

**“I just wanted to be a kid, but society would not let me”: an
exploration of adultification bias in the lived experience of
young black girls living in the UK**

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Abstract

Young black girls have historically been treated as more adult-like than their white peers. Research has shown that institutional racism is the main reason for this disproportionality and discrimination. This study aims to address the concept of adultification bias by delving into the fundamental themes which contribute to why black girls experience a racialised childhood. Expanding on current literature will also address the gaps in British discourse surrounding this topic. The study consists of semi-structured interviews with 6 women aged 18-40 years. The findings from the study suggest that there is evidence of an adultification bias in the lived experience of black girls and women in the UK, and that general notions of black girlhood are transferable from the USA to the UK, implying that there is a systematic bias working in opposition to black girls' favour.

Contents

Abstract

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Introduction

This dissertation sets out to understand the experiences of young black girls in the UK in relation to adultification bias. Adultification bias is a concept that was coined by Rebecca Epstein and colleagues in 2017 relating to the lived experiences of young African American girls in the US. Epstein et al (2017) defined this concept as “a social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children in the absence of knowledge of children's behaviour and verbalisations”. The adultification bias addresses the idea that black girls are generally viewed as ‘less innocent, display ‘mature’ behaviours, and are in need of less nurturing and protection. Although this is not a contemporary assumption of black girls, conceptualisation of this matter did not occur until Epstein et al created the Georgetown Law Report called *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of black girls' childhood*; thus, it can be assumed that the topic is under researched and there is a lack of awareness of this in wider society. The report highlights the experiences of black girls by presenting a study where the results imply that black girls are disproportionately adultified in comparison to white girls. In 2019, this report was developed as the authors released a follow-up study that found that black girls routinely experience adultification bias. With the exception of these reports, the literature surrounding adultification bias and its relevant components are limited. This paper will develop the discourse relating to this bias whilst addressing gaps in literature as it is acknowledged that there is a lack of exploration of this topic, especially within British thesis. This research paper will also aim to identify any commonalities between the findings from the study conducted and the existing findings from the Georgetown Law Report.

For the purpose of this research question, a study of six women was conducted to be able to explore the features of adultification bias. This study was done in order to understand if adultification bias is recognisable in British society as well as in the United States. From the current literature in place, it can be predicted that the findings will indicate that black girls are viewed as more mature than white girls, even though this may not reflect the reality of their sense of identity and/or lived experience. The analytical approach will focus on the theoretical understanding of the findings whilst paying attention to historical and broader social contexts. The

topic at hand lacks critical investigation from social researchers. This research paper aims to give a perspective from an alternative social context as it is stated that the current literature in the UK does not delve into the themes of adultification bias. This research will set out to add value to the discussion of this topic and be able to identify if the themes of adultification bias are transferable across national social contexts. The objectives are to understand what experiences young black girls face, how these experiences go on to impact their lives, and to what extent these discriminatory biases are unconscious or conscious.

The first chapter of the literature review thoroughly discusses the literature that is currently in place and interrogates the main themes of adultification bias. Exploring themes such as the education system, black femininity, and the family will create a conceptual context which deconstructs the notions of adultification bias. This in turn will inform analysis of the findings from this research. Chapter two on the research methodology maps out the research design and discusses how participants were selected and data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The chapter also outlines how these were carried out according to standards of ethical practice. The third chapter reports the findings of the data collection, and these are organised using the following themes identified in the research: racism as the norm, sexualisation, vilification, and marginalisation. Finally, the analysis chapter explores the results presented in the findings and critically analyses them with reference to the literature discussed in chapter one and with further reading.

Literature Review

This section reviews and analyses the current literature in place in relation to the concept of adultification bias. The main themes that will be discussed are: adultification in education systems, black femininity and hypersexuality, and family life. This review will attempt to deconstruct the notions which give an explanation for the prevalence of adultification bias and will also critically explore the studies that have been proceeded surrounding this topic. Although the concept of adultification bias is fairly new, there does remain copious amounts of research that can be considered relevant to the topic at hand. With the use of theoretical concepts such as intersectionality, critical race theory and institutional racism we can probe into the themes which contribute to the explanation behind the research question.

Education System

Over the course of many years, the literature published surrounding race has provided a solid foundation for the development of the concept of adultification bias. The article “ladies or loudies” by Professor Morris (2007) created a gateway for discussion of the perceptions and experiences of black girls within classrooms. This then led to the forming of the concept of adultification bias which is the prominent theme throughout the Georgetown Law report (2017) carried out in the United States by Rebecca Epstein and colleagues. This report sparked a heavy concern around this issue and successfully managed to map out the discourse that has been developed as a result of the introduction of this concept. The report offers a thorough insight into understanding how the social position of a black girl may be compromised by the embedded cultural ideologies of society. This involves focusing on lived experiences of this social group, and also identifying the perceptions that other social groups have of black girls; particularly within education and criminal justice systems where they receive a differentiated exercise of discretion from officials. This is extremely important as there has been a lack of acknowledgement for black girls within school discipline literature up until recently; literature was previously dominated by black boys (Annamma et al, 2016). The report highlights that the use of stigmas and stereotypes being applied to black girls causes them to be treated as adults and have an erasure of childhood, which then impacts their

experiences within many aspects of life (Epstein et al, 2017). Stereotypes which depict black women as 'loud' and 'aggressive' are transferred onto young black girls which mask their innocence and therefore prevent them from being treated as children (Walley-Jean, 2009). The study included in the Georgetown Law report (2017) consisted of focus groups and aimed to deconstruct and explore the perceptions that people have of black girlhood. The findings from the study suggest that black girls are collectively viewed as more adult-like than their peers. This causes them to have a loss of childhood as they are not able to make immature life decisions without being penalised like an adult would be (Lockhart, 2019).

An article by D'Clarke (2019) discusses that whilst black girls are adultified, white girls are infantilised which amplifies the impact of adultification bias. Studies show that black girls are twice as likely to be suspended from educational institutions than white girls (Camera, 2017). This actively demonstrates that the perceptions of black girls negatively impact their ability to complete school successfully. Although, it is imperative to recognise that other factors such as social class play a big role in the reasoning behind these statistics. Black girls from a middle-class background are seen to display more acceptable behaviours than those from a working-class background (Wright, 2013). Thus, we can assume that poverty and family structures may influence the behaviours and attitudes of a young black girl; this is something that many educational institutions fail to pay attention to.

In addition to this, the proposal that black girls are viewed as less 'innocent' and are in need of less nurturing than their white peers is a historical consensus that has been recognised as a common theme throughout societies in the western world (Epstein et al, 2017). Employing a critical race theory approach, it is highlighted that black girls experience more punitive measures within schools and find themselves encountering a racialised form of punishment (Annamma et al, 2016). Ocen (2015) develops this idea, stating that black girls are often viewed as offenders and not victims in the occurrence of incidents, which leaves the assumption that childhood is

racially constructed. Expanding on this, a study by Monique Morris (2019) highlights a teacher's perception of black girls which reads "they think they're adults, and they act like they should have control sometimes". This same study identifies that teachers generally view black girls as displaying 'mature' behaviours. These assumptions of black girls can be very damaging to their identity as they consequently receive less support and protection and have fewer opportunities to recover from their mistakes (Epstein et al, 2017). A quote from a black girl in the report states that "we don't get a second chance like white girls" which implies the idea that black girls do not get to make the usual hiccups which you would expect from someone within the childhood life stage (Epstein et al, 2017). As a result of this, the academic success of these individuals is hindered as the labels that are attached to them decrease their legitimacy and therefore reduce their chances of high attainment (Rullock, 2007). An intersectional approach helps to reveal that both the race and gender of these individuals correspondingly inhibit their ability to achieve within education (Ricks, 2014).

Black Femininity and Hypersexuality

In relation to this, critical race feminism also helps us to understand the complexities of gender and race, not just within education, but in other aspects of life, as black girls are seen to be more 'sexual' than their white counterparts. They are seen to have more developed bodies and are subject to the stereotype of getting pregnant young and being a 'baby mum' (Joseph et al, 2016). The sexuality of black women has been dramatically influenced by the legacies of the colonialism and the media in contemporary society. Throughout history, black women have been identified as being hypersexual and lascivious (Abraham, 2002). We can identify a shift in the way this ideology is distributed as society has transitioned from blatant racism to more covert and insidious forms of prejudice and discrimination. However, the fundamental idea of black women being more sexually active and available remains fixed.

Contemporary discussions of the sexual objectification of black women are developing. An article written by Anderson and colleagues (2018) revisits the jezebel

stereotype which portrays black girls and women as the seductive exploiter of men's weaknesses. This stereotype stems from the colonial era where black women were ridiculed for their phenotypical differences such as having larger buttocks or breast sizes, which are predominantly known as sex assets (Awad et al, 2015). This concept was also used as a way to justify the non-consensual sexual relations between white masters and black slaves (Williams, 2001). Sara Baartman is a prime example of this as she was displayed in freak shows for these assets which were viewed as 'abnormal'. The intersectionality of a black woman during slavery caused her to be socially controlled by racist and sexist ideologies (Anderson, 2018). Baartman was given the name 'Hottentot Venus' which has sexual connotations and allows us to assume that she was being exploited as a result of her being able to attract the hegemonic male gaze (Qureshi, 2004). During this period of time, there was a widespread dissemination of anti-black sexual archetypes which are now located in the Jim Crow Museum (Gates, 2013). This played a key role in perpetuating these ideas as the images displayed black women in a dehumanising sexual manner. These ideas are reflected in school dress codes as it is reported that black girls get into much more trouble for wearing short skirts and tight clothes than white girls as a result of their bodies being seen as more developed (Brown and Turner, 2020)

Linking to this, not much has changed in contemporary society as we still see the sexuality of black women being a highlight of the mass media. The media constantly reinforces the negative stereotypes directed at this social group. Framework from Matthews (2018) helps explore the notion that black women are mostly casted for degrading roles such as the 'baby mum' or roles that portray a 'sexually willing' female. Examples of this are rap music videos which often have black females playing the 'vixen' role. These themes transcend the confines of the media and manifest into society. This then reinforces the jezebel stereotype and creates negative role models for young black girls. As a knock-on effect of this, black girls are expected to be sexually active and also get pregnant at a young age (Winter, 2012). This is a key factor when exploring adultification bias as it is one of the main reasons why black girls and women face many challenging experiences throughout

their life course. An article by Kalof (2000) explores this further, examining race and female sexual victimisation. She discovered that black girls are far less likely to be taken seriously as a victim of sexual assault or rape. The main issue with these stereotypes is that they are placed upon young black girls which creates a lack of distinction between their childhood and adulthood and puts them at great risk. This affects the identity of black girls as they are unable to unapologetically be themselves without societies' presumptions creating a social barrier for them.

Family life

Moving forward, external factors such as education and criminal justice systems give a good overview of the concept at hand. However, it is key to analyse the importance of the family when discussing adultification bias as many fail to recognise that it is culturally embedded to treat black girls as more mature than the boys within the family. From a young age, dating many years back, especially in Afro-caribbean households, black girls are taught to take on maternal roles such as cooking, cleaning and doing laundry from a very young age (Jefferson et al, 2016). This is a direct result of slavery, as young black girls were sent out to work on plantations from the ages as young as 2 or 3 (Epstein et al, 2017). Thus, we can presume that adultification bias is a part of a generational curse that is passed down over time through many different ways and is therefore hard to eradicate. It is important to acknowledge that although black girls are given mature responsibilities such as housework, within the family they are still infantilised to a certain degree. Leath et al (2020) suggests that the sexual socialisation that black girls are subject to within the family causes them to become more curious about sex when they discover it, as black families often portray sexuality as a taboo subject. This could be an explanation for why many young black girls end up in compromising situations such as being a subject of sexual exploitation or becoming pregnant young due to the lack of sexual education. From this research we can understand that pre-existing expectations of black girls are reinforced through the family. Ginsburg et al (2018) suggests that the family should educate black girls about society's perceptions of them as this will help them deal with their experiences accordingly, rather than complying with the stereotypes that are placed upon them.

The current literature in place successfully allows us to understand the depths of adultification as it probes into the themes that explain how and why black girls are treated as adults instead of being able to live an innocent childhood. From the research discussed, it can be concluded that education systems are not set up to cater for black girls as they lack the understanding of the cultural and social factors that contribute to personalities within the black female diaspora and impose adultification stereotypes onto black girlhood. We can also assume that childhood is gendered and racially constructed, which is also reinforced in the contexts of media and family life. Although, the literature does acknowledge that the adultification bias disrupts the success of young black girls, especially educationally, most literature fails to include references to other racial groups besides black and white. This would give room for more comparison and allow us to gauge what the actual scale of this issue is.

Methodology

This section will discuss the methodological approach that was taken in order to explore the experiences of black girls in the UK relating to the concept of adultification bias. To be able to successfully explore adultification bias it was imperative that a novel methodological approach was taken to address gaps in literature. In order to choose the most suitable method, it was vital to evaluate the current research that has been conducted for this subject. Existing research surrounding adultification bias in the UK is still minimal; literature on the topic remains heavily dominated by American discourse. Thus, this research paper aims to build a foundation for British literature on adultification bias as there is recognised to be a lack of acknowledgement for the matter.

For the basis of this research, the method of semi-structured interviews was used as it was deemed most appropriate and efficient for obtaining in-depth, qualitative and informative data. Bulmer's (1977) work on sociological research methods helped to solidify the decision to use interviews as this research design was most suitable for accessing people's lived experiences and perceptions. Interviews help realise the concept of *verstehen* or interpretation as an epistemological approach in social research that can access subjective understanding of social phenomena (Tucker, 1965). This allows the results to produce rich data which can be thoroughly explored and interpreted to identify commonalities in ideas. The choice to use semi-structured interviews was finalised due to the method's ability to give the interviews some structured questions, from which the rest of the data will develop from. From this it can be concluded that the chosen method is well established with the advantages being that it produces results that are high in validity which correspond with the real experiences of the social world (Andrade, 2018).

Rebecca Epstein and colleagues conducted a study which was influenced by Goff's study of black boys being perceived as older than their white counterparts (Goff, 2014). Epstein's study used surveys and concluded that although the findings

presented a clear consensus that black girls are viewed as more adult-like, the understanding of these results are limited as the study failed to obtain thorough explanations for the reasons behind the findings. Therefore, it is acknowledged that the use of surveys would not be helpful during this research as they fail to produce rich data (Bernard,2013). This helped to justify the decision to use interviews as they allowed the findings to expand on the consequences of adultification bias by producing interpretive data. Semi-structured interviews were assumed to be the most efficient method for contextualising ideas. The use of content, narrative and discourse analysis will help to categorise themes and ideas whilst interpreting their meanings.

A sample of six black women between the ages 18 and 40 who were all from the UK were chosen through the use of social media advertisements. The sample was selected based upon the willingness of the participants to disclose their personal lived experiences of adultification bias. To be able to get a solid sample, a mixed-method approach was taken and both convenience and stratified sampling were used. Convenience sampling helped to gather participants by their willingness to be a part of the study. However, to be able to get relevant results, the method of stratified sampling was used to ensure that the participants met the criteria of identifying as black, and a woman, between the ages 18-40 (Berndt, 2020). Discussing the independent, dependent and controlled variables for the research enables the results to be interpreted more easily. The independent variables for this study were the ages of the women chosen which were 21, 19, 35, 29, 39 and 33. The controlled variables are the race and location of these women. The purpose of these variables is to be able to identify whether social change over the years has contributed to the prevalence of the topic being explored. The aim is also to see if all black women can relate to similar experiences. It is important to note that two of the participants were middle class and the other four were working class. This was deliberate so that it can be identified whether social class has a direct effect on the experiences of adultification bias.

Each interview was based on a list of brief questions which the participants were able to expand on and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. For practicality reasons, the interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded. This method was most effective for researching the topic at hand whilst facing minimal practical obstructions. To analyse the data, all information from the interviews was reviewed and selectively transcribed by taking the key points and interpreting the data to come up with themes that were relevant to the objective. This was the most useful strategy to reflexively document and affirm theoretical positions (Davidson, 2009). Following on from this, the data was then ready for analysis which was undergone by comparing and contrasting the results with existing literature.

Whilst carrying out the interviews, there were many ethical factors to take into consideration in order to prevent any harm. First and foremost, to gain ethical clearance, each participant was given an information sheet and consent form (see appendix 1&2). To ensure participants gave informed consent, these documents discussed the basis of the interview and allowed the participant to be sure on whether they wanted to participate. In correspondence with data protection, all personal and confidential data such as name, date of birth, and address were stored on the university drive and will be destroyed at the end of this project. This information was securely stored to maintain the participants' anonymity.

To prevent ethical concern, all questions were orchestrated in a non-invasive manner, however still allowed room for explanation and to receive detailed responses from participants without causing any harm. Once all interviews were recorded and transcribed, they were also saved on the university drive to ensure that only those who were eligible to access them were able to do so. The results from the research will also be destroyed and deleted post project. One theme that raised concerns is the sexuality aspect of the topic. To avoid causing any psychological harm, this was not introduced as a question for the participants, however, inevitably the concept was mentioned on the participants behalf due to its high relevance. Therefore, to certify that no harm was inflicted on the participants, they were given

the right to withdraw from the study and be able to refuse to answer any questions that step out of the confines of comfortability (Bryman, 2015).

The overall outcome of these interviews was a success as the results proved there to be synchronicity with existing research, whilst correspondingly elaborating on the topic. The structure of the interviews allowed the participants to delve into their experiences which produced results that reinforced key themes and concepts, leaving room for thorough analysis. Although, there were few limitations which slightly hindered the validity and reliability of the results. Due to the interviews being conducted via Zoom, the rapport between the researcher and the participant was weaker than anticipated. This may have affected results as it meant that the participant may not have felt entirely comfortable to disclose truthful and personal information. This also required the use of extensive resources such as a laptop with reliable software which allowed the proceeding of the Zoom call to run smoothly. In addition to this, it was vital to ensure that all questions asked were not leading or biased in any way. This was to make sure that my personal beliefs and morals did not influence the responses received.

Findings

This section will aim to deconstruct the findings from the research by categorising them into thematic discussions which will allow room for thorough exploration and simplify interpretation. From the findings we can identify that there are four main interrelated themes which are highlighted throughout all data produced. These four themes include racism as the norm, sexualisation, vilification, and marginalisation. These themes will be addressed throughout this section with the use of transcriptions from the interviews that were carried out for the purpose of this research paper.

Racism as the norm

To start off with, the participants were asked to detail their lived experiences and their outlook on racism. Amongst all participants there was a clear consensus that racism is viewed as the norm. The responses given collectively showed the general idea that the racism they experienced never caused any outrage between other peers who were witnessing the racial discrimination take place, which led them to feel as though racism was an accepted factor within society. Participant 3 disclosed that she felt as though institutional racism was the most abundant form of racism she had ever experienced throughout her lifetime and says, "schools are the breeding ground for racist ideology". Each participant was asked if they had ever been punished for something at school or work which was not their fault. All participants answered yes, which is suggestive that they were experiencing adultification bias by being viewed as less innocent. They then began to give their own accounts of scenarios they had been placed in. This question was then expanded by asking them if they thought that their race was the main contribution to the reason behind these experiences. Participant 1 then explained that "it's quite obvious really. When I reflect on certain situations, I think to myself, there couldn't possibly be any other reason." When asked if they could give an example, they then proceeded to say:

"It happened to me recently at work. I had taken 9 months off work due to the current circumstances of the pandemic and within 2 days of me being back I was being blamed for gossip that I wasn't even there to witness. I feel like I

am the target whenever someone needs a cop out because I'm the only black member of staff at my workplace." [Participant 1]

In addition to this, Participant 5 states that in school they recognised that there seemed to be one rule for black girls and a different rule for everyone else; nobody even dared to question it. This directly relates to the idea that black girls experience a racialised childhood which differs from the childhood of everyone else:

"From hairstyle regulations and uniform dress codes to behaviour, there was a clear difference between how the black girls were treated in comparison to everyone else, and if the teachers did not agree with how a black girl was presenting herself, the punishment would be 10 times worse." [Participant 5]

The participants expressed that they were rarely treated as children, instead they were made to feel as though they were fully responsible for their juvenile mistakes, as an adult would be.

Sexualisation

Two participants communicated their frustrations regarding the sexualisation of young black girls and argued that the media helps to reinforce the negative assumptions of black women. The participants were asked "what are your opinions about the representations of black girls and women in the media, can you give any examples?". Participant 4 began to explain that:

"There is never anything positive to say about us, it's always the loud and ratchet examples of us that are displayed all over the TV and YouTube!".
[Participant 4]

Participant 2 who is 18 explained that throughout their whole secondary school experience they were constantly asked if they knew how to 'twerk' by their white peers, which directly shows how the stereotypes of black women are also transferred on to black girls:

"This wasn't something I was familiar with, my parents would never allow me to present myself in that way, especially as a young child at the time. They

(white girls) see black celebrities on the internet acting that way and assume it's the same for all of us, even for kids!" [Participant 2]

However, participant 3 gave an alternative perspective by explaining:

"I think times are slowly changing and black women are beginning to make more of a positive impact within mainstream media. Previously, everything that was highlighted about us was always bad, now we are starting to see a change in narrative with the introduction of films such as *Hidden Figures* and *Black Panther* where black women are shown in a much more powerful light." [Participant 3]

This participant continued by expanding on the importance of good role models for young black girls as opposed to the likes of celebrities such as Nicki Minaj or Megan Thee Stallion who are currently the embodiment of black femininity in contemporary media. Here the participants discuss that the media helps to shape societies' understanding of black women and causes everyone to assume that the stereotypes of black women being 'loud', 'aggressive', and 'hypersexual' reflects the whole of the black female diaspora. Collectively, the participants looked back on the way they have been treated throughout their lives and concluded that most of the sexual expectations of them were based upon the media's portrayal of black women. This effectively shows how adultification bias disproportionately affects black girls as stereotypes of white women do not reflect those of a young white girl. Participant 6 expressed that even as a child, a prominent feature of her childhood was that she was constantly made to feel like she had to cover up her body and not dress the same as her white peers due to her natural development:

"I just wanted to be a kid, but society would not let me. Even within the family, my mum drilled it into my head that I had to live under constant pressure of not attracting sexual attention, this is an issue that my white friends are unable to relate to". [Participant 6]

Participant 6's main argument was that she did not get to experience the freedom of childhood like everyone else her age. Instead, she was told to carry herself in a mature manner for societal benefit.

Vilification

Literature from the US on adultification bias proposed the idea that the experiences of being adultified within the education system has a direct link to black girls and women being disproportionately represented in criminal justice statistics (this is also a pattern in UK policing and criminal justice – see Lammy, 2017). All participants were asked if they had ever been stopped by the police or arrested, which only one answered yes. Participant 1 explained:

“In school or at work, I was always perceived as delinquent, even though that does not reflect who I am as a person. I was stopped by the police whilst driving, but they had said they had mistaken my identity and thought I was someone else.” [Participant 1]

Participant 5 discussed that although teachers used to make her feel as though she would amount to being nothing but a criminal, this did not reflect the reality of her life:

“That was never going to be the case, all of my teachers’ assumptions of me were completely incorrect, I was never going to end up in jail.” [Participant 5]

The participants were then asked if they think that society vilifies black girls.

Participant 3 answered by saying:

“100%, many people think that only black boys are seen as the villains in society, when in reality, the same narrative goes for us.” [Participant 3]

In addition to this, most participants agreed that they had been labelled ‘rude’ or ‘aggressive’, often before even speaking:

“The white lady at my call centre job said that she could tell the caller was black because she was rude, and it just frustrates me that society always associates the tone of black voices with rudeness.” [Participant 6]

In relation to this, Participant 4 shared an experience which she says was the realisation point for her on how much of an issue adultification bias is. This participant said that she posted a picture of her 12-year-old daughter on Facebook to which a white colleague of hers replied ‘little miss attitude’ without ever meeting or speaking to her:

“Although I know she did not mean any harm by that comment, I still feel as though she subconsciously labelled my daughter based on societies’ outlook on black girls.” [Participant 4]

As stated previously, this underpins the concept of adultification bias as it shows that black girls feel the repercussions of the stereotypes that are in place against their older peers.

Marginalisation

To be able to see what social effect adultification bias has on black girls, the participants were asked if they feel like they had support from professionals in any situation (e.g., teachers, police officers, nurses). Participants 4 and 6 shared their experiences, expressing that they often felt overlooked by professionals, which perpetuates the idea of black girls being ‘strong’ and in need of ‘less nurturing and protection’:

“In school I used to have really bad period cramps as I suffer with endometriosis and the school nurse would always dismiss me and send me back to class, whereas there was a white girl from Poland with the same health issue, and she would always be treated with great sympathy. The nurse was obviously racist.” [Participant 4].

Participant 6 disclosed that she called the police on a family member for sexual assault but was questioned by the police as if she was the one who had committed the offence:

“They bombarded me with questions about what I was wearing, and how I reacted to the assault, I could just tell they were convinced that I was lying, which made it even harder for me to share the story.” [Participant 6]

The participants were then asked how these experiences impacted them. They generally described that due to these encounters they often felt marginalised in society and were forced to become independent, tackling life issues alone:

“I always felt left out, I had no choice but to be independent and count on myself because the people who were supposed to care just didn’t.” [Participant 3]

Participants explained that they felt like black girls are in the margins of social normality and never get accepted or fit in.

Overall, the findings show the trend that black girls experience exclusion from the core of social life. They often feel as though they receive less protection from members of society and are categorised into one social description which prevents them from having the normal experience of childhood. These accounts also show that black girls feel like they cannot challenge these discriminatory acts as a result of the adultification bias being a normalised aspect of society. The findings present the common themes of institutional racism and sexualisation which have been mentioned concurrently in previous literature.

Analysis

This section will aim to take an analytical approach to explore the findings from the study conducted in response to the research question. From the findings it is recognised that there are several commonalities between the experiences of black girls within UK and US. The results from the study mostly reflect the literature that has been shared previously, suggesting that adultification bias is a prevalent component of society. This section will include a thorough synthesis of the ideas presented in the findings chapter. The analysis will deconstruct the following subsections: racism as the norm, sexuality, vilification, and marginalisation. Analysing these sections will allow this research paper to identify the interrelated themes whilst reflecting on the broader social context.

The findings show that all participants have experienced institutional racism at some point in their lives, whether it be within the education system, workplace or criminal justice system. The data shows that the life experiences of black girls display clear incidents of racial discrimination, with their age also being a factor. As discussed in the findings chapter, Participant 3 was able to highlight that the social reaction towards institutional racism was very minimal through times where racial discrimination was occurring. This statement corresponds with Participant 5's idea that "nobody even dared to question it (institutional racism)". This implies that institutional racism is culturally embedded into the norms of society, creating a barrier for young black girls as they experience a racialised childhood and consequently miss out on the social opportunities that other children are given. As reported by social researchers Clair & Denis (2015), institutional racism is a historical component of society, dating back to the colonial era which consists of 'implicit biases' and processes that are constructed and sustained through years of deliberate systematic oppression. This therefore explains why the general notions of institutional racism rarely cause moral panic within society.

How does this link to adultification bias? This contributes to the embedding of adultification bias as it allows the assumptions of young black girls to be widely

accepted and therefore hard to challenge due to the systematic entanglement with the institutions and racism. This engrained bias is reinforced through the means of the media, education systems, and criminal justice systems which help to give the negative tropes about black girl's credibility. Therefore, it can be assumed that adultification bias stems from a long history of generational discrimination which explains why the issue is highly prevalent but only briefly addressed in literature. From the findings we can recognise that this bias comes in the form of both unconscious and conscious contexts. However, due to it being so deeply embedded in society's systems, it is then presented more unconsciously which ties in with the idea of racism being the norm. It is also imperative to understand that majority of this bias is expressed by those in positions of authority such as teachers, which increases the legitimacy of this discrimination. This explicitly opposes the functionalist proposal that the education system is meritocratic and everybody who goes through it has equal opportunities to succeed (Teklu, 2018). From the evidence put forward it can be concluded that this is not the case as institutional racism puts black girls at an educational disadvantage. Statistics show that in the UK black girls are 3 times more likely to be excluded from schools than white girls, which is a direct result of harsher penalisation and therefore affects their chances of high educational attainment (Gov UK, 2015).

Following on from this, the data suggests that it is the norm to give black girls harsher punishments than any other racial group. Participant 5 expressed that "if teachers did not agree with the way a black girl was carrying herself, the punishment would be ten times worse." Punitive measures within institutions disproportionately affect black girls as society has a zero-tolerance attitude towards them. A study which took place in Colorado found that there were racialised and gendered disciplinary disparities that existed wherever children of colour attended school, whether the schools were urban, suburban, or rural (Annamma, Morrison, and Jackson, 2014). These researchers implied that black girls being punished more than any other race is a transferable occurrence that can be identified in several different social contexts. Therefore, there is evidence that supports the suggestion that this form of discrimination is the norm as it can be pointed out wherever young black girls are educated. It is worth noting that Participant 1 also explained that she

felt she was often blamed for misconduct that did not even involve her. This participant then expanded on this by saying “it’s quite obvious really. When I reflect on certain situations, I think to myself, there couldn’t possibly be any other reason”, inferring that these experiences solely reflected her racial identity. This reinstates adultification bias as it highlights that there is no clear distinction between childhood and adulthood for black girls and women as they encounter similar experiences of discrimination. This finding also indicates that black girls are viewed through a ‘punitive lens’ where their wrong-doings are unjustifiable. The participants all agreed that white girls are able to act with impunity, which is the opposite for black girls.

There is consistent evidence that blackness is inherently linked to criminality. Literature by Smiley & Fankule (2017) explains that stereotypes and racist ideologies are manufactured and disseminated through various channels such as the media and lead to discriminatory policies. The findings show that the majority of the participants interviewed felt that they were automatically vilified by society which played a major role in their experiences within policing. Participant 1 shared that in school she was always perceived as deviant, which implies that she was adultified as the innocence that is associated with childhood was never associated with her. The works of Lisa Long (2018) helps to deconstruct this idea as her literature addresses the concept of the ‘suspicious gaze’ which suggests that the systematic model of what a criminal is directly targets black girls. Long (2018) explains that police officers use their typification’s to decide who can be deemed as a criminal; majority of the time black girls fit the criteria for this. However, Long (2018) expands on this by disclosing that the intersectionality of race and gender counteract each other as the chivalry thesis sees women being treated more lenient than men and neutralises the racialised gaze that the police tend to have. Although, it is key to mention that it is the white hegemonic norms of femininity that the chivalry thesis favours and therefore the black women who do not display this will still be subject to the racialised gaze.

Linking on from this point, it is interesting to mention that when the participants were asked if they think society vilifies black girls, Participant 3 responded by saying “100%, many people think that only black boys are seen as the villains in society, when in reality the same narrative goes for us.” This implies that there is a lack of focus on black-girl criminality in criminological and sociological literature. It can therefore be assumed that limited information exists about the perceptions of black girls and crime in the UK; discourse surrounding race and crime is heavily male dominated. Patton et al (2016) pinpoints this by explaining that there seems to be a ‘state of emergency’ discourse surrounding black boys which is juxtaposed with ‘invisibility’ discourse for black girls. A report from the Prison Reform Trust (2017) further supports this claim as it states that “there is surprisingly little published information about the race and ethnicity of women in the criminal justice system”. This aspect of the adultification bias causes implications for black girls in society as it means that researchers are failing to explore the reasons behind the behaviours that some black girls may display. Instead, they are labelled with adult stereotypes and assumed to be ‘challenging’ and ‘problematic’. This helps to form an understanding of why black girls feel like they ‘can’t get a break’ as the several aspects of adultification bias combined creates a heavy burden for these young people which society seems to be ‘invisible’ to.

Coexisting evidence from the US and UK allows room to be able to compare and contrast the findings. The participants were asked if they had ever been stopped by the police; only one answered yes and this situation turned out to be mistaken identity. The findings juxtapose the consensus throughout American literature, as it is often mentioned that adultification bias leads African American girls straight from the education system to the criminal justice system (Epstein et al, 2017). Data shows that the imprisonment rate for African American women was 1.7 times higher than it was for white women in 2019 (The Sentencing Project, 2020). The Georgetown Law report reflects on this and clarifies that the over policing of black girls' inevitably causes them to be more at risk of being arrested and sentenced (Epstein et al, 2017). As previously mentioned, the discussion surrounding black girls and criminality in the UK is limited. However, research shows that colonial legacies of

institutional racism can be recognised in both the UK and US, which therefore makes the experiences from both countries relatable.

Moving forward, on the issue of sexuality, the findings show a variety of ideas. In line with predictions, most of the evidence indicates that black girls are oversexualised by society and are shown negative role models in the media which continues to reinforce this. This was discussed by Participant 4 as they disclosed that there is never anything positive about black women in the media. These assumptions of this particular race and gender then transcend the confines of the media and are manifested into real life. Support of this can be found in the works of Lewis (2019) as she explains that social cognitive theory accounts for the influence of mass media on a person's beliefs about identity-based groups. Consequently, black girls are burdened in society as they are pressured into reversing the sexual assumptions made of them by doing things such as 'covering up' and 'acting appropriately'. Participant 2 bolsters this proposition by saying "they see black celebrities on the internet acting that way and assume it's the same for all of us, even for kids." Although, it must be acknowledged that this discourse surrounding black femininity in present day is highly influenced by historical contexts. These stereotypes of black women have permeated both historical and contemporary culture and are a driving force for the discrimination black women face daily (Lewis, 2019). Deep-rooted ignorance has caused the jezebel stereotype of a black women to be consistently reinforced, to the point where young black girls start to idolise the negative role models that are put out there, adding continuity to the pernicious cycle. Participant 2 expressed that because of what her white friends seen on YouTube, she was constantly asked if she could 'twerk'. Again, this reinforces the idea that stereotypes of black women are reflected onto black girls.

However, contrary to expectations, Participant 3 introduced an alternative perspective which states that actually, the media portrayal of a black woman is slowly starting to change, and they are being highlighted in a more positive light. This participant then went on to mention how the film *Hidden Figures* consists of positive black female leads. Although here it is imperative to understand that the film still

reflects on the intersectional complexities that black women face, clearly stating that this is still a relevant issue (Chen, 2016). This corresponds with the liberal-difference feminist point of view which suggests that there has been a march of progress for the social position of black women, however there is room for further positive change (Curtis, 2017). The mention of this film allows us to reflect on the intersectional disparities that being a woman and being black may spark. Studies show that black women are more likely to be sexually harassed in the workplace (Oppenheim, 2019). This is evidence of how the stereotypes of black women directly affect the assumptions of boundaries in terms of sexuality. In addition to this, it is important to note that cases like this are also overlooked as a result of the tropes of black femininity, which also discourages black girls and women from reporting sexual harassment/assault.

Moreover, the findings indicate that adultification bias leaves black girls feeling socially marginalised, which is something they then carry into their adult life. The participants explanations of feeling excluded from society were led by their distrust for people in authoritative positions. From the findings it is recognised that black girls are often let down by police officers, nurses, and teachers. Participant 4 explained that she was never taken seriously in regard to her health and was always dismissed by the school nurse even though she suffers with endometriosis. This reinforces the idea that black girls are in need of less nurturing, and they are mature enough to look after themselves. This is reflected heavily in UK health statistics as black women in Britain are five times more likely to die during childbirth and the post-partum period than their white counterparts (Braithwaite, 2020). Beim (2020) furthers this understanding by disclosing that medical negligence against black women has been a recurring factor in society and found that “black women are underrepresented in clinical trials that require consent and overrepresented in studies that do not.” From this we can acknowledge that the stereotypes of black women being ‘strong’ contribute to the justification of systematic oppression as they are then treated different within healthcare sectors as a result of this. By logical extension, it can be argued that adultification bias then sees black girls being treated as if they are biologically stronger than white girls, which is a historical notion that dates back to the colonial era. Seanna Leath (2019) discusses how the expectations of strength

harms black girls and found that this stereotype is a cultural and psychological coping mechanism which does not represent biological factuality. Laio and Yin (2019) focus on how the trope of 'strong black woman' can have a psychological impact on victims/survivors of interpersonal violence, as well as the extent of their victimisation. This reinstates the idea that black women are viewed through a colonial lens by society as the cultural components from the colonial era have remained a part of hegemonic ideology and continue to systematically oppress people based on gender and race.

Expanding on this, Participant 6 disclosed that her interactions with the police regarding the reporting of a sexual assault were uncomfortable and disheartening as she was made to feel like her story was fabricated and she was not the victim. This type of experience is mentioned in conversations surrounding the #metoo movement as Barlow (2021) informs us that black girls are underrepresented in child services and sexual assault studies and statistics. This causes black girls to feel excluded in society as they do not receive the same protection as their white counterparts from the people who are supposed to protect them. Participant 3 shared that as a result of this type of systematic oppression she had no choice but to be independent because the people who were supposed to care for her did not. Linking back to the discussion of black femininity, adultification bias causes many black girls to suffer in silence when it comes to experiencing sexual assault and rape due to the fear of not being believed. This is just one example of how this adultification bias puts black girls at a social disadvantage.

Conclusion

To begin this summary, we must acknowledge that the overall findings show that black girls are at a triple disadvantage due to their intersectional identity of being young, black and female. These three factors overlap and together have contributed to their lived experiences within society's institutions. The research aimed to identify the prevalence and experiences of adultification bias in relation to black girls within the UK. Based on the qualitative analysis of the results presented in the findings chapter, it can be concluded that the features of the adultification bias can be identified in the UK, as well as in the US. The widespread notion that young black girls are viewed as less innocent and more mature is reflected in the accounts of all participants. Therefore, this research paper assumes that the findings generally support the extant literature.

The study for this research paper was successful in exploring adultification bias as it was able to obtain multiple accounts of lived experiences that support the claim that young black girls are adultified within the UK. It would be useful for further research to explore whether this concept is prevalent within other western societies. The paper has been able to thoroughly discuss the themes that contribute to adultification bias by probing into the historical and contemporary contexts which form the basis of this concept. From exploring this topic, it can be concluded that colonial legacies are reinforced into society through institutions such as the media, education systems, and criminal justice systems. These legacies are a culturally embedded part of the hegemonic ideology and therefore gives reason as to why the study finds that racism is the 'norm'; this in turn becomes a key element of adultification of young black girls.

The chosen methods employed to facilitate this research were effective in answering the research question as they provided interpretive data which enabled the themes of adultification bias to be developed. The findings were then able to be transcribed and discussed accordingly. As a result of this, this study helps to update the literature and fill in the gaps within sociological research. However, there are certain

limitations to consider when reflecting on the success of the study. Firstly, although the results reflect the reality of the experiences the participants faced, they cannot be presumed to be representative of the whole black female diaspora. In addition to this, the sample size was relatively small, therefore, to strengthen the evidence further research with more participants would be useful.

Future research may benefit from exploring the nature of black girls and criminality in the UK as this seems to be a gap within discussions. With the exception of this research paper, there has been little published work aimed at understanding adultification bias in the UK. Expanding on this literature may help to contribute to understanding black-British girlhood.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 2 – Participant Consent Form

Appendix 3 – Interview Questions

Appendix 1 -



Investigating the adultification of young black girls Participant Information Sheet

Remayah Skeen
Coventry University

Before you decide whether you would like to take part in this study, you may want to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you.

Please take time to read the information below carefully. This tells you about the purpose of the study and what will happen if you take part. Contact details for the research team are provided below.

What is the purpose of the study?

The project is interested in the subject of childhood and adultification amongst black women. The research will explore how the adultification of young black girls impacts their experiences within society.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been identified as suitable to participate and would allow me to develop an understanding of the topic at hand.

What will be involved?

Should you agree to participate, you will be interviewed by the researcher via zoom. This interview can take place in a location of your choice and will take around an hour. You will be asked some questions but the interview is not heavily structured, you will be free to discuss topics which are interesting to you.

The interview will be recorded but this will be kept confidential and secure. On the completion of the research project recordings will be safely destroyed.

Do I have to participate?

Absolutely not. You are under no obligation to participate and it is your free choice to be involved in the research.

You can also withdraw from the research at any point during the study by informing the researcher that you no longer wish to participate in the project using the contact detail listed at the end of this document. You do not have to give a reason for your withdrawal.

What will happen after the interview?

The researcher will transcribe the interview recording by writing up all that was said during the interview and will then analyse the script along with those of other interviews conducted. The findings from the interviews will be written up in my final year dissertation which will be submitted to Coventry University and marked by appointed academic staff.

What next?

If you are happy to participate in this research project you will be asked to sign the informed consent form which you will have been provided along with this sheet.

Please retain this document for future reference.

Contact Details:

Remayah Skeen - skeenr@coventry.ac.uk

In the unlikely event that you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the researcher, please use the following contact details:

Catherine Morgan

Lecturer in Criminology

Coventry University

ad3449@coventry.ac.uk

Appendix 2 -



Investigating the adultification of young black girls

Remayah Skeen

Informed Consent Form

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

- I have been informed of the aims of the project and understand why the project is being conducted.
- I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that data collected during the research will be confidential and every effort will be made to ensure my anonymity.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up to the cut-off date without giving a reason for doing so.

- I am happy for [the interview/focus group] to be recorded
- I agree for anonymised quotes to be used in the research student's dissertation and in any academic publications and presentations which may result from the research
- I agree to take part in the study

Full name of participant:

Signature:

Date:

Student researcher signature:

Date:

Appendix 3 -

Dissertation Interview Questions

1. What's your age and ethnicity?
2. Do you think your ethnic background has affected your life experiences – for example at school, at work, or at home?
3. Have you ever been punished at home or at school for something that wasn't your fault? Do you think this was linked to your ethnic and gender identity?
4. Have you ever felt you lacked support from teachers and other staff at school? Do you think this was linked to your ethnic and gender identity?
5. Were you ever treated as an adult in any situation at home or at school? Do you think this was linked to your ethnic and gender identity?
6. What are your opinions about representations of black girls and women in the media? Can you give any examples?
7. Who do you think are role models for young black girls today?
8. Are there any stereotypes you believed were true about someone of your ethnicity and gender? Do you think any are true?