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Exploring the Impact of Internalized Negative Stereotypes on Black Women's Identity Development, Mental Health, and Resilience

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ABSTRACT: *Black women in the United States face unique psychological burdens shaped by internalized racialized gender stereotypes, particularly the "Strong Black Woman" and "Angry Black Woman" schemas. These narratives demand emotional suppression and hypervigilance, contributing to chronic stress and identity fragmentation. This study aimed to explore how young adult Black women experience, internalize, and resist these stereotypes in everyday life. A descriptive phenomenological design was used to capture the lived experiences of 15 self-identified Black women aged 18 to 35 from the Southeastern and Southwestern U.S. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed using a six-phase thematic analysis process supported by NVivo 15. Five core themes emerged: emotional self-censorship, institutional bias, cultural reclamation, psychological strain, and resistance through boundaries and community. A co-occurrence matrix revealed strong interconnections between stereotype internalization, emotional regulation, and identity redefinition. Participants reported both psychological distress and strategies for resilience, including therapy, peer support, and cultural affirmation. These findings underscore the clinical and institutional need for culturally responsive, identity-affirming interventions. This study contributes new insights into how Black women assert agency and redefine strength amid ongoing systemic pressures.*

Key words*: Black women, coping, identity development, intersectionality, mental health, racialized gender stereotypes.*

1. Introduction

Black women in the United States navigate intersecting systems of oppression that shape their psychological well-being, emotional expression, and identity development. Two dominant stereotypes, the "Strong Black Woman" (SBW) and the "Angry Black Woman" (ABW), play a critical role in this dynamic. These racialized gender narratives, while distinct in tone, converge in their demand for emotional control and self-surveillance. The SBW schema idealizes stoicism and self-sacrifice, while the ABW trope penalizes assertiveness and emotional expression (Davis & Jones, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2022). Together, they constrain authenticity and impose psychological burdens often misunderstood in clinical and institutional settings (Liao et al., 2020; Watson & Henderson, 2023).

The internalization of these stereotypes has been linked to emotional suppression, chronic stress, and identity fragmentation (Moody et al., 2023; Nelson et al., 2024). These effects are particularly salient during young adulthood, a period marked by career formation, relational development, and increased navigation of social systems (Erving et al., 2022; Spates et al., 2020). Despite growing attention to stereotype threat and gendered racism, limited research has examined how Black women interpret and resist these narratives in everyday life (Williams & Lewis, 2021).

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Intersectionality Theory offers a valuable lens to examine how overlapping racial and gender identities produce unique forms of psychological strain (Crenshaw, 1991). Rather than framing internalized stereotypes as intrapsychic flaws, this framework emphasizes how systemic expectations reward emotional regulation and penalize deviation from normative emotional scripts. While emerging literature has highlighted protective strategies such as therapy, digital advocacy, and peer support (McCluney et al., 2021; Pérez-Torres, 2024), few studies foreground the lived experiences of Black women as a source of insight and resistance.

This study addresses that gap by exploring how young adult Black women experience internalized racialized gender stereotypes and how those experiences shape their emotional well-being and identity development.

2. Method and Materials

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in Husserlian principles (Crabtree & Miller, 2023), to explore how Black women experience internalized racialized gender stereotypes and their influence on identity and psychological well-being. The design emphasized bracketing of researcher assumptions, reduction of interpretive bias, and a focus on capturing the essence of lived experience. Although informed by Black feminist thought, interpretation was restrained to participant meaning as expressed, not inferred. (Collins, 2000). The approach was intentionally non-extractive, focusing on relational understanding rather than abstract theorizing and seeking to foreground Black women's strategies to navigate, resist, and reframe societal expectations.

3. Participants

Fifteen self-identified Black women between 18 and 35 participated in this study. This age range was selected to capture critical life transitions during which identity development, career formation, and systemic navigation often intensify. Participants represented two regions in the U.S., the Southeast and Southwest, and came from various educational and professional backgrounds. While developmental differences between emerging adulthood (18–25) and early adulthood (26–35) were observed (greater digital advocacy among younger participants and increased workplace boundary-setting among older participants), the analytic focus remained on shared lived experiences across the young adult spectrum. This allowed for exploring how racialized gender expectations manifest and are negotiated across educational, relational, and occupational domains.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling using professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn. Inclusion criteria required that participants (a) self-identify as Black women, (b) demonstrate awareness of societal narratives such as the “Strong Black Woman” (SBW) or “Angry Black Woman” (ABW) stereotypes, and (c) be willing to reflect on personal experiences related to emotional well-being, identity, and stereotype internalization. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new themes or significant variations emerged in subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Saturation was observed after 13 interviews, with two additional interviews conducted to confirm thematic consistency.

No experimental or comparative design was implemented, consistent with the study’s phenomenological emphasis. The design sought to elevate participant narratives rather than test hypotheses or impose predefined categories. The constructivist orientation of this research enabled meaning to emerge through dialogue, co-construction, and reflexive interpretation. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit narratives related to internalized stereotypes, emotional regulation, identity development, and resistance strategies. Open-ended questions encouraged depth and flexibility, with follow-up prompts tailored to each participant’s language and lived reality. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted 45 to 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Verbatim transcripts were generated and anonymized using participant codes.

All participants received informed consent documents before participation and were briefed on the purpose and voluntary nature of the study. Data collection occurred over six weeks. The virtual format increased accessibility, particularly for participants balancing work and family demands. During interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect freely, and several described the process as affirming and therapeutic, a reflection of the study’s relational intent. The primary researcher identifies as a Black woman with lived experience navigating the same sociocultural narratives under investigation. This insider standpoint shaped

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access and interpretation, enabling deep rapport while necessitating intentional reflexivity. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to track assumptions, analytic decisions, and emotional responses. Bracketing was used to distinguish participant meaning from researcher projection, and peer debriefing with a culturally responsive qualitative mentor enhanced transparency. The study's design reflects a commitment to research with, not on, Black women, consistent with Black feminist methodologies that center on relational ethics, resistance to erasure, and the honoring of emotional truth.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and synthesis. NVivo 15 software supports data management and code organization. The analysis focused on explicit descriptions shared by participants, with efforts to minimize researcher interpretation. Themes reflect shared structures of experience rather than inferred meaning. Code comparison techniques explored interconnections between key domains, such as identity, emotion, and coping. A pattern matrix was developed to trace how frequently major themes co-occurred, illuminating key intersections between stereotype internalization, psychological distress, and acts of resistance.

Multiple strategies were employed to ensure cultural and ethical rigor. Member checks were conducted with five participants, all of whom affirmed the accuracy and resonance of the thematic interpretations. The thick description of participant language and context enhanced transparency and transferability. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained a commitment to relational accountability, recognizing participants not as data sources but as co-constructors of knowledge. The study was reviewed and approved by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB #01-08-25-1022134), and all participants gave informed consent. The research process was guided by principles of justice, respect, and cultural affirmation, foundational to ethical inquiry and community-centered scholarship.

4. Results

This study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 15, to examine the lived experiences of 15 Black women navigating internalized racialized gender stereotypes. The analysis emphasized participant voice, inductive coding, and iterative theme development. Through close engagement with interview transcripts, codes were clustered into five conceptually rich, interrelated themes:

1. Internalized stereotypes and emotional self-censorship
2. Racialized gendered experiences in professional and academic spaces
3. Identity development through cultural reclamation
4. Psychological distress and emotional fatigue
5. Coping and resistance strategies rooted in community and self-definition

These themes co-occurred across narratives, revealing how participants simultaneously navigated emotional suppression and empowered resistance.

4.1. Participant Profile and Sociocultural Context

Participants represented diverse educational, regional, and employment backgrounds. Younger participants (18–25) often emphasized digital activism and peer solidarity, while older participants (26–35) described workplace boundary-setting and emotional exhaustion. These age-related patterns provided context for understanding how stereotype internalization varied across developmental and professional settings.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Demographic Category	Subcategory	n
Region	Southeast (AL, GA, KY, LA, SC)	11
	Southwest (TX, AZ)	4
Age Range	18–25	9
	26–35	6
Education Level	Some college	10
	Bachelor's degree	5
Employment Status	Full-time	5
	Part-time	8
	Student	1
	Unemployed	1

These demographic patterns reinforced key thematic findings, particularly how developmental context, cultural pride, and racial identity salience influence the ways Black women interpret and resist internalized stereotypes.

4.2. Thematic Insights and Participant Narratives

Participants described the emotional labor of managing external perceptions shaped by the SBW and ABW stereotypes. Many reported early socialization to monitor tone, volume, and affect to avoid being labeled "too emotional" or "too angry." These strategies often led to anxiety, self-doubt, and interpersonal strain. Despite these burdens, women identified acts of resistance, such as therapy, cultural pride, and peer support, as essential for reclaiming emotional authenticity and redefining personal strength.

Table 2. Emergent Themes and Illustrative Quotes.

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quote
Internalized Stereotypes	Angry Black Woman	"I'm cautious when expressing frustration…"
	Strong Black Woman	"People assume I can handle everything…"
Mental Health Impact	Burnout and Fatigue	"I feel depleted but push through…"
Coping and Resistance	Community Support	"Being with other Black women helps me feel seen."
Identity Development	Redefining Strength	"I don't want strength to be my only trait."

4.3. Intersections and Co-Occurrences Patterns

Themes did not emerge in isolation but in dynamic interaction. For instance, internalized expectations around emotional restraint were tightly linked to experiences of workplace tone policing. Conversely, identity redefinition was frequently associated with access to affirming spaces and collective healing.

Table 3. Co-Occurrence of Core Themes.

Theme Interaction	Description
Internalized Stereotypes × Mental Health	Negative schemas contributed to emotional suppression, anxiety, and burnout.
Identity Development × Coping Strategies	Active identity work reduced stereotype stress and supported resilience.
Workplace Experiences × Emotional Regulation	Professional settings often trigger monitoring and fatigue.
Cultural Identity × Resistance	Cultural pride supported self-definition and empowerment.
Public Perception × Self-Concept	External stereotypes shaped internal narratives and relational engagement.

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5. Discussion

The following section interprets these findings about existing literature and theory, offering a critical analysis of how internalized racialized gender stereotypes affect psychological well-being and identity development among Black women.

This study highlights the lived emotional costs of the SBW and ABW schemas. Participants described the burden of constantly regulating emotional expression to maintain social acceptability and safety. These pressures led to emotional suppression, perfectionism, and chronic fatigue, experiences that are frequently misread as personality traits rather than adaptive responses to systemic demands (Liao et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2022).

Participants intentionally resisted through therapy, community solidarity, and cultural reclamation. These strategies facilitated narrative shifts, from survival to self-definition, underscoring the resilience embedded in emotional truth-telling. While earlier studies have identified stereotype conformity as a predictor of distress, this research illuminates how Black women actively reinterpret and resist harmful narratives in relational and sociocultural contexts.

Clinically, these findings reinforce the need for culturally attuned and intersectionality-informed practice. Emotional guardedness should not be pathologized but understood as protective and contextually informed. Identity-affirming interventions can help clients name and challenge internalized scripts that reinforce silence, self-blame, and emotional erasure (Erving et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021).

At the institutional level, workplaces and academic settings must address tone policing, emotional labor demands, and cultural invisibility. Psychological safety, not just representation, is essential to reducing stereotype-driven stress. Training programs should integrate these realities into counselor and clinician preparation, ensuring future providers can recognize, validate, and respond to the racialized emotional labor of Black women (Watson & Henderson, 2023; Williams & Lewis, 2021).

By centering the voices of Black women, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of identity negotiation within oppressive systems. It calls for a therapeutic paradigm shift that affirms complexity, centers narrative agency, and redefines strength on the terms of those most impacted.

Conclusion

This study offers critical insight into how young adult Black women experience and resist internalized racialized gender stereotypes. A descriptive phenomenological approach reveals how the “Strong Black Woman” and “Angry Black Woman” schemas shape emotional expression, identity development, and psychological well-being. Participants articulated the emotional toll of self-monitoring and stereotype conformity, highlighting pathways to resilience through cultural pride, community support, and self-definition (McCluney et al., 2021; Spates et al., 2020).

These findings underscore the need for culturally responsive, identity-affirming mental health interventions that acknowledge the lived realities of Black women. Clinicians, educators, and institutional leaders must recognize emotional suppression not as dysfunction, but as an adaptive response to systemic pressures. Effective care requires centering the narratives of those most impacted and dismantling environments that pathologize their survival strategies (Collins, 2000).

Ultimately, liberation from internalized oppression begins with validating emotional truth and creating space for narrative reclamation. By elevating the voices of Black women, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship committed to equity, cultural accountability, and psychological justice.

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