the face of adversity, drawing on their self-identity and the support and guidance of their parents. The authors recommended creating more inclusive and supportive educational environments and ensuring parents and guardians were engaged in their children's educational journeys (Burnett et al., 2022). Regarding the research question that discussed what could be done about the adultification of young African American girls in the U.S., the responses had a collective action emphasis on working together to combat stereotypes. Further, many of the young African American girls said that the seniors in their families could use therapy themselves, suggesting a need to enhance the entire family's well-being.

Mental Health and Therapy Approaches

When it comes to mental health, West (1995) proclaimed that therapists must recognize and challenge racial and sexual stereotypes in their interactions with African American female clients, creating a safe, non-judgmental space for self-expression and emotional exploration. West (1995) emphasized the need for culturally competent therapy

that acknowledged and addressed the perpetual stereotypes that were associated with African American women. West (1995) noted that therapists needed to educate themselves about African American women's historical and contemporary experiences, challenge their own biases, and foster an environment where clients were free to express themselves without judgment or stereotype reinforcement. Culturally competent therapy can help empower African American women to overcome the impacts of these stereotypes that negatively affect their mental health and well-being (West, 1995).

Limitations of the Study

Despite providing rich data, the study had some limitations. One limitation of the study was likely a social desirability effect and, to some extent, respondents' demoralization with non-African American male groups, given that the scribe was an African American female. This may have deterred the non-African American group respondents from speaking freely. For example, for one of the focus groups where two young White men were interviewed, their answers sounded socially desirable, and one observation was that they seemed a bit defensive.

The social interaction within focus groups can enrich and complicate data collection. Group dynamics can lead to dominant personalities overshadowing quieter participants, potentially skewing the data toward the more vocal viewpoints. Additionally, participants may conform to group opinions, suppressing dissenting or unique perspectives due to social pressure. This likely occurred to some extent across the focus groups.

It is noted that the analysis of qualitative data, including focus group discussions, involves a degree of interpretation by the researcher. This interpretative process

introduces subjectivity, as different researchers may draw different conclusions from the same data set. The presence of researcher bias, whether conscious or unconscious, can influence the thematic analysis and interpretation of the data.

Recommendations for Future Research

For even more insights on adultification, future studies could encompass additional racial and ethnic groups, such as Hispanic or Latino communities, given the common impact of immigration, in that when a parent migrates, children often have to assume the adult responsibilities of that missing parent. The impacts of adultification will likely vary according to the family's cultural heritage. There could also be studies of the impacts of adultification on male versus female youth across various age groups and regions of the U.S., such as urban families versus rural families. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the nuances and complexities surrounding racial and ethnic perceptions and experiences of youth.

Future research could also challenge the widely accepted definition of adultification and how it impacts different ethnic groups in various ways. This is because the current definition is based on a dominant White perspective of the phenomenon from Burton (2007). A newer definition could differentiate between the label attached to this process according to the various reasons why children tend to take up adult roles, whether as a consequence of immigration, parental mental illness, parental physical illness, parental incarceration or other abandonment, parental education or language barriers, as a defense against societal threats.

Other future research on the adultification of African American girls is vital for addressing and mitigating its impacts on their development, education, and interaction

with the juvenile justice system. Such research could deepen the understanding of how adultification intersects with other systemic inequalities. Researchers should consider the roles of socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual orientation in shaping the experiences of adultification (Crenshaw, 1991).

Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term psychological effects of adultification on African American girls, including their self-esteem, mental health, and identity development (Epstein et al., 2017). It is vital to explore the influence of adultification on the treatment of African American girls in the juvenile justice system and to identify reforms that ensure fair and equitable treatment (Epstein et al., 2017). Relatedly, it is crucial to analyze the representation of African American girls in media and its impact on public perceptions and self-image and develop strategies for promoting positive representations (Collins, 2000). It is also essential to examine the effectiveness of community-based programs, policies, and practices in supporting African American girls and combating the effects of adultification (Wun, 206). Finally, future research should consider teacher background to understand how racial biases and stereotypes may shape teacher-student interactions (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020). These future research directions, grounded in existing literature, highlight the need for a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing the adultification of young African American girls.

Conclusion

This multi-dimensional exploration into the lives of African American girls and women revealed a deeply interwoven narrative of societal perceptions, their associations with historical injustices, and cultural identities, emphasizing the complexity and richness

of their experiences. It brings to light the pervasive challenges they face, rooted in the adultification, racial and gender stereotypes, and systemic disparities that have long characterized their interaction with various societal institutions, including education, the criminal justice system, and healthcare. The journey through the historical and societal contexts that shape the experiences of African American girls and women unveiled a disturbing continuity of marginalization and oppression, going back to the era of slavery and systemic racism. These historical injustices have evolved into contemporary forms of discrimination, manifesting in the adultification of young African American individuals and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes that unjustly define their identities and capabilities. In educational settings, the stark reality of the school-to-prison pipeline and punitive disciplinary practices reveals the urgent need for systemic reform. These practices not only disproportionately target African American girls, contributing to their marginalization and exclusion, but also perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage that extends beyond the classroom and into broader societal participation and maybe involvement with the juvenile justice system.

However, amidst these adversities, the narratives of African American girls and women also show profound resilience and agency. These findings depicted the strength and perseverance in the face of systemic challenges, highlighting how they navigated and resisted the constraints imposed upon them. Their lived experiences are a powerful testament to the enduring spirit of resistance and self-definition against societal expectations and stereotypes.

This exploration offers insights into how to interrupt home and school practices that harm African American girls. It calls for a renewed commitment to understanding

and addressing African American girls and women's unique challenges. It demands an acknowledgment of the historical and contemporary injustices shaping their lives and a concerted effort to dismantle the systemic barriers perpetuating inequality. By embracing a holistic approach that recognizes the intersectionality of their identities and experiences, society can move toward a more inclusive and equitable future.

While the findings largely support those of previous studies on adultification, they add novel insights, such as the African American girls' description of their experiences of adultification as being mainly from their families as opposed to the schools. The researcher expected that school would have been the dominant arena of their adultification experiences. This study also gave voices to the African American participants who stated that the home adultification, while well-intended, was actually burdensome. They also described observing that their older family members needed therapy or healing from their own hurts for a healthier African American family. This study offered details on the females' experiences of adultification in school in their voices. It also offered updated insights on how today's African American females in a higher education context cope with their adultification. It excluded risky sexual behavior, poor academic performance, and fighting but included developing an independent, self-reliant posture, choosing when to do a clapback, deciding to see the positive aspects of self, such as perceiving the self as a trendsetter or choosing to blend in by adopting White femininity traits and appearances. Overall, they have more positive agency in how they respond. Markedly, it was surprising that these respondents did not mention faith as a part of their coping processes, given that such has historically been a source of coping for African Americans.

In conclusion, the lives of African American girls and women encapsulate a dynamic interplay of struggle and resilience, oppression, and empowerment. Their experiences, rooted in the complex interweaving of historical injustices and contemporary challenges, demand our attention and action. As we move forward, it is imperative that we champion policies, practices, and narratives that affirm the dignity, rights, and potential of African American girls and women, ensuring that their voices are heard, their experiences are validated, and their futures are unbounded by the constraints of the past.

Summary

This chapter delved into the multifaceted experiences of African American girls and women, underscored by the historical and ongoing impact of systemic racism and adultification. It reveals how societal perceptions rooted in stereotypes of being loud, defiant, and promiscuous unfairly categorize African American girls, contributing to their disproportionate representation in the correctional system and facing challenges within educational settings. Central to the discourse is the phenomenon of adultification, which assigns adult characteristics to African American girls from a young age, affecting their development and how they are treated by society. Despite facing significant challenges, themes of resilience and empowerment emerged, highlighting the strength and determination of African American girls and women to navigate and resist these societal constraints. Their experiences emphasized the importance of addressing these systemic issues through comprehensive understanding, policy reform, and fostering environments supporting African American girls and women's well-being and aspirations.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: *IRB Approval for Study*

PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY

A Member of the Texas A&M University System

To: **Camille Gibson, Ph.D.**, Principal Investigator
Sherie Sam, Co-Investigator

From: Marco L. Robinson, M.A.Ed
Director, Research Regulatory Compliance
Office of Research Compliance

Date: December 8, 2023

Re: IRB Protocol #2023-122
How African American Girls are Perceived, Possible Adultification, and Impacts on Behavior

This serves as an official notice that your IRB protocol application submitted falls under the Exempt Review, category #2ii, according to the Code of Federal Regulations.

Please note, any changes to the exempt protocol must be re-reviewed by the IRB.

DocuSigned by:
Marco Robinson

Marco L. Robinson, M.A.Ed.
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Appendix B: *Focus Group Questions*

Focus Group Questionnaire Youth Perceptions of Black Girls

1. Close your eyes. When I say "Black girl" – what is the first image that comes into your mind? How does she look? How old is she? What is she wearing? What is the expression on her face?

2. How are Black girls viewed in the US and by girls…I mean persons under 18.

3. Would you say that they are treated differently from females of other races? Why or why not?

4. Do you think that society treats Black girls up to age 18 as if they are older, more mature females? Why or why not?

5. How true are these phrases regarding Black girls:

    a. They are loud and unladylike.
    b. They are very sexual.
    c. They are down with using substances sometimes.
    d. Black girls must know how to fight.
    e. Dating violence is a common part of Black girl life.
    f. Black girls in gangs are just a thing.
    g. Black girls are gold-diggers.
    h. You can't tell some of these Black girls anything…they don't want to hear it.
    i. Black girls are a blessing!

For the female groups only:

6. What sort of expectations do family members have of Black girls?

7. Do you think Black girls are expected to grow up faster than others?

8. What is like being a Black in US schools? How do teachers and staff see you?

9. Think back to your childhood, say up to age 4 or 15, did you have your own imaginary world sometimes? If yes, tell us about it. As a child, did you have an imaginary persona for yourself e,g. Beyonce has Sasha Fierce. Did you have anything like that?

10. Anything you want to share about how Black girls are regarded in the US?

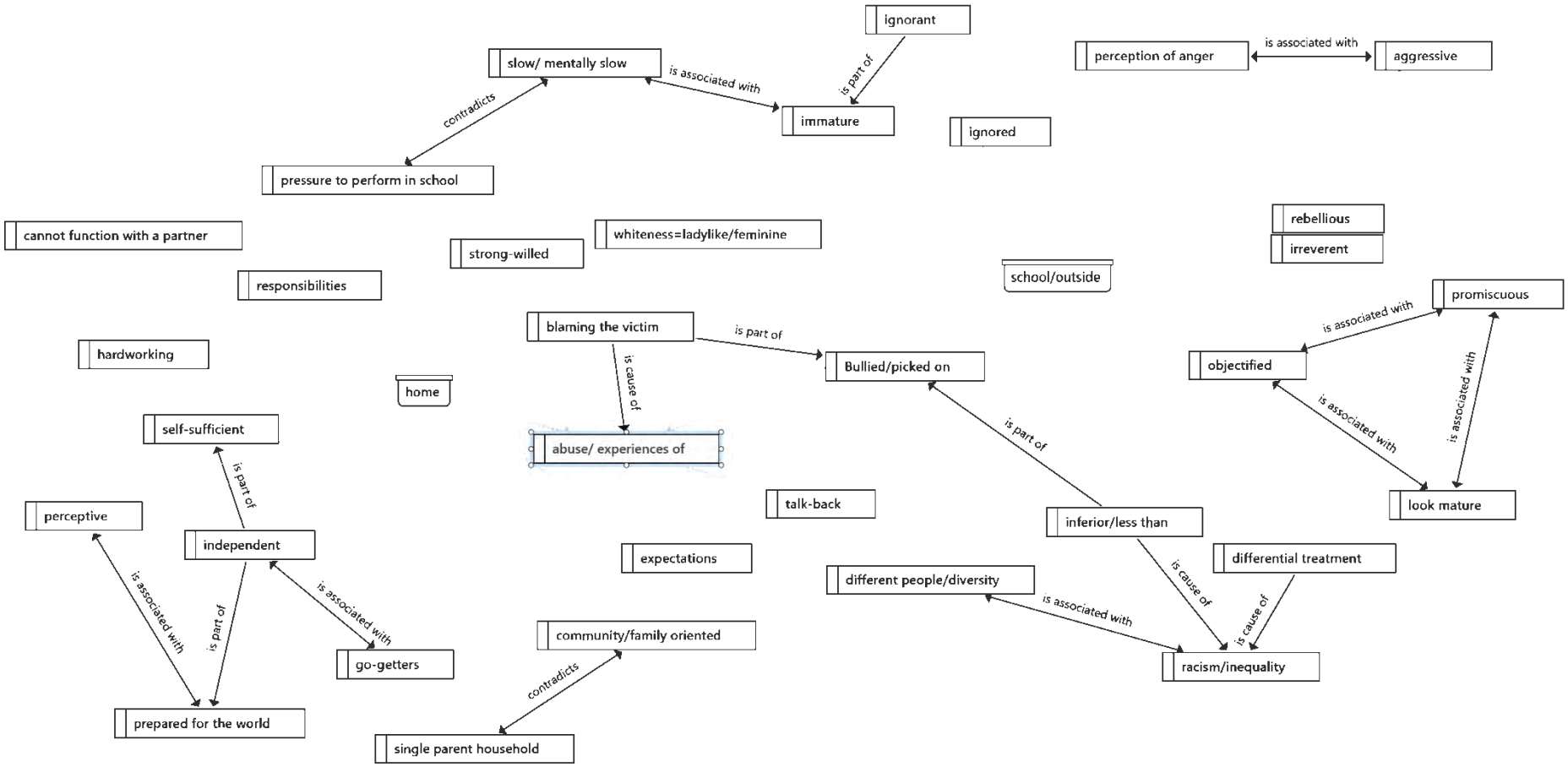
Appendix C: *Preliminary Code List – Classification by Research Questions*

Research Questions	Codes
RQ1 - Do Black girls report that they have experienced adultification?	Differential treatment in schools/racism in school Differential treatment outside/racism outside the homes Sexualized and objectified Negative Stereotypes – loud, aggressive, rowdy, unladylike Defensive Perceived as older and more mature (physical)
RQ2 - To what extent do youth adultify their peers?	Sexualized and objectified White standards Negative Stereotype – loud, aggressive, rowdy, unladylike Defensive Perceived as older and more mature (physical) Use of physical violence for self-defense ghetto
RQ3 - To what extent might adultification increase African American girls' vulnerability to dating violence or abuse?	Use of violence for self-defense Victimization – victim of sexual assaults Perceived as older and more mature (physical) Sexualized and objectified Differential treatment Negative Stereotypes - loud, aggressive, rowdy, unladylike
RQ4 - Do persons perceive that authority figures treat African American girls differently? If so, how? How is adultification experienced (its impacts) and addressed?	Sexualized and objectified Differential treatment in schools/racism in school Disparity in punishments in school School-to-prison pipeline Compromised academic performance Juvenile justice system
RQ 5 - How do young African American females defend (physically) themselves from	Use of violence for self-defense Sexualized and objectified

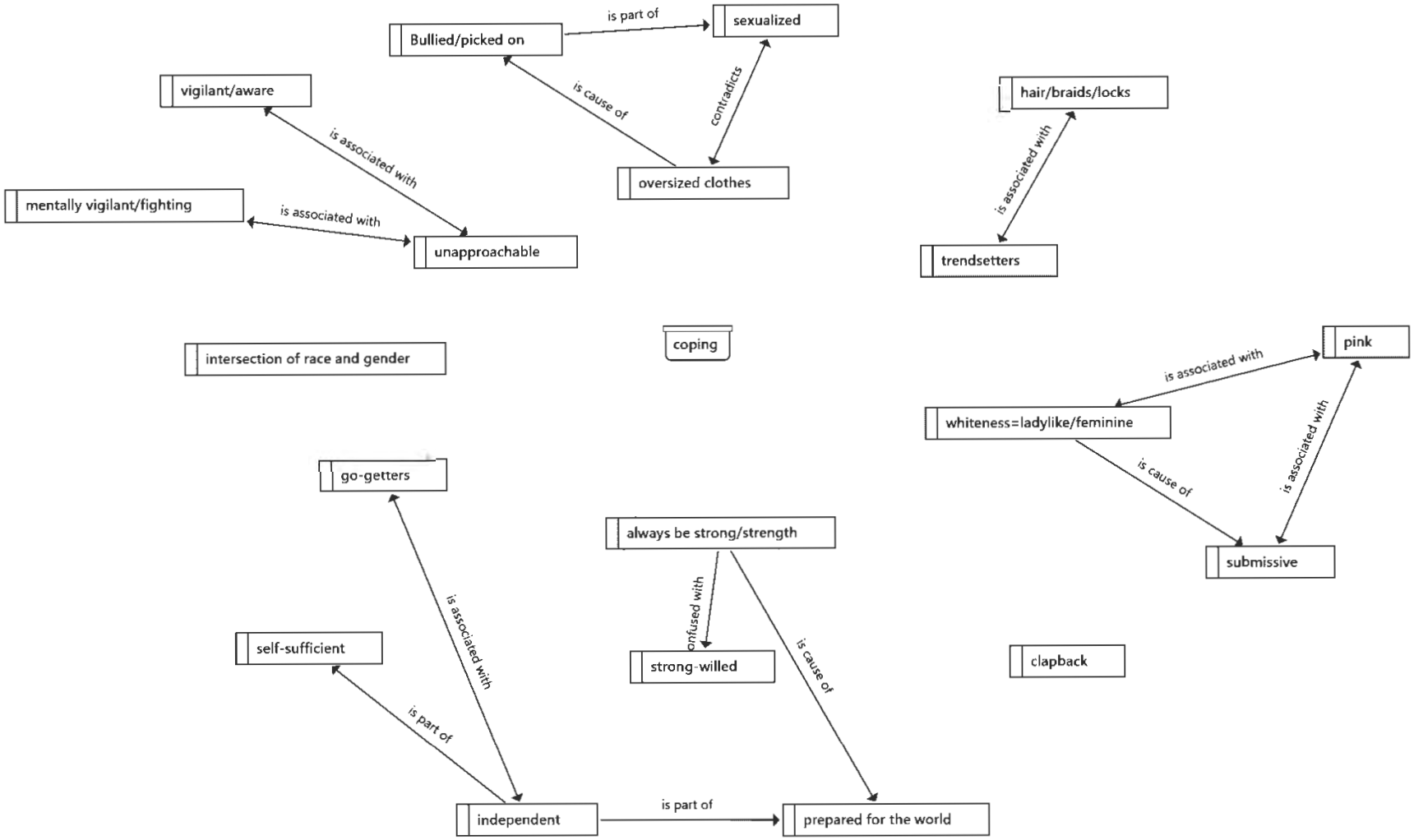
perceived threats to their well-being because of adultification?	
RQ 6 - How do adultified African American girls cope with adultification?	Use of violence for self-defense Risky sexual behavior Coping behavior – substance use Gang membership

Appendix D: *Code Networks for Research Questions*

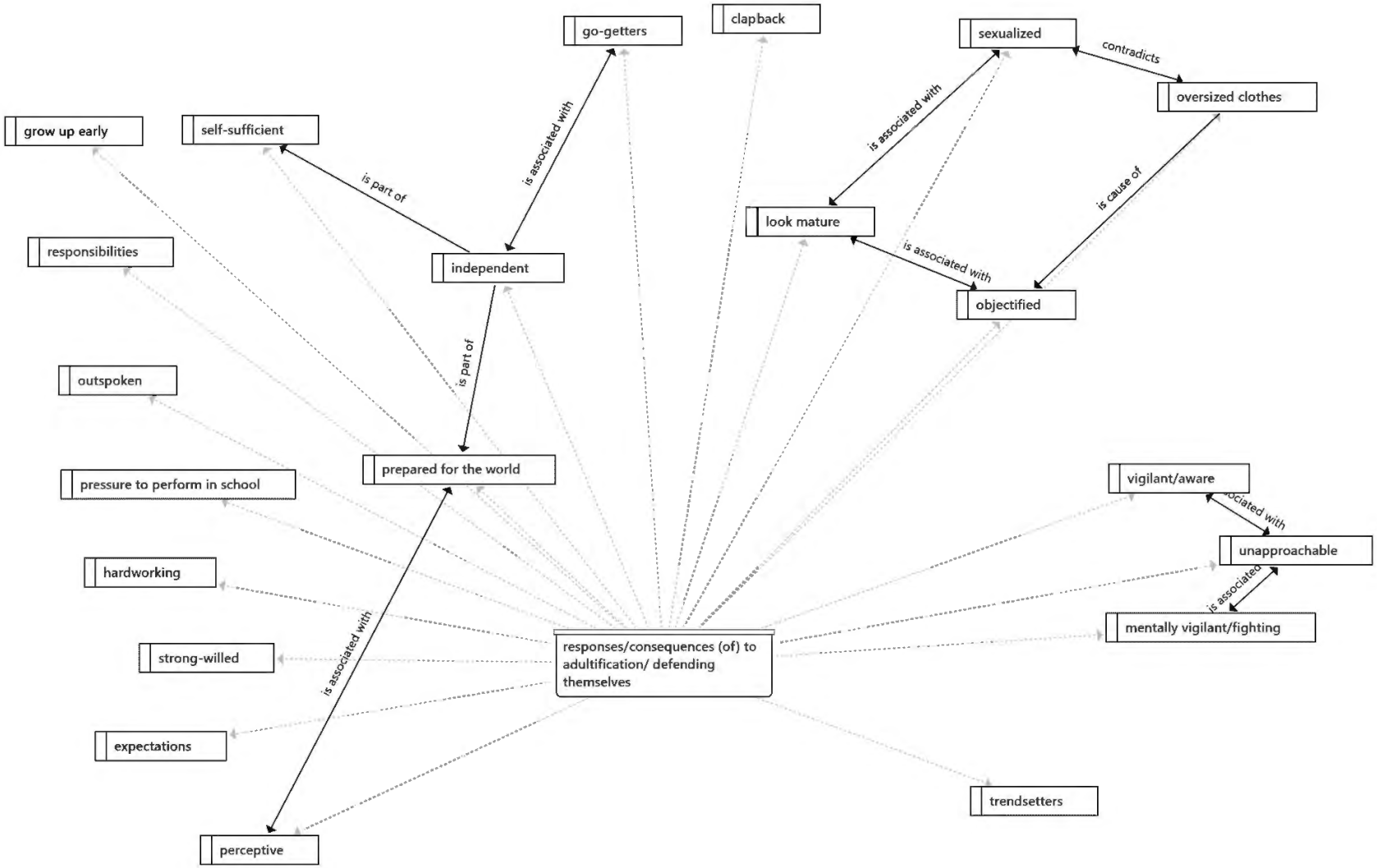
Network of codes for experiences of African American girls in Home and School



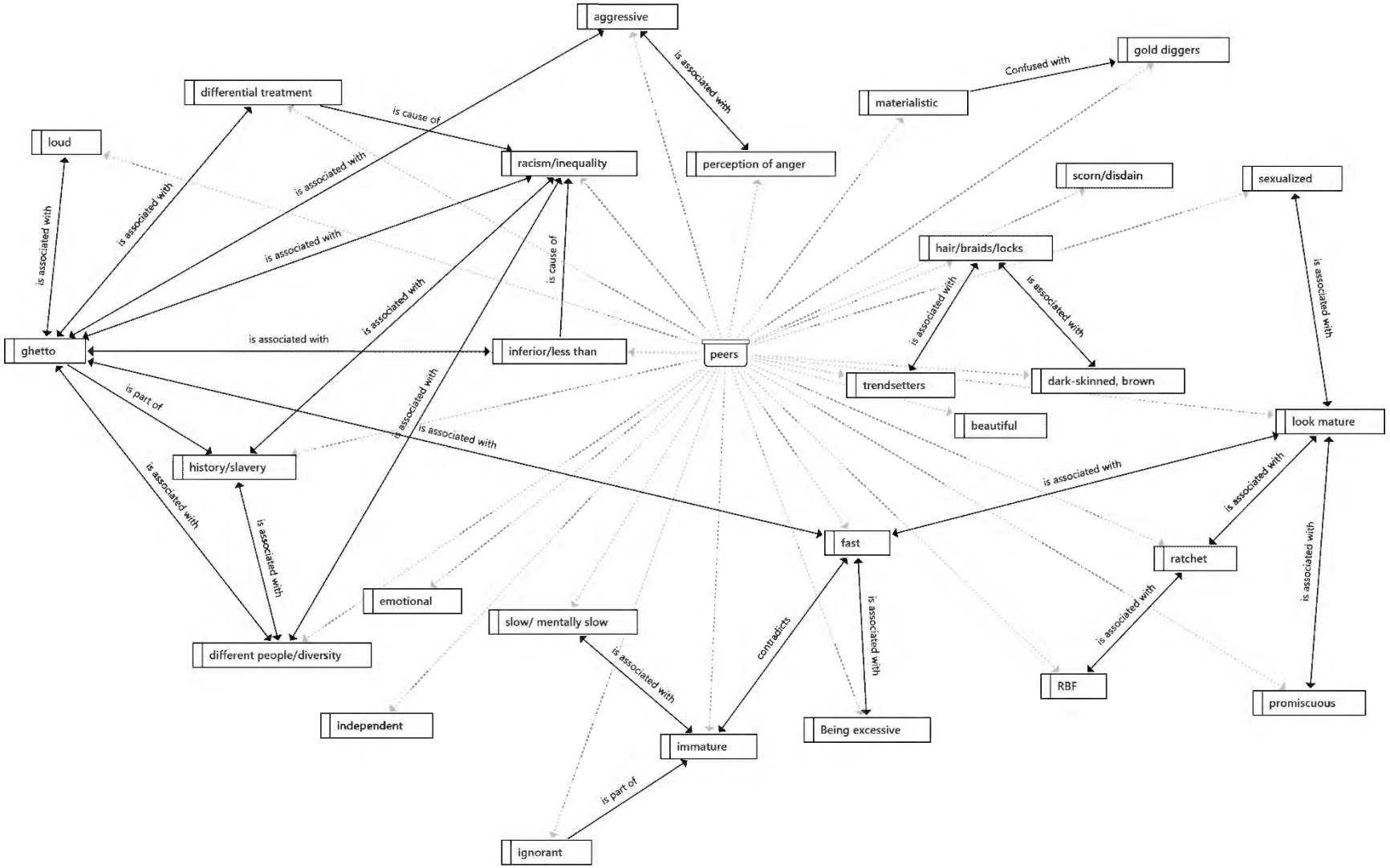
Network of codes for coping behavior among African American girls



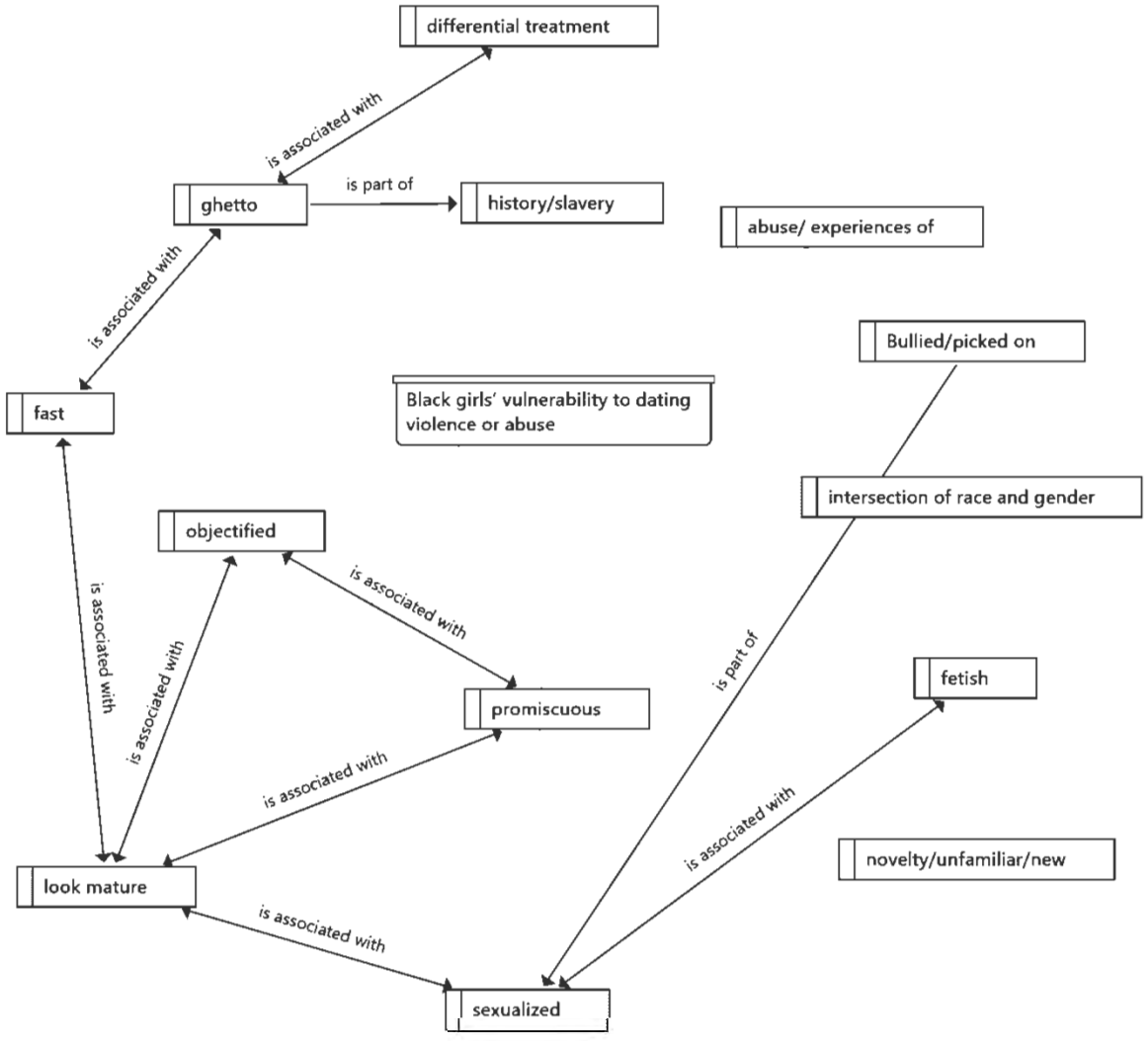
Network of Codes for Responses to Adultification among African American Girls



Network of Codes for Adultification of African American Girls by their Peers



Network of Codes for African American Girls' vulnerability to Dating Violence or Abuse



CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

- Ph.D. in Juvenile Justice, Prairie View A&M University, Texas, USA, 2024
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PUBLICATIONS

Sam, S. S., & Shankar, K. (Pending for 2024). A System in Crisis: Prescriptions for Texas Juvenile Justice, *Journal of Contemporary Juvenile Justice*.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Reviewer, Journal of Family Strengths
Reviewer, IGI Global