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Online victimization, womanism, and body esteem among young Black women.: A structural equation modeling approach

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Online Victimization, Womanism, and Body Esteem among Young Black Women: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach

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Abstract

Digital media use represents a central part of young adults' daily life, within which social interactions increasingly center on visual content. While visual content, such as representations of self, may facilitate positive social interactivity, it may also increase susceptibility to harmful social interactions, such as appearance-related online victimization. Black women's bodies are often the target of gendered racial microaggressions and sexual victimization which can contribute to body image concerns. Still, the online victimization–body esteem link among Black women remains unexamined. This study used structural equation modeling to examine the associations between four categories of online victimization (i.e., general online victimization, online individual racial victimization, online vicarious racial victimization, online sexual victimization) and body esteem. We further examined whether womanism, an identity-based factor, moderated the relationship between online victimization and body esteem. A sample of 1,595 young Black women completed an online survey. Results showed that online sexual victimization was significantly negatively associated with body esteem and that high levels of womanism buffered the harmful impact of general online victimization on body esteem. Future research is needed to examine Black women's and gender expansive people's experiences with online gendered racial victimization along with other forms of online intersectional oppression.

Keywords Black women · Body esteem · Body image · Online victimization · Gendered racial victimization · Racism · Sexism · Womanism

Mainstream media plays a central role in constructing people's perceptions of Black identities, behaviors, and bodies (Jerald et al., 2017). Gendered and racialized media portrayals – ranging from implicit biases in news coverage to television characters representing gendered racial stereotypes – can negatively influence how Black women perceive themselves as well as how people perceive and relate to Black women (Chen et al., 2012; Jerald et al., 2017). For example, the consumption of mainstream media images (e.g., actors on television, models in magazines) that reflect traditionally White feminine features (e.g., thinness) has been linked to lower body esteem among women (Grabe et al., 2008). Contrasted with traditional media, digital media (e.g., text, social media, blogs) facilitates social interactivity, whereby the user can be both a content producer, often featuring visual representations of self, as well as a consumer of others' content (Fardouly et al., 2017).

Research suggests that digital media's facilitation of social interactions combined with a heightened focus on visual content negatively influences young women's body esteem (Perloff, 2014; Yao et al., 2021). Online victimization is a harmful type of social interaction that often targets a person's appearance through technology-facilitated bullying, harassment, or other forms of interpersonal aggression (Butkowski et al., 2019; Tynes et al., 2010). A meta-analysis showed that young women may be more likely to experience

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online victimization than young men (Sun & Fan, 2018). Yet, the relationship between young women's online victimization and body esteem has not been adequately examined. Further, there is a paucity of research examining online victimization experiences that are racialized and/or gendered.

Intersectionality guides our understanding of Black women's body esteem as influenced by offline gendered racial sexual victimization (Dunn et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2013) and the internalization of body and appearance standards that devalue the Black aesthetic (Avery et al., 2021). Studies have pointed to identity-based protective factors for Black women's body esteem, such as racial/ethnic identity (Cotter et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2013) and womanism – a perspective that recognizes the roles of both gender and race/ethnicity in the lives of women of color (King & Fujino, 1994). Research is needed to clarify the utility of identity-based protective factors in online contexts. Thus, this study aimed to examine the associations between four categories of online victimization and young Black women's body esteem and the role of womanism within these associations.

Online Victimization: A Focus on Young Black Women

Young adulthood (~18 to 30-years-old) is a critical life stage when young adults are tasked with acquiring a stable sense of self and demonstrating aspects of psychosocial maturation, such as independence and confidence (Arnett, 2000). In the past two decades, digital media use has become a central social context for young adults' identity development (Primack et al., 2017). Approximately 84% of young adults in the U.S. report using at least one social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2021), averaging over 3 h of social media use per day (Cowen & Company, 2014). The interactive components of digital media may have implications for young adults who have a heightened susceptibility to peer influence in alignment with their developmental stage (Sherman et al., 2018). Thus, there have been calls for a greater understanding of the benefits and risks of digital media use to young adults' health and mental health (Primack et al., 2017). Young adults, however, are not a monolithic group.

Black Americans use social media platforms, such as Instagram (74%) and Facebook (49%), more frequently than White Americans (67% and 35%, respectively; Pew Research Center, 2021). Social media use may be more common among women than men, with women's primary motivations for use being social connectivity, knowledge-access and -sharing, and entertainment (Pew Research Center, 2021). As digital media becomes a primary location for young women to meet their social needs, so too do risks for online victimization, which is differentiated from offline victimization based on its capacity to transgress temporal and geographical bounds, with greater opportunities for anonymous perpetration (Yar, 2005). For example, a photo of a Black woman taken at a college campus party might be reproduced into a sexist and racist meme and distributed with the potential for viral and transnational reach.

Prior research on young adults' online victimization has used majority White samples to examine bystander behaviors (Henson et al., 2020) or to describe different types of online victimization (Berne et al., 2014; Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2017; Reyns et al., 2019). While providing broad insights into young adults' online victimization, studies have overlooked possible nuances in experiences based on racism, sexism, and their intersections. Thus, this study sought to interrogate the multiplicity of ways in which young Black women may be victimized online, including general online victimization, online individual racial victimization, online vicarious racial victimization, and online sexual victimization.

General Online Victimization and Body Esteem

General online victimization commonly targets a person's appearance, behavior, and use of language (Tynes et al., 2010). Specific to appearance, general online victimization often focuses on a subject's weight, facial features, and clothing (Berne et al., 2014). Among young women, common social media practices related to the use of digital visual content (i.e., editing, posting, and tracking feedback on photos) place a heightened focus on appearance, behavior, and language (Butkowski et al., 2019). Excessive photo investment may increase risks for appearance-based general online victimization, which has been shown to contribute to body image disturbance among predominantly White samples of adolescents (Berne et al., 2014; Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2017). These prior studies, however, have centered the experiences of White adolescents, with inadequate attention to young Black women's experiences with appearance-based general online victimization that may be gendered and racist in nature (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Black women are vulnerable to gendered racial microaggressions or subtle harmful commentary or behaviors related to their identities, bodies, and appearance (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Prior research describes offline appearance-based gendered racial microaggressions as targeting Black women's facial features, skin tone, body shape, or hair texture (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016). Research is needed to elucidate Black women's experiences with appearance-based victimization within online spaces.

Online Racial Victimization and Body Esteem

Online racial victimization refers to disparaging commentary, imagery, or other exclusionary behaviors on the basis of race (Tynes et al., 2010). Racial victimization may be easier to conduct online compared to offline due to increased anonymity on social media platforms affording perpetrators a decreased sense of social inhibition and accountability (Keum & Miller, 2017). Prior research demonstrated that online racial victimization was associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms among Black adolescents (Tynes et al., 2008, 2012). Scholars have conceptualized various mechanisms as operating within the racial discrimination–mental health link, such as physiological changes in response to chronic race-based stress, which can lead to adverse mental health (Harrell, 2000) or the harmful effects of internalizing negative racial/ethnic stereotypes (Pyke, 2010).

Online racial victimization can be experienced personally (e.g., being instant messaged a racial slur) or vicariously (e.g., observing a racist meme; Tynes et al., 2010). One study reported that 58% of its sample of adolescents of color experienced past year online individual racial victimization (Tynes et al., 2015). Another study reported that 71% of a sample of Black adolescents experienced online vicarious racial victimization in the past year (Tynes et al., 2008). While online vicarious racial victimization was negatively correlated with self-esteem in a sample of adolescents of color (Tynes et al., 2010), less is known about how online individual or vicarious racial victimization relates to Black women's body esteem. In the current study, we expected both online individual and vicarious racial victimization to adversely impact young Black women's body esteem, given research on the racist ideologies implicit within dominant feminine body and appearance standards (Avery et al., 2021).

Online Sexual Victimization and Body Esteem

According to objectification theory, women are socialized to internalize how others may perceive or judge their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In turn, women come to view their bodies as objects for others' enjoyment, which can contribute to harmful body monitoring behaviors and low body esteem (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Digital media facilitates practices, such as photo uploading and manipulation, which provide ample opportunities for young women to perceive and use their bodies as objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), with harmful consequences to body esteem (Gioia et al., 2021;

Perloff, 2014). The emphasis on visual content combined with a capacity for anonymous perpetration may together increase women's risks for online sexual victimization (Tamarit et al., 2021).

Online sexual victimization involves a range of sexually-violent interactions, such as the unauthorized sharing of sexual imagery, sexual harassment, or sexual coercion (Osman & Nicholson, 2021). Offline sexual victimization has been linked with lower body esteem in predominantly White samples of women (Davidson et al., 2013; Osman & Nicholson, 2021). Studies on online sexual victimization among adolescent girls and young women have largely focused on behavioral risk factors, such as sexting or presenting oneself in a "sexy" way (Tamarit et al., 2021). While a focus on the behavioral antecedents of online sexual victimization targets prevention, it veils the perspectives of those susceptible to victimization, not by pathway of their behaviors, but their positionalities, perpetuating oppressive discourses related to the sexual victimization of women of color (Leath et al., 2021).

Stereotypical views of Black women have persisted since the U.S. slavery era to denigrate, dehumanize, and control Black women (Lewis et al., 2016). The gendered racial stereotype of Black women as seductive, hypersexual Jezebels has functioned to justify Black women's sexual exploitation and subordinated status to White women (Collins, 2000). Jezebel stereotype endorsement and awareness has been linked with Black women's increased risks for offline sexual victimization (Cheeseborough et al., 2020; Leath et al., 2021). In turn, offline sexual victimization is shown to have harmful effects on Black women's body esteem (Dunn et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2013), self-concept (Hart & Rennison, 2003; Slatton & Richard, 2020) and mental health (Dale & Safren, 2020; Lewis & Neville, 2015). As the use of digital media proliferates and gendered racist messaging within media abounds (Ward, 2016), it is critical to explore the impact of online sexual victimization on young Black women's body esteem, along with the resilience strategies that Black women employ to mitigate its deleterious effects.

Intersectional Risk and Resilience Factors among Black Women

Developed by women of color scholar-activists, intersectionality is a framework for understanding the multiple dimensions of identities and subjective experiences within socio-structural contexts (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Scholars describe the use of additive/multiplicative and intersectional analytical strategies to examine Black women's experiences with power and oppression (Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008). For example, an analysis of additive effects involves examining the separate and cumulative

contributions of phenomena (e.g., sexism + racism) to an overall outcome (Moradi & Subich, 2003). An analysis of multiplicative effects involves examining if the interaction between the phenomena (e.g., sexism X racism) contributes to the overall outcome beyond the main effects (Moradi & Subich, 2003). Finally, an analysis of intersectional effects focuses on the unique experiences at the intersection of social positions (e.g., gendered racism; Collins, 2000; Shields, 2008).

Earlier body esteem literature focused on making Black-White racial comparisons, with studies indicating that, compared to White women, Black women had more positive body esteem due to a greater acceptance of larger body sizes in Black communities (Cash et al., 2004; Rucker & Cash, 1992). Scholars, however, have urged the need to move beyond prevalence comparisons across race to interrogate the gendered and racialized differences in body esteem within a sociocultural context (Watson et al., 2019). Indeed, accumulating research demonstrates how Black women's body esteem is shaped by the simultaneous experience of sexism and racism or gendered racism (Avery et al., 2021; Dunn et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2019). Black women's risks for low body esteem have been suggested to extend from the internalization of hegemonic feminine body and appearance ideals that devalue the Black feminine aesthetic as well as gendered racial sexual objectification experiences (Dunn et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2016).

Researchers have started to examine the coping strategies that Black women use to navigate gendered racial stressors, such as identity-based factors and connecting with other Black women (Cotter et al., 2015; Davis, 2015; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015; Walker Gautier, 2021; Watson et al., 2013). For example, researchers has examined the protective functions of racial/ethnic identity (Cotter et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2013) and womanism (Walker Gautier, 2021) for Black women's body esteem. Racial/ethnic identity has been conceptualized as involving three elements: racial/ethnic identity centrality (i.e., how a person defines themselves based on their race/ethnicity), private regard (i.e., the extent to which a person has positive perceptions of people of their racial/ethnic identity), and public regard (i.e., the extent to which a person perceives others in society as holding positive views of people of their racial/ethnic group; Sellers et al., 1997). Racial/ethnic identity may mitigate the harmful impact of offline and online racial victimization on Black adolescent's mental health (Sellers et al., 1997; Tynes et al., 2012). Yet, a study involving two samples of Black young adults (75–81% female) showed that while high private regard buffered the impact of racial discrimination on alcohol use, high public regard exacerbated the impact of racial discrimination on depressive symptoms (Su et al., 2021). Taken together, there are mixed findings about racial/ethnic identity as a protective factor for Black adolescent and young adults' mental

health. Furthermore, the examination of racial/ethnic identity and racial discrimination alone provides an incomplete understanding of the factors influencing Black women's body esteem and mental health. Thus, scholars have examined the protective function of gendered racial identity for Black women's mental health (Jones et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2017; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015).

Potential Moderator: Womanism

Coined by Alice Walker (1983), *womanism* (also *Black, Chicana, or Asian feminist consciousness* or *womanist consciousness*) involves the integration of a racial/ethnic identity and feminist identity. Grounded in beliefs about the interactive nature of racism and sexism, the shared histories and futures of Black women, and the need to collectively dismantle racism and sexism, womanism may be central to the construction of Black women's perspectives (King & Fujino, 1994). While not explicitly named as womanist, Black women engage with Black-oriented blogs (e.g., Crunk Feminist Collective), social media platforms (e.g., Black Twitter), and social media based empowerment and activism campaigns (e.g., #BlackGirlMagic, #YouOKSis, #SayHerName) that serve to affirm Black women's beauty, celebrate Black women's achievements, and engage in activism (Brown et al., 2017; Olayinka et al., 2021). In one study, 69% of a sample of Black women believed that engagement with the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag significantly improved their self-esteem (Olayinka et al., 2021).

Womanism is suggested to enhance Black women's ability to resist hegemonic ideologies that perpetuate gendered racial hierarchies in which Black women's identities and bodies are positioned as inferior to those of White men and women (King, 2003; Velez et al., 2018; Walker Gautier, 2021). While stronger racial/ethnic identity may buffer Black women from the negative effects associated with internalizing hegemonic feminine body and appearance standards (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2013), womanism's emphasis on dismantling systems of racism and sexism positions it as a plausible protective factor for Black women's body esteem (Walker Gautier, 2021). Womanism has been discussed as a protective factor for Black women's mental health (Chadwick & DeBlaere, 2019; Velez et al., 2018). In a predominantly Black sample of women, the relationships between sexist and racist events with psychological distress were significant and positive at low womanism, but not high womanism (Chadwick & DeBlaere, 2019). Comparatively, high womanism buffered the effect of workplace discrimination on psychological distress among women of color (Velez et al., 2018). To our knowledge, only one study has examined the relations between womanism and body esteem, with high womanism predicting Black women's

greater satisfaction with Afrocentric women's body features (Walker Gautier, 2021). Given these findings, we anticipate that high womanism, but not low womanism, will buffer the impact of online victimization on body esteem in our sample.

The Current Study

The centrality of appearance-related content within digital media is shown to negatively influence young women's body esteem (Perloff, 2014; Yao et al., 2021). Less is known about how harmful social interactions, such as online victimization, might influence young women's body esteem – particularly among Black women whose bodies and appearance are the targets of gendered racial microaggressions (Lewis & Neville, 2015) and gendered racial sexual victimization (Cheeseborough et al., 2020). This study investigated the links between four categories of online victimization and body esteem in a sample of young Black women. We further examined the potential moderating role of womanism within these links. We hypothesized the following:

> *Hypothesis 1*: General online victimization will be negatively associated with body esteem.
> *Hypothesis 2*: Online individual racial victimization will be negatively associated with body esteem.
> *Hypothesis 3*: Online vicarious racial victimization will be negatively associated with body esteem.
> *Hypothesis 4*: Online sexual victimization will be negatively associated with body esteem.
> *Hypothesis 5*: Womanism will moderate the relations between all four categories of online victimization and body esteem, such that the negative associations will be weakest at high levels of womanism.

Method

Procedure

A sample of young Black women was recruited by Qualtrics Panels to take part in an anonymous online survey that aimed to examine the associations between Black women's identities, femininity ideology endorsement, mental health, and well-being. Participants were eligible if they self-identified as Black women between the ages of 18–30. Prior to taking the online survey, participants were given a brief description of the study and completed an informed consent form. The average completion time for the full survey was 54 min. No attention checks were included. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and compensated through Qualtrics Panels in an amount that was not disclosed to the research team. This study received institutional review board approval at a large Southeastern university.

Participants

The final sample included 1,595 cisgender women with a mean age of 23 years (SD_{age} = 3.41). The majority of the sample identified their ethnicity as African American (83.9%; n = 1,338), followed by Afro-Latina (5.1%; n = 81), multiracial (4.5%; n = 71), African (4.2%; n = 66), and West Indian/Caribbean (2.3%; n = 36). Most participants worked full-time (36.0%; n = 574), followed by those who were full-time students (22.1%; n = 352). Our sample was well-educated, with 27.8% (n = 443) having completed some college and another 27.0% (n = 430) having graduated from college or trade school. Most participants identified as heterosexual (72.1%; n = 1,147), followed by bisexual (18.9%, n = 269) and gay/lesbian (5.7%, n = 91). Eight participants (0.5%) described their sexual orientation as pansexual (n = 5) or asexual (n = 3).

Measures

Online Victimization

We used the 21-item four-factor Online Victimization Scale (Tynes et al., 2010) to measure general online victimization, online individual racial victimization, online vicarious racial victimization, and online sexual victimization. Participants reported the frequency of experiencing online victimization on a 5-point Likert-type scale (0 = *never* to 4 = *everyday*). Sample items in the general online victimization subscale (8 items) included: "People have said negative things about the way I look, act, or dress" and "I was threatened online because of the way I look, act, or dress." Sample items in the online individual racial victimization subscale (4 items) included: "People have threatened me online with violence because of my race or ethnic group" and "People have excluded me from a site because of my race or ethnic group online." Sample items in the online vicarious racial victimization subscale (3 items) included: "People have said things that were untrue about people in my race or ethnic group" and "People have cracked jokes about people of my race or ethnic group online." Sample items in the online sexual victimization subscale (6 items) included: "People have asked me for sexy pictures of myself online" and "People have shown me sexy images online." Higher total average scores indicated more frequent online victimization. The scale has been used successfully with racial diverse samples, ages 11–19 (Tynes et al., 2010, 2012). Convergent validity has been demonstrated by scores on the scale being significantly positively associated with scores on measures of depression, anxiety, and stress (Tynes et al., 2010). A study found that

online individual racial victimization was negatively correlated with self-esteem among a majority female sample of Black adolescents (Tynes et al., 2012). The original validation study (Tynes et al., 2010) reported Cronbach's α for the subscales as follows: general online victimization (α = 0.84), online individual racial victimization (α = 0.66), online vicarious racial victimization (α = 0.87), and online sexual victimization (α = 0.76). In this study, Cronbach's α were: general online victimization (α = 0.95), online individual racial victimization (α = 0.89), online vicarious racial victimization (α = 0.87), online sexual victimization (α = 0.89).

Body Esteem

The 31-item three-factor Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) was used to measure body esteem. The scale measures women's attitudes towards body parts and functions related to sexual attractiveness (sample items: "chest or breasts" and "lips"), weight concern (sample items: "hips" and "appearance of stomach"), and physical condition (sample items: "biceps" and "muscular strength"). Participants rated how they felt about their body parts and functioning on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *have strong negative feelings* to 5 = *have strong positive feelings*). Higher total average scores indicated higher body esteem. Convergent validity has been demonstrated by scores on the scale being correlated with scores on measures of body competence and self-esteem (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). The use of the scale with a sample of Black women (Capodilupo, 2015) demonstrated good internal reliability: sexual attractiveness (α = .82), weight concern (α = .98), and physical condition (α = .93). In this study, the full scale (α = 0.96) and all subscales (α = 0.92) demonstrated high internal consistency.

Womanism

The 15-item unidimensional Womanist Consciousness Scale (King & Fujino, 1994) was used to assess womanism. Participants indicated their agreement with statements based on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items included: "Black women cannot separate racism and sexism in their fight for equality," "Black women's problems are often caused by both racism and sexism," and "It's hard for me to think about ethnic issues without also considering women's issues at the same time." Higher total average scores indicated higher womanism. Convergent validity has been demonstrated by scores on the scale being significantly positively correlated with measures of racial/ethnic and feminist consciousness (King & Fujino, 1994). When used in previous studies with samples of Black female college students, the scale had Cronbach's α of 0.80 (King, 2003) and .90 (Walker Gautier, 2021). Internal consistency in our sample was high (α = 0.93).

Covariates

Participants reported their age in years. Participants indicated their ethnicity within the categories: Afro-Latina, West Indian/Caribbean, African, Black, Biracial/Multiracial. Subjective SES was measured by using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000) with a ladder representing social standings. Participants were asked, "Where would you place yourself on this ladder?" Response categories ranged from 1 ("*best off*") to 10 ("*worst off*").

Analytical Approach

The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the main study variables were calculated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 28.0). We conducted Pearson correlations and one-way ANOVAs to examine the associations among the sociodemographic variables, online victimization variables, womanism, and body esteem. Based on their significant associations with body esteem, three sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, having an ethnicity that was not African American, and subjective SES) were included in the model as covariates. We created a dummy variable for Not African American with African American as the reference group. We collapsed Afro-Latina, West Indian/Caribbean, African, and Biracial/Multiracial into Not African American based on their small sample sizes impeding the ability to make meaningful statistical comparisons.

We used SPSS AMOS Version 27 (Arbuckle, 2021) for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation. The CFA model for online victimization consisted of four latent variables (general online victimization, online individual racial victimization, online vicarious racial victimization, online sexual victimization) and 21 observed items. The CFA model for body esteem consisted of three latent variables (attractiveness, weight concern, physical condition) and 31 observed variables. The hypothesized structural model included the four online victimization variables, womanism, the interaction variables, and three covariates as observed exogenous variables; the four error terms as unobserved exogenous variables; the three factors of body esteem as observed endogenous variables; and body esteem as an unobserved endogenous variable.

We employed a five-stage SEM approach: model specification, model identification, model estimation, model evaluation, and model modification (Kline, 2010). Model specification included defining the hypothesized relationships among the main study variables. Upon confirmation of model identification, we estimated the model coefficients. Model fit was evaluated by using a variety of recommended indices (Kline, 2010): chi-square, root mean square error

of approximation (RMSEA), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). For the RMSEA, a value < .08 was considered acceptable, with a value < .06 considered good (Hu & Bentler, 1999). For the SRMR, a value of < .05 was considered good. For the CFI and TLI, a value ≥ .90 was considered acceptable, with a value ≥ .95 considered good (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Although we report the chi-square statistic, we place less emphasis on this measure based on its sensitivity to rejecting models in large samples (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Post-hoc model modifications involved sequential trimming of non-significant pathways (in order of greater p value), starting with the interaction effects and then the main effects (Waddimba et al., 2021). For the moderation analyses, all variables used to compute the interactions were mean centered, with significant interactions explored using procedures by Aiken and West (1991). We used simple slopes analysis to plot the interaction at two levels (±1.00 SD) of online victimization and womanism (Dawson, 2014).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We conducted an a-priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 and found that a sample size of $N = 184$ was needed for a medium effect size between online victimization and body esteem at an α level of .05 with power at .95. To test the data for normality, we screened for missing data and examined box plots and Q-Q plots to identify outliers. There were no missing data. While we identified a small number of outliers ($n = 6$), we retained them as they did not affect our tests given our large sample size (Field, 2013). Skewness values ranging from -.30 to .07 and kurtosis values ranging from -.97 and .95 were well within the acceptable range (Byrne,

2010). There was no evidence of multicollinearity issues, with variance inflation factors < 10, tolerance values > .20, and condition indexes < 30 (Shrestha, 2020).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (Cronbach's α, mean, standard deviation, range) and correlations for the main study variables. On average, participants reported rarely experiencing general online victimization ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.11$), online individual racial victimization ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.14$), and online sexual victimization ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.06$), while experiencing slightly greater online vicarious victimization ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.18$). Participants reported moderate levels of womanism ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.24$). On average, participants had moderate levels of body esteem ($M = 3.40$, $SD = .88$).

All the online victimization variables were significantly moderately to strongly positively correlated with one another (Table 1). General online victimization [$r = -.15$, $p < .001$], online individual racial victimization [$r = -.15$, $p < .001$], online vicarious racial victimization [$r = -.09$, $p < .001$], and online sexual victimization [$r = -.17$, $p < .001$] were weakly negatively correlated with body esteem. General online victimization [$r = -.14$, $p < .001$], online individual racial victimization ($r = -.13$, $p < .001$), and online sexual victimization [$r = -.06$, $p < .01$] were weakly negatively correlated with womanism, while online vicarious racial victimization ($r = .12$, $p < .001$) was weakly positively correlated with womanism. Womanism was moderately positively correlated with body esteem, $r = .34$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis Testing

Measurement Model

The model for online victimization fit acceptably with the data: $x^2/df = 11.83$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Main Study Variables

	1		2		3		4		5		6
1. GOV											
2. OIRV	.85	***									
3. OVRV	.52	***	.63	***							
4. OSV	.82	***	.83	***	.66	***					
5. Womanism	-.14	***	-.13	***	.12	***	-.06	**			
6. Body Esteem	-.15	***	-.15	***	-.09	***	-.17	***	.34	***	
α	.95		.89		.89		.87		.93		.96
Range	1–4		1–4		1–4		1–4		1–7		1–5
Mean	1.66		1.77		1.62		2.02		4.76		3.40
SD	1.11		1.06		1.14		1.18		1.24		.88

N 1,595, *GOV* general online victimization, *OIRV* online individual racial victimization, *OVRV* online vicarious racial victimization, *OSV* online sexual victimization

$^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

= .08, and SRMR = .05. The model for body esteem also fit acceptably: $x^2/df = 7.53$, $p < .001$, CFI = .91, TLI = .90, RMSEA = .06, and SRMR = .04. Factor loadings within the models for online victimization (.65 to .85) and body esteem (.60 to .79) were statistically significant ($p < .001$). The Cronbach's α for the online victimization scale (α = 0.97), its subscales (general online victimization: α = 0.95; online individual racial victimization: α = 0.89; online vicarious racial victimization: α = 0.87; online sexual victimization: α = 0.89), and the body esteem scale (α = 0.96) demonstrated strong internal consistency.

Structural Model

Our hypothesized model presented with adequate fit: $(x^2/df) = 8.08$, $p < .001$, CFI = .98, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .07, and SRMR = .05. Post-hoc model modifications (i.e., the sequential removal of non-significant pathways) were conducted, yielding our respecified model as shown in Fig. 1. The final structural model explained 18.4% of the variance of body esteem, $F(7, 1587) = 50.08$, $p < .001$, and had an improved fit for the data: $(x^2/df) = 7.51$, $p < .001$, CFI = .98, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .06, and SRMR = .05. There was a significant negative main effect of online sexual victimization on body esteem ($β = -.18$, $p < 001$). There was a significant positive main effect of womanism on body esteem ($β = .29$ $p < .001$). All covariates were

Fig. 2 General Online Victimization and Body Esteem at Two Levels of Womanism. *N* 1595, *GOV* general online victimization, *Low* 1 standard deviation below the mean, *High* 1 standard deviation above the mean

significantly associated with body esteem, including age ($β = .06$ $p < .05$), having an ethnicity that was not African American ($β = -.05$ $p < .05$), and subjective SES ($β = .19$ $p < .001$). There was a significant interaction between general online victimization and womanism, $β = .10$, $p < .001$. As captured in Fig. 2, simple slopes analysis showed that at low womanism, general online victimization was significantly negatively associated with body esteem, $t(1587) = -2.64$, $β = -.08$, $p < .01$. At high womanism, general online victimization was significantly positively associated with body esteem, $t(1587) = 2.08$, $β = .05$, $p < .05$. There were no other significant interactions.
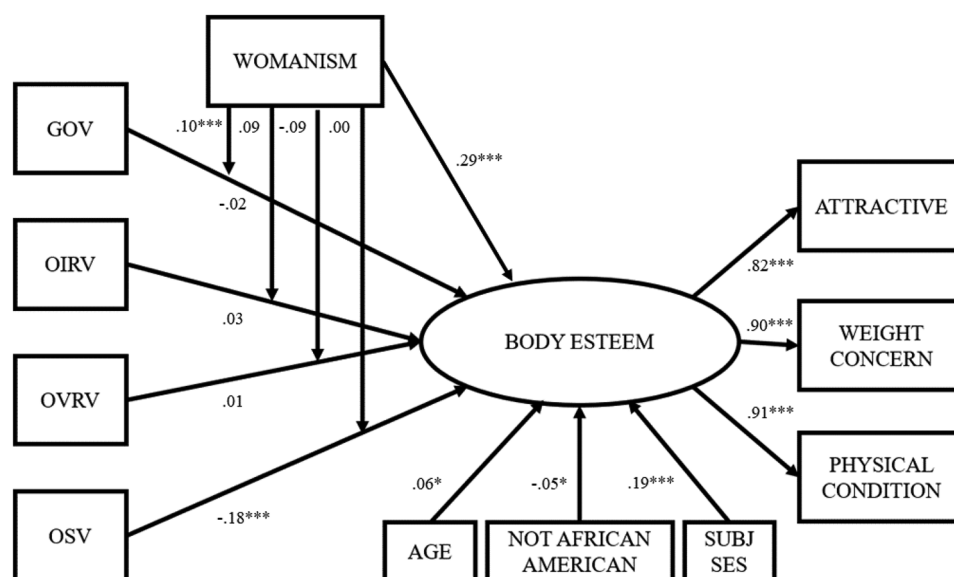

Fig. 1 Structural Equation Model with Standardized Loadings. *N* 1595. *OVRV* online vicarious racial victimization, *OIRV* online individual racial victimization, *OSV* online sexual victimization, *GOV* general online victimization, *ATTRACTIVE* sexual attractiveness, *WEIGHT* weight concern, *PHYSICAL* physical condition, *SUBJ SES* subjective socioeco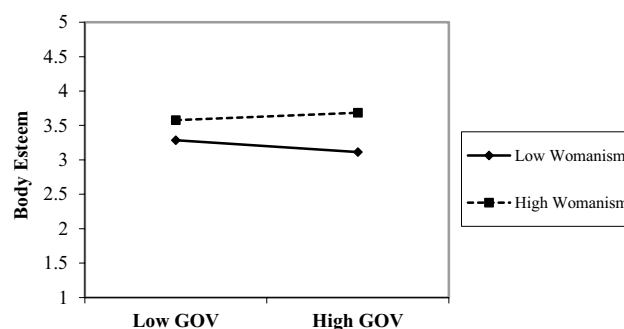nomic status. Not African American was coded as 0 = Not African American/1 = African American, with African American as the reference group. GOV, OSV, OIRV, and OVRV are subscales of the Online Victimization Scale (Tynes et al., 2010); Appearance, Weight Concern, and Physical Condition are subscales of the Body Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984). *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Discussion

The current study investigated the associations between general online victimization, online individual racial victimization, online vicarious racial victimization, and online sexual victimization with body esteem in a large sample of young Black women. Additionally, we examined the potential moderating role of womanism in these associations. Our results demonstrated a significant negative association between online sexual victimization and body esteem. Results from our moderation analyses indicated that womanism had a significant main effect on body esteem and the interaction between general online victimization and womanism had a significant effect above and beyond this main effect. To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to examine young Black women's experiences with online victimization.

Our hypothesis that general online victimization would be significantly negatively associated with body esteem was not supported. Our results, however, indicated a significant interaction between general online victimization and womanism. At low womanism, general online victimization was significantly negatively associated with body esteem, whereas at high womanism, general online victimization was significantly positively associated with body esteem. Thus, low womanism did not buffer the impact of general online victimization (even at lower levels) on body esteem. Alternatively, we found that high womanism buffered the impact of general online victimization on body esteem, corroborating previous research identifying high womanism as a protective factor for Black women's body esteem (Walker Gautier, 2021).

Given research on appearance-related general online victimization as targeting facial features, weight, among other aspects of individual appearance and behavior (Berne et al., 2014) – it is plausible that some forms of general online victimization experienced by our sample were racist, sexist, or gendered-racist in nature. This assumption may be further implied by bivariate findings that general online victimization was strongly correlated with online individual racial victimization ($r = .85$; $p < .001$) and online sexual victimization ($r = .82$; $p < .001$). Within digital media, interpretations of others are informed by observations of skin tone, hair texture, clothing, speech, and written text (Berne et al., 2014). When centering young Black women, such interpretations may be filtered by a gendered racial lens that devalues and penalizes the Black feminine aesthetic by means of general online victimization. While our measure for general online victimization included two items that were explicit to appearance-related online victimization (i.e., "People have said negative things about the way I look, act, or

dress;" "I was threatened online because of the way I look, act, or dress"), the majority of the other items in the subscale captured more generalized forms of online victimization (e.g., "I was bullied online" or "People have posted mean or rude things about me in the Internet"). Thus, we are unable to determine if it was appearance-related general online victimization that contributed to the significant interaction with womanism. Future research might apply item response theory to assess the relationship between general online victimization as a latent construct and its subscale item responses by samples of Black and White women.

Our second and third hypotheses that online individual and vicarious racial victimization would predict lower body esteem were not supported. Contrasting prior research linking online individual racial victimization with adverse mental health outcomes (English et al., 2020; Tynes et al., 2008, 2010, 2012), we did not find evidence of a significant association between online individual racial victimization and body esteem. Our finding that online vicarious racial victimization was not significantly associated with body esteem corroborates previous research with Black adolescents that did not find a significant association between online vicarious racial victimization and mental health outcomes (Tynes et al., 2008). While these prior works similarly used Black American samples, aspects of these studies are markedly different. Notably, all previous studies investigating the links between online racial victimization and mental health (English et al., 2020; Tynes et al., 2008, 2010, 2012) featured samples of adolescents whose developmental perspective may differ from that of our sample of young Black women, the majority of whom were well-educated and worked full-time. Further, our findings suggest that our sample had relatively low frequency of online racial victimization which might have influenced the results. In a prior study examining the relationships between online racial victimization and campus school climate, Tynes et al. (2013) reported descriptive statistics for online individual racial victimization ($M_{ind} = 1.64$, $SD_{ind} = 1.03$) and online vicarious racial victimization ($M_{vic} = 3.14$, $SD_{vic} = 1.35$) for Black college students. Compared to this prior study, scores from the current study were lower for both measures ($M_{ind} = 1.62$, $SD_{ind} = 1.14$; $M_{vic} = 2.02$, $SD_{vic} = 1.18$).

Additionally, in the over 10 years since most of these studies were published (Tynes et al., 2008, 2010, 2012), a myriad of digital platforms, content features, and products have been introduced. For example, the three most commonly used social media platforms among young adults – Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok – were introduced for public use in 2010, 2011, and 2018, respectively (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). As the most commonly used social media platform among young adults, Instagram did not release its

video sharing or photo editing tools until 2013 and 2014 (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). Thus, this study contributes more recent data on online victimization related to the under-researched population of Black women.

We found support for our fourth hypothesis that online sexual victimization would be negatively associated with body esteem. This novel finding suggests that young Black women's vulnerability to offline sexual victimization (Cheeseborough et al., 2020; Leath et al., 2021) extends into online contexts. Our results extend prior research on online sexual victimization conducted with majority White samples of adolescent and young women (Tamarit et al., 2021), illustrating the need to consider the role of racial and gendered racial oppression within young women's online sexual victimization experiences. While our results suggest that young Black women are experiencing online sexual victimization, it remains unclear what types. Qualitative research might be suited to clarify Black women's experiences with online sexual victimization, including if and how these offenses are gendered and racialized. This is particularly necessary considering our bivariate findings that online individual racial victimization and online sexual victimization were significantly strongly correlated ($r = .83$; $p < .001$).

We did not find support for womanism moderating the relationship between online sexual victimization, online individual racial victimization, or online vicarious racial victimization and body esteem. Thus, our study's fifth hypothesis that womanism would moderate the relationship between all online victimization variables with body esteem was partially supported. It is possible that the presence of other contextual factors occluded womanism from conditioning the impact of online sexual or racial victimization on body esteem. For example, we did not probe for characteristics related to the victimization events, such as related to context or who was vicariously observed as victimized. Future studies should investigate the conditions in which the protective effect of womanism is activated, such as whether the vicarious experience was observed as perpetrated against other Black women or Black men.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional design does not permit analysis of the directionality of effects. Studies are needed to examine the effects of online victimization on body esteem over time. Given research illuminating appearance-based comparisons (Perloff, 2014; Yao et al., 2021) and appearance-related preoccupation (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021) as shaping women's body esteem within online contexts, longitudinal studies might examine possible appearance-based psychological processes that mediate the online victimization–body esteem

link. Second, our research would have been strengthened by the examination of intersectional effects via the inclusion of a measure for online gendered racial victimization–which, to our knowledge, has yet to be introduced. Thus, future research is needed to develop and validate a measure for this crucial variable that may provide greater understanding of the unique risks that Black women experience online. Third, while our use of Qualtrics Panels enabled us to recruit a geographically representative sample of ethnically-diverse Black women in the U.S, it provided some limitations to our sampling. Our use of Qualtrics Panels impeded our ability to reach and subsequently recruit Black transgender women for participation which would have created for a more inclusive study. Related, our study did not inquire about how heterosexism or cissexism were experienced by participants, nor their effects on body esteem. Thus, these findings cannot be generalized to Black sexual minority and/or Black gender expansive populations.

Finally, this study did not examine other factors that would have contributed a greater understanding of participant online victimization experiences, such as whether the participant knew the perpetrator(s) or with what regularity the victimization experiences occurred. These factors could have supported a deeper understanding of whether known or anonymous perpetrators, or infrequent or frequent victimization contributes to differences in body esteem. Another broad limitation of this study is specific to our lack of assessment about participants' digital media use characteristics and behaviors. Our survey did not probe for the specific types of digital media platforms (e.g., social media, video conferencing, chat) used by participants which might have enabled analysis of online victimization by platform used. Further, we did not assess digital media use frequency, motivations for digital media use, passive or active use, or the integration and importance of digital media use to their daily lives. For example, whereas active engagement relates to more interactivity online, such as sharing content or commenting on posts, passive online engagement involves more secondary observation and browsing of content. This distinction may have importance as research indicates that more active social media engagement is associated with more body image concerns (Kim & Chock, 2015).

Practice Implications

Our findings highlight the need to employ a culturally-sensitive lens to the prevention and treatment of young Black women's body image concerns. Of primary importance, practitioners should interrogate their own socialized understandings about young Black women's identities and body image, including outdated conceptions of Black women as being less susceptible to body image concerns than White women (Rucker & Cash, 1992). Gendered racial

biases could have detrimental outcomes for the accurate assessment and treatment of Black women's body image and related issues. Additionally, practitioners should seek to understand how Black women's perceptions of their bodies are influenced by experiences with racism, sexism, and gendered racism, such as with the internalization of hegemonic feminine appearance ideals (Watson et al., 2013), as well as victimization experiences (Lewis et al., 2016).

Practitioners might guide young Black women in assessing the risks and resilience factors associated with their online behaviors. For example, our study elucidates young Black women as at risk for online sexual victimization, which, in turn, negatively impacts their body esteem. On the other hand, our findings point to high womanism as buffering the harmful impact of general online victimization on body esteem. In a study examining the sexual negotiation strategies of Black adolescent girls, French (2012) discussed opportunities for clinical interventions that seek to promote sexual agency through the use of individual and collective resilience strategies centered on Black women's empowerment. Within digital spaces, resistance strategies might include the use of womanist hashtags, blogs, and social media platforms, which foster self-esteem (Olayinka et al., 2021), connectivity with other Black women (Davis, 2015), and opportunities for resistance against dominant gendered racist discourses (Brown et al., 2017). While research on Black technology-based therapeutics is in its nascence, practitioners ought to consider their potential for supporting Black women's well-being.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to a greater understanding of the relationships between multiple categories of online victimization, womanism, and body esteem among young Black women. Our results suggest that high levels of womanism may buffer the harmful impact of general online victimization on body esteem. Our findings also suggest a significant negative association between online sexual victimization and body esteem. Taken together, this study underscores risk and resilience factors related to the body esteem of young Black women within online contexts. Methodological advancements are needed for the measurement of online gendered racism and other forms of online intersectional oppression as experienced by diverse segments of Black women.

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