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This project looks at how African American women teachers are treated in today's schools and colleges, especially when they are disciplined or criticized for their appearance or behavior. Many schools describe themselves as fair and equal spaces. However, ideas about what is "professional," "appropriate," or "proper" are often shaped by race and gender. Because of this, Black women teachers are often watched more closely and judged more harshly than their White coworkers. They may be criticized for their clothing, tone of voice, hairstyles, or body shape in ways that go beyond written policies.

The main research object for this study is a viral TikTok video showing an African American teacher who received backlash and disciplinary action because of the outfits she wore to work. A related YouTube video that explains and debates the controversy will also be analyzed. These online videos serve as modern case studies. They help show how school discipline and public opinion come together to police and judge Black women's bodies.

This project is guided by the following research questions:

- How does intersectionality influence the disciplinary treatment of African American teachers in education?

- In what ways do historical representations of Black women, exemplified by Sarah Baartman, inform modern perceptions of professionalism?
- How do viral TikTok and YouTube narratives contribute to the public policing of African American teachers' bodies?
- What does the backlash against Black educators reveal about the persistence of respectability politics in educational institutions?

This study is important because it connects what is happening today to history. Many scholars have studied intersectionality, discrimination in education, and respectability politics. However, fewer researchers have clearly shown how historical images of Black women's bodies still shape modern ideas of professionalism—especially in the age of social media, where videos can go viral and reach millions of viewers. By bringing these ideas together, this project adds to discussions in Black feminist theory, education studies, and cultural studies.

The foundation of this project is intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw explains that Black women experience discrimination in ways that cannot be understood by looking at race or gender separately. Instead, racism and sexism work together at the same time. This means that Black women face unique forms of discrimination that are different from those faced by Black men or White women.

Intersectionality helps explain why school discipline may seem neutral but still affect Black women differently. For example, a dress code might not mention race or gender. However, how it is enforced may reflect hidden biases.

Patricia Hill Collins builds on this idea in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins introduces the idea of “controlling images,” which are stereotypes used to define Black women. These include images like the hypersexual “Jezebel” or the loud and aggressive “Sapphire.” These stereotypes influence how people see and judge Black women in professional spaces. If a Black woman’s body is already seen as “too sexual” or “too loud,” she may be judged unfairly even when she follows the rules.

In more recent work, Moya Bailey introduces the term “misogynoir,” which describes the specific hatred directed toward Black women, especially online. Bailey shows how social media platforms often amplify racist and sexist comments. This idea is especially important for this project because the teacher’s discipline became part of a viral online discussion.

Together, these scholars show that Black women’s experiences in professional spaces are shaped by overlapping systems of race, gender, and power. However, while intersectionality has been widely studied in law and sociology, fewer studies apply it directly to viral dress code controversies involving educators. This project helps fill that gap.

Many scholars argue that professionalism is not neutral. Instead, it reflects white, middle-class standards. Gloria Ladson-Billings explains that schools often reproduce inequality while

claiming to be fair. Rules about behavior and dress may appear equal, but they are often based on cultural norms that center whiteness.

Research shows that Black women teachers are often judged more harshly in areas that are subjective, such as “attitude,” “tone,” or “professional appearance.” These categories leave room for personal bias. For example, natural hairstyles or curvier body types may be viewed as unprofessional even when they do not break official rules.

Scholars also argue that professionalism is tied to ideas of modesty and restraint. Since Black women’s bodies have historically been stereotyped as excessive or overly sexual, they may be more likely to be seen as inappropriate—even when wearing the same clothing as others.

This research shows that discrimination in education is systemic. However, many studies focus on policy or statistics and do not connect modern discipline to historical images of Black women’s bodies. This project brings those two conversations together.

Respectability politics was first explained by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. She showed how Black communities encouraged modest behavior and dress in order to fight racist stereotypes. While this strategy helped protect communities, it also created strict rules about how Black women should behave.

Today, respectability politics still affects how Black women are judged. Clothing, hairstyles, and body shape are often connected to ideas about morality and character. When Black women are seen as not fitting narrow standards of modesty, they may be labeled unprofessional.

On social media, respectability politics becomes public. Comment sections often debate whether a Black woman's outfit is "appropriate." These conversations show how ideas about professionalism and morality are deeply connected. Although respectability politics has been widely studied in history and politics, fewer scholars have looked at how it appears in viral school-related controversies. This project examines how respectability politics operates both in school discipline and in online commentary.

The story of Sarah Baartman provides historical background for this study. In the 1800s, Baartman was displayed in Europe as the "Hottentot Venus." Her body was treated as a spectacle and used to support racist ideas about Black women being hypersexual or physically excessive. Scholars argue that Baartman's treatment helped shape long-lasting stereotypes about Black women's bodies. These stereotypes did not disappear; they changed form over time. Instead of public exhibitions, modern institutions use rules, policies, and public judgment to regulate Black women's bodies.

While today's schools are not the same as 19th-century exhibitions, similar patterns of hypervisibility and scrutiny continue. This historical connection helps explain why Black women

educators may still be judged through stereotypes rooted in the past. This study uses intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, as its main theoretical framework. Intersectionality helps explain how race and gender work together in shaping how Black women are treated in schools.

The project also uses ideas from Patricia Hill Collins about controlling images to understand how stereotypes affect judgments about professionalism. The concept of misogynoir (Bailey) helps analyze racist and sexist comments online. Respectability politics (Higginbotham) helps explain why certain behaviors are labeled as inappropriate.

The project uses a historical-continuity approach centered on Sarah Baartman to connect past stereotypes to present-day discipline. The main research method is qualitative discourse analysis. This method studies how language and images create meaning. Instead of just asking what happened, it asks how people talk about what happened.

This study uses a **qualitative research approach**, which focuses on understanding meaning, language, and patterns in social behavior rather than numbers or statistics. The goal is not to measure how often Black women educators face discipline, but to understand **how and why** it happens and how it is discussed publicly. By looking closely at social media content and public responses, this project examines how schools and online communities work together to monitor and judge Black women's bodies.

The research combines three main approaches: **intersectional analysis**, a **historical-continuity framework**, and **qualitative discourse analysis**. Intersectionality helps explain how race and gender work together to create unique experiences of discrimination. The historical approach connects present-day events to longer histories of public scrutiny and racialized bodily control. Discourse analysis examines the language, images, and framing in social media content and comments. Together, these methods allow for a deep understanding of how professional expectations and public judgment operate for Black women educators today

The study is guided by **intersectionality**, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality shows that the experiences of Black women cannot be fully understood by looking at race or gender alone. Instead, racism and sexism overlap to create unique forms of discrimination. In this project, intersectionality will help answer questions such as: Would the teacher have been judged differently if she were White? Would a Black male teacher face the same scrutiny? Are these reactions connected to her identity as a Black woman?

The project also draws from Patricia Hill Collins, who introduces the idea of **controlling images**—stereotypes that shape how Black women are perceived. Examples include the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the Sapphire. These images are not just cultural ideas; they influence how institutions judge behavior and appearance. This study will examine whether these stereotypes appear in online discussions or institutional responses about the teacher.

Another key concept is **misogynoir**, introduced by Moya Bailey. Misogynoir describes the specific discrimination and hostility Black women face, especially online. Since this study

focuses on viral TikTok and YouTube content, misogynoir helps explain patterns in public comments and social media reactions. The project will analyze how racialized and gendered hostility shapes the conversation about the teacher.

Respectability politics, first described by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, is also part of the framework. Respectability politics involves social pressure for Black people to behave in ways that fit dominant cultural norms. In schools, professional rules are often presented as neutral, but they are influenced by white middle-class expectations. This project explores whether backlash against the teacher is shaped by these expectations—judging her clothing, behavior, or body according to narrow ideas of what is “proper” or “respectable.”

A **historical-continuity framework** is used to connect present-day scrutiny to long histories of racialized body policing. The example of Sarah Baartman, who was exhibited in Europe as the “Hottentot Venus” in the 19th century, shows how Black women’s bodies have historically been treated as objects of public judgment. While schools are not literal exhibitions, patterns of hypervisibility, bodily scrutiny, and moral judgment can persist today. This historical lens allows the study to connect past and present ideas about Black women’s bodies and professionalism.

The **research objects** for this study include a viral TikTok video of an African American teacher who faced backlash for her outfits, a YouTube video that discusses the incident, public comments under both videos, and any official statements or media coverage about the case. These materials are treated as cultural texts, meaning they are analyzed for how they reflect

social ideas about race, gender, and professionalism. The TikTok video is the main case study, while the YouTube video and comments provide context and insight into public reactions.

Data collection involves watching and reviewing the videos, transcribing important spoken content, and selecting recurring themes in the comments. The study focuses on patterns rather than every single comment. Common themes include judgments about professionalism, morality, body image, blame, defense of the teacher, and comparisons to others. Focusing on patterns helps reveal broader social attitudes rather than isolated opinions.

The main method of analysis is **qualitative discourse analysis**, which examines how language, tone, and images shape meaning. First, the study analyzes visual elements of the TikTok video, such as camera angles, framing, and focus on the teacher's body, to see whether the video emphasizes appearance over professional role. Second, the study examines the spoken words in both videos, looking for repeated words and phrases related to professionalism, morality, or distraction. Third, comments are grouped into themes and analyzed for patterns of racial and gendered judgment.

Once patterns are identified, the study applies intersectional analysis to interpret them. It asks whether criticisms reflect stereotypes about Black women, whether the teacher's body is judged as "excessive" or "distracting," and how race and gender interact in shaping public judgment. Finally, the findings are placed in **historical context**, comparing modern public reactions to older racial narratives like those surrounding Sarah Baartman. This step shows how

contemporary professional norms and public scrutiny are connected to historical patterns of surveillance.

To ensure the rigor and credibility of this study, multiple strategies will be used. First, the analysis focuses on recurring patterns across videos and comments rather than isolated opinions, which allows for stronger and more reliable conclusions. Second, theoretical frameworks guide the interpretation of the data rather than relying on personal assumptions. Third, multiple types of sources—including TikTok and YouTube content, comment sections, and any available institutional statements—are compared to provide a fuller picture of how public discourse and institutional norms operate together. This triangulation of sources strengthens the reliability of the findings and ensures that conclusions are well-supported by evidence.

Ethical considerations are also central to this research. Because the study examines publicly available social media content, no private or confidential data will be used. The analysis will focus on general patterns, language, and themes, rather than identifying or shaming individual commenters. Additionally, the study is careful to respect the privacy and dignity of the teacher at the center of the case. By treating the videos and comments as cultural texts rather than personal attacks, the research maintains ethical standards while still analyzing the social dynamics at play.

Finally, this methodology contributes to scholarship in several ways. It applies intersectionality directly to a contemporary digital case study, connecting Black feminist theory,

historical analysis, and education studies. It demonstrates how definitions of professionalism are socially constructed and shaped by both institutional policy and public perception. By situating contemporary backlash against Black women educators within a longer history of racialized bodily scrutiny, the study shows how old stereotypes persist in new forms, especially in online spaces where social media amplifies public judgment. Overall, this methodology provides a clear, theory-driven approach to understanding both institutional and cultural mechanisms that regulate Black women's bodies in education.

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