

From Advice to Influence: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Kevin Samuels' Relationship Commentary

Damien Kelly¹, Chakema Carmack^{1,2}

¹Health Research Institute Center for Addictions Research and Cancer Prevention, RCMI, Community Engagement Core, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA

²Psychological Health & Learning Sciences Department, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA
Email: ccarmack@central.uh.edu

How to cite this paper: Kelly, D., & Carmack, C. (2025). From Advice to Influence: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Kevin Samuels' Relationship Commentary. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 530-553.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.1312039>

Received: October 10, 2025
Accepted: December 27, 2025
Published: December 30, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Introduction: The decline in marriage rates and the shifting dynamics of romantic relationships among African Americans have prompted a need for nuanced exploration into the interplay of cultural, socioeconomic, and psychological factors. The present study examined the discourse of Kevin Samuels, a popular internet influencer and professional image consultant, whose often provocative commentary during the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped discussions about relationships, particularly within the African American community. Using self-determination and social exchange theories as a framework, the study examined the alignment of individual expectations with relationship outcomes, emphasizing autonomy and perceived value as critical determinants of relationship quality. **Methods:** Leveraging transcripts from Samuels' YouTube interviews, this qualitative study employed a reflexive thematic approach to develop insights into how his discourse reflected perceptions of romantic relationships and dating culture. Utilizing a random sample of N = 12 previously aired and publicly available videos featuring Samuels' commentary, the analysis contextualized Samuels' impact within broader trends, such as the declining marriage rates among African Americans and the complex barriers to sustaining relationships, including financial instability, racial discrimination, and early-life experiences. **Results:** Five reflexive themes were developed: 1) Power, Control, and Gender Dynamics, 2) Race, Identity, and Structural Injustice, 3) Romantic Expectations and Dating Culture, 4) Mental Health, Healing, and Emotional Labor, and 5) Social Norms, Religion, and Cultural Beliefs. **Discussion:** The findings provide a deeper understanding of how his discourse reflects and shapes evolving cultural attitudes toward romantic relationships, offering a foundation for psychosocial exploration and intervention strategies

aimed at addressing relationship challenges in African American communities.

Keywords

African Americans, Romantic Relationships, Kevin Samuels, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Media Influencers

1. Introduction

Many podcasters and internet media influencers thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic, with their target audiences staying home more during pandemic lockdowns. During this time, internet influencer Kevin Samuels, an American internet influencer and corporate image consultant, gained popularity, particularly among African American young adults, for his ability to convey real-world, sometimes controversial, self-care and relationship advice. With the isolation COVID-19 brought, many individuals turned to Samuels for relationship insights. Studies show that Americans find having a “good job,” being “well educated,” and “physical attractiveness” to be some of the most important attributes of an ideal romantic partner (Cionea et al., 2018). Using social media, such as Instagram and YouTube, Samuels was able to speak with his audience in real-time and give voice to their concerns. Samuels provided commentary on the evolving landscape of dating for men and women to convey realistic relationship expectations. At the time of his death, Samuels had achieved over a million subscribers on his YouTube channel and spawned countless reaction videos, thus leaving an impact on dating culture among African Americans.

1.1. Romantic Relationships and Influences

Romantic relationships can bring happiness and a deep sense of satisfaction to our lives. These romantic ideations can manifest themselves in various ways, such as attachment, sexual attraction, and caregiving (Stephanou, 2012; Van der Wal et al., 2023). Relationship quality is heavily dependent on partners’ perceptions and expectations (Lemay & Spongberg, 2014). Individuals tend to attribute the positive aspects of relationships to themselves and many of the negative aspects to their partner selection (Stephanou, 2012). Thus, when individuals struggle to maintain adequate romantic relationships, they may attribute it to their partner selection. Relationships characterized by discord and frustration can often lead to negative views and foster a negative view of long-term relationships or marriage (Simons et al., 2014; Simons et al., 2011). Previous relationships and experiences can establish partner expectations (Stephanou, 2012). Meeting intimate partner expectations can be a strong predictor of a relationship outcome (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2018). Falling below expectations can be detrimental to the longevity of a relationship and is associated with lowered commitment and satisfaction (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2018). With the current dating culture, some expectations

have changed over time. Young adults in the U.S. consume copious amounts of media, including media focused on romantic themes in movies, reality television, podcasts, and social media. Being inundated by these themes can give viewers a skewed expectation of romantic relationships (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018).

In addition to media influences, research has highlighted the importance of prototypical interaction patterns in shaping relational expectations. For instance, partners are expected to provide emotional support during difficult times, reciprocate affection, and maintain loyalty. Such patterns represent “best examples” of commitment in relationships, and their absence or violation can significantly harm relational satisfaction and stability (Hampel & Vangelisti, 2008). However, with these mounting expectations, individuals who are sensitive to rejection may approach romantic relationships in a more prevention-focused manner. These individuals may attempt to prevent or avoid harmful interactions and forgo relationships (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011). Additionally, research has shown that lowered expectations may be helpful in avoiding undesirable consequences. According to Zoppolat et al. (2019), if expectations are low, individuals may feel less likely to be disappointed. Notwithstanding, modern relationships that are inherently unrealistic can lead to poor relationship outcomes (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2017).

Romantic decisions and behaviors are often influenced by social networks as well (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2016). These relationships operate within a broader spectrum, consisting of an individual's family, friends, and associates. These social networks play a role in the foundation and persistence of romantic relationships, and gaining the approval of an individual's social network can help reduce uncertainty regarding relationships (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2016). In essence, the influence of social networks on romantic relationships is grounded in the broader psychological mechanisms of social influence. The need to comply with social norms drives individuals to seek alignment with their social circle's expectations (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2016).

Changes in the environment have influenced the culture of dating. Dating, interacting, and relationship building frequently happen online now. Castro and Barrada (2020) conducted a systematic review exploring the sociodemographic and psychosocial correlates of dating app usage. Their review categorized findings into user characteristics, motives for usage, and the associated benefits and risks of using dating apps. The researchers identified key trends, such as the popularity of dating apps like Tinder and Grindr among different demographics. With the rise of online dating and its ease of acquiring romantic partnerships, motives for seeking relationships have changed. Motives now may also include casual sex, relationship-seeking, and entertainment. Risks involved the negative effects on mental health and the increased likelihood of risky sexual behaviors. Benefits highlighted the apps' convenience for meeting potential partners. Van der Wal et al. (2023) explored different aspects of online dating and found that with the rise of online dating apps, men and women can emphasize the importance of their partners having similar values. Both studies concur that dating apps have signifi-

cantly reshaped social interactions and romantic relationships, making the online space rich for exploring and analyzing relationships.

Previous research indicates a shift in the African American community regarding the development and maintenance of romantic relationships (Bae & Kogan, 2020; Crissey, 2005; Kogan et al., 2013). Although research has shown that marriage is declining in America among many demographics, this is markedly evident in the African American community (Mouzon et al., 2020). In 1970, approximately 64% of adult African Americans were married. Currently, according to the American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau (2023), 31% of Black Americans are married, compared to 48% of the overall U.S. population. Furthermore, approximately 50% of African Americans have never been married, in contrast to 27.5% of White Americans and 34% of the total U.S. population. With declining marriage rates and increasing divorce rates since the turn of the millennium, the disproportionate decline in relationships may imply unique relationship challenges that African Americans face.

1.2. Complexities of African American Relations

Relationships and marital expectations can be influenced by several factors for African Americans, including financial issues, discriminatory experiences, childhood trauma, and community-related stressors. Financial instability has been associated with the health and viability of African American relationships (Bae & Kogan, 2020; Kogan et al., 2016; Weaver & Ganong, 2004). Due to reported economic distress, many young adults have felt the need to postpone or abandon the idea of marriage. For young African American men in particular, Kogan et al. (2016) found that being socioeconomically disadvantaged has a cascading effect that can prevent the formation of committed relationships in adulthood. Lincoln et al. (2008) examined nonmarital romantic unions among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks, highlighting that material hardship negatively impacted relationship satisfaction for both groups. The study found that expectations of marriage were lower among African American women, older participants, and those with lower incomes, while Caribbean Blacks with higher incomes and prior marital experience had higher expectations of marriage. Relationship longevity was positively associated with age and parental status but was hindered by dissatisfaction among Caribbean Blacks. These findings underscore the importance of addressing financial hardships and cultural factors that shape nonmarital unions. Mouzon et al. (2020) explored romantic involvement among older African Americans and found significant gender differences in marital and relationship statuses. African American men were more likely to be married or romantically involved, while older women, particularly those aged 75 and above, often lacked the desire for romantic involvement. The study connected these trends to caregiving responsibilities, particularly for African American women. The findings emphasize the economic and social implications of these patterns, particularly the heightened risk of poverty among unmarried older African American women. These trends

underscore the importance of policies that mitigate economic inequalities and health disparities to support older adults' romantic and social well-being. Focusing on emerging adulthood, [Bae and Kogan \(2020\)](#) identified three distinct romantic relationship trajectories among rural African American men: normative, uncertain, and conflictual. The study linked adverse childhood experiences and current stressors, such as community disadvantage and socioeconomic instability to less stable and supportive relationships. Defensive relational schemas were pivotal in shaping these trajectories, particularly in the uncertain and conflictual groups. These findings highlight the need for interventions that address cumulative adversity and promote relational health during critical developmental stages.

Racial discrimination can also take a toll on African American relationships, exacerbating the challenges of forming and maintaining romantic partnerships ([Bae & Kogan, 2020](#); [Kogan et al., 2013](#)). Moreover, the intersectionality of racial discrimination and financial strain intensifies relational challenges, leading to lower rates of marital satisfaction and higher instances of relationship instability ([Lincoln & Chae, 2010](#)). Research indicates that exposure to racial discrimination, coupled with economic hardship, undermines trust, satisfaction, and stability in romantic relationships ([Kogan et al., 2013](#); [Bryant et al., 2010](#)). Additionally, research indicates that a complex pattern of community-related stressors has a profound influence on developmental outcomes that are more likely to impact African Americans ([Kogan et al., 2013](#); [Kogan et al., 2016](#)). These stressors can range from neighborhood crime, public health problems such as COVID-19 or addiction issues, and environmental factors like noise and pollution ([American Psychological Association, 2023](#)). Exposure to deviance in communities can lead individuals to anticipate subpar treatment from individuals with whom they choose to pursue romantic relationships. Taken together, these studies highlight the complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and developmental factors influencing romantic relationships among African Americans across the lifespan. They emphasize the need for policies and interventions that address financial hardship, structural inequalities, and family dynamics to foster healthier and more supportive relationships.

Studies also show that caregiving practices and experiences during childhood can affect relationships. Parental practices observed during childhood influence how young adults shape their participation in and expectations of romantic relationships in adulthood ([Giordano et al., 2005](#); [Kogan et al., 2013](#)). [Simons et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Simons et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the long-term effects of childhood experiences on relational behaviors and attitudes among African Americans. [Simons et al. \(2011\)](#) showed that race-related adversities are linked to distrustful relational schemas, which foster troubled romantic relationships and negative perceptions of marriage. [Simons et al. \(2014\)](#) extended these findings by demonstrating how parenting styles (supportive and harsh) during childhood influenced their attachment style, anger management, and relationship behaviors in adulthood. Thus, the critical role of early-life experiences shapes relationship competencies and attitudes, advocating for interventions that target family dynamics and structural

inequalities to strengthen relationships. Samuels often spoke about many of these dynamics during his social media podcast shows, urging the callers and audience to reexamine their relationship expectations and understand the mutual benefits of relationship building.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

Among the social science theories on relationships that predict the quality and longevity of relationships, self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation that incorporates an individual's development, influences, and emphasizes autonomy (Hadden et al., 2014; Knee et al., 2013). Self-determination can be described as actions that are relatively autonomous and freely chosen (Knee et al., 2013). Self-determination places a strong emphasis on an individual's actions being congruent with one's beliefs and needs. It is an individual's reflective awareness of their needs that guides their behavior. Self-determination is a fundamental motivation for being in a romantic relationship with a partner (Knee et al., 2013). By including a romantic partner in their life journey, an individual can expand their resources, perspectives, and characteristics. A romantic partner's willingness to provide these attributes is an essential element in romantic relationships. However, individuals bring their own beliefs and assumptions about how a romantic relationship should develop. If the cost of investing in a romantic relationship does not equate to expectations, individuals will use their autonomy and not proceed. This idea is also shared with social exchange theory, wherein an individual's expectations are not met, and the romantic relationship ends abruptly (Mouzon et al., 2020).

1.4. Study Purpose

The goal of the present study is to qualitatively examine how Kevin Samuels' publicly available content reflects evolving views on gender roles, relationship value, and the structural conditions influencing romantic decision-making in the African American community. Using reflective thematic analysis, this study will explore the narratives embedded within Samuels' discourse and the sociocultural factors that contributed to his impact. We examined 1) how gendered expectations and power dynamics are articulated in modern heterosexual relationships, and 2) how Samuels' content reflects intersections of race, economic vulnerability, and generational trauma within the African American community. This study provides a foundation for addressing romantic relationship well-being among African Americans and contributes to the limited academic literature on influencer discourse in African American communities.

2. Methodology

The present study employed reflexive thematic analysis, a "Big-Q" qualitative approach, using archival data consisting of YouTube videos produced by Samuels and his interview participants. The primary objective was to reflexively analyze

Samuels' freeform monologues on the relationship landscape to identify underlying patterns, themes, and insights into romantic relationships.

2.1. Materials and Data Collection

The data source for this study consists of transcripts from Kevin Samuels' YouTube channel, which are publicly available and are classified as public domain. The interviews, originally broadcast for entertainment purposes, form the basis of the present analysis. The majority of the randomly selected interviews entail lengthy monologues from Samuels on the state of African American relationships and general relationship advice for younger and older adults wanting to establish and maintain healthy relationships. A total of 331 transcripts spanning the period from January 30, 2020, to May 4, 2022, were downloaded for random selection. Each episode was given a unique identifier. From this body of work, a random sample of 12 episodes was selected for reflexive thematic analysis. Given the narrow focus of the research inquiry, participant diversity (i.e., Samuels being the sole speaker over multiple broadcasts), the data richness provided in his commentary, and the reflexive thematic analysis's flexibility in creating meaning, the researchers settled on $N = 12$ random transcripts as the units of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Although reflexive thematic analysis is considered a Big-Q method that does not place high emphasis on strict sample size recommendations, typical thematic analysis studies recommend that 6 - 12 interviews are usually sufficient for theme saturation, as 70% saturation occurs with 6 interviews and over 90% saturation occurs with 12 interviews. Additionally, researchers Hennink and Kaiser (2022) determined that for qualitative research, 9 to 17 interviews are sufficient to reach saturation.

Table 1. List of live streamed episodes.

Date Aired [mm.dd.yyyy]	Episode Title
03.30.2022	Narcissistic Modern Women Are Driving Men Insane?
03.15.2022	Men Aren't Handling Women's Ish Today
12.15.2021	Why Do High-Value Men Get the Benefit of the Doubt?
11.17.2021	This Isn't Modern Women's Fault
07.21.2021	Where Do I Rank? Estimating Your Real Market Value
07.10.2021	Why Can't Modern Women Handle the Truth?
02.24.2021	A Man That Is "Equally Yoked"
12.09.2020	What in the World Is Going On?
11.27.2020	Do Modern Women Deserve High-Value Men?
10.22.2020	Do Women Fear Commitment?
09.23.2020	Black Women Are Wrong About Black Men...Or Are They?!
06.11.2020	B. Simone Doesn't Want a 9 - 5 Man Are Women Like Her Right or Wrong?

In full consideration of this, the researchers decided that 12 randomly selected episodes would be sufficient to reach sufficiency (i.e., saturation). A range of numbers from 1 to 331 was entered into Google Generate, which is a cloud-based, free software that can be used to generate random selections. Google Generate selected the following 12 episodes at random: 13, 20, 49, 61, 100, 105, 157, 185, 190, 214, 235, 297. The list of episodes is provided in **Table 1**. Samuels' monologues lasted approximately 20 - 25 minutes each.

For the present study, themes were developed through reflexive analysis using verbatim transcripts of Samuels' monologues. Thus, video-audio context, such as tone and visuals, was not analyzed. Regarding Samuels' monologues, the analytic purpose of the RTA procedure was to derive meaning from Samuels' verbal dialogue only. Non-verbal cues, such as body language and tonality, would be better suited for a different analytic framework and were not included as data points for the present study.

2.2. Design and Method

The researchers applied reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following **Braun and Clarke's (2023)** framework. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is a Big-Q methodology that utilizes the researchers' subjectivity as additional data that informs the findings (**Braun & Clarke, 2023**). Big-Q research involves qualitative interpretation of the data where knowledge is co-constructed, subjective, reflexive, and deeply interpretive (**Decision Analyst, n.d.**). Results, findings, and their interpretations are *developed* (by the researchers), as opposed to *discovered* or *emerging*.

For the present study, RTA was selected as the method of inquiry because it allows the researchers to interpret Samuels' overt messages and identify the underlying ideologies and power structures that shape them. It is also able to accommodate various theoretical frameworks. RTA emphasizes the importance of identities, privileges, and oppression when developing themes (**Roberts et al., 2019**). In RTA, themes are deliberately crafted through reflexive engagement with the data pieces (i.e., Samuels' monologue interviews, in this case). As part of the RTA process, the authors discussed how the content of these monologues might relate to *their* lived experiences and how their lived experiences, in turn, influence the RTA results. Both authors provided their perspectives throughout the research design and analysis. Thus, positionality statements are presented to acknowledge their identities and social backgrounds, commonly required for academic studies utilizing RTA as a method (**Robinson et al., 2025**).

2.3. Researchers' Positionality and Social Context

Damien Kelly, Ed.D. The first author (lead researcher) identifies as a Black, heterosexual cisgender man and is an independent researcher from Houston, TX, who has worked in social services for 20 years and within research institutions of higher education for 3+ years. My career has included roles such as case worker in public housing, director of a homeless youth drop-in center, and program di-

rector for rapid rehousing. Within university research institutions, I have co-led mixed-methods projects addressing mental health deserts and health disparities in BIPOC communities, while mentoring students and presenting findings at community forums. My work has consistently centered on community-based participatory research (CBPR) and equity-driven policy engagement. Born and raised in Houston, TX, I was raised in the Baptist church and later converted to Catholicism. I reflect on how my experiences with systemic racism, neighborhood disadvantage, and community reliance have informed my perspectives regarding the present study. These lived realities parallel much of my research, particularly in exploring the intersections of structural inequities, health, and family dynamics. Additionally, I am divorced, and my ex-wife and I share one daughter. In developing this study, I engaged in reflexive practices such as journaling and peer debriefing to bracket personal assumptions while recognizing my “insider-outsider” role as a Black man and independent researcher. I intended to amplify participant voices, link narratives to broader social determinants, and advance scholarship that fosters meaningful change and health equity for communities of color.

Chakema Carmack, Ph.D. The second (senior author) author identifies as a Black, heterosexual cisgender woman and is an associate professor in the counseling psychology Ph.D. program in Houston, TX. As an author and curator of the reflexive themes developed in this study, it is important to state that I am currently married with children, but dated sufficiently and happily during my emerging adulthood and young adulthood years. I was born and raised in the southern region of the United States and studied community psychology, statistics, and methodology at various institutions throughout the U.S. as an adult scholar. I am a trained community psychologist, and my early training focused on psychosocial theory validation for diverse populations. I have been involved in HIV prevention research and the psychosocial aspects of sexual behavior for over 15 years. Throughout this study, I drew upon my scholarly mission to influence meaningful change for communities of color that fosters a culture of sexual health and well-being. In developing this study, I reflected upon my dating years and my own expectations for a suitable mate. I reflected on how internal and external motivators may have influenced those expectations. I also reflected upon my maturity and growth regarding the characteristics I sought in romantic relationship partners.

2.4. Data Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis data analysis process consisted of six phases: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) systematic data coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) developing and reviewing themes, 5) refining/defining and naming themes, and 6) reporting. Data analysis began with the researchers listening to each monologue interview carefully while following along with the transcripts several times to familiarize themselves with the content and context of the monologues. The researchers used the transcripts to take notes about pieces of dialogue

that were of particular interest regarding the overall research inquiry. Due to the reflexive nature of the study, the researchers also noted any personal assumptions about the meaning of a particular piece of dialogue, noting familiar and unexpected points and their reactions to the dialogue's potential meaning.

RTA is a strictly non-positivist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Hayes, 2000). "Organic" coding was used to systematically code the data. Organic coding consisted of an inductive and iterative process where codes naturally emerge. This is in contrast to Small-Q qualitative methods in that the themes and codes are not predetermined or imposed on the data in advance. This is known in Big-Q methods as "letting your data speak for itself." In this, meaning arises through the researchers' engagement with the data. The researchers engaged in both semantic and latent coding (Braun & Clarke, 2023). A list of 19 codes was constructed along with their corresponding dialogue. The researchers inspected this list to ensure that it sufficiently captured the fundamental nature of the data as they observed it. The researchers studied the codes and dialogue and reflected upon their meanings, assumptions, and reactions. During RTA, the researchers used the following guiding questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Robinson et al., 2025): What worldview did the code and dialogue reflect; Was the meaning of codes/dialogue located within the speaker's world (e.g., a direct reflection of what the participant thinks) or was it an observation by the speaker about the social world; and What did the speaker's point of discussion make you think? The researchers engaged in robust note-taking and discussed their perspectives and experiences as they related to romantic relationships and partner-seeking. Themes were co-created between the researchers, considering our overarching inquiry to examine the evolving views on gender roles, relational value, and structural conditions that influence romantic decision-making in the African American community.

Listing codes and dialogue allowed the researchers to qualitatively combine similarly related codes. Similarly related codes were then grouped together. Upon this, five initial themes were developed, and spreadsheets, one per theme, were created as a thematic visual. This included the theme, associated codes, example dialogue, and episode identification. This allowed the researchers to validate the coded data alongside watching the episode again, hence the iterative nature of RTA. Developing the themes concluded with defining and naming the themes.

To support the coding process, ChatGPT 4.5 was used as an analytic aid. After transcripts were coded manually, codes were entered into the program with prompts to identify redundancies and recommendations for thematic labels. An example prompt included "with these four codes, make suggestions for overarching thematic labels," or "highlight areas where more codes may overlap in meaning or intent." All AI-generated outputs were treated as supplementary rather than primary results. These outputs were utilized for brainstorming thematic labels and were thoroughly discussed between the researchers. Discrepancies were discarded, ensuring that all final themes reflected human interpretation and reflexive deliberation, as opposed to simple algorithmic pattern recognition. This

multistage review process helped with triangulation and mitigated bias while maintaining cultural context.

Of note, reflexive thematic analysis does not typically lend itself to a strict set of codes, nor does it endorse positivist metrics of traditional thematic analysis, such as high inter-rater reliability. As inter-rater reliability is essentially a metric of the consistency and agreement of raters, it is not within the scope of reflexive thematic analysis to demonstrate this (Braun and Clarke, 2023; Carmack & LeFebvre, 2023). Rather, the researchers engaged in a total of three reflexive sessions to discuss their interpretations and how each researcher's point of view, expertise, and experience may have influenced their interpretation. By employing these methods, the study seeks to contribute a nuanced understanding of the perspectives and insights shared during Kevin Samuels' interviews, offering a systematic exploration of the themes embedded within this unique dataset.

3. Results

Through reflective analysis, we were able to create five overarching categories from 18 unique codes: 1) Power, Control, and Gender Dynamics, 2) Romantic Expectations for Marriage, 3) Race, Identity, and Structural Injustice, 4) Social Norms, Religion, and Cultural Beliefs, and 5) Mental Health, Healing, and Emotional Labor.

3.1. Theme 1 - Power, Control, and Gender Dynamics

This theme focused on relational power imbalances, gendered expectations, and critiques of modern relationship roles. Codes included Perceived Double Standards and Entitlement in Relationship Expectations, Narcissistic Behaviors and Relationship Dynamics, Perceived Competition within Romantic Relationships, Rejection of Performative Affirmation in Gender Discourse, Accountability and Consequences in Relationship Choices, and Perceived Sabotage of Relationship Progression.

Samuels spoke about tensions surrounding power dynamics and gender roles, reflecting a perceived shift or challenge in traditional relationship roles or expectations. In his observations, he noted relational dynamics where one partner, typically characterized as self-centered, dominates or emotionally destabilizes the other. This theme captured how modern relationship behavior may involve boundary violations and the manipulation or exploitation of partners. These behaviors are framed not as clinical diagnoses, but as observed patterns that contribute to instability, inconsistency, and psychological stress in romantic partnerships. Within the dialogue, we interpreted a belief that contemporary women may enter relationships with a sense of privilege or moral superiority, creating a double standard in how conflict and mistakes are handled. While modern women expect compassion, some are hypercritical of men, positioning this as a source of relational tension. It also reflected broader cultural anxieties around fairness, gender roles, and shifting power dynamics in intimate partnerships. Individuals (both

men and women) may hinder relationship progress for personal gain, reinforcing a narrative of codependency and manipulation. It also reflected expectations about support dynamics and self-interest in dating culture. This theme captured a rejection of gendered performativity, where men are expected to affirm and uplift women for commercial or social approval, not for [her] individual attributes but solely for her gender. It highlighted a counter-narrative positioning male advocacy alongside female-centric messaging. As Samuels explained:

Modern women today give themselves the benefit of the doubt too often in relationships. [Addressing his women audience.] You're walking into relationships entitled, privileged, and arrogant because you honestly expect someone to give you the benefit of the doubt when you are hypercritical of men.

Many of you ladies sit around and can't wait for him to do something wrong so you can say, "See, there it is!" but let you do something wrong, and you don't want to talk about it.

We've not even evolved to be able to survive without the group, so just because you can go get degree and a job, that doesn't make you happy. You can walk around smiling at brunch, but that ain't what makes women happy.

3.2. Theme 2 - Partner Expectations for Marriage

This category centers on ideals, aspirations, or frustrations related to dating, including modern standards and disillusionment with romance. Codes included in this category are Concept of the "High-Value Man" and Relationship Expectations, Marriage Ceiling and Its Impact on Social and Economic Mobility, Disillusionment with Independence and Societal Expectations, and Influence of Media on Perceived Relationship Narratives.

Samuels popularized the term "high-value man" as a culturally defined ideal in dating, typically associated with financial success, status, attractiveness, and social influence. Samuels engaged in an aspirational and critical examination of what constitutes "value" in men, as well as the expectations placed on women who seek such partners. Throughout the dialogue, expressions of frustration or dissatisfaction with the realities of financial independence, career obligations, and societal expectations were explored separately for the genders. The researchers interpreted messages of African American men and women being overworked, underappreciated, or struggling to balance work, relationships, and emotional fulfillment. He highlighted the impact or perceived impact of media portrayals (movies, books, television) on individuals' narratives or expectations about relationships, sometimes to the extent of overshadowing or exaggerating their own lived experiences.

Samuels also discussed the "marriage ceiling." The marriage ceiling refers to the perceived professional and social limitations placed on unmarried individuals, particularly in corporate settings. This involves the belief that married individuals receive preferential treatment in career advancement and social standing, while those who remain single face barriers to upward mobility. Although the term marriage ceiling is a recognized academic term, marriage often correlates with en-

hanced economic stability. This may reflect underlying biases suggesting that marriage is linked to perceived commitment and stability in professional circles, as it is in romantic relationships.

We don't like to talk about the economics. the money, the value, and that's why a lot of Black people are [upset with] me because I'm actually talking about value and asking what is yours?

I need you ladies to understand something. roughly ten percent of men in this country (I'm not even dealing with Black men) earn six figures or more, whether you think that's a good number or not is irrelevant. I have no problem with it. You can want what you want. I don't judge what people want. I just say what's the likelihood of getting it according to a lot of numbers. By saying you want a six-figure guy, that means she was saying 90% of men aren't good enough for her.

As Samuels advised one of his female callers who expressed her desire to couple with a six-figure-earning “high value man,”

What you're saying to most men is that if you are an average, hard-working, stand-up, everyday citizen, that you're bad. You're saying to men who are self-sustaining, functional, productive members of society, if they can't give you diamonds for breakfast that they're not they don't matter.

Although much of his direct advice was imparted to women on this particular platform, within his monologues, he would often address men also regarding their relationship value. For example, Samuels advised,

The one thing that men should value more than anything else is time. It's the equalizer. That's why you got the fox and the hare, the ant and the grasshopper, all these fables. Time, time, time. Talent is wasted every day, abilities are wasted every day. You think you're on top, you get comfortable, you get complacent, you get content. People watch how you spend your time, women watch how you spend your time.

3.3. Theme 3 - Social Norms, the Pandemic Pause, and Religion

This category captures relational messages influenced by spiritual values, social scripts, and broader societal commentary, including contemplations on how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced attitudes about coupling. Codes included in this category are Gender Roles, Submission, and Religious Expectations in Relationships; Importance of Social Connections and Community; and Affirmation of Male Self-Worth and Exceptionalism.

Throughout his dialogue, Samuels recognized social relationships and community engagement as essential aspects of personal fulfillment and well-being. The dialogue reinforced positive self-identity and self-worth among men, indicating the influencer's role in affirming or reshaping men's self-concept within the broader societal and romantic context. Traditionally, men were known as the “earners” in a relationship, and women were known for their caretaking. With women, particularly African American women, obtaining professional degrees at higher rates than their male counterparts, those labels are becoming more fluid in

the minds of emerging young adults. The social norms of traditional gender roles remain ingrained ideas in society; however, what is actually happening in society may not align with those traditional ideas. This may be intertwined with men's and women's expectations of the contribution of each partner in heterosexual relationships. Samuels spoke about men being "easier" to communicate with and the young adult women he observed to be disrespectful toward the value of good, so-called regular, men.

I see it now. We've got to start being honest about this. We are so uncoupled, and one of the big issues that I'm starting to notice is that most of my clients 90%+ of my clients— want to be married.

When you get the outcomes you get, you want somebody else to fix your image problem. Well, Black men, you need to fix your own image problem with your own women. That's another reason guys don't like me, because I've fixed the party image problem. I've made an image where these Black women will come talk. Black women ain't coming to talk to some of you guys.

The Black man's authority has been so diminished to where when a man is just speaking from an authority position, first you want to question who he is. I mean, I've actually had 20-year-old people talking to me like I'm their age. It doesn't matter my pedigree, my degree, whatever. It's like the level of disrespect and contempt for the Black male image is something that I often say, men, we gotta fix.

Samuels also connected the state of romantic relationships in the African American community to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed Samuels' social media platforms to increase in popularity and consumption due to people being home more, with some counties implementing stay-at-home orders. During this time, single, uncoupled individuals may have been faced with social isolation compared to their pre-pandemic social lifestyles. Many uncoupled men and women, particularly those considered middle-aged, may have had to reconcile with the loneliness of being uncoupled at a time when in-person social interaction was limited.

I better understand what's about to come. Gentlemen, if you are a man and you've been consistently employed during the pandemic, you are an asset that's only about to go up, up, up in value.

When the [COVID-19 pandemic] happened, and everybody was locked in, that's when women in our community finally had a chance to see what it's like to not to go to work all day and be distracted by a job, to not be able to go talk to or spend time with your girlfriends. They had to sit in their houses, their apartments, alone. And to the right, to the left of them, nothing [-referring to a romantic partner]. That's when this show took off.

Historically, research has indicated that religion continues to play a prominent role in the lived experiences of African Americans compared to other U.S. racial-ethnic sub-populations (Pew Research Center, 2021). As such, this theme also captured the intersection of religious doctrine and gender dynamics, emphasizing Biblical submission as a relational expectation for women. It reflected a belief that

romantic relationships should mirror spiritual principles, with men as leaders and women as followers within a faith-based framework.

[Addressing women:] A man is supposed to submit to God. You're supposed to submit to God and the man. A man is not supposed to "handle" you or "break" you. But if you start off asking about Christianity and Christ, and you have been with men before, how can you be with a man and never have submitted to a man?

One of the issues I tend to have with modern women, especially modern sisters [African American women] is, you use the Bible as a weapon against men with incomplete doctrine and feminist ideals.

3.4. Theme 4 - Race, Identity, and Structural Injustice

This category captured themes related to racial bias, intergenerational conflict, and systemic inequality affecting African American relationships and communities. Codes included in this category are Perceived Racial Bias in Societal Reactions to Violence, Black Trauma and Collective Memory, Intergenerational Conflict and the Deconstruction of Black Wealth, and Predictions of Economic Vulnerability and Homelessness.

Samuels often referenced past and present racial injustices, violence, and discrimination. He pointed to negative societal perceptions experienced collectively in African American communities, emphasizing how these experiences shape emotional responses, expectations, and interpretations of current lifestyles. Societal reactions and consequences regarding violence, including intimate partner violence, differ significantly based on race. In the U.S., harsher or more critical responses occur when the individual involved is an African American man. Racial injustice and structural discrimination highlight the growing economic instability, job insecurity, and homelessness in African American communities. This may be based on current social, political, or labor market trends. These predictions often focus on how economic shifts—such as government cutbacks or retail downsizing—will disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, especially African American men and women.

Everyone wants to look at the best-case scenario, but the worst case is what tends to happen when problems arise. This is why we are so quick to leave each other. We are disposable to one another in the Black community.

The federal government and retail are the two largest employers of Black women. The federal government is running out of money, and retail is in a free-fall, collapsing spiral. What are people who have been working these jobs for 10, 20, 30 years? What are they going to do if they lose those jobs? Ladies, it is time for the women who want to understand that you are not meant to be by yourself on this planet. You were meant to pair with a man and be fruitful and multiply.

The researchers noted expressions of frustration that Samuels has about generational influences. He discussed the perceptions that older generations (e.g., Baby Boomers) made financial or social decisions that contributed to the decline of generational wealth among African Americans. Although there are larger system-

atic influences that contribute to the decline of generational wealth, the researchers situated these statements in the context of partner-seeking among young adult African Americans. This included discussions of property loss, economic stagnation, and shifts in family or community structure, often framed as a departure from earlier economic and social progress.

My generation, Generation X: history is going to look back and say one of the greatest harms and one of the greatest lies ever perpetrated against a group people is going to be what feminism did to women of the West [Western countries]. The world is not meant for us to be single in our 40s and 50s.

Up until Baby Boomers, the black community was growing leaps and bounds. But... that's why Big Mama's house is gone. Because Mom and them sold it. Everything that the family had out of Jim Crow, the South, and slavery was liquidated.

Many of us are coming at each other from a scarcity, fear-based mindset. We don't know each other, we don't understand each other. So we're on heightened alert. I mean, for God's sake, the world has told you that I'm your enemy, and the world has told me that you're a horrible person, so there's no wonder why there's so much conflict. But it's time for us to decide who we are to each other.

3.5. Theme 5 - Mental Health, Healing, and Emotional Labor

This category centers on therapy, emotional self-awareness, and how past trauma influences present relationships. Codes include Advocacy for Mental Health Support and Emotional Baggage and Its Impact on Relationship Expectations.

Samuels remained a proponent of mental health and therapy, especially within the African American community. This theme highlighted the need for increased mental health awareness, support, and access to therapeutic interventions within the African American community. Samuels emphasized the stigma and silence surrounding mental health discussions among African Americans. He discussed how unresolved emotional experiences from past relationships influence present relationship dynamics. This could lead to anxiety, stress, and perceived inconsistencies in behavior. Expectations are placed on new partners to compensate for or rectify past experiences, which is not optimal for healthy romantic relationships.

That's why I say the first thing we all need is therapy. If you've never watched my panel, I say we all need therapy. He needs it, she needs it - for our daddy issues, with our mother issues. I am not perfect. I don't try to be perfect.

Women [are] traumatized from past relationships and what you think you see in the media. We got a lot of folks walking around with the inability to connect, and we got to start diagnosing that before we start [i.e., begin a committed relationship].

If it's clinical depression, that means it's a long-term condition that you're not responsible for. It's managed by medication. If it's short term, like many of us have had, you deal with it. There's no difference in having insulin; it's a condition we treat, but there are people who have long-term depression, and it still doesn't keep them from living a fit, active life.

Many people tend to think that therapy slows you down. No, no, no, no, no. Therapy speeds you up because you'll learn how to recognize opportunities and things like that, and learn how not to repeat mistakes [in relationships].

4. Discussion

The present study was conducted to understand the state of romantic relationships and coupling among African American adults and young adults within the African American community, via a popular social media influencer and professional image consultant, Kevin Samuels. Samuels, a sometimes polarizing internet influencer and image consultant, gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic by offering straightforward relationship advice that resonated with millions of viewers, particularly African American men and women. His commentary provided a rich, understudied archive for examining how race, gender, and socioeconomic concerns converge in contemporary dating discourse among this sub-population. Underlying critiques of structural inequality, racialized expectations, and intergenerational shifts in relational values and wealth retention can be observed throughout his relationship advice. Five reflexive themes were developed from a sample of his social media podcast show: 1) Power, Control, and Gender Dynamics, 2) Romantic Expectations for Marriage, 3) Race, Identity, and Structural Injustice, 4) Social Norms, Religion, and Cultural Beliefs, and 5) Mental Health, Healing, and Emotional Labor. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the present study is the first of its kind.

Samuels' influence stemmed from positioning himself as a counter-narrative authority figure who pointedly challenged the feminist-skewed mainstream relationship advice that indoctrinates women to 'not need a man.' Through reflexive thematic analysis techniques, the present study explored how gendered expectations and power dynamics are articulated in modern relationships. Samuels often framed partner-seeking with a focus on developing a positive male identity and perceptions of "relationship value" in heterosexual relationships. It reflected a current gender value system that positioned men's relationship worth in terms of economic success, dominance, and the ability to provide, while critiquing women's perceived entitlement and unreasonable, although mainstream, expectations. These dynamics resonate with prior findings that being a socioeconomically disadvantaged African American man can undermine the development of committed partnerships (Kogan et al., 2016). Samuels' insistence on linking men's value to economic productivity and women's desire for "high-value men" mirrors earlier scholarship on how financial strain delays or disrupts marriage (Lincoln et al., 2008).

Five themes were developed in this research that align with Self-Determination Theory (SDT): *Power, Control, and Gender Dynamics, Partner Expectations for Marriage, Social Norms, Religion, and Cultural Beliefs, Race, Identity, and Structural Injustice, Mental Health, Healing, and Emotional Labor*. Specifically, Samuel's discourse revealed how these themes can shape how the African American

community frames relationships. Notwithstanding, codes such as value, accountability, and relational reciprocity are not unique to SDT and can be found in other social behavioral theories. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate that African American relationship expectations can be viewed as both volitional (i.e., of one's own free will), yet volatile (i.e., liable to change rapidly and unpredictably, particularly for the worse).

Prior ideals of relationships, particularly those associated with mid-20th-century America, often invoked the 1950s suburban aesthetic: a single-income household, homeownership, a stay-at-home mother with the option of outside work, and financial stability sufficient to support two cars in the driveway. Yet this ideal was never universally attainable. Access to such stability varied greatly across geographic regions, racial and ethnic groups, and socioeconomic classes. In many communities of color, it was never a realistic option. Additionally, the buying power that once sustained such a lifestyle has since declined, with affordable housing and single-income households (i.e., stay-at-home moms) becoming increasingly rare, indicating that there has been a cultural shift in dating and relationships. This can be seen throughout themes 1 and 3 (*Power, Control, and Gender Dynamics and Race, Identity, and Structural Injustice*).

Regarding theme 2 (*Romantic Expectations for Marriage*), many who reference these prior relationship ideals do so not from lived experiences but through images consumed in film, television, or social media, which romanticize a brief and selective moment in U.S. history. In contrast, contemporary relationships unfold in a context transformed by civil rights gains, women's labor force participation, and technological change. These shifts have produced both new opportunities and new complexities. Norms once taken for granted, such as who should pay on a first date, now spark viral debates online, suggesting that while progress has expanded individual choice, it has also introduced heightened negotiation around even mundane aspects of dating. In this sense, modern relationships contrast with prior ideals not only because structural conditions have changed but because social discourse itself now magnifies and complicates expectations.

Theme 5, *Mental Health, Healing, and Emotional Labor*, entailed rich advice for mental health advocacy and for consolidating personal trauma that can damage otherwise decent and productive relationships. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for and utilization of therapy have risen sharply across the United States. Prolonged social isolation, financial strain, and health uncertainties have contributed to heightened rates of anxiety, depression, and stress, particularly among low-income families (Kelly & Carmack, 2025). Within this context, Kevin Samuels's commentary is notable for its consistent advocacy of therapy, particularly for African Americans, a population for whom mental health treatment has historically been stigmatized. He emphasized that unresolved issues, ranging from childhood trauma to prior relational disappointments, should be addressed through professional counseling rather than carried into future partnerships. In this framing, therapeutic interventions were as essential to relational

well-being as physical health care is to bodily well-being. This emphasis on healing also reflects family process research, which links early childhood trauma and negative parental styles to troubled adult relationships (Simons et al., 2014). By advocating therapy, Samuels was able to echo scholarly calls for interventions that address these intergenerational patterns of trauma. Furthermore, his affirmations of African American male self-worth underscored the importance of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-awareness as foundational to healthy coupling. This theme aligns with the goals of marriage and family counseling, which aim not only to repair distressed relationships but also to equip individuals and couples with the tools to foster resilience, improve communication, and build sustainable relational bonds. By situating therapy as both a personal necessity and a communal resource, Samuels contributed to the ongoing destigmatization of mental health treatment within African American communities.

For emerging adults, these findings highlight the complex negotiations involved in decisions to couple or remain uncoupled. This can be observed within the *Romantic Expectations for Marriage* theme and the *Social Norms, Religion, and Cultural Beliefs* theme developed from the research. On one hand, the cultural emphasis on “high value” partners and elevated expectations around financial stability, education, and social status create standards that many cannot realistically meet. This raises barriers for those who aspire to marry, as the mismatch between idealized partner expectations and everyday realities can generate frustration, delay commitment, or foster disillusionment. On the other hand, refusing to couple is not without its own constraints. Particularly in the African American community, cross-cutting social ties make complete disconnection from family or community networks impractical, and low marriage rates mean that opting out of relationships may further limit already scarce opportunities for partnership. Emerging adults may therefore feel “trapped” between unrealistic standards of value and the structural realities of race, economics, and community reliance. For some, this tension results in delaying or abandoning long-term relationships; for others, it drives acceptance of imperfect or less satisfying unions. Ultimately, these dynamics underscore how coupling in emerging adulthood is not merely an individual preference but is shaped by cultural narratives, community obligations, and structural inequalities that collectively narrow the range of viable choices. These tensions mirror earlier observations in which African Americans, particularly young men, face fewer viable pathways to stable romantic unions due to socioeconomic and community stressors (Bae & Kogan, 2020). Samuels’ framing gave voice to these challenges in language his audience could directly recognize.

Faith and spirituality emerged as recurring data points in many of Kevin Samuels’ interviews. Callers often invoked their religious upbringing to excuse certain behaviors or to justify expectations around partnership. Concepts such as “submission” for women or “provision” for men were frequently framed through a Biblical or spiritual lens, reflecting the enduring influence of religious doctrine on relationship ideals in the African American community. For some, faith-based

frameworks reinforced traditional gender hierarchies, positioning men as heads of households and women as caretakers or supporters. This reflects the broader cultural importance of religiosity in African American life (Pew Research Center, 2021), while also underscoring tensions between traditional Biblical gender expectations and gender-neutral independence among individuals. These religiously anchored expectations often collided with the realities of modern relationships. As women increasingly pursue higher education and professional careers, their economic independence can challenge notions of so-called Biblical submission. Likewise, men facing systemic economic barriers may struggle to fulfill the role of sole provider, creating tension between spiritual ideals and lived realities. The findings suggest that spirituality continues to shape relational discourse as both a source of guidance and a site of conflict, offering comfort, meaning, and shared values while also amplifying debates over gender roles, authority, and equality in modern relationships.

4.1. Limitations and Future Research

Although the use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) provides a richness of interpretation through the lens of the researchers, it is not without limitations. RTA encourages flexibility in data interpretation, but with transparency about the researcher's role in conducting the research. However, RTA analyses are not generalizable to other samples or other researchers' interpretations. Rather, RTA findings are meant to lend narrative perspectives of a particular phenomenon based on the researchers' familiarity with the subject matter. It provides a means to further examine observed concepts, contexts, and relationships between/among the varying concepts presented therein. While ChatGPT-4.5 was used to contemplate thematic labeling, all AI-generated suggestions for thematic labeling were thoroughly reviewed, contextualized, and revised by the research team to uphold cultural sensitivity, theoretical coherence, and methodological rigor (Pinnick et al., 2023; Weigand et al., 2023). By transparently disclosing how AI was used and emphasizing that all final thematic labeling decisions and interpretative language were made by human researchers, we aim to maintain both interpretive depth and ethical responsibility in our methodology.

Only transcripts were analyzed for this study. During the initial viewing of the YouTube videos, the researcher noticed that many of the audience callers on Samuels' show chose to remain off camera and only made themselves visible to Samuels himself. This is a practice common to call-in shows using this format. Additionally, due to the popularity and/or controversial nature of the show, many of its viewers preferred to remain anonymous. Audio-visual cues, such as tone and body language, were not considered, as they were not relevant to the type and scope of the present study. This omission also mitigated the potential for bias in interpreting the results. Although qualitative research is subjective in nature, additional studies related to the video visuals of Kevin Samuels and his guests may be warranted if appropriate for future research investigation.

The decline in marriage rates and shifting relational dynamics within the Afri-

can American community highlight a growing need to understand how gender, race, and social media influence relationship expectations and cultural norms. Looking ahead, future studies may build upon this work by using triangulation through participant interviews, focus groups, or surveys to see how different audiences interpret and apply relationship advice across age, gender, and socioeconomic statuses. Comparative studies across social media influencers or public figures may also be useful, highlighting how differences in style, tone, or framing shape what resonates in African American communities. Longitudinal research could help us see how repeated exposure to these messages influences views on gender roles and partnering over time. Mixed-method approaches, combining experiments with qualitative follow-up, could further examine the pathways suggested by our themes. Finally, future work could also involve community advisory boards, ensuring that the findings reflect lived realities and can be used in ways that benefit the communities most impacted.

4.2. Conclusion

African American relations have continually evolved in response to the social, economic, and cultural conditions of America, and more recently, the rapid expansion of social media. While Kevin Samuel's detractors may view him as a provocateur, this analysis demonstrates how his commentary illuminated deeper truths about relationship dynamics and created spaces for open dialogue. Though social media has existed for decades, its influence on shaping cultural identity, relationship expectations, and community discourse is still emerging.

Among the many digital personalities populating YouTube, few have achieved the reach or cultural resonance of Kevin Samuels regarding relationship-seeking among African Americans. His dialogue struck a chord in a community longing for different perspectives. Combined with the timing of the COVID-19 shutdowns, popular discourse among young adults created a synergy that enabled Samuels to extend his reach past his intended African American audience, although his messages remain culturally centric. His meteoric rise underscores how influencer-based platforms can both mirror and mold contemporary understanding of mutual love, accountability, and well-being in African American life. Future research should continue to explore how online spaces can both mediate and shape cultural dialogue, relationship-seeking, and relationship quality.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the late Kevin Samuels, his family, and his participants for having the courage to engage in difficult conversations around relationships; Dr. T. Hassan Johnson for taking the time to meet with the research team; and the inspiration attained through Introspective Black Men of Reform.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- American Psychological Association (2023). *Stress in America 2023*. American Psychological Association.
<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2023/collective-trauma-recovery>
- Bae, D., & Kogan, S. M. (2020). Romantic Relationship Trajectories among Young African American Men: The Influence of Adverse Life Contexts. *Journal of Family Psychology, 34*, 687-697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000645>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Is Thematic Analysis Used Well in Health Psychology? A Critical Review of Published Research, with Recommendations for Quality Practice and Reporting. *Health Psychology Review, 17*, 695-718.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2022.2161594>
- Bryant, C. M., Wickrama, K. A. S., Bolland, J., Bryant, B. M., Cutrona, C. E., & Stanik, C. E. (2010). Race Matters, Even in Marriage: Identifying Factors Linked to Marital Outcomes for African Americans. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 2*, 157-174.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2010.00051.x>
- Carmack, H. J., & LeFebvre, L. E. (2023). Narrative Mapping in Relational Research: Visualizing the Catching Feelings Process. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 25*, 78-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17459435.2023.2239827>
- Castro, Á., & Barrada, J. R. (2020). Dating Apps and Their Sociodemographic and Psychosocial Correlates: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*, 6500. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186500>
- Cionea, I. A., Van Gilder, B. J., Hoelscher, C. S., & Anagondahalli, D. (2018). A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Expectations in Romantic Relationships: India and the United States. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 12*, 289-307.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2018.1542019>
- Crissey, S. R. (2005). Race/Ethnic Differences in the Marital Expectations of Adolescents: The Role of Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 67*, 697-709.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00163.x>
- Decision Analyst (n.d.). Large-Scale Qualitative (or “Big Qual”). *Decision Analyst*.
<https://www.decisionanalyst.com/qualitative/bigqual/>
- Etcheverry, P. E., & Agnew, C. R. (2016). Predictors of Motivation to Comply with Social Referents Regarding One’s Romantic Relationship. *Personal Relationships, 23*, 214-233.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12121>
- Giordano, P. C., Manning, W. D., & Longmore, M. A. (2005). The Romantic Relationships of African American and White Adolescents. *The Sociological Quarterly, 46*, 545-568.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2005.00026.x>
- Hadden, B. W., Rodriguez, L. M., Knee, C. R., & Porter, B. (2014). Relationship Autonomy and Support Provision in Romantic Relationships. *Motivation and Emotion, 39*, 359-373. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-014-9455-9>
- Hampel, A. D., & Vangelisti, A. L. (2008). Commitment Expectations in Romantic Relationships: Application of a Prototype Interaction-Pattern Model. *Personal Relationships, 15*, 81-102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2007.00186.x>
- Hayes, N. (2000). *Doing Psychological Research: Gathering and Analyzing Data*. Open University Press.
- Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample Sizes for Saturation in Qualitative Research: A Systematic Review of Empirical Tests. *Social Science & Medicine, 292*, Article 114523.

- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Kelly, D., & Carmack, C. (2025). Addressing Mental Health Deserts: A Geographic and Economic Analysis of Mental Health Service Gaps in Houston. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13, Article 1571183. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1571183>
- Knee, C. R., Hadden, B. W., Porter, B., & Rodriguez, L. M. (2013). Self-Determination Theory and Romantic Relationship Processes. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 17, 307-324. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868313498000>
- Kogan, S. M., Lei, M., Grange, C. R., Simons, R. L., Brody, G. H., Gibbons, F. X. et al. (2013). The Contribution of Community and Family Contexts to African American Young Adults' Romantic Relationship Health: A Prospective Analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42, 878-890. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-013-9935-3>
- Kogan, S. M., Yu, T., & Brown, G. L. (2016). Romantic Relationship Commitment Behavior among Emerging Adult African American Men. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78, 996-1012. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12293>
- Lemay, E. P., & Sponberg, K. (2014). Perceiving and Wanting to Be Valued by Others: Implications for Cognition, Motivation, and Behavior in Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Personality*, 83, 464-478. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12122>
- Lincoln, K. D., & Chae, D. H. (2010). Stress, Marital Satisfaction, and Psychological Distress among African Americans. *Journal of Family Issues*, 31, 1081-1105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x10365826>
- Lincoln, K. D., Taylor, R. J., & Jackson, J. S. (2008). Romantic Relationships among Unmarried African Americans and Caribbean Blacks: Findings from the National Survey of American Life. *Family Relations*, 57, 254-266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00498.x>
- Mouzon, D. M., Taylor, R. J., & Chatters, L. M. (2020). Gender Differences in Marriage, Romantic Involvement, and Desire for Romantic Involvement among Older African Americans. *PLOS ONE*, 15, e0233836. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233836>
- Pew Research Center (2021). *Faith among Black Americans*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/>
- Pinnick, A., Groves, M., & Greenhalgh, T. (2023). *Reflections on Using ChatGPT for Qualitative Research Coding: Promise and Pitfalls*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2311.03999>
- Roberts, K., Dowell, A., & Nie, J. B. (2019). Attempting Rigour and Replicability in Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Research Data; A Case Study of Codebook Development. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19, Article No. 66. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0707-y>
- Robinson, T. A., Coleman, T. M., & Carmack, C. (2025). "Your Sexuality Is Yours and Yours Alone": A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Sexual Orientation Microaggressions and Their Impact on LGB Emerging Adults' Sexual Health Knowledge and Attitudes. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13, Article 1522751. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1522751>
- Simons, L. G., Simons, R. L., Landor, A. M., Bryant, C. M., & Beach, S. R. H. (2014). Factors Linking Childhood Experiences to Adult Romantic Relationships among African Americans. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 28, 368-379. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036393>
- Simons, R. L., Simons, L. G., Lei, M. K., & Landor, A. M. (2011). Relational Schemas, Hostile Romantic Relationships, and Beliefs about Marriage among Young African American Adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 29, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511406897>
- Stephanou, G. (2012). Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood: Perception-Part-

- ner Ideal Discrepancies, Attributions, and Expectations. *Psychology*, *3*, 150-160. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2012.32023>
- US Census Bureau (2023). American Community Survey (ACS). *Census.gov*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>
- Van der Wal, R. C., Litzellachner, L. F., Karremans, J. C., Buitter, N., Breukel, J., & Maio, G. R. (2023). Values in Romantic Relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *50*, 1066-1079. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231156975>
- Vannier, S. A., & O'Sullivan, L. F. (2017). Passion, Connection, and Destiny. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *34*, 235-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407516631156>
- Vannier, S. A., & O'Sullivan, L. F. (2018). Great Expectations: Examining Unmet Romantic Expectations and Dating Relationship Outcomes Using an Investment Model Framework. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *35*, 1045-1066. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517703492>
- Weaver, S. E., & Ganong, L. H. (2004). The Factor Structure of the Romantic Beliefs Scale for African Americans and European Americans. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *21*, 171-185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407504041373>
- Weigand, K., Foth, M., & Bilandzic, M. (2023). *Large Language Models and the Risks of Automating Qualitative Coding: An Analysis of Bias, Opacity, and Accountability*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2309.17147>
- Winterheld, H. A., & Simpson, J. A. (2011). Seeking Security or Growth: A Regulatory Focus Perspective on Motivations in Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*, 935-954. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025012>
- Zoppolat, G., Visserman, M. L., & Righetti, F. (2019). A Nice Surprise: Sacrifice Expectations and Partner Appreciation in Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *37*, 450-466. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519867145>