

Online Civic Engagement, Political Agency, and Sustaining Communities with Informal Education: Negotiating Misogynoir

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Abstract: Misogynoir—expressed gender bias and racial discrimination against Black women—studies have been limited in contemporary adult education empiricism. This mixed methods pilot used social media posts, interviews, and an online survey to examine the phenomenon. The research volunteers centered on American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS), aged 19 to 58. A validated psychometric survey was administered to 110 subjects aged 19 to 82. Results did not support the propositions of a *gender war* between ADOS men and women. Perception of Black women being undesirable partners was significant at the $p < .01$ alpha level. Black women perceived Black men as the key influencers of misogynoir themes compared to white men. However, the collectivist higher-order thinking to support a national reparations project was notable in Black men.

Keywords: civic engagement, informal adult education, online gender wars, misogynoir, Spiral Dynamic Theory

The attention garnered through the *#MeToo* movement shined a salient spotlight on allowing a voice to women negatively impacted by sexual, mental, and physical abuse. The *MeToo movement* has its genesis in the work of community activist Tarana Burke (Sherwood, 2019), who for years worked with survivors (mainly low-income young Black women) of sexual violence seeking pathways for healing. Notably, white feminist celebrities used the branding of the *MeToo* slogan as a Twitter hashtag, thereby redirecting the empathy work of Ms. Burke toward their seeking redress for perceived oppression and sexual power-plays by white men in Hollywood (Mueller et al., 2020).

In another instance, racist social media attacks by *Twitter Trolls* were directed at actress Leslie Jones (Lawson, 2018) following her role in the *Ghostbusters* film remake. The attacks on Jones's appearance offer another contemporary example of Black woman feature-shaming and anti-Blackness directed at a well-known and popular Black woman celebrity. Racial and emotional violence alongside the cultural erasure of Black femininity in the public sphere (Gaines, 2017) has been interpreted as misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018) in this study. The phenomenon includes emotionally and psychologically daunting memes in American popular culture. For example, a kerfuffle surrounding the emotional outburst of Serena Williams at the 2018 U.S. Open for women's tennis led to the creation of an arguably racist cartoon (Baron, 2018) of her as an exaggerated angry Black woman (Figure 1) reminiscent of the *Black Mammie* caricature discussed in Collins's (2014) writings.

The 2020 shooting of entertainer *Meg The Stallion* by Rapper Tori Lanez, which led to his trial and subsequent conviction for the crime, only seemed to garner what Lane (2021) described

Figure 1

Misogynoir imagery of Serena Williams at the 2018 U.S. Open



as an elusion¹ of grief and empathy toward his Black female victim. This pilot study encased the uniquely American experiences of Black women (and men) negotiating the double jeopardy of race and sex. We examine where imposed misogynoir was a mediating factor for those who share a historical legacy of chattel slavery and struggles with Black self-love. The study occurs within an emerging national Black American reparations project and political movement intended to bring this specific ethnic group comprehensive repair in the United States.

Background

Webber (2017) cites an ongoing double standard and obstruction of sexual agency for Black women who must negotiate misogynoir in the context of what has been described as Black male patriarchy (Charleston, 2014). The literature has also addressed the role of hip-hop and rap music as sources for what is being described as adversarial attitudes toward Black male-female relationships (Bryant, 2008) and, more recently, the use of Afrofuturism terminology as a subversive means to control even the "speculation fiction" futures of Black women (Williams, 2017; Johnson, 2015, p. 265). Notably, the February 2018 release of the Black Panther film (Alfonso & Coogler, 2018) created excitement for its powerful depictions of strong Black women in the imaginary African nation of Wakanda. Yet, a seminal work in Black feminist thought entitled *Mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images* (Collins, 2014) cautioned readers about the dangers of promoting negative cultural tropes and caricatures of Black women that lead to their socioeconomic devastation and representations as "unfeminine [emasculating] matriarchs" (p. 75). Following the Film's release, Black women in online discussion forums described their exasperation with the narrative that Black women were expected to always be strong and self-sacrificing, even to the detriment of their health and well-being.

In their critiques, women-centered social media forums like Lipstick Alley and Black women content creators on YouTube took issue with the cultural tendencies to view Black women as less feminine (than non-Black women). The representations of the Dora Milaje soldiers—

¹ an eluding; escape or avoidance by quickness or cunning

especially dark-skinned Black women depicted in the Film—serving in masculine fighting roles while they pledged obedience and allegiance to protect the nation and the throne of the Black male monarchy (i.e., Black Panther) was viewed—per the online discourse as objectionable by some of the Black women discussants.

Similar critiques resurfaced with the 2022 release of the Black female-dominated cast of *Woman King* (Prince-Bythewood, 2022), written and directed by a trio of white females. Acts of violence in the opening scenes showed the brutal fight between an African female Dahomey Warrior—an area now known as Benin West Africa—and an African male antagonist who mercilessly struck the woman. Such graphic violence against a non-Black woman character (especially a white female) is typically not tolerated in contemporary pop films intended for commercial consumption. Additionally, in social media spaces, there were criticisms about the messaging of the movie and its attempt to *whitewash* the violence of the African female warriors via attempting to portray the Dahomey Amazons as reluctant slave traders when the historical record shows the opposite of such propaganda (Black Pigeon Speaks, 2022).

In summary, the production and promotion of negative tropes about Black women and how such images develop and persist in undermining the healthy psychology of maturing adults require our attention and study within the context of an evolving digital age. This mixed methods study seeks to bridge the gaps in the literature by examining Misogynoir using Spiral Dynamic Theory as an adult development theoretical framework for conducting empirical research.

Literature Review

Based on the research of Brown (2023; 2018) and Clare Graves (2005), the Spiral Dynamic Theory (SDT) framework was used in this pilot study holding that adult developmental thinking occurs within a biopsychosocial system model (Beck & Cowan, 2006; Brown, 2016, Purdy, 2013) that incorporates factors of human biology, psychology (thoughts, emotions, and behaviors), and sociology in integral ways that contribute to healthy human relationships.

Memes and Human Imitation

This research used memetic science literature (Brown, 2016; Blackmore, 1996, 1998) as an element of the SDT theoretical framework to study adult developmental thinking within contemporary life in the United States for Black American ADOS. The SDT framework (Figure 2) descriptively enters the domain of epigenetic sciences, particularly the field of biology, by associating the natural sciences' genetic inheritance construct of a gene to the social science construct termed memes—behavioral units of culture that are transferred non-genetically through human imitations—in this research (Beck & Cowan, 2006; Brown, 2019; & Dawkins, 1976). This study held that misogynoir (within the confines of a racialized society) occurred memetically due to how human beings imitate each other in transferring specific types of worldviews, values, and thinking.

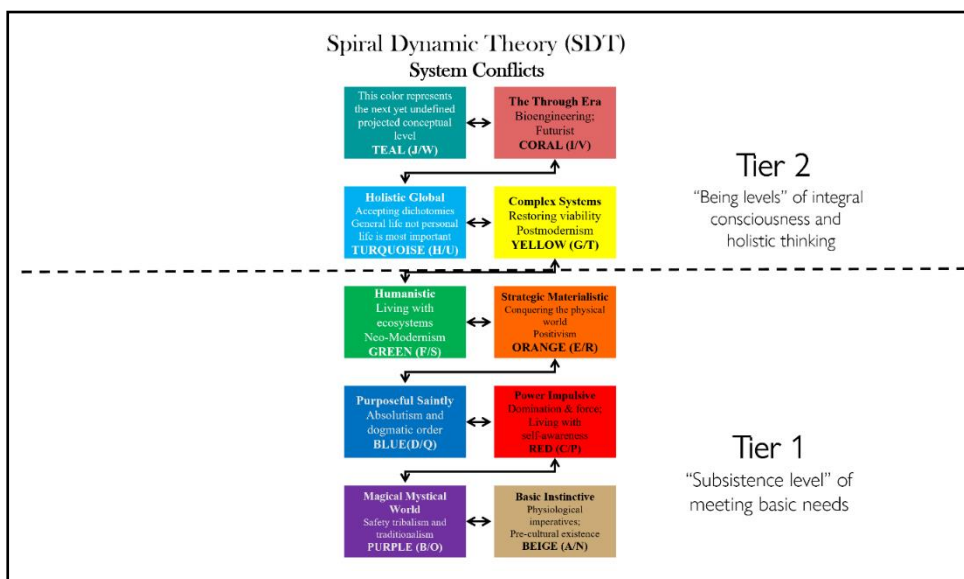
SDT Theoretical Framework

SDT holds that everyone possesses surface-level, hidden, and deep value systems (Cowan & Todorovic, 2000) that operate in conjunction with our unique ways of interpreting, problem-solving, and negotiating life based upon specific typologies of worldviews. Each memetically

color-coded worldview is characterized by its unique axiology, epistemology, ontology, and neuropsychology capacity to problem-solve (Brown, 2023). As healthy adults mature, their ways of thinking about the world have the potential to evolve, moving from simplistic to more complex thinking. Values-based memes (i.e., ^vMEME), represented on the SDT framework, offer a unique deep-value meta-ontology. The evolving SDT constructivist adult development theory is expressed on the individual, organizational, and societal levels (Beck & Cowan, 2006, Brown, 2016).

Figure 2

The Spiral Dynamic Theory Hierarchical Framework of Worldview Systems



Historically, academic educational theories that examined human developmental processes have centered on children and adolescents from predominantly white cultural backgrounds (Erikson, 1959; Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978). A lack of literature connects how Black American ADOS adults' thinking changes over time as one matures. Unlike Erikson's (1959) stage theory of role delineation—which focus on adolescents who are moving toward adulthood as they navigate self-identity—SDT introduces memetically emergent open-ended evolutionary stages (Brown, 2016) of adult development not yet applied to research the phenomenon of social media engagements and gender-based relationship interactions between Black American ADOS.

Deep Value Systems

On the SDT framework (Figure 2), five individualistic *me-oriented* ^vMEME Themata are on the right side of the SDT framework, represented by the beige, red, orange, yellow, and coral colors. There are also more self-sacrificial and collectivist *we-oriented* Themata on the framework's left side, represented by the colors purple, blue, green, turquoise, and teal. (Brown, 2019; Cowan & Todorovic, 2000; Graves, 2005). The SDT theoretical framework provided a means to interpret the diverse and emergent thinking that impacted this pilot study's dependent variable of misogynoir. Each color-coded construct on the SDT framework has an associated capital letter code that symbolizes conditions without (i.e., the external problem an adult faces) and a latent

system within (i.e., the internal neuropsychology representing an adult's ability to problem-solve). A forward slash mark separates the first capital letter then a second capital letter exists for each of the ten identified and distinct SDT worldview constructs. For example, with the color-coded C/P RED system, a person would possess a C-type problem that a P-type neuropsychology addresses. The inherent conflicts between problem types and one's capacity to solve the problem facilitate forward hierarchical movement or regression (stagnation) along the spiraling framework.

Methodology and Research Design

This mixed methods pilot study design (Figure 3) was conducted for development, triangulation purposes, and the convergence of stories (Greene et al., 1989). Face-to-face semi-structured question protocols were used to interview five study participants. The study includes mixed methods at the level of the *research questions*, *data collection*, and *final analysis* (Greene, 2007). The research design had two concurrent phases: recorded and thematically coded interviews and the simultaneous completion of an online psychometric—researcher-developed and validated—survey instrument to capture the distinct color-coded SDT worldview constructs statistically. No questions on the survey were created to detect the lowest-order mnemonically colored (Beige) thinking construct.

The recruited sample was highly educated, and the supposition was not for them to have presented with lower-order thinking. The survey was a preexisting verified instrument used in other studies and publications (Brown, 2016, 2018). Participants were selected through purposeful sampling for face-to-face interviews and recruited to take the survey using a modified random sample. Universities with minority affairs or diversity programs were contacted by researchers and asked if they would distribute the flyer to the students accessing their offices or faculty who could share the hyperlink with potential subjects who were Black-identifying men and women. We also used an email listserv from the university and shared invitations to participate via a flyer with an embedded hyperlink for the subjects to access the self-administered survey instrument. The following research questions guided the study: 1). *How is misogynoir realized for Black American women at work and in popular culture displayed in online nonformal learning spaces?* 2). *Which typologies of SDT worldview were statistically significant among the study sample group and their implications for praxis?* The pilot included the following hypotheses, H_1 : Black Americans ADOS descendants of U.S. slaves will statistically show greater SDT collectivist thinking by gender. The null hypothesis held, H_0 : There will be no statistical difference in the SDT memetic worldviews between study subjects by gender. One hundred and ten (110) online surveys were completed and used in the statistical analysis.

Data Collection

Interview data were collected from adults who had completed at least a high school education (Table 1). The site interviews took place at the homes of two of the volunteers, and three others Interviews occurred in a private location provided by the researcher on campus. The last interview took place in a private meeting room at a local YMCA. Collectivism was hypothesized to be more prevalent among the Black American ADOS volunteers in this pilot study due to concepts of social empathy theory (Sirin et al., 2016) being present among African American participants with a cultural history connected to slavery in the United States.

Figure 3
Mixed Methods Research Design

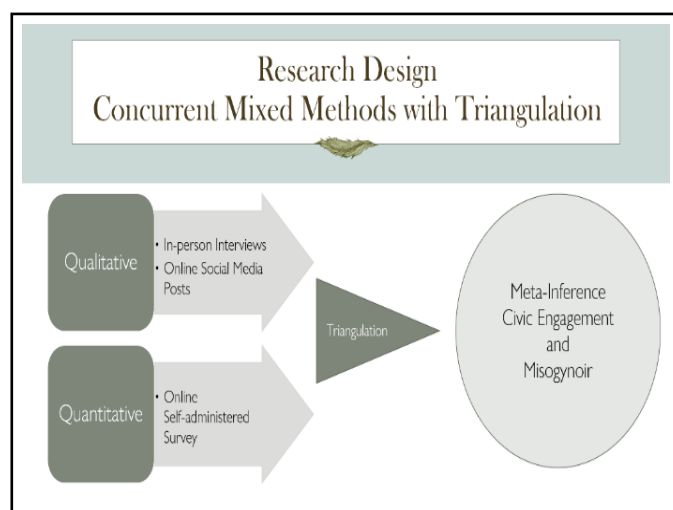


Table 1
In-person volunteer participant interview demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Self-identified			
		Race	Age	Marital Status	Level of Education
Coach	Male	Black	46	Married	B.A./Masters
Veronica	Female	Black	58	Married	Masters
Wise ^δ	Male	Black	46	Married	Some College
Wanda	Female	Black	52	Married	Some College
Abba ^δ	Female	Mixed Black	27	In a relationship	Master's Degree
Eric	Male	Black	19	Single	College Sophomore

^δ Participant quotes used for the qualitative data analysis coding

Data Analysis

The researchers used open coding and discourse analysis of the interview data. The responses were systematically categorized using color-coded markers to categorize them into their corresponding SDT themes quantitatively (Table 2) and using interpretive qualitative and descriptive hierarchical worldview construct levels based on the coding expertise of the SDT-trained researcher (see Figure 10). The "mixing" occurred at the level of the data collection method and the triangulated findings (see Figure 3 research design), where the study found complementarity between the quantitative and qualitative data analysis and provided a meta-inference about civic engagement and experiences of misogynoir.

Table 2.
Correlation among variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Generation	1.											
2	Gender	.06	1.										
3	Country	-.05	.09	1.									
4	Highest Education	.24*	.04	.22*	1.								
5	Work Status	.17	.13	.03	.08	1.							
6	Race	-.15	-.01	-.03	-.09	-.0	1.						
7	Income	.37**	.16	-.08	.29**	.13	.03	1.					
8	Marital Status	.34**	.16	-.03	.18	.18	.08	.36**	1.				
9	Ugly Perception B.W.	.33**	.28**	0	.15	.12	.01	.36**	.26**	1.			
10	Angry Perception B.W.	.19*	-.19*	.03	.27**	.02	.13	.27**	.02	.41**	1.		
11	Argumentative B.W.	-.09	-.22*	-.01	-.18	.06	.13	.06	-.06	.05	.24*	1.	
12	Turquoise_vMEME	0	-.28**	.05	-.03	.02	.01	.17	-.04	-.01	-.02	.09	1.

Note N=110. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Findings and Major Themes. The Black ADOS women in this sample indicated that white men ($\mu=3.36$; $SD = 1.86$) followed by Black men ($\mu=3.60$; $SD = 1.49$)—and to a lesser degree, white women ($\mu=1.16$; $SD = 1.57$) and Black women ($\mu=1.03$; $SD = 1.68$)—were the primary agents of the six misogynoir variables in the two-way cross-classification table embedded in the online survey instrument. In some instances, Black men were viewed as being equally or more oppressive toward Black women than whites or other Black women relative to the economic exploitation variable. Disaggregated data showed that in this sample, ADOS subjects perceived white men and white women as the highest group (86.4%) to exercise the misogynoir indicator of employment discrimination against Black women.

Figure 4
Misogynoir romantic partner violence

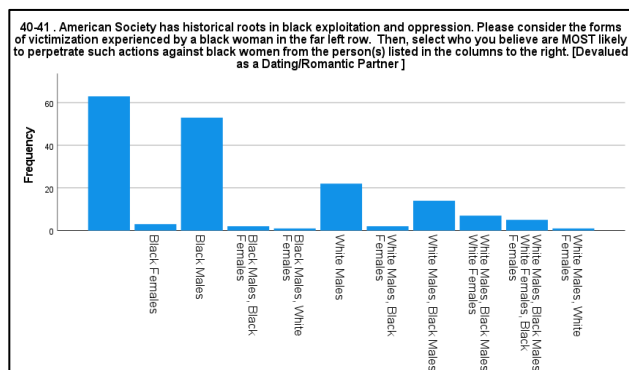


Figure 5
Misogynoir employment discrimination

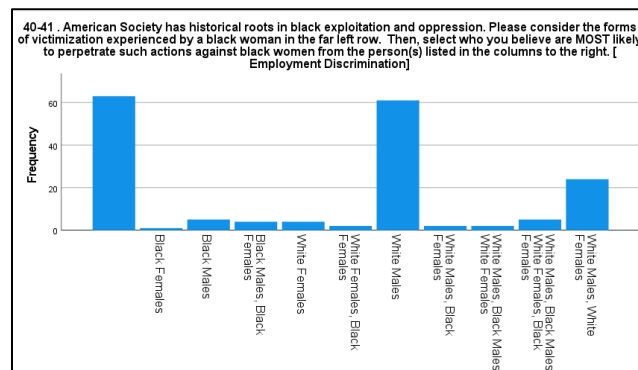


Figure 6
Misognoir economic/financial exploitation

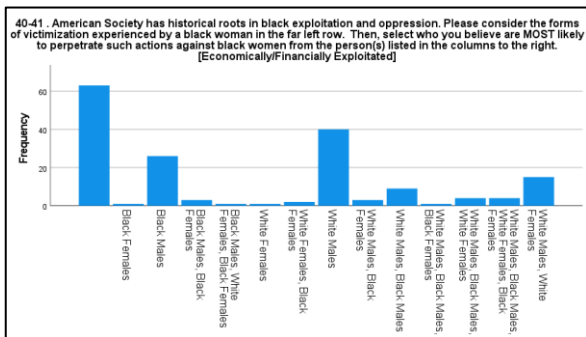


Figure 7
Misognoir sexual abuse and manipulation

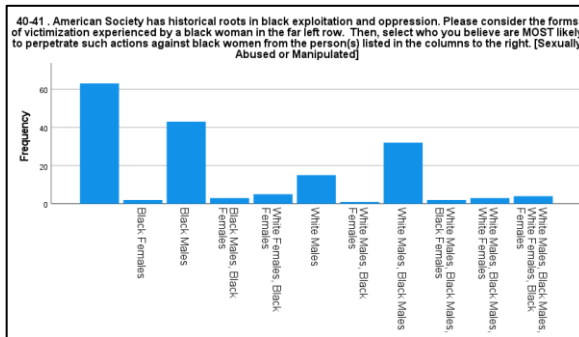
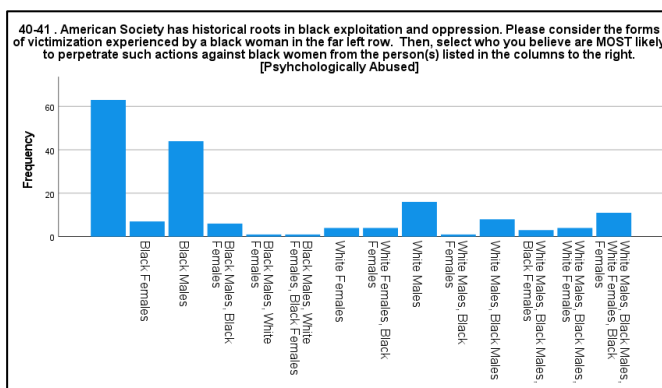
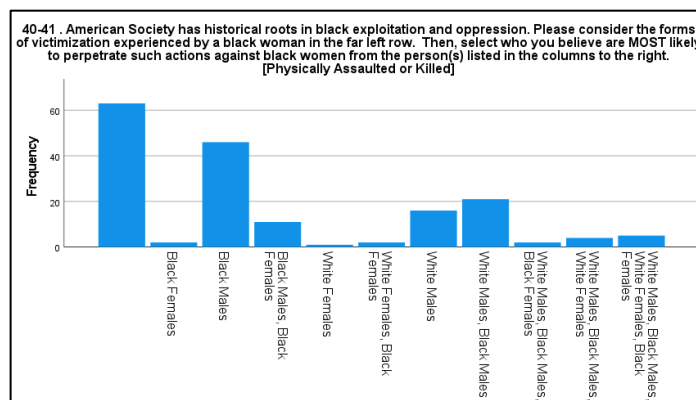


Figure 8
Misognoir psychological abuse



The null hypothesis H_0 is rejected. This sample's survey participants (Black women and men) were primarily more collectivist in their thinking, holding to the F/S Green SDT worldview thinking ($\mu = 1.77, S.D. = .42$) as the most dominant typology. Additionally, Black ADOS men presented more strongly for the Turquoise SDT higher-order thinking ($\mu = 1.74; S.D. = .44$) than Black women ($\mu = 2.10; S.D. = .50$).

Figure 9
Misognoir concerns for physical assault or being killed

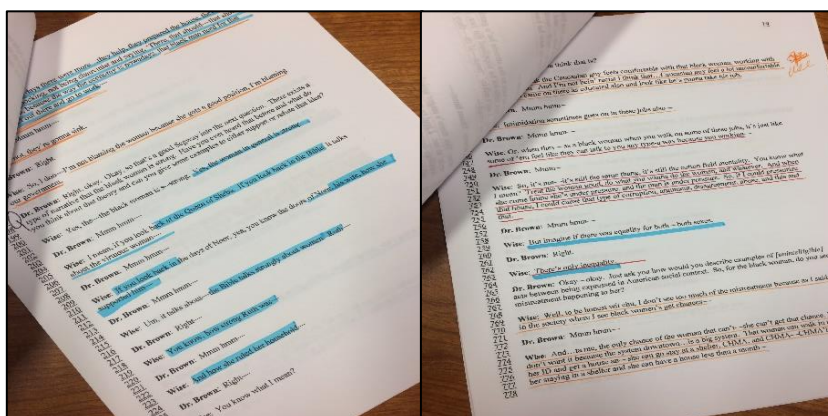


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Qualitative Open and Thematic Coding. Below is one of the in-person interview question protocols where the researchers asked the volunteers about their experience with perceptions of acts of misogynoir. The protocol item was designed to collect the respondent's perceptions of racial discrimination and sexism in the workplace. Below are the direct quotes from the participants. The data was in vivo coded (Figure 10) using the SDT framework color mnemonic constructs as a guide for categorical placement (Jugessur, 2022).

Figure 10

Discourse analysis using Spiral Dynamic Theory categorical color-coding markers.



One of the researchers had interpretive content expertise in using and classifying the SDT vMEMEs and could provide rich and deep interpretive descriptions and connections between the interview volunteers' responses to the associated thematic thinking and problem-solving typologies. For example, interview protocol question five is selected below to display the interpretive analysis process.

#5. Recently, Black males' encounters with Black females have been compared in articles to white racism, where Black men embrace white patriarchal oppression that devalues Black women. Do you find valid an argument that Black males in American society mirror U.S. racist and sexist ideologies in their engagement with Black women?

"Cause I think the Caucasian guy feels comfortable with that Black woman, working with that Black woman. And I'm not bein' racist I think that...Caucasian guy feel a lot uncomfortable if a Black man came on there as educated also and look like he's gonna take his job."

Wise (44-year-old Black man)

The response to question five offered by Wise was coded as SDT Orange (i.e., the *Strategic Materialism* worldview) in large part because he avoided answering the question and pivoted to centering himself as a Black man and how he perceived that a Black woman has an easier time in the workplace. Hence, in a manipulative and strategic way, Wise avoided addressing white male patriarchy, work-based oppression, or the discrimination experienced by Black women in the workforce.

The response by Abba to question five was SDT coded as partly red (*Power Impulsive*) and entering a more dominant Blue (*Purposeful/Saintly*) self-sacrificial worldview construct. Abba was very angry and upset about what she perceived as misogynoir directed at her by the Black male boss supporting the new and younger white female co-worker. Abba expressed in the interview that she knew the new hire had far less work experience than she did. She was visibly upset that her Black male supervisor did not welcome her questioning the employment decision and had such a negative and humiliating verbal response.

"When I approached the Black manager [about a white female co-worker] I was more surprised at how he responded to me than the white guy. He was like, 'No! Like you trippin'. I think you are overstepping your boundaries right now. She's younger, she has more fresher brighter ideas. They brought her here on that salary and really, it's none of your business and I don't have to explain it to you.' I was like WOW ok".

Abba (a 27-year-old Black woman)

Abba did not pursue the matter any further. She seemed to accept the authority and power exerted by her supervisor. She did not do anything more about the unfairness she had perceived under the circumstances of that worksite.

Discussion

Considering praxis and the necessary political activism needed to advance reparations coalition building, the quantitative data suggests that Black American ADOS, as a group, is well positioned to support such a project on a national scale collectively. However, such support may be limited when qualitatively assessed and taken on the level of an individual ADOS person and their attitude towards group-specific acts of solidarity, with race and gender being moderating variables. In general, the strong collectivist nature of the thinking reflected in this sample group is consistent with the literature (Brown, 2023; Brown, McCray, & Neal, 2023) claiming that *affective* adult education can lead to successful civic and community engagement when coupled with active adult learning required to support something such as a national reparations project.

Limitation

Replicating the pilot study on a larger scale could increase statistical reliability and validity results. Another limitation is that there was no equal chance of selection for the survey from the population universe (i.e., traditional random sampling). Convenience sampling was used to recruit volunteers for the interviews. Therefore, results from this pilot study should be viewed with caution as not generalizable to the larger population of Black ADOS in the U.S.

Conclusion

The internet through social media (though virtual) can exist like a *real physical world* of embodied knowing (Tisdell, 2003) that strongly reinforces the study participants' beliefs, values, and online perceptions of reality. The findings from this sample do indicate empirical and interpretive perceptions of misogynoir (broadly conceptualized) being experienced by Black American women in this study. Black men viewed white men as the primary promoters of the negative, angry Black women trope, while Black women thought Black men advanced such stereotypes. In this sample, statistically, Black women were less likely than Black men to challenge incidents of misogynoir in online nonformal adult learning spaces. However, statistically, Black ADOS men more frequently indicated that they would challenge the civic engagement of other Black men who posted negative memes and images (e.g., misogynoir) projecting violence or intending to insult Black women in online informal adult learning spaces.

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