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## Black Couples Filtering Their Love Stories Through the Use of Social Media

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Black Couples Filtering Their Love Stories Through the Use of Social Media

By

Jeff Rocker

A Dissertation Presented to the

Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Osteopathic Medicine

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

**Nova Southeastern University**

**2021**

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By

Jeff Rucker

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This dissertation was submitted by Jeff Rucker under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Dr. Kiran C. Patel College of Osteopathic Medicine and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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## **Abstract**

Black couples' use of social media for expressing their emotions needs to be explored to help them develop their narratives without external pressure. Narrative therapy is used to understand the difficulties of holding on to unique personal narratives and preferred futures in the context of a hostile dominant discourse. The Black community has a long history of oppression, which makes their stories significant. Thus, social media posts by successful Black couples can be helpful in developing a new theory explaining personal narratives of Black couples in an online environment. These narratives provide information regarding the most common problems faced by Black people in developing romantic relationships and the culture-specific factors influencing Black couples' relationships. This qualitative grounded theory focuses on understanding Black couples' use of social media in developing their couple narratives.

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

Humans are called social animals whose survival depends on relationships. People engage in hundreds of thousands of social interactions simply as part of daily life. Every person uses specific socializing skills to develop short-long term relations with different people. The advent of the Internet has revolutionized this process by providing a virtual environment to expand these relationships. Social media networks have gradually become competitive to real-life socialization in developed countries (Abbas et al., 2019). In this context, researchers need to explore various social mechanisms to understand the new trends of establishing romantic and intimate relationships with the help of social media. Fincham and Beach (2010) have already analyzed the role of social media in strengthening and expanding close and trustful relationships through innovative methods such as conveying online messages. People use social media not only for gaining knowledge and resources but also as a tool for fulfilling their emotional needs through finding friends and appropriate partners.

Social media has emerged as an important platform for couples to share their love stories. According to Fincham and Beach (2010), social media is actively used in communication between couples, thus enhancing their physical and psychological health. Research by Papp et al. (2012) reveals that young adults in romantic relationships use social networking sites to interact with their partners, thus enhancing their satisfaction in relationships. Couples that frequently share stories of their love relationships through activities such as posting partner updates are reported to have higher quality relationships through better communication and feelings of closeness even when far from each other (Steers et al., 2015). However, some studies have also reported negative effects of social

media usage in relationships. For instance, McDaniel and Coyne (2016) have reported higher conflict levels due to technology use during couple interactions. While social media usage in relationships has been previously examined, there has been little focus on Black couples. Thus, the focus of this study is to develop an understanding of how African Americans present their love stories to the world through social media.

### **Relationships**

Historically, people have been in quest for intimacy to satisfy their emotional requirements. Gottman and Silver (2012) note that couples with high levels of intimacy and empathy develop attunement ability. Specific romantic interactions and rituals guide people to find their sexual partners. Moreover, the process of establishing romantic relationships has various stages, which can be helpful in making these associations more durable and stronger. Additionally, researchers have also found that the element of empathy plays a vital role in strengthening the mutual bond between couples aspiring to create a family through marriage (Gottman & Silver, 2012). Other features of a strong romantic relationship are relatively less explored due to the diversity of relationships and ethnic communities. Furthermore, these characteristics vary from culture to culture making it difficult for scholars to evaluate their exact implications. Black couples can be cited as an example of this cultural variation as available information on their intimate relationships and the impact of social media on their interactions is limited.

Several models and theories are available in literature on romantic relationships and families, explaining the phenomena of love and intimacy (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). Scholars have developed various approaches that can be used to help couples having problems with intimacy. The researcher seeks to provide new stories of Black couples through the use of social media for establishing close intimate relationships.

### **Impact of Racial Discrimination on Black Couples' Relationships**

Although there is no standard definition of the term “Black love”, it is usually used to refer to a relationship between two individuals who are of African American origin. Due to prevailing racial discrimination in the U.S., Black couples are often termed as Black love on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Billingsley, 2016). Media and pop culture associate African Americans with social issues such as violence, crime, drugs, and sex, which compel the general public to perceive love among Black couples in a negative manner (Billingsley, 2016). Billingsley (2016) also stresses that love and romantic relationship studies have often focused on White American couples, which confirms the “muted group theory” that the needs of marginalized communities are overlooked by the dominant groups of the society. Therefore, Black couples struggle to establish their identity, which can have a negative impact on their relationships. Although racial discrimination is the main source of stress for African Americans in the U.S., little research has been conducted to evaluate its impact on couple functioning. Lavner et al. (2018) have conducted such a study to explore the relationship between racial discrimination and couple functioning among African-Americans. The findings of the study confirm that racial discrimination was a common factor in defining the nature of black relationships (Lavner et al., 2018). While men reported higher levels of psychological aggression, women complained of similar aggression in their relationship if they faced increased racial discrimination (Lavner et al., 2018). Hence, it is suggested that therapists should devise strategies to address the issue of racial discrimination among their clients.

Various initiatives and programs have been introduced in the American society to engage Black couples by using different culturally competent strategies to educate them on ways to protect their relationships through increased intimacy. Mickle and Gilbert (2019)

study the efficacy of these programs through a systematic review. Although the study employs various approaches, storytelling, an oral tradition is the main approach (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). The findings of this research suggest that Black couples benefit from such culturally significant programs, which help them establish healthier relationships through improved relationship skills (Mikle & Gilbert, 2019). Hence, Black couples need more attention to increase intimacy to protect their relationships and to enjoy durable marriages.

### **Significance of Storytelling Tradition in Relationship Therapies for Black Couples**

Storytelling is an African oral tradition and history, which can be an effective research methodology for encouraging Black couples to share their experiences. The storytelling technique is used by Africans to share their feelings, attitudes, and responses to various experiences. Moreover, this medium is also employed for transferring knowledge and traditions from one generation to another (Tuwe, 2016). These stories are unique as they present the worldview of the African community. Narrative therapists can use storytelling to learn about the life experiences of Black couples. The therapists can also encourage the couples to focus on their own voices to better perceive their preferred future by rejecting the dominant discourses.

The storytelling tradition was common among African Americans who worked as slaves during the slavery regimes. They sought to preserve their culture as well as seek inspiration for rebellion through storytelling (Rasson, 2017). In the modern world, this technique can be implemented to encourage Black couples to develop alternative stories, which focus on their strengths and abilities to help them resolve their relationship issues.

Although many scholars have studied the practice of intimacy among Black couples, the studies have been mostly focused on interracial couples without specific attention to their online interactions (Killian, 2013). Narrative therapists have long been interested in exploring

the problems of couples belonging to this ethnic minority to find the assurance that Blacks have individual ability to shape their relationships (Killian, 2013). Narrative therapy has a strong record of considering issues of race, class, culture, and gender (Killian, 2013).

Although researchers have studied Black couples and employed narrative therapy to understand their problems, this study aims at building on their work by integrating social media as a device to explore intimate relations among Black couples (Wilkins et al., 2013).

Awosan and Opara (2016) introduced valuable mechanism for studying Black couples' intimacy through culture-based therapeutic approaches. Their research can be a good foundation for exploring stories of Black couples posted on social media as these stories expose both privileged and submerged voices. The conflicts between submerged and privileged voices in the stories make relationships difficult and challenging for Black couples due to cultural differences and discrimination. Although these practices and others have been suggested as useful interventions to address the issue of Black couple intimacy, this study aims at considering previous studies as a foundation to develop a new personalized theory to help repair relationship issues among Black couples. David Epston and Michael White's (1996) Narrative Therapy can be used as an efficient tool to understand the conception of relationships among Black couples. This non-pathologizing approach can encourage Black couples to understand that they have skills and expertise to cause positive change in their relationships.

### **Efficacy of Social Media Platforms in Sharing Experience of Black Couples**

The social media platform is evolving as a new place for couples to share their intimate feelings. Discouraged by the indifferent behaviors of the US society, African Americans have started using social media for sharing their views about love and romantic relationships (Billingsley, 2016). Hence, it can be an effective strategy to include this



medium in exploring the personal narratives of Black couples. They use this platform to share their life experiences with others and discover the purpose of their life through stories.

Although Black couples share success stories online, the content can be analyzed to explore the sense of insecurity regarding durability of the relationship (Purnell, 2020). Thus, the social media posts of successful Black couples can be helpful in developing a new theory explaining personal narratives of Black couples occurring in an online environment. These narratives provide information regarding the most common problems faced by Black people in developing romantic relationships, and culture-specific factors influencing how Black men and women perceive each other. Social media can also help them express their feelings to their partners through various communication tools. Sending romantic messages through social media can also be useful for reducing marital conflicts, which would improve their psychological and physical health (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Thus, it is interesting to research Black couples' intimacy in the context of social media.

Majority of American couples claim that they use digital technology for maintaining emotional intimacy among their relationships (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). However, overdependence on social media can directly influence the users' interpersonal communication abilities (Boyle et al., 2018). For this purpose, therapists should understand the specific traits of family discords prevalent in Black couples. Mickle (2016) contends that couple approaches employed by therapists have not specifically targeted Black couples due to their unique relationship issues. There are only a few studies that have systematically analyzed the efficacy of intervention programs designed particularly for Black couples by integrating cultural components (Mickle, 2016). The study effectively concludes that cultural-based interventions significantly increase efficacy of programs introduced for Black couples

(Mikle, 2016). Hence, therapists should focus on African-centric approaches for designing interventions for Black couples to strengthen their relationships through sustained marriage.

Research on relationship dimensions among Black couples is also significant, because their social and cultural issues are quite specific. Again, relationships among Black couples are influenced by factors like racism, which encourages African American women to get involved in non-traditional co-parenting and marital relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Fincham and Beach (2010) also report that researchers have started exploring topics related to online relationships but there are a number of gaps in scholarly literature. This study addresses the problems of intimacy among Black couples through social media. This study uses the underpinnings of Narrative Therapy as an effective theoretical base to decode the voices of Black couples.

Arguably, scholarly literature contains a number of useful interventions required to integrate the online environment into marriage and family therapies. However, the process of therapy can be made more beneficial by the integration of modern technologies to encourage Black couples to share their life experiences anonymously. Black couples can gain confidence through social media to understand their relationship issues by recalling their own stories.

### **Social Media**

Social media has become one of the most widely used means of communication in the world. On average, people spend about 2 to 3 hours on social media daily (Average Time Spent Daily on Social Media, 2020). People establish friendships and romantic relationships on social media, even without seeing each other for days or ever, thus communication in social media is similar to real-life communication. The new generations use social media and

computer technologies more than previous generations, and that is why scientists pay so much attention to Facebook and other social networks. Some social media services, such as Badoo, were specifically designed for helping people to establish intimate and romantic relations (Miguel, 2016). Furthermore, social networks are the primary platform for uniting potential romantic partners, many of whom may have fewer possibilities of finding each other in real life.

It is interesting that social media websites and applications allow the use of various types of information, including audio and video, to help people better understand each other's emotions and make social interactions quite similar to interactions that occur offline. It should be noted that in the modern world there are more people who communicate with each other online than offline, and therefore social media becomes the main instrument for developing and maintaining intimate connections. In fact, the concept of intimacy-at-a-distance has emerged and refers to various intimate practices used by people to establish or maintain intimate relationships without being geographically close (Miguel, 2016; Steers et al. 2015). Another unique feature of social media services is that they transform people's understanding of privacy and intimacy (Miguel, 2016). People use their social media profiles to share various intimate experiences, related to their families, romantic relationships, and other aspects of their lives.

Also, social media often acts as a personal online diary, where people often disclose their deeper emotions and feelings. Certain information that was labeled as private in the past is perceived as public in the modern world. Social media stimulates people to share various intimate experiences because it provides a feeling of protection. It is even possible that romantic love between people appears even before they meet each other in reality. Even for people in marriages or long-term relationships, social media can be used to show each other

sincere and deep emotions (sending intimate text and voice messages, or publishing photos or videos of the two together).

Depending on people's relations and culture, the use of social media, and the way in which people express their intimacy may vary significantly. For instance, people belonging to collectivistic cultures and living in relatively isolated societies may prefer to avoid sharing their intimate feeling and emotions on social media. Some may believe that intimate information must be kept within a family and that social opinion plays a significant role in people's self-esteem. On the contrary, people belonging to individualistic cultures may share more private information and personal feelings. The U.S. is a country dominated by individualism and individualistic values. Hence, using social media for establishing and maintaining intimate relations with others is a common thing for modern-day Americans. Still, American society is highly diverse and depending on ethnicity and culture, people's perceptions of intimacy through the use of social media vary significantly. Therefore, this variation is expected even among black couples.

### **Significance of Stories in Developing Romantic Relationships**

Every person has a life story in which they present themselves as a hero. Interestingly, this story changes with the passage of time by including new details in it. The mood of telling a specific story depends on the nature and timing of the story (Ackerman, 2019). Listening to the stories of various Black couples can be helpful in validating the issues of individuals by understanding their personal context. Therapists and counselors use stories to discover the opportunities for improving a relationship by encouraging an individual about their ability to handle a crisis. Stories are narrated in a personalized manner to convey their point of view about their world. People share their shared experiences with others to explore the meaning

behind their feelings and emotions. Hence, the stories have a specific purpose in improving intimate relationships.

Usually, people have more than one story in their life, which encourages therapists to find the social context of these stories to determine their significance. People understand their life through the lens of culture, which establishes the negative or positive impacts of their stories (Morgan, 2019). However, people feel anxious when their stories do not correspond to their life experiences (White & Epston, 1990). Although the American society advocates for the principles of freedom and equality, ethnic minorities face problems in raising their voices to be noticed at the national level. Their point of view is submerged in the dominant discourse, which makes them feel isolated. Narrative therapy can be helpful in encouraging Black couples to reject the dominant voice in their stories and present themselves through their own perspectives. This feature of personal narratives can be used to explore the nature of intimate relationships of Black couples. Due to the anonymous nature of social media, Black couples can confidently discuss their life stories without disclosing their identities. It provides therapists with an opportunity to acquire firsthand information about Black couples' intimacy. Thus, through the respectful and non-judgmental approach of Narrative Therapy, individuals can view their problems in an objective manner. Therapists use the notion that people have the necessary skills and competencies to overcome their issues.

### **Importance of the Study**

Love and intimacy are important to the emotional and social wellbeing of human beings. Healthy relationships help individuals meet a psychological need of feeling close to others. Mutually supportive intimate relationships could help in promoting health and resilience (Knudson -Martin & Huenergradt, 2010). With the proliferation of social media in almost every aspect of human life today, there is a greater role of online platforms and

practices on expression of love and intimacy. However, this is not yet clearly understood, especially in African American communities. Thus, this study seeks to explore the use of social media to present love stories among Black couples. This understanding is important because it gives counselors and therapists a knowledge base of love relationship issues among African Americans in the era of social media. The stories of Black couples and their love relationship in the context of social media could give important insights into the representation of Black American family and relationship issues. These voices and narratives could help in understanding the problems of Black couples in romantic relationships. The knowledge could also benefit therapists in exploring the opportunities for improving relationships among Black couples.

This study is also important because of its contribution to the body of knowledge on Black couples. There has been significant scholarly interest on relationship issues for African Americans. However, there is little attention on the dynamics of social media as a tool for telling love stories among African Americans. Understanding the role of social media in Black couples' relationships could help in expanding the capacity for further exploration on marriage and family therapy practices for African American communities.

### **Organization of the Remainder of the Study**

In Chapter I, the researcher describes basic information related to the study. The researcher provides the background for the study, which has general information regarding the phenomenon of interest and explains basic concepts related to the study. The study also highlights some previous findings and provides various definitions of the main concepts. The purpose of the study is also described and explained, based on previously discussed arguments and the findings from this study. In addition, it is essential to define the terms used in the study, which is done in the "Definition of Terms" section.

In Chapter II, the researcher reviewed previous literature related to patterns of social media usage among Black couples. Further, the researcher justifies the need for conducting the study, by stating arguments and facts proving that there is a gap in the scientific literature, and lack of knowledge related to the researched phenomenon. As a result of the literature review, the researcher summarizes previous theories related to the intimacy and presents findings of previous authors. Research questions are used to better understand how social media has impacted Black couple narratives.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Orientation for the Study**

Narrative couple therapy model formed the theoretical framework for this study. Narrative therapy model is a postmodern approach of dealing with issues related to Black couples (White & Epston, 1990). According to the theory, marital conflicts emanate from negative narratives that distort the cognitive processes and coping strategies, thus shaping Black couples' identities (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The aim of narrative therapy is to expand the experiences of Black couples and helping them to reconstruct and retell new stories about their relationships. Thus, Black couples observe their relationships through a new perspective to explore the distinct relationship strengths. Narrative therapy is helpful in facilitating collaborative rewriting of the couple's problematic narratives to shape their relationships. The main emphasis of the approach is to create new positive meanings for Black couples (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2015). In the present study, the narrative model is used to explore Black couples' stories as told through social media. It also evaluates significance of social media in safeguarding Black couple relationships.

A number of strategies have been suggested by scholars such as Gottman and Johnson (2018) about emotionally focused couples' therapy and intimacy. The current study uses the concept of online manifestation of emotions within relationships through the narrative therapy approach. There are many traditional theories that are still used to explain intimacy, empathetic relationships between people, and how romantic relationships are formed. In general, many theories of romantic relationships divide love into various components and emphasize that love is a heterogeneous phenomenon meaning that it depends on numerous factors that should be considered. Hence, scholars try to identify the most important factors and components related to love (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). In this study, intimacy is



defined in line with Gottman's interpretation as the deeper sense of connectedness, friendship, empathy, creation of shared meaning, and sexual relationships between Black couples. Thus, social media can serve as an effective platform for Black couples to express their inner feelings without any social and cultural barriers.

### **The Role of Stories in Life**

People cannot be separated from their stories. The historical and social contexts of stories encourage people to tell and remember the main events of their lives while ignoring all other unimportant parts (Combs & Freedman, 2012). People employ various shared practices and beliefs to decide which parts of their life stories to disclose. The common values called discourses "powerfully shape a person's choices about what life events can be storied and how they should be storied" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 43). According to narrative therapists such as White and Epston (1996), people use stories to imagine how their romantic relationships would look like. These stories can be influenced by various factors, including parental relationships, emotions, cognitions, past relationships, interactions with siblings, and parents. People may have stories where intimacy plays a major role, or on the contrary, where passion is the most important component.

Additionally, stories of people who are in relationships are often different, that is why partners often have to modify these stories and create new ones, to make sure they align with current relationships. Stories control how relationships develop and how people behave within these relationships. Every story has a beginning, middle, and ending. Moreover, people have various ideals that determine what they include in these stories. Hence, stories can be different depending on their social and cultural contexts. Thus, stories provide great tools for understanding the particular issues people face and what can be done to solve those issues.

Narrative therapy can help Black couples narrate their stories on social media without any external burden. Even though Lenhart and Duggan (2014) state the role that social media can play in maintaining intimacy, Boyle et al. (2018) warns about over relying on it. Consistent with Zhan et al. (2016), narrative therapists can encourage Black couples to share their unique characteristics through social media to convey their specific feelings to their partners. The social media platform will give them confidence by protecting their privacy, which Li et al. (2016) give priority in interactions. This strategy motivates Black couples to promote their subjugated voices and discard the perception of white supremacy. Upon realizing the importance of their life stories, they can start viewing their issues from a better perspective. Hence, Black couples benefit from storytelling and can promote their positive social media image.

### **Narrative Therapy**

Narrative Therapy is the main theoretical framework for this study because it provides a description of the interplay between various components of human experience in the context of privileged vs. submerged voices (Freedman & Combs, 2012). As narrative therapists focus on alternate stories and shifting discourses, they are often referred to as social constructionists (Madigan, 2013). Morgan (2000) contends that the strategy of encouraging Black couples to develop an alternate story can help them “celebrate significant steps in the journey away from a problem story to a new and preferred version of life” (p. 111). This therapeutic theory focuses on the idea that problems associated with people are influenced by social and cultural discourses, which can be explored by motivating the clients to reconsider an alternate story in their narrative (Madigan, 2011).

Black couples have been historically subjected to oppressive and racist environments characterized by indifference to their point of view. Narrative therapy provides these couples

with a way to explain their life experiences in their perspectives through externalization (Freedman & Combs, 2012). Moreover, having specific knowledge about the issues “can further reduce the influence of such problems in the lives of those affected by them and contribute to significant shifts in the lives of [Black couples]” (Morgan, 2000, p. 116).

Through the lens of this theory, the researcher is able to identify the role of intimacy in social networks and understand how social networks contribute to the development of intimate relationships and how people can use them to achieve ideals in their love stories by promoting the submerged voices (Freedman & Combs, 1996). By understanding what people expect in their love stories, it is possible to analyze the real desires of Black couples regarding their relationship (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This can help to develop and expand effective treatment strategies, focused on specific interpersonal and intimate problems occurring within Black couples.

Michael White (1996) employed Foucault’s theory of privileged versus submerged voices to construct a therapy, which is based on socially constructed personal narratives (Madigan, 2013). A narrative therapist can encourage clients to focus on privileged as well as subjugated voices within the system and try to focus on their own narratives without external pressure. This technique encourages Black couples to retell their stories from a different personal perspective. This principle is significant in the case of Black couples who have a legacy of parental rights as well as long history of oppression. This historical background discourages Black couples from promoting their personal perspectives as they focus on the cultural values while narrating their stories (Madigan, 2011). Narrative therapists can help Black couples focus on their subjugated voices to realize their identity and power (Morgan, 2000).

Narrative therapists have to perform within the domains of a powerful system of social control. This dominant discourse determines that patients are usually overwhelmed by their problems due to their generalized and taken for granted ideas (Madigan, 2011). Ethnic minorities are treated according to their stereotypes constructed and shaped by the dominant ideas (Madigan, 2013). Black couples have to bear racial discrimination due to their perceived status as slaves by the dominant segments of the US society. Narrative therapists encourage Black couples to consider their problems within their personal contexts rather than following the dominant ideas prevailing in the society.

This study focuses on narrative theory, which concentrates on stories of Black couples. These stories explore their problems in a personalized perspective to reduce the impact of dominant discourse (Freedman & Combs, 2012). It is considered that intimacy plays a core role in many loving relationships, such as love towards parents, children, friends and lovers. On the other hand, passion is not limited to relations where people have sexual contacts.

Narrative therapists encourage Black couples to focus on their own interpretation of specific situations according to their personal ideas. This strategy helps the privileged and the submerged voices to explore the origins of a particular problem. This method is also helpful in assisting Black couples to make meaning of the world they are living in. Black couples are also in a better position to explore their relationships with people living around them in a realistic manner. Thus, Narrative therapy can guide Black couples to analyze their issues without considering the dominant cultural beliefs.

Black couples have been facing societal and historical trauma since the era of enslavement, which has directly influenced their relationships (Hardy, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2013). They feel hesitant to express their feelings in public due to fear of criticism. Black

couples are also burdened by negative stereotyping, which subjects them to physical and emotional oppression. They are less inclined to share their feelings with their partners due to lack of self-confidence. Narrative therapy can serve as an effective process to explore Black couples' personal perspectives about their social status. This therapeutic technique can also encourage Black couples to rethink their positions in a prejudiced society for exploring their relationship problems. Moreover, the use of social media can also be helpful in reassuring Black couples of the confidentiality of their feelings. Thus, application of Narrative therapy along with social media platform is helpful in exploring the nature of Black couples' problems.

Narrative therapy can be effective in having a complete understanding about the social, cultural, and economic problems of Black couples, which shape their relationships. Issues like racism, discrimination, unemployment, gender inequality, sexism, and oppression can be explored through personal narratives of Black couples (Hurt, McElroy, Sheats, Landor, & Bryant, 2014). There is no alternative to this therapy for exploring such problems. Therefore, Narrative therapy technique can be helpful for understanding the issues that have negative impacts on Black couple relationships.

A narrative therapy model of storytelling is based on several assumptions, which guide therapists through various phases. The basic assumption of this model is based on the concept that people try to shape their life stories under the influence of their interpersonal experiences gained through the system of social justice, externalizing, dominant discourse, and privileged vs. submerged voices (Freedman & Combs, 2012). Therapists try to explore certain themes from these stories to manipulate the situation in order to provide guidance towards getting the desired results (White & Epston, 1990). Therapists encourage the submerged voices of Black couples and validate their experiences (Freedman & Combs,

1996). Narrative therapy also considers that people establish their identity through relationships based on perceptions about each other and mutual interactions as well as on the larger social and political context.

Another important assumption of a narrative approach lies in the fact that there is more than one story in a person's life. It is possible that an alternate story can help an individual to sort out the conflicts of a relationship more effectively (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Most people consider their problems in a personalized manner, which makes it challenging for them to address them. However, the concept of externalizing the problem can be more effective. Narrative therapists use this concept to differentiate problem from a person to free the individual from the tyranny of the dominant discourse (White & Epston, 1990). Therefore, therapists suggest to their clients to consider other stories about their life experiences, which can better represent them without the influence of their problems (Morgan, 2000). Alternatively, partners can have separate stories about the same life event. Thus, problems lie with the narratives rather than the people as they are unable to distinguish between dominant and submerged voices (Freedman & Combs, 2012). Hence, therapists encourage them to think about their life experiences from different perspectives to decide about their desired future. This fact helps therapists to view problems separately from individuals in order to seek viable solutions (Morgan, 2000). Hence, Black couples living in problematic relationships can understand their issues more effectively by focusing on their submerged voices rather than following the dominant discourse.

Narrative therapists focus on freeing the clients from the influence of problematic stories dominated by cultural values. However, it is not sufficient for Black couples to restate their narrative in the form of an alternate story. Narrative therapists are interested in ensuring that the alternate stories are richly described, which “do not support or sustain

problems” (Freedman & Combs, 1996). As the stories of Black couples are interwoven with the stories of interpersonal relationships, alternate stories can be co-authored to richly describe life events. This strategy can be helpful in exploring the dominant discourses and privileged voices in the lives of Black couples.

In order to apply Narrative Therapy in its true sense, professionals encourage people to relate their stories without interrupting them in a specific context. Therapists are interested in listening to the stories of their clients in their own context, but they encourage them to focus on the story based on their own rather than dominant voices (Madigan, 2013). Then, by employing the technique of externalization, they encourage people to view their problem as a separate entity. After that, they are also encouraged to employ deconstruction techniques to reduce the problem in such a manner to eliminate its impact. This technique makes narrative therapists social constructionists (Madigan, 2013). In the light of this acquired confidence that problems can be resolved, therapists encourage clients to change their storyline to develop a new narrative by marginalizing the impact of the problem. At the end, individuals are advised about existentialism, which means that one can redefine the purpose of life at any moment to give the world a new meaning. All these techniques can be helpful in assuring the client about his self-identity that he can manage them with his own skills (Morgan, 2000). Thus, narrative therapists do not interfere with the process and try to discover hints about the real nature of issues in a narrated story. By connecting people’s stories with their life experiences, narrative therapists are able to explore the realities shaping a specific narrative. However, this result needs therapists to listen to the stories with “focused attention, patience, and curiosity while building a relationship of mutual respect and trust” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 43). This strategy of enthusiastic listening can help therapists discover the problems of people seeking their insight to improve their relationships.

### **Recent Literature on Black Couples Therapy**

Current research on Black couples and family therapy mainly revolves around the societal and historical trauma faced by this minority. Davey and Watson (2008) attribute specific behaviors of Black couples to their 400 years long history of slavery. According to Davey and Watson (2008), feelings of inferiority and oppression have directly impacted the relationships of black couples. In this context, Wilkins' therapy consists of treating post-traumatic stress and substance use along with culturally sensitive issues. It is also believed that socio-emotional factors have a negative impact on the romantic relationship of Black couples (Awosan & Opara, 2016). Scholars and therapists consider that roots of disturbed romantic relations among Black couples lie in the long history of slavery, which has a negative influence on the personal character of this ethnic group.

Apart from this, negative stereotyping and African American legacy also play a vital role in nondurable Black relationships. Kelly and Floyd (2001) argue that "racial perspectives are important predictors of Black couple outcomes and that complex and conflicting racial attitudes held by Afrocentric Black men may cause deterioration in Black couple relationships" (p. 110). Moreover, the unique features of Black relationships also make it difficult for the therapists to explore issues among Black couples (Kelly, Maynigo, Wesley, & Durham, 2013). In order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Black relationships, researchers should focus on the attitudes specifically related to this ethnic minority (Kelly & Floyd, 2006). Thus, current literature on relationships of Black couples indicate the need to understand the underlying factors responsible for making them different from other groups.

Researchers like Boyd-Franklin have applied religion and spirituality to address emotional stress among Black couples (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). However, the diversity of religions among the African American community is a challenge in using spirituality as a



healing factor against racism and adversity (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). For instance, with some African American communities ascribing to Christianity and others to other religions, such as Islam, common religious perspectives on intimacy can be difficult to find, complicating the process of religious intervention in relationship problems. Therefore, keeping in mind the assertions of these contemporary scholars and therapists, Black couples need to develop the solution to their problems by themselves. Narrative therapy can be the best alternative for exploring their stories through social media to understand their viewpoints about intimacy. Their stories should be used to guide them towards their issues and assure them that they have the ability to resolve them effectively.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of Black Couples' Relationships**

There are certain factors responsible for fragile relationships among Black couples, which can be explored through Narrative therapy. As African Americans have traditionally been against the social values of the country due to the environment of oppression and discrimination, they prefer cohabitation over marriage (Hurt, McElroy, Sheats, Landor, & Bryant, 2014). Social media platforms can be used to explore the reason behind this behavior as Black couples can be encouraged to easily share their feelings anonymously. There are other factors such as economic instability, sexism, and gender inequality, which undermine the success of long-term relationships among Black couples (Hurt, McElroy, Sheats, Landor, & Bryant, 2014). Furthermore, the Faustian bargain also reduces the strength of Black relationships by designating the Black man as the head of the family (Bent-Goodly, 2015). The historical context of enslavement along with Jim Crow statutes promoting segregation provides the mechanism of racism and oppression, which directly influences Black relationships (Bent-Goodly, 2015). These factors discourage them from engaging in marital relationships, hence the low number of marriages among the Black community (Hurt,

McElroy, Sheats, Landor, & Bryant, 2014). These weaknesses make their relationships vulnerable as the majority of Black women in marriages seek divorce.

As challenges to black couple's relationships are often noted, the strengths of these relationships are often less explored in the literature. It is observed that scholars focus on the weaknesses of African American relationships, but stories about benefits of Black marriage are often ignored in the literature (Bent-Goodly, 2015). Social media can be used as an effective tool for encouraging Black couples to share the stories of their successful relationships. Creating a discourse that highlights the good and acknowledges the challenges from both historical and contemporary contexts is important to providing a more complete story of relationships in the African American community (Bent-Goodly, 2015). It is important to highlight the strengths of black couples to help shift the negative stereotypes associated with this ethnic group.

The strengths of black couples include the use of extended family, the power of mutual aid networks, and the use of spirituality to address everyday problems (Billingsley, 1994; Carlton-LaNey, 2001; Hill, 1997; Martin & Martin, 2003). Black family usually consists of grandparents who take care of children while couples engage in financial activities. Moreover, Black families are associated with networks of relatives who gather at one place during different religious and cultural events. Such activities give the Black community a sense of power due to their unity (Bent-Goodly, 2015). The extended family serves as a powerful resource for mutual aid that supports marriage, either through providing respite care, sharing examples of how to sustain a marriage, or by reinforcing the importance of marriage in the black community (Taylor et al., 2016; Bent-Goodly, 2015). Moreover, the use of spirituality in maintaining relationships and persevering during difficult times is also a critical anchor for African American married couples (Bent-Goodly, 2015). Additionally,

Black couples gain strength from the fact that they seek guidance from their religions in resolving their routine problems. Spirituality plays a vital role in their lives, strengthening Black couples in the modern materialistic world. These strengths make Black relationships unique compared to other ethnic communities. Narrative therapists should highlight these strengths to encourage Black couples towards developing personal narratives based on them. Such a strategy would provide self-assurance to Black couples for addressing the relationship issues.

Black couples can use the strength of their family structures to resolve their relationship issues. Social inequality in the U.S prevents Black couples from getting well-paying employment positions hence both partners have to work for economic stability of the family, which usually results in troubled relationships due to lack of time (Raley et al., 2015). Similarly, poverty presents various other challenges, which are difficult to manage within a family. This situation emphatically points out at racial discrimination in the US society, which can be regarded as a barrier to intimate relationships among Black couples to have intimate relations. However, the African family structure allows elderly parents to look after the children of Black couples. This arrangement provides an opportunity for Black couples to spend with each other.

### **Black Relationships Representation on Social Media**

There is a lack of studies on intimacy in social networks particularly about romantic relationships among Black couples. The current study avails this opportunity to employ social media platforms to encourage Black couples to discuss their relationship issues without social constraints. These studies are usually not related to romantic and sexual relationships, but rather to social interactions occurring between friends of people who barely know each other (Sutcliffe et al., 2018; Khoshbak & Southcott, 2019). Still, these findings can be quite useful

for understanding the mechanisms underlying the perception of intimacy through social media. This study explores such themes through analyzing the responses of Black couples to help them understand their relationship issues.

The study by Sutcliffe et al (2018) is one of such studies focused on the association between intimacy in social relationships and activity in social media. The authors of this study emphasize that the findings of other authors prove the existence of an association between social media use and the degree of intimacy in relationships. In fact, previous studies have found that the intensity of social media use is related to the emotional closeness between people. At the same time, Sutcliffe et al. (2018) suggest that there are other studies that prove that there is no association between offline intimacy and social media use. The study has found that social satisfaction is correlated with the size of the total network an individual has. The more a person communicates via a social network, the higher his/her social satisfaction is (Sutcliffe et al., 2018). These findings show that online communication can improve the psychological well-being of individuals, and it is as important as offline communication.

Miguel (2013) suggests that social networking services (SNS) are even more effective for intimate communication than offline communication. Furthermore, SNS provide possibilities for new intimate interactions between people. Young people can use social media to flirt with each other, date, and even break up, without being noticed by their parents or peers. This encourages people to have more intimate relationships, without being afraid that someone would judge them. Furthermore, Black couples who already have relationships may use social networks to send intimate messages privately to each other or share them with their closest friends. Hence, certain information that was considered as private and too intimate for the public in the past, is now becoming socially acceptable. Social networks create an environment changing people's perception of intimacy and encouraging people to

share private information. Black couples may even share erotic images of each other with friends on the social network, and if these images are appropriate and aesthetically beautiful, then social media friends may enjoy such intimate information (Dobson & Knezevic, 2018). Miguel (2013) suggests that more and more people exhibit their intimacy via social networks because they believe that such openness is beneficial for their relationships. Some authors, including Miguel (2013) believe that it is necessary to distinguish between offline and online intimacy because they are different. In an online environment, people feel distanced and alienated from others. That is why it is easier for people to share their intimate information online than offline. Miguel (2013) and Steers et al. (2015) conclude that in the era of SNSs, the concept of intimacy has changed, and more people find SNSs more convenient for sharing intimate thoughts, emotions, images, and other information than by sharing everything offline.

Another study conducted by Miguel (2016) researched how adults perceive intimacy and social media, and how they use images to establish an intimate connection with others. Previous studies such as Miguel (2013) found that users often do not like the excessive expression of intimacy on social networks, such as sex-related posts. Miguel interviewed participants who shared their ideas of what images can be considered intimate on social networks. The study found that the most intimate topics for the participants are sexual orientation, relationship status, and sexy pictures (Miguel, 2016). However, it was also found that context plays an important role, and in some social networks such as Badoo, sexy selfies and other sexy photos are considered appropriate and acceptable. Furthermore, the participants noted that they allow their partners to share various intimate pictures, such as photos of kissing, however only when such photos can be seen by people located within the so-called intimate circle. Hence, there can be several levels of intimacy identified within

social networks. Black couples may also share highly intimate messages and photos only with each other, less intimate with intimate circles of friends, and the least intimate with all users on a social network.

The study by Hand et al (2013) is also directly related to the topic of intimacy and romantic relationships. The authors examined how the time spent on social networks affects a couple's intimacy. They found that there is no connection between the use of social media and the intimacy existing between partners. Social networks do not increase or decrease intimacy, but rather they act as a means of communication where people can maintain romantic relationships and existing intimacy. The authors noted a negative association between perceived partner's usage of SNS and intimacy. It is possible that if the partner uses social networks for relatively long periods, another partner may become anxious and irritated by this behavior. Still, the study shows that there were no negative effects in using social networks for Black couples and their intimate relations did not suffer.

The findings of the study by Papp et al (2012) are also quite interesting and provide insights into intimate relationships between people and manifestations of these relationships on Facebook. The authors of this study noted that romantic partners usually demonstrate similar characteristics, including leisure activities and health behaviors. This is because people look for partners with whom they are able to establish satisfying relationships (Papp et al., 2012). Individuals are interested in reducing stress as much as possible and finding partners with similar traits and habits is a great way to prevent stressful situations. They hypothesized that partners may also show similar behaviors on social networks. The findings of the study confirm that Facebook and social networks, in general, play an important role in dating partner's intimate relationships (Papp et al., 2012). For instance, dating partners often place photos together with their partners on social media. This behavior is common for both

males and females. Furthermore, such behaviors increase relationship satisfaction.

Contrariwise, Facebook disagreements occurring between partners may cause harm to their relationship. Nelson and Salawu (2017) and Boyle et al. (2018) reveal that social media can also erode intimacy. From these findings, the authors conclude that Facebook is related to intimacy between partners and can be used both to increase and to decrease intimacy. Still, it should be noted that participants of the study were dating partners who were never married. Therefore, these results cannot be generalized with people having long-term relationships or living in a marriage.

Campbell and Murray (2015) also confirm the importance of Facebook in intimate relationships. The authors acknowledge that technology use can have both a positive and negative effect on a couple's relationship. Couples at a distance may find SNS quite useful for maintaining warm relationships and talking to each other (Hampton et al., 2017; Döring & Dietmar, 2003; Pascoe, 2013; Lee et al, 2019). In addition, couples may use SNS conjointly and watch some videos on SNS, which contributes to the creation of intimate moments, such as crying, laughing, and physical touch (Campbell & Murray, 2015). Furthermore, using messenger provides couples with greater privacy compared to phone calls. Couples may write deeply intimate things to each other, which they are unable to share by phone. In fact, a study by Coyne et al (2011) found that 75% of messages sent by couples are used to communicate affection to one another. Hence, the main purpose why couples use social media is to maintain romantic relationships and empathetic connections, with the help of compliments and other positive intimate messages. Campbell and Murray (2015) emphasize that some previous studies indicate that couples using interactive technologies to communicate with each other show a better emotional connection. Moreover, people suffering from social anxiety may find social networks more comfortable in establishing intimate relationships

with others. As for negative implications, Campbell and Murray (2015) agree that when partners use social networks for individual fulfillment, instead of spending time with each other, their relationships may suffer. Additionally, time partners spend on social networks decreases the time they spend on offline relationships. The lack of nonverbal communication may result in misunderstandings and other problems, which can undermine intimacy. Still, Campbell and Murray (2015) emphasize the importance of characteristics of each couple, because they are directly related to social network usage patterns. Couples in long-term relationships and those who are married use social networks less, compared to couples in short-term relationships. Moreover, married people and couples in long-term relationships are more likely to communicate affection while using SNS (Campbell & Murray, 2015). Age is another factor related to the time people spend on using SNS. Younger couples tend to spend more time online, while older couples use SNS less frequently.

Campbell and Murray (2015) describe the framework developed to understand how technologies are used by couples and in family life. This framework was initially developed by Hertlein and Blumer (2014). The Couple and Family Technology Framework (CFT Framework) consists of three main domains, which are family ecology, structural-functional, and interaction-constructionist. According to the CFT framework, structural-functional changes within couples occur because of the environment. Technologies significantly change and modify the environment, which leads to a change of boundaries, rules, and interactions within relationships (Campbell & Murray). Furthermore, technologies change the perception of intimacy. CFT framework emphasizes that it is possible to maintain intimacy and make it even better through technology use. At the same time, the CFT framework acknowledges that intimacy can be harmed if SNSs and technologies, in general, are used inappropriately.



As can be seen, findings of the vast majority of studies discussed above are quite similar and prove that social networks play a huge role in establishing an intimate connection between partners. It is interesting that online intimacy can be divided into several circles. The first circle is related to deeply intimate messages, photos, and videos shared by a couple with each other privately. For instance, such messages can be sexual and even pornographic. The second circle of intimacy refers to intimate messages and photos that can be shared with the closest friends. People not included in the couple's intimate circle can consider such manifestations of intimacy inappropriate. For instance, a couple may disclose intimate information related to their relationships or publish erotic pictures. Finally, the couple may express intimacy by sharing certain intimate pictures with everyone on the social network. Partners may publish a photo of hugging or kissing each other or may publicly tell about their romantic relationships. This proves that intimacy significantly varies depending on messages conveyed by couples, and on the access, others have towards these messages. The more people have access to a certain message, the less intimate it is. However, there are exceptions, when highly intimate messages are shared publicly, which can be considered by others inappropriate and result in a negative attitude towards the person who published such an intimate message.

### **Characteristics of Black Couples**

Contemporary researchers such as Wilkins et al. (2013) argue that traumatic effects of slavery are still present in the contemporary generation of African Americans. However, Black couples are generally less inclined to utilize therapeutic services for addressing their trauma. This fact is supported by statistical evidence suggesting that African American people are less likely to receive mental health care than their White counterparts (Wilkins et al, 2013). Thus, the roots of issues in romantic relations among Black couples lie in the long

history of slavery, which has a negative influence on the personal character of members of this ethnic group. This information can guide narrative therapists to encourage Black couples to share their stories in the historical context to explore the impact of racism on their relationships. Focusing on the history of enslavement and oppression can help Black couples analyze relationship issues in a completely different perspective. This strategy can be used to explore the reasons behind their family problems.

According to Hardy (2013), Black youths suffer from race-related trauma wounds, which need to be treated in order to restore their self-respect. Moreover, extensive studies on impact of slavery have diminished the social status of Black people, which has encouraged people to disregard their problems in romantic relationships (Wilkins et al., 2013; McGoldrick & Hardy, 2019). The contemporary trend of racism and segregation has also contributed to discouraging scholars to study this marginalized group regarding intimacy (Wilkins et al., 2013). These studies suggest that historic and social trauma influence Black couple relationships for making them unique. Hence, using social networks for helping Black couples develop strong intimate relationships, which may prevent divorce and result in a stronger empathetic connection. Black couples may require more complex support and treatment by a psychotherapist to address their social and historical context of slavery. That is why it is essential to develop new treatment strategies and approaches aligned with the needs of this ethnic group.

Additionally, analysis of family structure within different communities living in the US can also be helpful for revealing the difference between Black population and other ethnicities. While majority of white children live at least with one of their biological parents, only one-third of black children live with their family (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). Moreover, studies suggest that black women marriage rates are relatively lower than white

women, whereas divorce rates are higher within this community (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). Although racial and ethnic differences were the main reason behind unstable marriages for black women in the past, the recent trend does not follow the historic patterns. Raley, Sweeney, and Wondra (2015) contend that economic disparities are the main reason for non-durable family structure among Black couples. Hardy (2019) tries to explore the problems of African American couples through narrative therapy. Narrative therapists should employ this knowledge to help Black couples resolve their relationship issues. Moreover, Black couples can be encouraged to share their relationship stories on social media to safeguard their identity. Hence, the historical and existing facts can be combined to understand the problems of Black couples for exploring viable solution.

Pinderhughes (2002) seeks to explain why Black couples have problems in maintaining long-term relationships and what factors negatively influence Black marriages. The author argues that there are serious threats connected to intimacy within Black relationships influenced by historical context, and the role of Black people in the modern society. Due to the social roles of African Americans shaped by historical contexts, this ethnic group often experiences anger and frustration. Centuries of discrimination and oppression resulted in various cultural patterns, such as extreme isolation, which is especially widespread among Black males (Pinderhughes, 2002). The factors of historic enslavement and racial discrimination discourage them from engaging in marital relationships, which result in a low number of marriages among Black community (Hurt, McElroy, Sheats, Landor, & Bryant, 2014). However, in intimate relationships partners should share their vulnerabilities to each other. As a result, males often show too much power within relationships to compensate for the existing social injustice (Pinderhughes, 2002). Thus, it can be quite challenging for Black people to use self-disclosure and other strategies essential

for the establishment of deeply intimate and trustful relationships. This explains why Black couples have significantly higher divorce rates, and why there is a decline in marriage rates among Black couples. Pinderhughes (2002) concludes that therapists should be highly attentive to the historic background of enslavement while working with a Black couple and be aware of various issues resulting in intimacy problems.

Long history of enslavement and oppression has a negative impact on the durability of Black couple relationships. It can be contended that slavery and racism has resulted in skepticism within the Black community, which is the cause of the low number of Black marriages and increased number of divorce (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). This negative attitude results in mistrust within Black couple relationships. This mistrust is further aggravated by the inability to express intimate feelings in an offline environment. Such circumstances encourage Black males to engage in interracial marriages (Killian, 2013). Narrative therapists should incorporate social media for encouraging Black couples to share such weaknesses and retell their stories from their personal perspectives so as to highlight their strengths for rebuilding their relationships on strong foundations. Overcoming social and historical trauma can help Black couples to explore their strengths and make their relationships long-lasting.

Black couples, specifically, Black males also face economic issues due to discrimination. The impact of racism discourages Black youth from studying in reputed educational institutes, which have direct implications on their chances of employment. The economic constraints compel Black males to be involved in illegal activities such as drugs and violence resulting in overwhelming incarceration rates. The rates of Black incarcerations are much higher than that associated with Whites, which can be attributed to the legacy of racism and prejudice (Rosenberg, Groves, & Blankenship, 2017). Studies suggest that almost

half of the arrested offenders in 2011 were Blacks (Rosenberg, Groves, & Blankenship, 2017). These statistics clearly reflect racial bias in the US society, which has also influenced the criminal justice system. Such negative social attitude towards the marginalized community effectively changes the behavior of Black males. Current policing practices such as racial profiling help promote negative stereotyping of Black people among the general public (Rosenberg, Groves, & Blankenship, 2017). Thus, current public behavior towards this ethnic minority is the extension of centuries old societal and historical trauma, which portrays Blacks as criminals and violent individuals.

Unfortunately, the rise of hip hop and rap music has associated sexism, drug use, and other social evils with Black people. This music scene is dominated by Black rappers who rose from low income areas (Premier Addiction Treatment Center for Men & women, 2018). These areas are epicenters of crime and hustling activity and people of these localities consider it positive to use drugs. Thus, rap music mostly associated with Black community glorifies drugs and violence. It is noted that about 11% of rap songs produced from 1979 to 1984 contained positive references to drugs, which increased to 19% by the late 1980s (Premier Addiction Treatment Center for Men & women, 2018). Although White rappers are also promoting these things, the prevailing racism in the US society attributed this behavior only to Black youths. This unjustified association also impacted the Black community as most of the young Black males consider violence as the manifestation of their masculinity.

Such a negative behavior from Black youth has a direct impact on their relationships. Black males try to subjugate their partners in relationships, which results in negative consequences such as divorce. Researchers such as Davey and Watson (2008) argue that such behavior of Black males can be recognized as exhibitions of post-traumatic stress, which gives rise to the feelings of inferiority and oppression. These negative feelings result in

disturbed romantic relationships among Black couples. Thus, Black couple characteristic of gender inequality also explains the unique nature of Black relationships. These feelings confirm the findings of researchers who claim that Black females are less inclined to marry due to indifferent and aggressive attitude of Black males (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). Hence, the traumatic influence of racial discrimination compels Black males to develop certain personalities that negatively influence the durability of their relationships.

Apparently, studies on Black couples' relationships are focused predominantly on various issues caused by historical, cultural, and other factors (Killian, 2016). The studies emphasize high divorce rates and low marriage rates among Black people due to various historical and current social and economic factors (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). Social media can serve as an effective platform for Black couples to share their stories anonymously to help therapists understand their specific issues. The technique of Narrative therapy can help Black couples focus on the subjugated voice to provide firsthand knowledge about their relationship issues. However, researchers have yet to conduct studies on the role of social media in the intimate relationships of Black people, thus there is a gap in literature that needs to be filled. Thus, current study applies all previous knowledge and designs a questionnaire that seeks Black couples' manifestation of emotional feelings through social media. The study explores social and cultural factors that prevent Black couples to express their feelings.

For instance, the study by Senn et al (2009) tried to identify how African American men's perception of power influences their intimate relationships. The study found that there is a negative correlation between perception of power by Black men and intimacy. It was found that the perception of power is related to the number of financial resources invested in relationships. Hence, Black men who invest significantly more financial resources than women are likely to have high perceived power. It may result in increased sexual risk

behaviors and sexual contacts outside of relationships. Still, these findings are not surprising and are likely to be generalized over other cultural and ethnic groups.

### **Research Question**

The following research question has been taken to guide this study:

RQ How do Black people filter their love stories through the use of social media for developing their couple narratives?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The above literature shows that there is a gap in the literature regarding the exploration of Black couples' use of social media for conveying their intimate stories. Although this ethnic group has been the focus of attention for many scholars, their online behavior regarding the use of social media needs further research. Nevertheless, studies do show that the role of social media in romantic relationships is significant, and these platforms are changing modern communication, including communication between people who are in love or who are married (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). It can be suggested to use social media in psychotherapy to help people share their intimate relationship stories related to lack of intimacy and feeling of closeness (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). It can be quite difficult for Black people to disclose their emotions and feelings to each other as this can increase their vulnerability. Social networks provide Black people with an environment where they are able to convey intimate messages and foster romantic relationships. That is why finding out how Black people share their love stories through social networks can be useful for marriage and family therapists to better understand Black couples' relationships. Therefore, my study focuses on this topic.

Black people are one of the most widespread ethnical groups in the U.S. This group is highly influenced by stereotypes, as well as any other ethnical groups, that is why there are

many biases related to Black people and lack of objective information. Hence, there is still a lack of information regarding the subjective experiences of Black individuals. In general, the vast majority of studies on Black people and intimacy are focused predominantly on interracial relations and intimacy within them. In other studies, researchers have focused on certain narrow aspects related to intimate relations, such as power (Senn et al., 2009; Lee, 2017). There are relatively fewer studies explaining how people and particularly Black people perceive intimacy through social media.

The purpose of the study is to explore Black people's subjective opinions on various aspects of online intimacy through interviews and gain insight into how Black people perceive intimacy through the use of social media. The study is explorative in nature and uses qualitative grounded theory design, in order to create a theory explaining why Black people have certain perceptions of intimacy and how social media helps them to establish intimate relations.

This study seeks to fulfill several major goals. First, it contributes to scientific knowledge by filling the gap in the literature and initiating discussion on how Black people perceive intimacy in social media. Second, it derives a theory from qualitative data obtained directly from the participants to understand the concept of intimacy better, as well as how Black people understand this concept, and how their understanding may be different from other ethnical groups. The study provides a better understanding of the differences of perception in intimacy between Black men and Black women, because the male and female perception of intimacy is different (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). Finally, this study provides insights that can be applied to marriage and family therapy to support Black couples' needs.



### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it aligns with the research questions as well as with the purpose of the study. Qualitative research is based on the constructivist paradigm and emphasizes the importance of direct observations and opinions of participants as the main source of data (Kuper et al., 2008). A constructivist paradigm claims that it is impossible to find an objective truth because every person is biased and the way people perceive the world is limited. Constructivists argue that research should be conducted through observation and interpretation of subjective experiences. It is needed to ask the subjective opinion of people to find the truth and answer the research question. On the contrary, according to the paradigm of realism, there is an objective truth, and it can be established by using quantitative methods and statistical analysis. Thus, while a quantitative research design is used to answer questions “what?”, and “how much,” qualitative studies answer the questions “why?” and “how?.” In general, qualitative research is often exploratory in nature. It seeks to develop various theories, concepts, and models that can serve as a basis for future research. In qualitative research, data is obtained directly from the participants belonging to the population of interest.

In this study, the researcher has chosen a grounded theory qualitative design. This design focuses on generating theory from qualitative data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). A grounded theory approach allows for analyzing, organizing, and interpreting data, which makes the research process easier. After collecting the data, reviewing literature, codifying, and interpreting the data, the researcher creates a theory, which provides a detailed explanation regarding the phenomenon of interest. This approach is suitable for answering different kinds of questions and studying various topics, including interpersonal relations, individual processes, personal experience, motivation, emotions, and intimacy (Charmaz &

Belgrave, 2007). Grounded theory does not impose limits on what data can be chosen for analysis. The researcher is free to choose among different available sources of qualitative data.

Grounded theory process begins with data collection from different sources, including observations, field notes, interviews, literature, etc. The primary sources for this research were in-depth qualitative interviews. It should be noted that interviews are used when the research topic is rather broad and when open-ended questions are asked in order to obtain detailed answers.

There are several major types of interviews, such as structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Structured interviews have predetermined questions with no additional follow-up questions (Gill et al., 2008). These interviews can be conducted quite fast; however, they cannot provide in-depth information regarding the phenomenon. Such interviews also have many close-ended questions, which can be answered only with one word or phrase. Unstructured interviews are performed with little or no organization (Gill et al., 2008). While designing unstructured interviews, the researcher may use one or two questions related to the purpose of the study and may ask additional questions during the interview process. Unfortunately, such interviews provide quite subjective results and qualitative data of low quality. Interviewees may provide broad answers that are not related to the topic of interest, and the researcher may have to spend much time analyzing and interpreting such interviews. As for semi-structured interviews, they combine previously described types and are highly effective for obtaining relatively organized and highly informative data. Thus, this research used semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions.

One of the central concepts related to the quality of data acquired with interviews is data saturation. The researcher must acquire enough interviews to achieve data saturation;

otherwise, there can be certain threats to the validity and objectivity of the results (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Usually, qualitative studies use about 10-20 interviews to achieve data saturation. However, the number of interviews required for data saturation may significantly vary because of the answers provided by the participants, as well as the purpose of the study. If the research question is too broad, the researcher may need to conduct more interviews.

Questions were also asked before the interview to obtain information regarding demographic variables. These questions were related to socioeconomic status (SES) of the participants, their age, sexual orientation, gender, and some other additional information. Hence, by combining both these sources of qualitative data the researcher was able to answer the research question. It was essential to gather as much data about participants as possible, because their perceptions of intimacy may vary and may be influenced by factors such as age and socioeconomic status.

### **Research Questions**

The list of the research questions guiding this study:

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RQ How do Black people filter their love stories using social media for developing their couple narratives?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think makes your story unique among Black couples?</li> <li>2. How has social media impacted your relationship?</li> <li>3. What interactions via social media do you have with your partner?</li> </ol>
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- RQ How do Black people filter their love stories using social media for developing their couple narratives?
1. How do other people perceive the online intimacy of Black couples?
  2. Tell me about the advantages of online intimate communication?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Black couples* are heterosexual or homosexual couples where both partners are African Americans. *Intimacy* is closeness existing in relationships between two persons, which consists of commitment and positive affective, cognitive, and physical closeness one experiences with a partner in a reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) relationship (Moss & Schwebel, 1993, p. 33).

*Social media* also referred to as social network services (SNS), are web-based services allowing individuals to create a public or private profile located within a bounded system, have a list of users with whom they are connected, and communicate with other users of social platforms by using audio, video, textual, and voice messages (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 2).

### **Qualitative Grounded Theory**

A qualitative grounded theory design was used to answer the research questions since exploratory studies are conventionally conducted through qualitative research. In every study, researchers have to choose among qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research design. The research design depends on the purpose of the study and the research question.

Qualitative studies are used to derive a theory or explore the phenomenon, especially if there is a lack of information regarding the phenomenon. Qualitative researchers conduct their studies in order to understand the multiple realities of each participant (Lewis, 2015), which is why interviews are often used as the main data collection method. Through interviews, participants are able to provide their subjective feelings, emotions, and interpretations related to the phenomenon.

### **Recruitment**

The population of interest comprises of are Black individuals who are married or who have been dating each for 3 or more years. There is no accurate information regarding the total number of individuals in this population, however, according to U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1 Year-Estimates there are 41.393,491 Black or African American people living in the U.S. About 10 million Black people are currently married, and about 90% of Black people have a spouse of the same race/ethnicity. Moreover, many Black couples live out of marriage as about 30% of African American women have never been married (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). It can be concluded that the target population ranges from 15 million to 25 million Black people. Hence, the population is rather huge.

There are several sampling strategies that were used in this research. The sampling strategy used depends on the purpose of the study, design, and other factors. This study used snowball sampling because the technique provides an opportunity to select volunteers more easily than other methods. As the topic of study is not encouraging for the Black couples to voluntarily share their stories, the researcher explored acquaintances of the initial recruits to complete the required number of participants. Purposeful sampling is considered as quite subjective and can significantly increase the validity of the qualitative study; it is also quite

widespread in qualitative studies (Painkas et al., 2015). Moreover, snowball sampling has several major advantages over other sampling strategies. First, it allows researchers to use specific inclusion criteria, which ensures that the participants chosen to provide highly-saturated information regarding the phenomenon of interest. Second, this sampling method is relatively simple. Finally, it is perfectly suitable for exploratory research. It should also be noted, that due to the specifics of the research, it was necessary to recruit participants who understand what intimacy means and how intimate relationships are established. That is why participants needed to have the experience of long-term relationships as identified in the demographic questions.

Qualitative data can be interpreted differently and is saturated with details and subjective descriptions of individuals. In this study, the researcher recruited 6 Black couples in order to ensure that data saturation is achieved (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Procedures**

Participants were recruited and the interviews were conducted. The information regarding the inclusion criteria is provided. Issues related to the protection of participants and ethics, in general, are also discussed in this section. Challenges and barriers related to the recruitment process are also mentioned

### **Inclusion Criteria**

The participants were selected based on several inclusion criteria.

1. The duration of a relationship. Only those participants who have been in relationships for three and more years were included in the study.
2. Participant's age. English speaking participants of ages 25 and older were allowed to take part in this study. The researcher of this study was highly interested in married Black couples because this study is related to marriage and family therapy. Black

couples who have been in long-term relationships for 3 years or more and are not married were considered for recruitment as well.

3. The use of social media websites. Only those Black couples with a high presence on social media and have knowledge in this topic were recruited. It is necessary to note that participants took part in the study voluntarily.
4. Participants have to be regular users of social media.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

1. Unmarried Black couples who have been in relationships for less than 3 years.
2. Participants who are unable to read and write in English.
3. Participants who do not use Facebook or Instagram as main social networking websites were also excluded.

The researcher searched for participants via Facebook. Facebook provides powerful instruments for advertising and marketing. It allows choosing the target audience by using various parameters, such as age, geographic location, interests, and gender. By using the Facebook Ads Manager, it is possible to search for Black people in relationships and to obtain their contacts. Facebook allows the use of lead-forms where potential participants of the study leave their phone numbers and emails. This recruitment strategy has been used in various studies. For instance, Ramo et al (2014) placed 36 ads to find the participants. Six Black couples were recruited in total. Hence, the researcher spent \$20-\$40 for ads to recruit all the participants. Moreover, such a method allows recruiting people who are actively using Facebook, which was essential for this study.

After obtaining applications, the researcher contacted every participant and conducted a brief interview by phone, to ensure that the participants met the inclusion criteria. 6 Black couples were selected for the study and interviewed separately as 12 individuals. Further, the

researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants. If participants were unable to have face-to-face interviews, the researcher conducted interviews by using Skype or other applications for online video encrypted communication.

### **Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations**

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) Code of Ethics was used to conduct the study. According to the AAMFT Code of Ethics (2015), researchers must honor the public trust in marriage therapists. They should use non-discriminatory practices while conducting a study to avoid bias. An Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Nova Southeastern University approval was obtained to conduct this study. All requirements related to confidentiality, non-maleficence, privacy, and other ethical principles were followed. Researchers are responsible for protecting personal information and ensuring the confidentiality of data. Each participant and each couple were assigned a unique ID. There were six Black couples in total taking part in this study. Hence, these couples were numbered from 1 to 6 etc., and each participant within the couple was assigned a unique label such as “1M” for male, and “1F” for female. Similar IDs were assigned to all other participants. Furthermore, every participant was asked to sign the informed consent form (Appendix E). This form was sent to each participant via email. The researcher ensured that all the participants take part in this research voluntary and are fully aware of all the important aspects of the research. According to the principle of non-maleficence, practitioners should never cause harm to individuals. The researcher did not provide any incentives to the participants, which also improves the objectivity of the results. The main concern of the researcher was related to the privacy of personal information provided by each participant. That was why all the required protective procedures such as data encryption were done, in order to ensure sufficient privacy and prevent data leaks.



This form provides an explanation of the purpose of the study, data protection, methodology, and procedures. All participants were informed about all the potential risks as well as benefits of this research. They were informed about potential issues related to confidentiality, time needed to participate, and the importance of providing honest answers. Additionally, participants were informed regarding the importance of their contribution to the field of marriage and family therapy. Participants were allowed to take part in the study after signing the informed consent forms (Appendix E). Each interview was audio-recorded, and each audio record was protected by a password. The researcher saved all records on a personal notebook protected by a password and retained for at least 36 months in a private locked office.

### **Data Collection**

Except for some demographic data obtained from the participants, the main type of data collected in this study was narrative data. This data type was obtained through the narratives of the participants, via interviews with open-ended questions. The research questions were answered with the help of semi-structured interviews and questions created by the researcher. For instance, to better understand how Black people perceive intimacy through social media, the researcher asked:

1. What interactions via social media do you have with your partner?
2. What do you think makes your story unique among Black couples?
3. How has social media impacted your relationship?

All participants were contacted via emails or via phones gathered through Facebook. The emails sent by the researcher contained brief information about the study. The interviews were conducted either by using Skype, or face-to-face. Before starting each interview, the researcher provided information regarding the course of the interview and that interviews

were being audio recorded. The researcher also stated that every participant had the right to leave the interview at any time. Additionally, participants were asked to answer questions honestly, and to ask the researcher in case any question was unclear. Each participant was interviewed separately to obtain the information regarding the differences in perception of intimacy between Black male participants and Black female participants.

### **Data Analysis**

After obtaining the audio-recorded data, the researcher transcribed all interviews. The researcher did not add or change anything said by the participants. In addition, the researcher used the interview transcript review technique also called Member Checking and sent all the transcripts to each participant to ensure the information was accurate and complete. The reliability and credibility of findings was established through the qualitative research technique involved in member checking. This strategy allows study participants to review summary of the findings to ensure its trustworthiness and accuracy. This technique positively influences the trustworthiness of the study. All audio recordings were stored according to IRB requirements, which require that they be kept for 36 months from the end of the study. After all participants had reviewed their transcripts, the researcher began the qualitative coding procedure. The qualitative coding was conducted using NVivo software.

### **Coding**

After conducting the interviews, the researcher created transcripts based on audio recordings. The transcripts were saved in a textual and electronic format. To analyze and interpret the transcripts, the researcher used constant comparison and qualitative coding. This qualitative data analysis method is widely used in qualitative studies, and it perfectly aligns with the grounded theory (Saldana, 2015).

Constant comparison is a method that focuses on developing a theory that is grounded in data (Boeije, 2002). This method allows the researcher to compare qualitative data relevant to the research question and modify it if needed. Every piece of data relevant to the research must be compared with all other pieces in order to increase the internal validity and trustworthiness of the results. Additionally, a constant comparison method is highly effective for identifying when data saturation is achieved. In fact, there are no specific recommendations on how the constant comparison should be done, and what techniques should be used (Boeije, 2002). In the context of the current study, a constant comparison method was used to compare the interviews of partners in romantic relationships, answers of different Black couples taking part in this study, codes, categories, and themes. The researcher constantly compared chunks of qualitative data in order to develop a theory explaining the online intimacy of Black couples.

Qualitative coding begins with the open coding phase, also known as initial coding (Saldana, 2015). During this phase, the researcher read the transcripts several times and identifies codes that can be assigned to certain chunks of textual information. Codes usually consist of one or several words and capture the meaning of what participants were trying to tell. The coding process is done either manually or by using qualitative coding software, such as NVivo. Software used for qualitative data analysis is called Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) (Rademaker, Grace, & Curda, 2012). Such software is designed specifically for researchers and scientists and has all the functions needed for qualitative data analysis. This software makes the coding process faster and easier and allows visualizing the results of the analysis, as well as provides detailed statistics on the most and least used codes. NVivo makes navigation through transcripts easier and saves resources that

can be used to make the study better. This software was used to categorize all the sources, so any transcript or survey can be accessed within one or two clicks.

The initial coding phase is one of the most time-consuming stages because the researcher has to constantly read and reread textual information until all codes are assigned and all textual data is coded. Usually, the researchers use line-by-line coding, meaning that each line of the text is coded and not just separate pieces (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). This method helps to avoid bias and ensures that all data is coded. Blair (2015) identifies two major approaches to coding. The first approach is using codes that were created beforehand, and the second approach is to assign codes by interpreting what was written. Obviously, using codes that were created before does not align with the grounded theory approach and purpose of the study in general. Thus, the researcher used line-by-line coding.

After conducting the initial coding, the researcher makes an axial coding. During this coding phase, the researcher analyzes codes acquired and combines them into various categories. Some codes can be removed, if they are similar to each other, or can be revised (Saldana, 2015, p. 218). The researcher may also create sub-categories to make data more organized and structured. This stage is transitional between Initial Coding and Theoretical Coding. In some cases, axial coding can be done several times, because in qualitative coding the researcher constantly moves back and forward, adds and modifies qualitative information, to ensure it aligns with the purpose of the study.

The next stage is the Theoretical Coding, also referred to as Selective Coding. It begins with identifying the “core category” which is related to all the codes and categories that were identified during the previous two phases. Sometimes defining the core category can be rather challenging, and that is why this process is quite time-consuming. Further, the core category can be used to create a theory, or modify existing theories, which is also

appropriate in grounded theory research. There is no need to create a new theory if previous theories can be modified or improved.

Similarly, to previous coding stages, the researcher modified categories, sub-categories, and codes to ensure that the core theme would directly related to them. Finally, to create a theory the researcher uses core category and additional data, such as analytic memos and previous theories. As a result, a theory, which provides a detailed answer to the research question, is created. After a theory is created the researcher can initiate a discussion and interpret findings through the lens of the created theory (Saldana, 2015).

### **Instruments**

In this section, all the instruments used during the data collection and analysis processes are described. Besides the instruments described below, the researcher used a smartphone to record the interviews, and Microsoft Office to manage and edit data, including personal notes that are taken during the research.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The researcher is a central figure in the qualitative research process and the quality of the interpretations and analysis depends on the researcher. In most qualitative studies, the researcher is considered as a part of the research instrument (Houghton et al., 2013). This is because of the constructivist philosophical orientation, which guides the qualitative process. Though the researcher uses various strategies to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, the subjective opinion of the researcher still plays a crucial role while interpreting the data and creating a theory. The credibility of the study heavily depends on the procedures used by the researcher, as well as the researcher's self-awareness (Houghton et al., 2013).

All participants taking part in this study were not involved in multiple relationships with the researcher and did not have any contacts with the researcher before the recruitment process. The data was collected with the help of semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face or via Skype. The researcher used self-awareness through the course of the research to minimize potential bias or prejudice.

### **Summary**

This research is based on a qualitative grounded theory methodology. The purpose of this research was to answer the following research questions: “How do Black people share their love stories through the use of social media?” and “How is intimacy achieved through the use of social media?” Scientific literature has yet to provide a meaningful understanding of online intimacy of Black couples; therefore, there is a need to conduct an explorative study. It means that this study gains initial insights into intimate online interactions occurring between Black people in relatively long-term relationships. The findings and results are discussed in Chapters IV and V.

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS**

A description of the extant literature on the use of social media by black couples was presented in the previous chapters, followed by a description of the methods used to conduct the study. In this chapter, the various themes that are instrumental in understanding the practices of black couples in developing their couple narratives through social media are described. The following research question was used to guide the study and the development of themes to achieve the objective of this research;

1. RQ: How do Black people filter their love stories through social media to develop their couple narratives?

For this study, 6 Black couples were selected, and each of the 12 individuals was interviewed separately. Even though the option of conducting face-to-face interviews was preferred, some interviews were carried out through online platforms, such as Skype. This study's participants were selected based on strict inclusion criteria, particularly the relationship length and participants' age and use of social media websites. Facebook provided an excellent opportunity for the researcher to search for appropriate participants to meet the specified inclusion criteria.

### **Steps to Developing the Themes**

The process of developing the themes of the qualitative study was initiated by clarifying the study objective. The thematicization process derives from the coding process described in the last chapter. The first step in developing themes for thematic analysis is familiarization. In this first step, a preliminary review of the collected data was carried out to understand the essential content and know the data (Caulfield, 2020). The approaches taken included transcribing audio records, making initial notes, and reading the literature review text.

The second stage in the thematicization process was the coding process. Coding, in this context, refers to the identification of common descriptors of content and collating data into groups based on the codes assigned to each (Caulfield, 2020). The coding process is described in more detail in the methods section because it is the most extensive and intensive part of the thematicization process. Afterward, the themes are generated from the codes. A combination of deductive and inductive approaches to theme development was used to develop the appropriate themes for the study. The deductive approach entails collecting data and allowing the data contents to determine what the themes are depending on the presenting patterns. On the other hand, the inductive approach entails beginning the thematic analysis process with preconceived ideas of what themes to use (Caulfield, 2020). Given that the study was grounded theory-based, preconceived notions from the literature review were available at the start of the thematic analysis process. At the same time, the use of the narrative therapy approach implied that the range of concepts to be presented from participants' stories was not predetermined; hence additional themes and categories were picked from the stories. Table 1 below gives an overview of the different themes and categories developed for this study as used in this study. All the themes and categories are structured with the objective of answering the research question namely, **how do Black people filter their love stories through social media to develop their couple narratives?** The overriding theme found in this study was sharing love stories to the world via social media. Table 1 below gives a summary of the themes and categories obtained from the interview responses with regards to this research question.



*Table 1: Themes and Categories in the Study*

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Positive aspects of Black Couples sharing their story on social media	Interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance
	Community support is shared for the relationship
	Shared positive stories counteract negative existing dominant discourse
Negative aspects of Black Couples sharing their story on social media	Couples report a fear of possible judgment
	Public sharing can diminish private intimacy

### **Major Themes in the Study**

#### **Positive Aspects of Black Couples Sharing their Love Stories via Social Media**

Social media interactions promote various positive outcomes among black couples sharing their love stories. Findings from the participants yield interesting data in this research. With regards to this category, the findings from the participants' responses revealed various themes. The themes also define some of the positive features of both social media and black relationships and provide detailed information regarding how social media impacts black relationships. The themes address discussions on interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance; community support is shared for the relationship; and shared positive stories counteracting existing dominant discourse.

#### ***Interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance***

From the responses of some of the participants, interactions with the wider community and with loved ones via social media are unbounded by geographical distance. Some of the participants mentioned communicating with their loved ones regardless of their

geographical locations, hence confirming the possibility of interactions unbounded by geographical distance. Their responses indicate that social media platforms allow for unbound communication, improving interactions in the relationship. For instance, FQ5 mentioned that,

*“For people having relationships on a distance, online communication is perfect for keeping intimacy;”*

while FQ2 reported that,

*“I have frequent interactions with my partner online to let them know that I love them by putting hearts or loving statements on their page.”*

Similarly, MQ3 reported that;

*“So, some days we don’t even see each other, and Facebook or WhatsApp help us to communicate.”*

While FQ3 says;

*“ It makes it easier for us to communicate with each other when we are busy. Social media allows to still be connected to each other even though we are mile apart a while from each other.”*

FQ4 also agrees that;

*“My husband also likes when we interact on social media. Especially, when he is in another state or country because of his work, we can enjoy each other mentally and emotionally with the help of social networks.”*

These responses confirm the role of social media in promoting geographically unbounded communication. From the evidence provided, it emerges that the role of social media in promoting geographically unbounded communications is appreciated by both male

and female participants. The responses came mostly from individuals who have been in long distance relationships.

***Community support is shared for the relationship***

Shared community support for black relationships emerged as a unique theme mentioned by only one participant. Community support is generally described as the assurance of oneness and unity in a relationship through comments and advice originating from family members as well as friends. As part of the recognition of community support as a factor contributing to the relationship uniqueness, MQ2 reported that:

*“Friends’ approval of our relationship makes us more excited to express our love and talk of intimate issues with much enthusiasm.”*

***Shared positive stories counteract negative existing dominant discourse***

Another partly emerging theme linked to black couples’ positive aspects using social media to share their love stories is that of shared positive stories which counteract existing dominant discourses. The theme is a partial one, as depicted by the responses of only some participants. Traditionally, the black community has been characterized with submerged voices due to the historical experiences of the communities. However, social media provides a diverse platform for all people. Therefore, its uncovering of privileged and submerged voices is certain and helps to uncover the submerged voices by eliminating barriers while counteracting the dominant voices on black relationships. To confirm these shared positive stories, MQ6 stated that social media has:

*“help to destroy masks Black people have to wear in real life. I think the main advantage is that they allow us to be weak when we needed. It is quite difficult to be strong all the time.”*

The comments from MQ1 describe the challenges as well as the perspectives portrayed by black couples.

*“Maybe for some Black people establishing intimate connection can be quite challenging, because of the conditions Black people live. Because of poverty and other challenges, many Black community members want to look stronger than they are.”*

Similarly, FQ1 describe the experiences of black couples as follows:

*“Black women often want to look stronger than they are in reality, and for some Black men it can create certain barriers towards true loving relationships”.*

Likewise, FQ6 reported that

*“they erase barriers existing between people, and make Black people show their true identities to each other.”*

These responses indicate that social media has triggered a transition from the traditionally submerged voices associated with black relationships to more privileged exhibitions. The fears around social expectations, poverty, and perceived weakness have resulted in the development of strong personalities and emphasis on portraying strength even if as a probable cover for expected weakness.

### **Negative Aspects of Black Couples Sharing their Love Stories through Social Media**

While many respondents support the positive aspects of black relationships, the negative aspects are less documented. From the interview responses, the major negative aspects that emerged included fear of possible judgment and the diminishing privacy as a result of social media publicity. Both of these themes were however only partially shared.

#### ***Couples report a fear of possible judgment***

From the interviews several couples reported facing fear of possible judgment either on social media or in offline relationships. For instance FQ4 stated that;

*“I think it can be rather challenging for Black women to find a good man. That is why many Black women have huge patience. So many relationships involving Black couples are not equal, and women often have to sacrifice their personal interests.”*

Additionally, FQ5 presents this fear of judgment by asserting that;

*“My partner does not like when I post pictures of us all the time, but I love it.”*

*“I have many female friends who want to look stronger than they are. It makes them quite masculine, and I believe it terrifies Black men.”*

MQ6 also exhibits this fear of judgment through the assertion;

*“It seems for me that Black people often have prejudices even to each other, because of trying to be hypocrite. This is because we are afraid of being criticized and fitting negative stereotypes that exist in society.”*

Additionally, FQ4 says that;

*“I am very careful not to put too much information on social media because people have tendency to use information that they learn about you against you”*

Most of these responses do not directly communicate fear of judgment in one way or the other. However, they portray reservations to engage in certain activities on social media as a result of the perceived public interpretations. Some of the responses indicate the fear by one partner and the indifference to judgment by another.

### ***Public sharing can diminish private intimacy***

Black couples face various challenges when using social media, which contribute to the negative outcomes of using social media by black couples to share love stories. The nature of social media nature to foster communication across a public platform is one of the

demerits of the platform that affects black couples. The public nature of such platforms inhibits their ability to support privacy even among couples. For instance, information respondent FQ1 indicates the disadvantage of exposing too much information about a relationship to the public.

1F: *“I am very selective the information that I put online. I don’t need everyone to know to know everything that happens in my relationship. Not everyone wants you to succeed in your relationship”*

Additionally, couples are increasingly finding it hard to trust each other on social media. Respondent MQ2 notes this observation, stating that:

*“I would say that it has created some mistrust in my relationship. My girl does not like when I like or comment on other female pictures. We have had a couple of arguments because of that”*

Respondent MQ3 also reported that;

*“There are certain things that I feel comfortable sharing and there are other things that I feel it is nobody business to know.”*

Likewise, MQ4 suggests that;

*“A lot more of the real the intimate messages, I just send to her directly as it is not appropriate to share with others.”*

Table 2 gives an overview of the findings obtained for answering the question: **how do Black people filter their love stories through social media to develop their couple narratives?** The findings are categorized into themes (as universal, partially shared, and unique themes) with their respective sub-themes, which also follow the same categorization patterns. From the table, it is evident that there are no universal themes in the findings; most of the themes are partially supported and only one is unique.

Table 2: Shared and Unique Sub-Themes Across Cases

	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Participants who expressed the theme</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Partly Shared Themes	Positive Aspects of black couples sharing their stories on social media	MQ3 FQ2 FQ3 FQ4 FQ5	Interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance
		MQ1 FQ1 MQ6 FQ6	Shared positive stories counteract negative existing dominant discourse
Unique theme		MQ2	Community support is shared for the relationship
Partly Shared Themes	Negative aspects of black couples sharing their stories via social media	FQ4 FQ5 MQ6	Couples report a fear of possible judgment
		FQ1 MQ2 MQ3 MQ4	Public sharing can diminish private intimacy

### Summary

The interviews aimed to examine the patterns of how black couples filter their love stories on social media. The themes were developed using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis process based on the grounded theory and narrative therapy focus of the research, respectively. The overriding theme was that of sharing love stories to the world via social media, which is described in more detail in 5 themes: Interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance, shared positive stories counteract dominant negative existing dominant discourse, and community support is shared for the relationship, couples report a fear of possible judgment and public sharing can diminish

private intimacy. Each of these themes is associated with participants' various responses, as described in this chapter and as summarized in Tables 1 and 2 above. In the next chapter, further discussion of the findings is presented.



## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Discussion**

The research question was answered based on five themes: Interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance, shared positive stories counteract dominant negative existing dominant discourse, community support is shared for the relationship, couples report a fear of possible judgment, and public sharing can diminish private intimacy. In this chapter, a discussion of the various study findings is presented. Additionally, the study's implications, research findings, study limitations, future research recommendations, and conclusion are provided. In discussing the study findings, an explanation of the links between previous literature on the subject and the current findings in this study is presented. Areas in which the findings and past research align and those in which they diverged are presented.

#### **Interactions with Wider Community are Unbounded by Geographical Distance**

One of the themes that was partially shared by various participants in this study was captured by the view that interactions with wider community are unbounded by geographical distance. Several participants mentioned that they used social media to discuss their relationships and that it brought them closer to one another. The role of social media was evident in relationships in which both partners had busy schedules or were located in different towns. The ability to use diverse means of communication made it possible for couples to connect regardless of the distance between them.

The findings from the interviews mirror those obtained from previous literature and presented in the literature review in various ways. Literature from authors such as Ramo et al. (2014), Campbell and Murray (2015), Steers et al. (2015), and Miguel (2016) confirmed the role of social media in long-distance relationships. Hampton et al. (2017), Lee et al. (2019),

and Doring and Dietmar (2003) also confirmed the usefulness of social media in long-distance relationships through the assertion that social media networks are useful in maintaining warm relationships through continuous conversations with each other. Ramo et al. (2014) and Pascoe (2013) show that social media is useful in overcoming differences in geographical locations and even in other features, such as gender differences during communication. Miguel (2016) emphasized the role of intimacy-at-a-distance which social media promotes by enabling couple to maintain intimate relationships even if they are not geographically close. Campbell and Murray (2015) also state that couple at a distance may find social media quite useful in maintaining warm relationship and communication. Based on the findings by Steers et al. (2015), sharing stories of love relationships can improve the quality of relationships by improving communication and feelings of closeness when not geographically close to each other. Consistent with the findings of this study, past studies also indicate that social media promotes communications that are unbounded by geographical locations.

### **Shared Positive Stories Counteracting Negative Existing Dominant Discourse**

The theme of shared positive stories counteracting negative existing dominant discourse represents perspectives on privileged and submerged voices among African American communities. Dobson and Knezevic (2018) and Lee (2017) observed that it is traditionally common for mainstream media to have black people as the target of negative stories, which result in a portrayal of exaggerated proportion of African Americans with societal vices and negative stereotypes that dominate public perceptions and images about them. Even though Dobson and Knezevic (2018) acknowledge that social media can also legitimize and reinforce stereotypical portrayals of race, the findings on this theme support the studies by Bent-Goodly (2015) showing that social media has been instrumental for black

couples to overcome the stereotypes and fears associated with their relationships and supersede the social barriers that have been constructed by social and historical experiences in the black community. Bent-Goodly (2015) notes the need for a discourse highlighting the good and challenges from historical and contemporary contexts to provide a more complete story of relationships and shift the negative stereotypes that characterize the ethnic group. Social media has been an essential resource for the development of couple narratives among black couples. The finding mirrors the observation by Lee (2017) stating how social media can undermine explicit and implicit bias in mainstream news and unite folks through self-identification and reclaiming of blackness. Besides using social media as a channel for communication, black couples have managed to communicate their insecurities, share their feelings regarding the challenges they face, and communicate their support for each other. However, judging from the participants' responses, there is no indication of barriers to openness related to blacks' historical experiences. Instead, reference is made to cultural predispositions barriers. The participants also mentioned social media's role in identifying similarities in attributes among people, which facilitates the development of effective relationships.

The findings on this theme reflect those from previous research, albeit to some extent, in the comprehension of historical influences on black couple relationships. Historical literature portrays blacks as having undergone racial oppression and abuse that influences their relationships with others, including people's choice to be connected to and the nature of conversations they have with other people (Morgan, 2000; Hardy, 2013). Research has painted a picture of black relationships as extensively influenced by such historical injustices and oppression and social media as a platform through which black couples can interact without any fear. Institutional racism is reported to have segregated the communities into

submerged and privileged voices since time immemorial (Gottman and Johnson, 2018). Due to their minority status and low socio-economic status relative to other communities in the US, earlier communications among black couples have been from the subjugated perspective. Moreover, black communities' historical experiences have discouraged the promotion of personal perspectives, which has limited the degree of openness among conventional black couples (Morgan, 2000). Thus, social media has been described as a platform for pushing discussions on racial violence and can be considered a facilitator of attention directed towards the submerged voices. Social media has also been used extensively in recent times as a platform for sharing personal narratives on relationships without fear (Gottman and Johnson, 2018). The narratives provided through the interviews confirm the role of social media in overcoming insecurities, social and cultural barriers, all of which can be linked to historical experiences and injustice. There is, however, no direct mention of issues of racism and segregation against black communities in the interviews; hence the existing literature diverges from the findings in this aspect.

Another concept in which there is a similarity between the present findings and those of previous literature is describing the characteristics of black couples. For instance, Narratives on survival, resilience, endurance through adversity, and persevering racial trauma have been used to explain the strengths associated with black couples (Hardy, 2013). This resilience and endurance are reflected through the recognition of strength and patience as core characteristics of black couples.

### **Community Support is Shared for the Relationship**

In describing the strengths of black couples' relationships, the findings show little connection with the role of the extended family and spirituality in black relationships. The responses from the interviews have quite a few mentions of the role of the family in

strengthening relationships, yet none of the participants mentioned spirituality. Hence, the dependence of black families on spiritual guidance for decision-making in marital and other family issues is unique in that it emerges only in previous literature.

The findings affirm the literature pointing at shared community support. The findings affirm the view by Khoshbak and Southcott (2019) that social media is pivotal to the lives of multiple individuals and to their personal and social relationships. Zhan et al. (2016) noted that the interactions that people make with those close to them on social media can make them have a favorable evaluation of their lives. From the previous literature, it has been found that the extended family has played a crucial role in strengthening marriages among Black couples (Martin & Martin, 2003). In past studies, the extended family is intricately linked to the concept of spirituality. Previous research has described the relationships of black couples to be unique due to their spirituality, the role of the extended family in the upbringing and strengthening the marital bond, preference for cohabitation relative to marriage, and various socio-economic and individual factors that influence interpersonal relationships (Martins & Martins, 2003). Extended family members are a crucial source of informal support to African Americans (Taylor et al., 2016). The networks of relatives that are characteristic of Black families also contribute to the effectiveness of maintaining religious and cultural ties that promote unity among Black couples (Hurt et al., 2014). Routine problems in life are resolved based on religious guidance in the context of the modern materialistic lifestyle (Bent-Goodly, 2015). This strength in spirituality and support from family also reinforces certain values that are important in sustaining strong relationships between black couples.

### **Couples Report a Fear of Possible Judgment**

On the concept of fears of judgment in the use of social media, the fears depicted through the narratives counteract the perception that black couples are continuously subject to historical influences. Instead, they depict the nature of social interactions in contemporary society, difficulties in trusting others, and intentional exhibition of strength where people would be perceived as weak, especially for women.

The finding on fears of judgment in the use of social media contradicts previous findings on the use of social media in sharing stories. For instance, social media has been shown to potentially encourage the externalization of oppressive and racial environments that characterize traditional communication among blacks (Combs and Freedman, 2012). Lee (2017) noted that social media forums provide a space for actively undermining attempts to oppress black bodies through heightened awareness. The concept of social media impacts is thus used to present first-hand perspectives into the benefits associated with social media interactions, such as expanding opportunities for conversations, which could not have been there without social media (Gottman and Johnson, 2018). Moreover, other findings show that black couples consider social media platforms the optimal solution to improving their bonding and communication without judgment (Coyne et al., 2011). It appears that face-to-face communication is sometimes challenging for Black couples who are more adjusted with the freedom, flexibility, and convenience offered by social media platforms (Jelenchick et al., 2013). From these studies, it would have been expected that social media would be useful in overcoming boundaries associated with judgment rather than reinforcing them, as portrayed in the findings in this study. However, the findings affirm the observation that Li et al. (2016) made that privacy disclosure of already vulnerable users increases their perceived risks. Thus, exposure to abuse and harassment is likely to be more influential as it fuels the fear of possible judgment.

### **Public Sharing can Diminish Private Intimacy**

Similar to the fear of judgment, limitations in intimacy due to the public nature of social media communications are a unique concept that only emerges in the findings in the current study. Even in the current study, this finding is unique because it was only relayed by one of the couples and was not shared by any other person.

The findings from existing literature on whether social media reduces intimacy provide diverse perspectives. On the one hand, the findings of this study were consistent with those by Lee et al. (2019) as they noted that some findings show online disclosures to negatively affect relational outcomes such as intimacy and satisfaction in romantic relationships. Nelson and Salawu (2017) attributed the rising rate of emotional infidelity to social media networks that provide potent channels for self-disclosure. Boyle et al. (2018) faulted the overdependence on social media as deleterious to users' interpersonal relationship. Hampton et al. (2017) acknowledged that couples in long-distance relationships are more likely to avoid public sharing and prefer more private communication channels. They considered social media not to be the optimal medium of communication and generally did not use the social networking platforms as their common means of communication. On the other hand, Lee et al. (2019) found online disclosure to be beneficial because the partner interprets it as caring and inclusive as well as a validation of the relationship and the partner, which is likely to heighten intimacy. Lenhart and Duggan (2014) observed that couples consider self-disclosure on social media beneficial to maintaining emotional intimacy. On the contrary, the freedom to communicate without repercussions has been linked to the ability of users to explore their most adventurous selves through social media communications (Combs and Freedman, 2012). Thus, contrary to the findings in existing literature, social media

presents black couples with opportunities for exploration, which would require them to move away from their perspectives on judgment and fear of publicity.

### **Implications for Family Therapy**

The findings of this study offer several crucial implications for family therapists working with Black couples. One of the key implications that can be drawn from this study is that social media is important to black couples. Social media helps Black couples to promote positive stories about their relationships and possible solutions to improve their relationships. Thus, it is important for family therapists to consider the use of social media in practice and ask their clients about their patterns of social media use. The therapists should also review the social media usage by their black clients. Maybe, taking a look at the couple's social media posts could help in enhancing the therapeutic efficacy during the practice of family therapy as it enhances communication among couples. It is, therefore, important for family therapists to consider social media as a tool for their practice when dealing with Black couples.

In the use of social media as part of therapy for black couples, the study findings provide various specific implications that family therapists need to have in mind. First, family therapists can encourage the use of social media to promote geographically unbounded communication. Second, it is vital to promote the publishing and sharing of positive stories as they have the potential to counteract negative discourse that dominate in most of the public characterizations of black couples. Thus, their presence on social media can be encouraged to eliminate barriers and counteract the dominant voices on black relationships. Third, therapists should acknowledge the benefit that external approval of relationships of black couples can promote a sense of unity and oneness in relationship. Thus, it is crucial for family therapists to consider the family, religious, and cultural ties that influence couple's relationship. However, it is vital for family therapists to be conscious that black couples are likely to



exhibit vulnerabilities as the fear of being judged harshly. Thus, it is crucial to be aware that some may have intentionally withheld their communications or engagements on social media in fear of being interpreted negatively. Privacy disclosure of already vulnerable users increases their perceived risks. Lastly, the findings suggest that family therapists should consider the erosion of private intimacy due to public sharing. Public sharing should be approached with caution because it can erode relational outcomes such as intimacy and satisfaction in romantic relationships.

### **Study Limitations**

This study found some exciting findings endorsing or refuting various previous studies on the issue of interest. However, the results of this study were likely to be limited in a number of ways and the limitations should be considered when interpreting or generalizing the results. First, the study was limited to only heterosexual couples. Failure to include same-sex couples in the study is likely to be a source of bias. However, it would be more challenging to attempt to determine the nature and extent of bias. It is complicated to hypothesize the way the sample would differ if same-sex couples were included. Another limitation in the findings relates to the fact that all participants were from Florida, which limits diversity as the couples were most likely to exhibit similarities in some behaviors to which environmental factors contribute.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The results of this study reveal the variables likely to influence how Black couples filter love stories using social media. It is recommendable for future studies to further conceptualize and test their impacts using a quantitative research using large-scale survey. Such will require future studies to develop scale and measurement instruments for the identified variables to conduct quantitative hypotheses development, data collection, and

empirical data analysis. The quantitative survey strategy would assist to explore the factors that this study identifies. The quantitative study would assist to identify the strength of the relationships between relevant variables to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

### **Conclusion**

From the study findings, the practices of black couples filtering their love stories via social media are evident. One of the most visible aspects of sharing love stories via social media is the focus on positive aspects of relationships. From the results of the interviews, it is clear that most of the black couples prefer using social media as a tool to foster positive communications between them. Most of the communications passed via social media relate to positive shared moments and are used to pass the message that black relationships work. Through social media, families can view and contribute to the positive moments shared by couples through encouragement. In selecting the content to share via social media, black couples consider factors such as publicity and the potential for criticism. The most shared stories, therefore, are those that paint black relationships in a positive light, limit the victim mentality that focuses on historical oppression, and give an image of hope for black relationships in the long term.

The objective of communication is another factor considered by black couples when filtering their love stories via social media. Primarily, factors such as distance and intimacy come into consideration in the course of communication. The participant couples in this study confirmed that social media has been a tool for overcoming the barrier of geographical distance; hence, meaningful communications that cannot wait for physical proximity are held via social media. Such communications not only bring couples closer but also enable them to build trust with each other. Intimate discussions, on the other hand, are held through more

private social media tools such as instant messaging that do not expose black couples to public criticism.

As knowledge on the impact of using social media in different facets of life continues to expand, family therapists can look forward to improved outcomes in dealing with Black couples filtering their love stories using social media. In agreement with previous studies, the findings of this study show that geographical distance does not limit interactions with the broader community. The results also affirm that the positive stories that Black couples share publicly help to counteract the dominant negative discourse. The interactions that Black couples make with close relatives and friends through social media can promote a sense of unity and oneness if the couples share their relationship publicly. However, the findings refute the literature showing that social media eradicates the boundaries that lead to negative portrayal of Black couples. The study finds that Black couples continue to fear possible adversarial judgment when sharing their love stories using social media. In addressing the confusion that remains over the impact of social media on intimacy, this study advances that publicly sharing love stories can impact intimacy in a positive and negative way. A family therapist should consider the way each couple filters their love stories by using social media to utilize the benefits of using social media platform and avoid the adverse effects that public sharing of love stories poses on intimacy. If utilized effectively, social media offers a valuable channel for communication among couples seeking to build stronger and more resilient relationships.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What interactions via social media do you have with your partner?
2. What do you think makes your story unique among Black couples?
3. How has social media impacted your relationship?

**Appendix B: Demographic questions**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your sexual orientation?
3. How would you characterize your socioeconomic status? (low/middle/high)
4. How long have you been in your relationship?

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent Form**

### **General Informed Consent Form**

*Black Couples Filtering Their Love Stories Through The Use Of Social Media*

#### **Who is doing this research study?**

College: Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

Principal Investigator: Jeff Rocker, PH.D. Candidate

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Anne Rambo, PH.D.

Co-Investigator(s): None

Site Information:

How We See It Inc.

10700 City Center Blvd Suite 5245

Pembroke Pines, FL 33025

Funding: Unfunded

#### **What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to explore Black people's subjective opinions through interviews and gain insight into how Black people filter their love stories through the use of social media. The study is explorative in nature and uses qualitative grounded theory design, in order to create a theory explaining how Black people modify their love stories and how social media have helps them to establish intimate relations.

#### **Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you experience in romantic relationships may provide valuable insights, which can be used further to help people suffering from intimacy-related problems



This study will include about 8 people.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be asked to visit one 30 minutes long interview session. You will be asked to review your answers, transcribed by the researcher several days later.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

As a participant, you will be asked to answer questions related to demographic information, including your age, gender, time in relationships, and social status. Further, you will be asked to take part in 30 minutes long interview, and answer open-ended questions related to relationships and online intimacy. Your answers will be audio recorded and then transcribed.

**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

The only potential risks are related to privacy and confidentiality of your data. The researcher guarantees that no personal or confidential information will be disclosed, and appropriate measures will be applied to ensure protection of data.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study but you may request that it not be used.

**What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

There is no guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefit from this study. We hope the information learned from this research study will benefit other people with similar conditions in the future.

**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

Ask the researchers if you have any questions about what it will cost you to take part in this research study (for example bills, fees, or other costs related to the research).

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. All the participants will be assigned unique IDs, and no personal information such as First Name or Last Name will be mentioned in the study. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely on researcher's personal computer and protected by password. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by erasing it from hard disk drive.

**Will there be any audio or video recording?**

This research study involves audio and/or video recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any of the people who gave the researcher money to do the study (if applicable). The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:

Jeff Rocker, MS can be reached at (786) 355-8680, that will be readily available during and after normal work hours.

If primary is not available, contact:

Dr. Anne Rambo can be reached at (954) 262-3002, that will be readily available during and after normal work hours.

**Research Participants Rights**

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board

Nova Southeastern University

(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790

[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

**All space below was intentionally left blank.**

**Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section**

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

**SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:**

- You have read the above information.

**Adult Signature Section**

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

### **Biographical Sketch**

With years of experience working with clients going through individual, relationship, and family issues, Celebrity Therapist Jeff Rocker has provided therapeutic services to clients from as young as 3 years old to individuals in their late adulthood. Over the years, Dr. Jeff has organized lectures and various events in the community, including excursions and retreats for couples to improve their communication and gain a better understanding of each other. He has experience working with athletes such as those in the NFL, NBA, and MLB. In addition, Dr. Jeff has also worked with clients in the Movie, Music, and Entertainment Industry.

Dr. Jeff Rocker is nationally recognized for his innovative techniques and approaches towards troubled teens, interpersonal relationship partner conflicts, and professionals struggling with work-life balance. He also works with clients with debilitating addiction issues and provides a holistic approach to therapy.

Born and raised in Miami, Florida, Dr. Jeff J. Rocker has seen the effect that the lack of mental health awareness has had on his community and those surrounding it. CEO of How We See It, Inc. Dr. Rocker has established a team of diverse individuals that are changing the world's perspective on mental health one community at a time. His team does multiple outreach programs for these communities to help dispel the myths of therapy and remove the stigma around mental health.

One of the outreach programs that Dr. Rocker created is called Hip Hop Therapy. This is an interactive workshop done in high schools across South Florida. His goal is for students to have a safe space to express themselves in an unconventional manner. Growing up with a musical background, this program is one that truly resonates with him on a personal level.

Dr. Jeff Rucker completed his Ph.D. in Marriage and Family therapy from Nova Southeastern University and currently is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. He obtained his masters from Nova Southeastern and his bachelor's from Bethune Cookman University.