

BAKER, KAYLA J. Ph.D. *Why are all the Black Kids Tweeting Together? Exploring the Impact of Black Social Media Spaces on Black College Students at Historically White Institutions.* (2023)

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Why are all the Black Kids Tweeting Together? is a mixed methods study that applies critical race theory (CRT) and the campus racial climate framework to explore the role same-race peer groups created on social media platforms play in the experiences of Black students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs). Building on the research that examines how peer groups influence student experiences, this study gauges why Black students choose to create and participate in Black social media spaces and the influence of the campus climate on their decisions to do so. Using data collected from virtual focus group interview sessions, photo-elicitation, and a survey, this study seeks to uplift the voices of Black college students and encourage them to use their voice to share their stories individually and collectively. Evidence from this study suggests that Black social media spaces operate as a source of joy, self-preservation, and resistance to assimilation. Study findings also indicate that Black students at HWIs use Black social media spaces to expand their sense of community, thrive in spite of being minoritized, and engage in spaces that support racial identity expression and affirmation. As colleges and universities continue to search for and develop ways to support students from underrepresented groups, they must acknowledge how these groups use agency to develop their own strategies to be successful as valid and sources of knowledge that can inform the decisions of campus administrators. This study offers up a new lens through which the experiences of Black students at HWIs can be understood, with a specific focus on how same-race peer groups on social media provide supportive, safe, and affirming spaces that aid in their persistence and success in environments that can be racially challenging.

WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS TWEETING TOGETHER? EXPLORING
THE IMPACT OF BLACK SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES ON BLACK
COLLEGE STUDENTS AT HISTORICALLY
WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

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Approved by

Dr. Leila Villaverde
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DEDICATION

This dissertation and the grave efforts that went into completing it are dedicated to the many Black students who are enrolled in colleges currently and who will enroll in the future. Whether they attend a Historically Black College and University or a Historically White Institution, my dissertation and the work I have done in higher education were created with Black students in mind. To those who create Black spaces for their survival and well-being, keep doing that unapologetically. To the Black students who I have had the pleasure of mentoring and taking under my wing, I dedicate this to you. Keep striving high, walking in your purpose, and becoming the educated, resilient, brilliant leaders you were designed to be. To the students who participated in my study, thank you for sharing your stories and for your vulnerability.

I would like to pay a special tribute to dance. Dance has given me peace, joy, and clarity during the most trying times. Dance has allowed me the opportunity to express both my emotions and my research in powerful ways. At times when I felt like I didn't have a voice, it was dance that provided a platform for me to amplify my story through movement.

Last, but certainly not least, I dedicate this work to my future self. When I embarked on this academic journey towards a PhD, I had no idea what I was doing. This became a goal I never even knew I wanted to achieve. As this journey concludes, I am proud of who I have become and my success despite the numerous sacrifices, challenges, and tears that came along the way. Such an accomplishment was necessary to ensure a future full of unlimited opportunities and purpose-driven living. I'm making a promise to my future self to not let the sacrifices be made in vain, and to use this experience as a catalyst to continue to develop into the woman God has called me to be. My future self will be so thankful for what I have done in this season.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that a large amount of college student interaction now takes place online, the role social media platforms play in perceptions of racial issues, campus racial climate, and the navigation strategies of Black college students has not been a major consideration in higher education research. Social media is undeniably a significant part of our society. There are now certain social media platforms that are viewed as substantial social, cultural, and political aspects of the lives of its users (Lee-Won et al., 2018). Black social networks, specifically, can serve as necessary tools that aid in the perseverance of Black people who are immersed in predominantly White environments as they are able to use these spaces to communicate their racialized experiences, provide empathy to others, celebrate the successes of one another, find validation and community, and bond over shared memories (Williams & Gonlin, 2017).

While platforms such as Black Twitter (along with Blacktags) and Instagram have received much attention amongst bloggers and news sites, these spaces receive little attention in academic environments, despite being a paramount aspect of the social lives of today's college students. Black Twitter can be described as the collective gathering of Black people in online communities (Brock, 2012) and engagement in "Black cultural discourse" that takes place on Twitter (Klassen, 2022, p. 96). Black social networks are so unique in the way Black users engage and create group solidarity within those spaces that "users who do not understand the sociohistorical implications of coded tweets (or posts) are excluded" (Williams & Gonlin, 2017, p. 989). As a result, Black social networks provide a sense of community building and empowerment in culturally relevant ways for Black users (Klassen, 2022). The use of Black social media spaces exhibits the ways in which Black users demonstrate agency, resistance, and

activism that increases the awareness of the struggles and triumphs present within the Black community.

Racial segregation has been extremely prevalent in American society and continues to be evident in residential neighborhoods, schools, churches, and beyond. Similar to what we observe in physical spaces, social media sites can be analyzed as “an online microcosm of U.S. society” that are also racially segregated (Williams & Gonlin, 2017, p. 984). Black members on social media platforms tend search for other Black users to develop social ties and find support (Klassen, 2022; Williams & Gonlin, 2017). This study has great potential for offering up a new lens through which the experiences of Black students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) can be understood, with a specific focus on how same-race peer groups on social media impact the college experiences of Black students at these institutions. The term *historically* is used to refer to the institution type rather than the term *predominantly* as a means to emphasize that it is the institution’s past and foundational ideologies that continue to inform the current operations that go unquestioned and appear as “natural and inevitable” (Keels, 2020, p. 10). These perpetuated beliefs, and not just the demographic composition of the campus, make these HWIs hostile places for historically minoritized student populations (Keels, 2020).

As conversations continue about supporting diversity and inclusion on campuses, same-race peer groups of racially minoritized students must not be looked at as the problem. Instead, these groups should be viewed as valid social responses to circumstances on campus, in virtual spaces, and within the larger society. This study considers how Black students at HWIs use social media to create and participate in same-race peer groups that expand their sense of community, racial identity expression, and source of supportive, safe, and affirming spaces in virtual settings.

Statement of the Problem

The Black student population in higher education is continuously increasing; however, there are disparities that persist in the retention and graduation rates of Black students. From 2000 to 2018, college enrollment rates among Black, traditional aged college students increased from 31% to 37% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). Despite their access to college, studies show that only 45.9% of Black students who attended four-year public institutions actually completed their degrees in six years (Shapiro et al., 2017). Research continues to find that Black students have the lowest six-year completion rate when compared to other racial and ethnic groups in post-secondary education (Lumina Foundation-Gallup, 2023; McMurdock 2023; Yang, 2023). Findings from the Lumina Foundation-Gallup 2023 State of Higher Education study show a number of barriers to completion for Black students such as family responsibilities, work schedules, and the financial burden of tuition (McMurdock, 2023; Yang 2023). Throughout their college experience, Black students are charged with navigating such challenges, which often impact them at disproportionate rates (McMurdock, 2023; The Lumina Foundation, 2023). Specifically, the report displays that Black students are more likely to be caregivers for family members or friends, be parents or guardians of children under 18, and employed full-time (McMurdock, 2023; Yang, 2023).

The obstacles Black students face when enrolled in HWIs can be extremely detrimental to their academic and social success. For example, Black students face higher rates of discrimination, isolation, and racism on HWI campuses (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). When enrolled in programs that severely lack racial diversity, Black students are more likely to not only feel discriminated against, but also disrespected, and physically or psychologically unsafe (The Lumina Foundation-Gallup 2023 State of Higher Education Study, 2023; Yang, 2023). In

response to such conditions, Black students often find safety in the creation of racially homogeneous peer groups. The security, community, and empowerment that same-race peer groups provide to Black students should be further investigated and supported through research. Studies of this nature will offer additional data that may inform higher education leadership decisions on how postsecondary institutions can enhance strategic support initiatives targeted specifically to Black students.

Black students at HWIs face social and academic hindrances that impact their academic achievement and overall college experience. For example, Black students are more likely to have lower grade point averages (GPA) and are less likely to graduate than White students, even when academic ability and preparation are equal (Keels, 2020). Socially, these students often struggle with finding membership in the dominant White culture that permeates HWIs. According to some scholars, Black students at HWIs experience personal dissatisfaction (Hope et al., 2018), alienation (Love et al., 2009), social isolation (Hope et al., 2018; Love et al., 2009), and marginalization (Keels, 2020), in addition to the pressure to conform, struggles with fitting in with their White peers (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012), and a lack of sense of belonging on campus (Keels, 2020). For Black students, finding and maintaining a sense of belonging on historically White college campuses has been and continues to be a complex task. One of the explanations behind this is that Black students have “unequal access to the cultural and social resources that HWIs require” (Keels, 2020, p. 15). Awareness must continue to be brought to the issues these students face, as well as the ways in which Black students choose to cope with the disparaging treatment at HWIs.

Researchers (e.g., Keels, 2020; Levin et al., 2006; Solórzano et al., 2000) suggest that Black students create counterspaces or subcultures at HWIs that involve same-race peer groups,

perhaps as a response to such conditions. Same-race peer association patterns usually do not draw much attention when it is White students who are operating in these patterns. As Keels (2020) framed it, “White student segregation is fostered in these long-standing unmarked White spaces that are seen as simply part of the history of the institution” (p. 162). However, when students of color are observed associating in same-race peer groups, the associations are framed as a self-segregation problem and the cause for racial balkanization on campuses that prevents interracial interactions from happening (Kim et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2006).

Research has shown that affiliation with one’s own racial peer group in college, specifically for Black students, is presumed by some scholars to have a negative effect on learning, behavior, and values after college (Villalpando, 2003). Contrary to this belief, in-group associations may negatively influence White students’ attitudes toward diversity, while at the same time positively influence Black students’ openness to cultural diversity (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). While some scholars (i.e., Hurtado et al., 1998; Keels, 2020; Sidanius et al., 2004) argue that ethnic student organizations provide minority students with a safe space and strong social support system, there are others (i.e., Sidanius et al., 2004; Von Bergene et al., 2020) who claim that groups such as ethnic and racial student organizations, whose membership is mostly comprised of students of color, are a large contributor to racial segregation on campuses because they maintain isolation of minority groups, increase a sense of ethnic victimization, diminish collective identity, and exacerbate racial tensions.

Such propositions that claim same-race peer group interactions will “exert a negative influence on its members because of the peer group’s ethnic/racial composition [are] deeply rooted in traditional cultural deprivation and deficit theories ... [and] undergirded by a racist, White supremacist ideology” (Villalpando, 2003, p. 620). As Patton (2006a) discussed, these

culturally insensitive perspectives also fail to recognize how such racial subcultures and same-race peer groups emerged due to the historical exclusion of Black students from the main culture of campuses and higher education overall—an exclusion that still exists in certain ways at HWIs today. These claims completely reject the benefits that ethnic and racial student organizations offer to members and sends a message to students of color that they should ignore their racial identity and the circumstances they will face because of their skin color.

Furthermore, such claims against identity-affirming organizations encourage students of color to assimilate to the White culture at HWIs. While some researchers (i.e. Berger & Braxton, 1998; Gumport, 2007; Rendon et al., 2000; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1992) have heavily relied on the traditional notion that the “assimilation and acculturation of students into the dominant culture of the institution” (Baber, 2012, p. 68) will equate success, Tierney (1999) referred to assimilation as “cultural suicide” (p. 82) that requires students to eliminate the ties they have with their culture and their heritage. Those who encourage Black students to assimilate usually assume that adopting the “cultural norms” of the dominant culture is a goal for this group and disregards “exclusionary barriers” that exist to prohibit such conformity (Dawkins & Braddock, 1994, p. 395). Assimilation robs Black students of the opportunity to embrace their racial identity and find affirmation within their Blackness. Often, Black students who do assimilate still find themselves struggling to fit in with their White peers and feel excluded from mainstream campus activities and networks (Feagin, 1992; Love et al., 2009; Museus, 2008; Tynes & Markoe, 2010). Other problems arise when students of color feel required to assimilate such as a negative self-concept and using “cognitive and affective energy” that could be better utilized in other decision-making processes (Steinfeldt et al., 2010).

The existing research that examines campus racial climate mainly focuses on understanding the experiences of students of color with racial discrimination and prejudice, differences in White and racial minority students' perceptions of the environment, and students' interactions across racial lines (Museus et al., 2012). Much of the literature on Black students at HWIs examines the academic and social challenges they face, which have resulted from tense campus racial climates at the institutions. When such studies highlight the stories of low educational achievement and attainment of students of color specifically, they sometimes support cultural-deficit discourses (Solórzano et al., 2000) as opposed to using the experiences of students of color as sources of strength and giving students a platform for their voices to be heard as they express their stories. There is a need for more studies that examine how students of color utilize agency to successfully navigate their collegiate experience despite operating in environments where racial hostility is encountered regularly.

Scholars (Levin et al., 2006; Solórzano et al., 2000) suggest that in addition to the academic and social pressure Black students face, perceptions of ethnic discrimination and the culturally unsupportive environments they encounter at HWIs also motivates Black students to create counterspaces that involve racially homogeneous peer groups. Considering the current racial landscape of college campuses, it is vital to understand what role, if any, same-race peer groups play in the lives of Black students enrolled in HWIs. Solórzano et al. (2000) demonstrated how Black students used the creation of counterspaces as an important strategy for academic survival. There is a need for more research that examines the benefits that result from interactions within homogeneous peer groups, as opposed to framing such groups as the problem that prohibits diverse interactions from happening on HWI campuses. While there have been educational benefits associated with cross-racial interactions, these instances usually do not

consider the potential psychological and emotional impacts cross-racial interactions have on the minoritized students whose presence makes such interactions possible (McGowan, 2016).

Instances of racial microaggressions experienced in both academic and social spaces have serious consequences for the mental health, self-esteem, and academic achievement of students of color. Specifically among Black students, racial microaggressions result in a perception of the racial climate as negative, and numerous battles with feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Another problem presents itself in regard to the negative opinions people have about organizations and facilities (i.e., cultural centers) that encourage and support same-race peer groups and gatherings for Black students. Some higher education administrators and faculty perceive these facilities as avenues that separate Black students, prevent them from joining into the larger campus environment, and hinder their ability to move beyond their comfort zone and connect with people who are different from them (Patton, 2006a). However, such perspectives fail to recognize how same-race spaces and organizations at HWIs emerged due to Black students' feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and alienation (Keels, 2020) in White spaces on campus, the dominant culture at HWIs that influences campus activities and environments. White spaces heavily reflect the interests and identities of White students, and exacerbate the exclusion and discrimination Black students have experienced historically in higher education overall. Considering these factors, I agree with Patton (2006a) who stated it is an unrealistic expectation—and also a culturally insensitive expectation—to expect

Black students to immerse themselves in a predominantly White campus environment and to exclude their own culture and history ... [by] asking them to renounce an important part of who they are as individuals and to do without a source of support and

comfort that they need as they navigate the unfamiliar territory of a predominantly White campus. (p. 5)

Some students of color arrive at their college campuses with experience in “adaptively coping with cultural marginalization” (Keels, 2020, p. 93), especially if they grew up in schools and neighborhoods that were predominantly White. However, for those students who do not come to campus with those coping skills, it is important that they have the opportunity to utilize and create counterspaces on campus that help them collaboratively and collectively process and learn from experiences of marginalization (Keels, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

Building on the academic work that examines how peer groups influence student experiences, the purpose of this study was to explore what role, if any, same-race peer groups created on social media platforms play in the experiences of Black students at HWIs. Focusing on the support and comfort that same-race peer groups provide for Black students, I spotlight the ways Black students utilize same-race peer groups on social media platforms to engage in community, racial identity affirmation, as well as a source of resilience, persistence, and perseverance. This study gauges why Black students choose to participate in same-race peer groups on social media platforms, the influence of campus climate on their decisions to create and engage with same-race peer groups and social spaces, and the creation of race-based digital campus spaces. Specifically, I analyze how race influences the experiences and behaviors of Black students as they navigate historically White spaces. Additionally, with this study I am challenging and bringing awareness to the conditions for Black students within HWIs. This work adds to not only the knowledge of how HWIs reproduce and maintain dominant power structures that work to disempower Black students, but also how Black students utilize agency to navigate

their experiences with marginalization. This study contributes to the importance of uplifting the voices of marginalized communities by creating opportunities for Black students to share their own narratives. I am challenging the deficit-based and culturally exclusive narratives by investigating the perspectives of Black students on the ways in which they create community within racially homogeneous spaces and how they make meaning of their experiences.

Ultimately, this study was conducted to investigate how Black students go about creating safe, affirming, and liberating spaces while enrolled at HWIs that seem to be isolating, oppressive, and racially tense. This study's findings address the effects of HWIs on Black students, why they choose to engage with same-race peer groups on social media platforms, and what these same-race social media counterspaces offer to their educational experiences.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it has the potential to provide insight to inform the decisions of campus administrators, faculty, and staff concerning support and retention strategies for Black students on HWI campuses. Diversity and inclusion efforts on campuses must reflect a critical consciousness of the historical legacy of exclusion that Black students have faced and its implications for the circumstances encountered by students today. Institutions can learn from Black students, the community they create within same-race peer groups, and the avenues through which students from racial and ethnic minoritized populations are empowered. As conversations continue about supporting diversity and inclusion on campuses, same-race peer groups of racially minoritized students must not be looked at as the problem, but as valid social responses to circumstances on campus, in virtual spaces, and within the larger society. Because the racist legacy and histories of all HWIs still impact institutional operations, policies, and practices (Patton, 2006a), institutions must make commitments to supporting diversity in a public

manner and establish concrete plans to make the dreams of truly inclusive educational environments a reality. Creating inclusive environments in higher education should not only refer to promoting cross-racial interactions for students. It should also mean creating space and opportunity for minoritized students to embrace their racial identity and express it in ways that these specific student populations have identified as helpful and supportive. As many instances have shown, one of the ways in which minoritized students choose to create solid support systems is through the creation of racially homogeneous peer groups (Keels, 2020; Kim et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2006; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Higher education institutions must embrace that and allow for racially minoritized students to gather without feelings of fault or blame for choosing to protect their mental health, utilize agency, and build community in ways that are authentic for them.

From a pilot study I learned that the creation of same-race friend groups and other spaces for racially homogeneous peers to gather stemmed from similar background experiences; a level of familiarity, comfort, and support with Black people; the desire that these students had to show up as their authentic selves; and a general discomfort they felt around White peers, faculty, and staff. Just as the community, safety, solidarity, and unity these students gain from Black subcultures on campus allow them to thrive in environments that are racially tense and academically rigorous, it is worth examining what the students gain from the creation and maintenance of same-race peer groups on social media platforms. My research demonstrates how Black students freely choose to engage in racially homogeneous spaces on social media platforms and what impact such engagement has on student experiences. Most importantly, my research uses the voices of Black students to discuss the benefits they perceive from the identity-

affirming counterspaces (Keels, 2020) they create – allowing them a moment to reflect on their sources of joy, community, and racial identity expression.

Research Questions

In an attempt to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate students who participate in same-race peer groups at HWIs, and to account for aspects of campus life that now take place online, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Why do Black students at HWIs choose to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms, and what role do these spaces play in the experiences of Black students at HWIs?
2. To what extent does campus racial climate influence the decisions of Black students to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms?
3. How do Black students use the creation of their own race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms to navigate their college experience?

To answer the research questions, qualitative and quantitative data collection, coupled with analysis were used. The results of this research capture the experiences of Black college students while attending HWIs. The sharing of their stories can aid in the awareness of challenges these students encounter at HWIs and the support strategies Black students use during their time on campus.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized two theoretical frameworks: critical race theory (CRT) (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and the campus racial climate framework (Hurtado et al., 1998). Many other researchers on the Black student experience in education also utilized CRT as a theoretical framework. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined critical race methodology as “a theoretically

grounded approach to research that (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process” (p. 24). CRT resonated with me most because of how it centralizes race; focuses on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender; uses culturally relevant techniques to discuss experiences of students of color; and views their experiences “as sources of strength” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). The experiences of students of color are often told from deficit theories. Critical race theory actively challenges those traditional ideologies by acknowledging that “the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), “the main solution for the socioacademic failure offered by cultural deficit majoritarian storytellers is cultural assimilation” (p. 31).

Understanding that the outdated argument has been “students of color should assimilate to the dominant White middle-class culture to succeed in school and in life,” I am interested in using CRT to produce counterstories to challenge that tightly held assumption (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 31). According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), CRT in education centers students of color and “focuses research on how students of color experience and respond to the U.S. educational system” (p. 31). The creation and utilization of same-race peer groups by Black students at HWIs is a response to the educational system that is valid and one that needs to be thoroughly understood to effectively support these students in college settings. What I appreciate most about CRT is how this framework expresses the importance of using the voice of racialized minoritized groups to define their lived experiences. As I seek to combat the ways in which historical educational research has silenced marginalized populations, specifically Black students at HWIs, I found CRT to be the most appropriate paradigm to “give voice and turn the margins into places of transformative resistance” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37). The act of

storytelling provides CRT with a highly effective mode of framing the “lived experience of racialization in America and the sharing of others” (Price, 2010, p. 159 as cited in Dillette et al., 2019). Counterstorytelling, on the other hand, invokes an oppositional narrative practice and is also part of CRT. Utilized by underrepresented voices, counterstorytelling narrative is used to “build up, as well as break down, community, shared understandings, and deeply held beliefs” (Price, 2010, p. 160 as cited in Dillette et al., 2019). The influential power of storytelling is strategically deployed by CRT to elicit empathy and to change opinions (Dillette et al., 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, CRT and CRT methodologies are now globally informing data collection and analysis within academic research across disciplines (Dillette et al., 2019). Utilizing the CRT framework will allow me to affirm and center the knowledge and counternarratives of Black undergraduate students as valid, worthy, and sources for learning.

Hurtado et al. (1998) provided a framework for understanding four dimensions of the campus climate, which is now known as the campus racial climate framework or model. The dimensions included in this model are: “An institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups; its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups; the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups; [and] the behavioral climate dimension, characterized by social interactions on campus” (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 282). The history of higher education continues to affect the climate for racially minoritized groups at HWIs as these groups were traditionally denied college access. Because HWIs have a history of policies and practices that limited the acceptance and inclusion to racially marginalized groups, the historical legacy of these decisions still has an impact on current institutional practices, policies, and procedures. In regard to structural diversity, although racially minoritized enrollments continue to increase at

HWIs, Black students continue to be an underrepresented population in terms of degree attainment, sense of belonging, and retention rates. The psychological dimension of climate informed how I analyzed the perceptions of Black students of the campus climate as well as their attitudes concerning same-race peer groups. The behavioral dimension of this framework explains how “White students interpreted ethnic group clustering as racial segregation, while minority students viewed this behavior as cultural support within a larger unsupportive environment” (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 290). The campus racial climate framework equips scholars with a relevant conceptual context to use in research that focuses on the racialized experiences of college students (Chang et al., 2011). Additionally, this framework is necessary in understanding differences in the perceptions of various racial groups and various capacities that can maximize the inclusion of minoritized racial groups. This study used the campus racial climate framework to focus on social interactions that take place on social media platforms, with specific attention to social segregation, and the perceptions that inform the decisions of Black students to engage and create Black social spaces, both virtually and on campus.

Positionality

As a student researcher, my research topics are influenced by my identity and experiences. While it was extremely important for me to choose a research topic in which I could connect and relate to my study participants, it was also necessary for me to avoid imposing my experiences and perceptions on the participants. My statuses as a Black woman, a former administrator at a HWI, an educator, a graduate of a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), and a graduate student enrolled at an HWI contributed to the execution of this study. As an undergraduate student at an HBCU, I was surrounded by people who looked like me; I received daily affirmation of my intellect and worth, and was equipped with the necessary skills,

confidence, and competence needed to navigate the real world. Attending an HBCU with fellow Black scholars eagerly exploring emerging adulthood in the midst of strong community was such an affirming experience because I did not have to constantly think about my race in the various spaces I occupied on campus. I would attribute my graduate program success at a HWI to such an empowering undergraduate experience. It wasn't until my graduate school experience at an HWI that my awareness of the vast differences in campus cultures at HBCUs and HWIs was heightened. As a Black graduate student on the campus of a HWI, I felt excluded by the dominant White culture that was pervasive through the actions of my peers, class discussion topics, and the campus activities curated for students. It was during my first years of graduate school that I noticed my strong desire for community with Black peers and student organizations, along with the impact that connection had on my academic success and overall ability to thrive at my university.

Once I started working at a mid-sized, public, research HWI in the South, I became intrigued by the different perceptions of campus climate, the Black student population in higher education, and the ways in which different racial student populations occupied campus spaces. The latter of those points captured my intellectual curiosity the most. I vividly remember going to a particular space on campus and, quite regularly, I would observe how the utilization of that campus space became extremely racialized as White students set the norms and dominated an open area that was intended to be for any student. Additionally, I was seeing how students would mostly gather in racially homogenous groups in social settings outside of the classroom. As someone who was also heavily involved in diversity and inclusion efforts on campus, I was also seeing the push from administration to promote cross-racial interactions among students on campus. For students of color, engagement with racially homogenous groups results in many

benefits when students are attending a HWI. Unfortunately, these types of narratives get overlooked and are not valued as much as the focus on diversifying the campus. During my five-year career as a student affairs administrator and college level educator, I had discussions with students from marginalized backgrounds where they shared the highs and lows of their college experience. Typically, the highs were when they were with others they had found to be a source of community and joy. For my Black students, these were usually racially homogeneous communities. The lows often occurred when Black students felt like they did not belong because of the largely White culture of HWIs. During these conversations, I would try to validate Black students' experiences with my own feelings of discomfort in majority White spaces. As a Black woman working at a HWI, I had my value and knowledge questioned and often self-monitored and censored the ways in which I showed up and spoke up in spaces out of fear of being stereotyped or disregarded. I also found myself seeking community in identity-affirming spaces and with other Black administrators at my institution. Similarly to my students, I have used social media platforms to connect with other Black people to not only find community but to also feel free to express myself authentically and discuss racially driven incidents in a safe space. These experiences have contributed to my perspectives and fostered my research interest specifically in Black students at HWIs and their use of same-race peer groups.

Synopsis of Chapters

This study investigates how the interactions with same-race peer groups on social media platforms impact the experiences of Black college students enrolled at HWIs. As a result, this study gives voice to Black college students, allowing them to express their perceptions and experiences on sources of community they find to be authentic and meaningful. This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter I, includes an introduction of the study's topic, statement of

the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and identified the need to address the experiences of Black students attending HWIs. Chapter I also contains a description of the importance of understanding why Black students choose to participate in same-race peer groups on social media platforms. Chapter II will provide a review of the literature, including an overview of the challenges faced by Black students at HWIs, sources of support for Black students, and how the campus climate at HWIs influences Black students' use of Black subcultures on campus. Chapter II will also contain a discussion of the gap in the literature that the study will address. Chapter III will include the research methodology that was employed in this study, including research design, selection of participants, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis. A mixed-methods approach was used in this study blending survey research and focus groups to provide quantitative and qualitative data. This research design used the voices of Black college students combined with photo-elicitation that embodied the perceptions, actions, and behaviors of their experiences with same-race spaces on social media platforms. In this section, I will also describe the pilot study I conducted that served as the foundation for my dissertation research. Chapter IV will be dedicated to reviewing the findings and presenting the results of this study. Using the data collected, I will explain the findings through the lenses of CRT and the campus racial climate model to provide a contextual framework from which the voices and experiences of the Black students will be centered. In the final chapter, Chapter V, the research study questions will be addressed and answered using the study participants' responses. A summary of the study, discussion and interpretation of research findings, implications for future research, and use of this information to provide recommendations for policy and practice related to increasing the persistence, success, and support of Black college students will also be provided in the final chapter.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate students at HWIs who participate in same-race peer groups on social media platforms. Specifically, the intention of this inquiry was to learn more about how Black students use social media platforms to find or expand sources of support and community in environments from which they have historically been excluded. In this chapter, I will review the existing literature on the following relevant aspects of Black students' involvement in same-race peer groups on social media platforms: (a) challenges faced by Black students at HWIs; (b) peer connections, support networks, and student involvement; (c) campus climate and campus culture at HWIs; (d) the role of subcultures in Black students' experiences; and (e) social media utilization patterns of Black users. Analysis of these five areas will provide a holistic view of the experiences Black students face at HWIs, including the challenges that emerge, how Black students at HWIs gain peer connections and support networks, and how Black students become involved in campus activities at HWIs. After examining the campus climate and culture at HWIs, I will discuss the role of subcultures in Black students' experiences and the potential for exploring the ways in which Black students make meaning of racially homogeneous spaces on social media platforms. Finally, the review will conclude with a presentation of the gaps in the existing literature, which my study will address. I acknowledge the diversity in experiences of Black students and understand that I am presenting generalizations through the combination of research from various studies.

Challenges Faced by Black Students at HWIs

Black students face unique challenges during their time enrolled at HWIs that have proven to have grave consequences on their success, both individually and as a group. It is

important to discuss these challenges as they provide context to understanding the significance of ethnic enclaves for Black students. While there are similarities in the experiences of minoritized racial and ethnic groups at HWIs, Black students encounter negative issues at higher rates than other groups (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). This section details what those challenges are; however, a question that remains unanswered is why Black students are experiencing these issues to a greater extent than other students of color.

When examinations of the Black student experience on a historically White campus have been conducted, the most common findings are ones that indicate Black students are at an increased risk for negative mental health outcomes, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Ancis et al., 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Gray et al., 2013; Grier-Reed, 2010; Hope et al., 2018). These negative health conditions emerge from their concerns of being accepted by and fitting in with their White peers, a lack of social support and resources, and racially hostile campus environments, in addition to racism and mistrust of the institution (Ancis et al., 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Gray et al., 2013; Grier-Reed, 2010; Hope et al., 2018). Additionally, several researchers (Ancis et al., 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Gray et al., 2013; Grier-Reed, 2010; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Prelow et al., 2006; Reddick, 2021; Thelamour et al., 2019) discovered that Black students report experiencing more racial conflict; toxicity; aggression; harassment; discrimination; isolation; loneliness; pressure to conform to or combat stereotypes; problems of cultural and social adjustment; and less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants than their White counterparts. Both theory and research support the idea that racial identity salience has the potential to strengthen self-esteem, reduce feelings of intellectual incompetence, and help students develop coping responses to protect themselves against experiences with racial

discrimination (Bernard et al., 2018). The types of hostile or discriminatory action directed against Black students reside on a continuum of the following practices: “(a) aggression, verbal and physical; (b) exclusion, including social ostracism; (c) dismissal of subculture, including values, dress, and groups; (d) type-casting, including assuming Blacks are all alike” (Feagin, 1992, p. 574). Racial discrimination can have a very huge effect on Black students’ degree attainment – varying from being the cause of Black students dropping out of college to the reason others never even consider enrolling into college (The Lumina Foundation-Gallup 2023 State of Higher Education Study, 2023). Furthermore, according to Harper and Hurtado (2007), Black students face more racial conflict and “race-laden accusations of intellectual inferiority,” causing these students to experience stress beyond the normal amount associated with attending a prestigious university (p. 13). Green’s (2016) work suggests that because of the circumstances that Black college students are facing at HWIs, they must have higher levels of perseverance and determination than their White counterparts.

The aforementioned conditions can comprise the academic careers of Black undergraduate students at HWIs in many ways. For example, fewer Black students overall (as compared to their White peers) are actually completing their degrees, despite the increase in numbers of this demographic matriculating into higher education (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Nguyen et al., 2012; Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017; Yeado, 2013). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022a), Black students represented 36% of the total college enrollment rates of 18–24 year olds in 2020 but only accounted for 27% of those graduating within four years. While precollege preparation can be a powerful determining factor of Black students’ educational achievement, the environments of historically White campuses, along with a combination of financial, academic, and social challenges are major influencers on

their educational achievement and degree completion (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Nguyen et al., 2012; Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Data that compare the student success of Black students continues to show gaps in the graduation rates between Black and White students (Nguyen et al., 2012; Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). However, researchers tend not to emphasize the gaps in degree attainment between Black women and men. When analyzing graduation data disaggregated by gender, there is evidence that Black women are both more likely to enroll in college and more likely to graduate within 6 years as compared to Black men (AAUW, n.d.; Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Guerra, 2013). Black women who show advancements in access to and achievement through college are consistently overlooked when it comes to students who require specialized student support services (Shaw, 2017). While many degree completion trends display that Black women have achieved and continue to reach positive increases in this area (Shaw, 2017), these numbers should not be used to neglect how Black college women could still tremendously benefit from support and institutional assistance that would allow them to not only just “survive their educational experience” (Shaw, 2017, p. 204), but thrive in areas such as personal growth, identity expression, professional development, community building, and self-advocacy. Shaw (2017) stated Black undergraduate women are not exempt from obstacles that disrupt their abilities to prosper academically and fully integrate into the campus community. Despite their encounters with the academic and social challenges that are usually associated with the unwelcoming campus climates at HWIs, Black college women are not being considered as a “distinct population worthy of support ... not because Black women are not struggling to succeed in college, but because they are struggling more successfully than their counterparts” (Shaw, 2017, p. 4). Black students at HWIs face unique circumstances, and matters certainly differ when looking at the journeys and educational attainment of Black women compared to

Black men on these campuses. However, studying Black women's and men's experiences collectively has the potential to take on an assets-based approach that could benefit both parties and uplift the voices of Black college women and men equally.

Faculty-student relationships are one of the most significant contributors to student success, sense of belonging, and retention (Allen, 1993; Harper, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). Typically, Black students at large institutions do not make meaningful relationships with the majority White faculty at HWIs (Patton, 2006a). Without intentional connection with faculty, Black students are put at a disadvantage for getting a high level of support to achieve academically. Harper (2013) presented a summary of existing research that indicated the connection between increased academic performance and degree attainment for Black college students in predominantly White educational environments with educators who “validate[d] their intellectual competence” (p. 188) and fostered opportunities to enhance sense of belonging. Harper's report displayed aspects that hinder the support of Black students' intellectual competence, including the anti-intellectual myth, reluctance different racial groups have in working with Black classmates on group projects, and a lack of access to faculty-led research opportunities. In a study on Black student resident assistants at predominately White institutions, Harper et al. (2011) found that Black students' competence was not only questioned in the classroom; in other settings, such as their places of employment, Black students' competence and task completion effectiveness were met with suspect while their White peers seemed to be excused from such scrutiny.

Black college students, along with other minoritized student populations, can truly benefit from having faculty advocate for their belonging and recognize their racialized experiences. According to Harper (2013), faculty of color usually are the ones who advocate for

minoritized students in this way; however, faculty of color also tend to be “disproportionately affected by heavy service expectations on predominantly White campuses” (p. 196). When HWIs have a small number of faculty of color, the faculty members’ position becomes taxing as they are the ones who tend to accept the responsibility of mentoring students of color, leading diversity initiatives, and navigating racial battles within their departments, all in addition to their role of teaching and research.

Furthermore, Black students are often the only or one of few Black students in their courses because the student population and faculty are mostly White. This can make it difficult for Black students to participate, get involved, or develop an active interest in the course (Solórzano et al., 2000). Being the racial minority in the classroom could potentially leave Black students feeling uncomfortable due to fear of being invisible, angry or defensive, or being viewed as the spokesperson for all Black people (Patton, 2006a). Harper (2013) emphasized the inherited expectation and assumption White professors and students have for Black students to weigh in on classroom discussions concerning race or the status of people of color. It is the accumulation of such recurring events that causes stress and constantly reminds Black students of their positionality at HWIs (Harper, 2013). Additionally, being a minoritized population in the classroom also creates the opportunity for Black students to be stereotyped as academically inferior. Solórzano et al. (2000) argued that the stereotype threat and microaggressions faced by Black students result in a sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion. Several students in Solórzano et al.’s study commented that they felt intimidated in several classes and were pushed to drop a class, change their major, or even leave the university to transfer to a different school.

Black students' personal experiences with racism on campus combined with their perceptions of the campus environment may result in discrepancies between their academic potential and their actual performance (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Incidents of harassment also affect Black students' sense of security on campus (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Yeado, 2013). When Black students do not feel that their basic need of safety is met, they may not be able to focus on excelling academically. Black students have communicated that they experience poorer health and energy, greater feelings of personal dissatisfaction, depressive symptoms, social isolation, and overall lower satisfaction with their universities than White students (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Grier-Reed, 2010; Hope et al., 2018). Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff need to be cognizant of these outcomes and implement effective approaches to increasing the care and commitment to success shown to Black students at HWIs.

As Black students face these issues, it is essential that they develop coping mechanisms and support systems in order to attain educational achievement in perceived hostile environments. Failure to do so could result in detrimental influences on and disparities in Black students' well-being, sense of belonging, engagement, academic functioning, retention, and graduation rates (Bourke, 2010; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Furr & Elling, 2002; Hope et al., 2018; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Kniess et al., 2015; Love et al., 2009; Museus, 2008; Prelow et al., 2006; Thelamour et al., 2019). Researchers (DeBerard et al., 2004; Dennis et al., 2005; Gloria et al., 2005; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Morosanu et al., 2010) have shown that social support is a key contributor to students' psychological welfare and academic success. According to the World Health Organization (2022), mental well-being is essential to recognizing one's capabilities, coping with life stressors, and being a productive and contributing member to society. The connection between psychological wellness and academic

success can increase the awareness of the circumstances that can positively and negatively influence those areas for Black college students in historically White environments (Harper, 2013).

According to Smith et al. (2011), a major psychological impact for students of color at HWIs is *racial battle fatigue*:

an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that considers the increased levels of psychosocial stressors and subsequent psychological (e.g., frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, hopelessness), physiological (e.g., headache, backache, “butterflies,” teeth grinding, high blood pressure, insomnia), and behavioral responses (e.g., stereotype threat, John Henryism, social withdrawal, self-doubt, and dramatic change in diet) of fighting racial microaggressions in MEES (MEES stands for “mundane, extreme, environmental stress”). (p.68)

Racial battle fatigue results from the accumulation of subtle and overt acts of discrimination encountered on an ongoing basis (Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2011). Essentially, Black students in historically and predominately White spaces utilize a high level of mental and emotional energy when considering if they are being genuinely accepted in the space and knowing when and how to confront race-based stress, when and how to resist oppression, and when and how to accommodate or tolerate it (Smith et al., 2011). Evans and Moore (2015) framed racial battle fatigue as an “unequal distribution of emotional labor” that people of color experience in predominantly White settings as they negotiate “both everyday racial microaggressions and dismissive dominant ideologies that deny the relevance of race and racism” (p. 439).

The research and literature reviewed here steadily calls awareness to the isolation, alienation, stereotyping, and racism Black students are often forced to struggle with at HWIs. These challenges have proven to have grave consequences for the educational achievement and success of Black students. Because of the conditions faced by Black students at HWIs, their opportunity for achieving academic success is put at risk. Without the necessary coping mechanisms and support, educational achievement for this group will continue to be an uphill battle. Vital sources of support for Black students can be found in their peer groups, social circles, and student engagement opportunities.

Peer Connections, Support Networks, and Student Involvement

Social support is the most important factor in determining success matriculation, retention, and satisfaction, particularly for Black students attending HWIs (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; McGowan, 2016; Patton, 2006b). One form of social support worth considering is the group of peers that students get connected to during their college experience. Peer interactions and friend groups at HWIs should be highlighted in the conversation concerning how Black students create and utilize same-race peer groups on social media platforms. It is often these support networks that contribute to the retention and satisfaction of this student population. Because of the adversities Black students are confronted with during their experience at HWIs, it is imperative to consider the ways in which they develop support networks and involvement strategies to help them persist through their collegiate journey.

According to some scholars (Gray et al., 2013; McGowan, 2016; Sallee & Tierney, 2007), the peer group plays an extremely vital role in the academic achievement and persistence of Black students at HWIs. Because students' perceptions of racial climate shape how they develop and maintain peer connections, Black students often find comfort in creating peer group

connections with other students who also encounter the significant challenges of racism, alienation, marginalization, and isolation that are affiliated with Black students navigating their experiences at HWIs (Guiffrida, 2003; McGowan, 2016). This research builds on the work of Bourke (2010) and D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993), which showed how it is essential for Black students to develop personal support systems to help them cope with discriminatory events. Such prejudiced actions have the potential to have a psychological impact on students and could compromise class attendance, studying, and overall academic achievement (Bourke, 2010; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). When Black students find strong sources of support, specifically within same-race peer groups, they are more likely to excel academically and be more socially involved on campus (Antonio, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Levin et al., 2006; Museus, 2008).

When students of color have been successful at HWIs, oftentimes it comes at the cost of assimilation (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tsolidis, 2006a). When students sacrifice their cultural values to be accepted into the dominant culture, they may feel it is a necessary action in order to be able to survive in these historically White environments (Love et al., 2009). Scholars such as Donovan and Guillory (2017) and Shaw (2017) specifically discussed how Black college-aged women face stereotyping, frequent experiences with microaggressions, a lack of faculty support, discomfort in social and academic spaces, and feelings of being limited in their identity expression through hair – all of which could tempt them into adopting assimilation as a way to succeed. The challenges present for this student group could be mediated by additional support as these Black college women perceive that historically White campuses do not adequately address nor meet their particular needs (Leath & Chavous, 2018; Shaw, 2017). Because survival for Black women has often been linked to “their ability to find a place to describe their

experiences among persons like themselves” (Shaw, 2017, p. 200), Black college women have sought out Black student associations, Black sororities, and Black female support groups as safe havens at HWIs. While there are data indicating that Black women are increasing their matriculation into and completion of college, Donovan and Guillory (2017) encourages readers to “go beyond the flawed narrative of Black women’s achievement toward a deeper understanding of what challenges might be negatively impacting Black women’s college experience” (p. 189).

Black students are still finding themselves struggling to adjust to White campus environments and feel great pressure to conform, while at the same time, perceive marginalization or exclusion from their White peers (Feagin, 1992; Love et al., 2009; Thelamour et al., 2019; Tynes & Markoe, 2010). Because of stereotyping, Black students have found it difficult to not only make close friendships with their White counterparts, but also to participate in social activities at HWIs (Bourke, 2010; Feagin, 1992; Furr & Elling, 2002). Other scholars (i.e., Love et al., 2009; Museus, 2008) have exhibited how Black students at HWIs felt excluded from mainstream activities and lacked access to campus networks that were available to their White peers. The probability of Black students experiencing racial hostility and discrimination at predominantly and historically White universities reduces when these students are in social settings with same-race peers (Bourke, 2010; Feagin, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) posited that same-ethnicity peer networks help students from minoritized backgrounds adjust and persist through their beginning years of college. These spaces are most efficient and effective for meeting the needs of this population and helping them to resist assimilation to the dominant White culture, which persists at HWIs (Leath & Chavous, 2018; Shaw, 2017).

As the minority, Black students in Evans and Moore's (2015) study said they felt the need to be guarded with their opinions and actions when they were around Whites. This sense of having to guard oneself in such environments can be attributed to the desire Black students have to avoid offending others (Guiffrida, 2003). Additionally, this sense of having to guard oneself could also be a result of wanting to combat stereotypes. According to Guiffrida (2003), as a result of wanting to combat stereotypes, a dissonance between Black students' *true selves* and the image they want to portray to their White peers arises. In an effort to fight this dissonance, many Black students felt the need to code switch – developing a separate persona when they were around Whites and feeling free to be their authentic selves only when interacting with other Black people (Guiffrida, 2003). Guiffrida (2003) further emphasized the importance of peer connections and support networks for Black students. These students should not have to monitor the ways they dress and speak (i.e., using slang) in order to make their White peers feel comfortable or to combat the negative perceptions (i.e., being viewed as ignorant or perpetuating stereotypes) their White peers may have of them. Black students should be able to develop peer connections that are affirming and allow them to show up as their true selves (Guiffrida, 2003).

In McGowan's (2016) study on the friendships created by Black college males at predominantly White institutions, race was a key factor in students' decisions to initiate peer connections. Similarly, Antonio (2004) noted that race and ethnicity tends to take precedence over other dimensions in friendship selection and has proven to be crucial in the development of college interpersonal relationships. Love et al. (2009) explained how Black students in their study expressed that White students rarely attempted to include them in study groups, in-class activities, and other social networks, leading the Black students to feel "invisible and not a part of the broader culture," (p. 32) especially if the student's appearance was Afrocentric. Because

of such circumstances, minoritized students tend to choose groups, such as ethnic student organizations or other ethnic enclaves as their primary way to get involved at HWIs. This allows them to express and develop their cultural and racial identities with students who face similar challenges on campus and relieves them of the pressure to prove themselves worthy of being a part of the social network (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008; Park, 2014). In addition to not having to carry the burden of trying to prove themselves, Black students also seek membership in racially-based organizations when their cultural interests are not reflected in the existing campus groups (Jones, 2014).

Racially minoritized students tend to choose groups such as ethnic student organizations or other ethnic enclaves as their primary way to get involved at HWIs, a practice proven to have many benefits (Antonio, 2004; Levin et al., 2006; Museus, 2008; Park, 2014; Villalpando, 2003). Villalpando (2003) found that when Chicana/o college students associate with same-race peers, “their socially conscious values are reinforced, they increase their likelihood of pursuing careers in service of their communities, and they are more inclined to become involved in community service activities after college” (p. 620). Villalpando’s (2003) study supports how homogeneous peer groups of color are “not culturally deficient or deprived but may actually possess cultural resources and assets that sustain and foster positive dispositions among individuals” (p. 621). Villalpando (2003) encouraged readers to apply this counter-narrative to the experience of other students of color as it illustrates the ways in which these peer groups help students combat isolation, marginalization, and racism and empower each other to achieve success at HWIs.

Although Villalpando’s (2003) study focused on Chicana/o college students, similar results were found when looking into Black student participation in ethnic and cultural organizations, showing that participation in these groups was “associated with higher levels of

ethnic identity awareness, ethnic activism ... [and] commitment to promoting racial understanding” (Park, 2014, p. 645), and served as avenues for cultural familiarity, cultural expression and advocacy, and sources of strength and cultural validation (Museus, 2008). Levin et al. (2006) outlined the benefits of participation in ethnic and cultural organizations for Black students, including increased engagement, more interaction with campus services, and improved academic standing. Likewise, Antonio (2004) found that engagement with racially homogeneous friend groups developed a shared consciousness of racism, increased Black students’ sense of support, and fostered a sense of responsibility to protect and defend other Black peers. For these students in particular, using race to determine the close bonds they developed was a matter of survival (Antonio, 2004).

The peer connections, support networks, and student involvement opportunities that Black students engage in at HWIs are highly influenced by race and campus climate. When Black students find strong sources of support, they are more likely to show increases in academic performance and develop a sense of belonging to the campus despite harsh campus racial climates (Furr & Elling, 2002; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Levin et al., 2006; Tsolidis, 2006a). Peer connections and student involvement contribute greatly to the retention of Black students. The focus should be on the vast benefits that racially homogeneous support networks provide for Black students. However, when scholars and practitioners choose to focus on ethnic and racially homogeneous groups as negative aspects of racial segregation, they completely disregard the substantial enhancements these groups bring for Black students and their college experience at HWIs.

Campus Climate and Campus Culture at HWIs

Campus climate is relevant to my study specifically because I want to understand the extent to which campus climate influences the decisions of Black students to participate in same-race peer groups online. In recent years, higher education administrators have become increasingly interested in understanding campus climate at various levels of the institution (i.e., departmental, college, overall). Insights concerning campus climate are helpful in determining how various groups of students are experiencing the campus. It is also important to assess campus climate regularly as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how the culture of a specific campus is perceived, perpetuated, and communicated to its constituents and provides data that can inform the strategies administrators implement to make the environment more inclusive.

Campus climate is defined as the perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes of the people on campus “concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential” (Rankin, 2005, p. 17), and the quality and extent of interactions between various groups (Hurtado et al., 1998; Museus, Lãm, et al., 2012; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Hurtado et al. (1998) provided a framework for understanding campus climate through four dimensions: (a) an institution’s historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various racial/ethnic groups, (b) its structural diversity in terms of numerical representation of various racial/ethnic groups, (c) the psychological climate of perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, and (d) the behavioral climate dimension, characterized by intergroup relations on campus. Harper (2013) suggested an institution’s historical legacy is what creates an understanding of “contemporary problems pertaining to race, stratification, and durable patterns of racial underrepresentation in higher education” (p. 188). In addition to the historical legacy of exclusion, Harper also

emphasized a need for understanding “the conditions” that resulted in access being granted to excluded groups and how “generations” of said groups “have been numerically and experientially minoritized” (p. 188). As a result of some of those conditions, the widely accepted expectation is that Black students will assimilate into the culture at HWIs. This longstanding notion appears in studies dating back to the 1990s. Benton (2001) discussed an example of this prevailing assumption in a review of Saddlemire’s (1996) study::

His [Saddlemire’s] findings indicated White freshmen had little or no contact with African Americans, yet they harbored negative assumptions about Blacks and Black culture. These students felt that Black students intentionally secluded themselves from Whites. Several indicated they rarely interacted with African Americans on their college campus. However, when these students did have positive interactions with Black students, it was always stated as an exception. These exceptions that were mentioned were African Americans who culturally identified as White. (p. 23)

Similar patterns of thought continue to be adopted on contemporary campuses, demonstrating the influence of past actions on the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of college students today.

Keels (2020) stated the history of the exclusion aspect of campus climate is an important consideration in understanding students from marginalized backgrounds and their use of campus counterspaces. According to Keels (2020), one product of this history is that at HWIs, the “benefits sustained for particular groups go unrecognized and often work to the detriment of groups that have been historically excluded by the institution” (p. 162). Historical instances of exclusion include Black students at White institutions only being allowed to listen to class lectures in the hallway, not being allowed to share residence halls with their White peers, and their applications being denied because of race (Harper, 2013). When campus climate is

examined for the differences in perceptions across various populations on campus, it is often found that minoritized students are the ones who continue to feel the impact of the historical legacy of exclusion, and White students continue to benefit from it (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

In a healthy climate, all individuals and groups present in the environment feel welcomed, respected, and valued (Rankin & Reason, 2005). In contrast, unhealthy campus climates have been characterized as being unsupportive and resulting in low academic performance and sometimes even high dropout rates for Black students (Solórzano et al., 2000). Campus racial climate deals specifically with how racial and ethnic groups feel about racial issues and experiences on campus. In a positive collegiate racial climate, students, faculty, and administrators of color can communicate feelings of inclusion in the campus environment, the curriculum is reflective of the experiences of people from minoritized backgrounds, and the recruitment and retention of students, faculty, and staff of color are supported by university programs (Lascher & Offenstein, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Thelamour et al., 2019). According to Solórzano et al. (2000), a positive racial climate can lead to positive academic outcomes for Black students. Examining campus climate, specifically racial climate on college campuses, can be a key part of understanding the adjustment, persistence, retention, and graduation patterns for Black students, as a negative campus climate disproportionately harms students from minoritized backgrounds (Kniess et al., 2015; Lascher & Offenstein, 2012; Thelamour et al., 2019). According to Taylor et al. (2018), campus climate research should engage with digital and online spaces, including social media. However, much of the literature on campus climate discusses experiences of students on campus (Taylor et al., 2018).

Researchers (e.g., Ancis et al., 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Love et al., 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Rodgers & Summers, 2008) have consistently

produced results that illustrate racial and ethnic minoritized students and their White counterparts at the same institution view the campus, racial, and academic climates very differently, which tends to result in gaps in social satisfaction and student success by race. For example, a study conducted by Rankin and Reason (2005) illustrated that a greater proportion of Black students, along with other students of color, viewed the campus climate as racist and hostile, while their White peers had no awareness of such occurrences. Such discrepancies in perceptions of campus climate have the potential to hinder or delay the awareness White students have of the racialized experiences of Black students (Worthington et al., 2008). Research focused on the campus racial climate indicates that Black students at HWIs are in an environment where they feel invalidated, marginalized, and unwelcomed (Lewis & Shah, 2021). Most commonly, results show that Black students view the campus climate as racially toxic, alienating, culturally insensitive, and hostile (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Karkouti, 2016; Love et al., 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

In Espenshade and Radford's (2009) study on cross-racial interactions, 56% of the Black student participants reported frequent interactions with White peers while only 19% of the White student respondents reported doing the same with Black peers. Studies such as Espenshade and Radford's tend to show Black students as being more open to cross-racial engagement, despite the negative experiences they have had or the lack of reciprocity from their White peers.

Researchers (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Karkouti, 2016; Love et al., 2009; Rankin & Reason, 2005) have shown that Black students describe cross-racial interactions as being less friendly, express harassment at higher rates, and report feeling like they are targets of racism as compared to White students, whose responses reflect limited perceptions of racial tensions, and who view the campus as respectful. In a study conducted by Harper and Hurtado (2007), Black students perceived the campus climate to be racially toxic because of the confrontations they had with

White peers and faculty, the lack of Black cultural spaces, White classmates not wanting to work with them because they were thought to be less intelligent, and a number of other barriers. The literature on campus racial climate also indicates that Black students' college experience at HWIs is associated with racial stresses due to the behavior of White students that consistently make them feel different from the majority and remind them that they have to prove themselves worthy of being in these White academic spaces (Davis et al., 2004; Thelamour et al., 2019). While researchers such as Hurtado et al. (1998) highlight a number of educational benefits that emerge as a result of cross-racial peer interactions, other researchers, such as Harper (2013) continue to call for awareness to the stereotyping and other modes of "racial injury" (p.193) that may occur during such exchanges. The ways Black students view the campus racial climate emphasize how these stressors negatively impact educational outcomes and social integration (Bourke, 2010; Karkouti, 2016; Love et al., 2009; Thelamour et al., 2019).

As a result of campus climate assessments, and as an attempt to address the exclusionary and racist past of these institutions, many HWIs are now working toward establishing and implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to support the retention rates of people of color on their campuses (Lewis & Shah, 2021). HWIs are enhancing efforts in response to an increased understanding and visibility of racism across the nation, which has caught the attention and concerns of students, faculty, and staff of color. In recent years, greater awareness of overt forms of racism has surfaced, including threats against people of color (i.e., lynching, death threats); slander in the form of graffiti (i.e., defamatory language, racist symbols) that defaces college property; and social media posts that degrade members of the Black community through pictures and events (Lewis & Shah, 2021). As administrations work to reactively develop

diversity and inclusion programs, a negative and inequitable campus climate around issues of race continues to be a problem at HWIs (Telles & Mitchell, 2018).

Participants in a study conducted by George Mwangi et al. (2018) specifically named how acts of racism they saw happening across the country were being “mirrored in what they saw on their own campuses (e.g., police brutality and tension, racially charged political climate)” (p. 465). Racial incidents occurring in U.S. society impacted participants’ academic and social campus engagement, how they experienced university spaces, and how they interacted with other members of the campus community (George Mwangi et al., 2018). Specifically, when race-related issues would make national news, the discourse on these incidents would impact how participants interacted with White faculty and peers on campus—especially when their faculty or peers seemed to be insensitive to topics such as the Black Lives Matter Movement. As Black students participated in race-related activism, such as protests, sit-ins, and walkouts, they were not always positively received by their White counterparts on campus. There have been instances where such views of the campus climate, along with a lack of sense of belonging on campus, have resulted in student protests and demands at HWIs. Thomason (2015) described several previous student protests and the activists’ demands that resulted from racial disparity issues or racially insensitive circumstances present on different HWI campuses. At the University of Missouri, Johns Hopkins University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Wright State University, students organized to demand an increase in Black faculty and Black student enrollment to enhance Black representation on campus and sense of belonging. At Guilford College, the Black students demanded for administration to develop a plan to eliminate the exploitation of Black-male student athletes. Black students at Emory University demanded institutional support be provided to Black students and an increase in pay for Black faculty and

staff. Students at Georgetown University demanded formal recognition of the university's history with slavery by installing plaques on the places where enslaved Africans were thought to be buried on campus. Students at Yale University demanded that a residential community be renamed, and two new residential colleges be named after a person of color to show that campus buildings and spaces could reflect their ancestors and culture just as the majority of building names do for White culture. Students at Purdue University demanded the university to reestablish the chief diversity officer position and called for an apology from the university president for his campus wide email message that seemed to ignore the many acts of racism that had become embedded into their campus culture. The University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa received demands from students for the creation of a "diversity space" where students from minoritized populations could find community. When campus climates at HWIs create toxic conditions for minoritized students, these students collectively organize to enact change (Thomason, 2015). Such racialized encounters contribute to the campus climate, tension between racial groups, aspects of (mis)trust, how students approach relationship building, and their well-being, safety, satisfaction on campus, and sense of belonging (George Mwangi et al., 2018).

According to Mayo et al. (1995), Black students who experience a sense of belonging and are integrated into campus social activities achieve higher GPAs than students who do not get involved in social events. However, Patton (2006a) explained how the social environment can be equally as stressful for Black students, as there tend to be only a few campus-wide programs that are devoted to the interests of Black students. In my observations of the utilization of campus spaces, I have seen that these spaces get extremely racialized as White students set the norms to where they are the students that dominate many of the spaces that are intended to be useful to all

students. Essentially, Black students at HWIs have developed a sense of marginalization and isolation due to these alarming circumstances.

The culture that emerges from the campus climate at HWIs is designed to reflect the cultural norms, perceptions, assumptions, and behaviors of the dominant group (i.e., White, heterosexual, cisgendered, traditional college age, males). This usually results in the campus cultures at HWIs being mostly associated with negative experiences among students of color (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). The working definition of campus culture that I would like to utilize was derived from combining the definitions provided in research by Jayakumar and Museus (2012, p. 8) and Kuh and Whitt (1998, pp. 12–13). Accordingly, I have come to understand campus culture as the persistent collective and shared patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the institution's history, mission, and environment, that inform the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university, which can be used as the lens for interpreting the meanings of campus occurrences and actions on and off campus. I think it is also important to communicate the operational definition for campus racial culture as I am concerned with the ways in which race influences student groups to create racially homogeneous groups. Museus, Ravello, et al. (2012) defined campus racial culture as,

The collective patterns of tacit values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that evolve from an institution's history and are manifested in its mission, traditions, language, interactions, artifacts, physical structures, and other symbols, which differentially shape the experiences of various racial and ethnic groups and can function to oppress racial minority populations within a particular institution. (p. 32)

Because race is such an influential factor in the creation and maintenance of systems of power, hegemonic forces ultimately socialize various groups into their respective places within

the campus culture. Patterns similar to the ones we see in larger society (i.e., White people as the group that sets the standards) are often reflected in campus cultures, as colleges are microcosms of our society. According to the 2022 U.S. census data, the Black race accounts for 13.6% of the total population, while Whites account for 75.8% of the population. As a result of the numerical majority, coupled with the increased access to power, capital, influence, and other resources, much of the culture within the U.S. represents the standards, norms, practices, and concerns of White people more than any other racial group. Consequently, the same patterns exist on HWI campuses.

The dominant White culture that persists at these institutions marginalizes the values and lived experiences of racial and ethnic minority populations (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012).

Tsolidis (2006a) provided a great example of this pattern, showing how Black students must “negotiate and compromise between the cultures they bring with them to school, those available to them, and those to which they aspire” (p. 613). Oftentimes, these students develop “critical resistant navigational skills” (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998, p. 216), in order to be successful in their collegiate experience in a HWI. These skills do not “stem from students’ conformist or adaptive strategies, but emerge from their resistance to domination and oppression in a system that devalues their ethno- and sociocultural experiences” (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998, p. 216). Evans and Moore (2015) believed that people of color must “actively seek ways to engage in forms of resistance that promote counter narratives and protect themselves from denigration” (p. 439). Through this process and navigation, we see the creation of racial subcultures on college campuses, which Museus (2008) stated is inevitable. Museus found that when students are “incongruent with the dominant culture of their campus,” (p. 572) in order to be successful, they choose to either fully integrate into the dominant culture or seek subcultures.

Existing literature suggests that the campus climate directly influences both educational and social outcomes for students. It is imperative that higher education professionals continue to examine how the differences in the perceptions of campus climate impact the inequities that continue to persist in student success outcomes for students of color (Kniess et al., 2015; Lascher & Offenstein, 2012; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Thelamour et al., 2019). Equally as important, campus climate determines the relationships that are developed on campus, the transformation of social spaces, and the cultural life of the institution (Museus, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Assessing the climate of a campus and understanding the campus culture must be a priority, and action should be taken to create and sustain a healthy climate so that all members of the community can be productive, feel valued, and included in the campus culture.

The Role of Subcultures in Black Students' Experiences

Analyzing campus cultures and the subcultures that emerge due to the socialization processes operating at HWIs and the oppressive conditions present on these campuses is integral to understanding why Black students continue to participate in and create counterspaces. The literature reviewed in this section provides an overview of how subcultures are defined, what they offer to Black students, and how they can aid Black students' success at HWIs. This is important for my study as I seek to investigate if Black students are operating in similar on-campus subculture patterns through their use of same-race social media spaces.

Keels (2020) defined counterspaces as those “exclusionary spaces where those of a similar social identity gather to validate and critique their experiences with the larger institution” (p. 11). Underrepresented students often intentionally seek out counterspaces or subcultures by engaging with their own homogeneous communities. Black students, specifically, utilize subcultures for many reasons, including feelings of isolation, the lack of cultural spaces, the

desire for community and support, the absence of professors from their ethnic group, the lack of positive interactions with their White peers and faculty, and other difficulties that come with navigating and adjusting to the cultures of HWIs (Grier-Reed, 2010; Gusa, 2010; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Kniess et al., 2015; Love et al., 2009; Magolda & Ebben, 2007; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Solórzano et al., 2000). When Black students experience racial microaggressions, isolation, and alienation that result in oppression (Grier-Reed, 2010; Love et al., 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000; Thelamour et al., 2019), they create their own homogeneous academic and social subcultures as a defense mechanism and shelter from the “psychoemotional harms” (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 14) that can result from negative campus encounters and oppressive cultures (Magolda & Ebben, 2007; Museus, 2008). According to Magolda and Ebben (2007), subcultures form “in reaction to the hegemony of dominant groups,” as students from marginalized backgrounds form communities of support (p. 145). Jayakumar and Museus (2012) defined campus subculture as

The distinct culture that is created and perpetuated by a group on campus that (1) is in persisting interaction with each other, (2) has developed distinct values, assumptions, and perspectives that guide behavior of its group members, (3) transmits those values, assumptions, and perspectives to newcomers to facilitate conformity to them, and (4) differs from the dominant culture of the campus. (p. 7)

For students from underrepresented backgrounds who experience difficulties due to the oppressive cultures of HWIs, “institutional subcultures can be a critical factor in their ability to find membership on their campuses” (Museus, 2008, p. 569). These subcultures increase the likelihood that students from underrepresented backgrounds will successfully adjust to these

settings, find meaningful acceptance within the environment, and persist in college (Museus, 2008). Although subcultures and counterspaces,

promote the separation and segregation of subgroups of students from the broader institution, it is for brief periods of time and for the strategic purpose of helping students develop the adaptive coping resources and skills that enable them to re-emerge and engage more fully with the broader institution. (Keels, 2020, p. 161)

Black students who choose to create and/or participate in subcultures should be viewed as utilizing agency to find sources of community and joy in the midst of daunting conditions. As Keels (2020) stated, these are spaces where students from minoritized backgrounds can develop agency, which Keels defined as “active resilience, resistance, and circumvention of the psychological consequences of oppression” (p.77). Oftentimes as a result of the environments at HWIs, people of color perceive the campus to be exhausting and a place where their sense of control, comfort, and meaning are diminished (Smith, 2008). Subcultures are great outlets for students of color to reclaim control, find purpose, and express themselves freely in a space that does not cause them stress, anxiety, or frustration.

The literature on campus cultures and racial and ethnic minoritized students proposes that the dominant cultures of HWIs can negatively influence students of color (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006b). Scholars (e.g., Guiffrida, 2003; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006b) argued that campus subcultures provide safe spaces for minoritized students that help to facilitate success, persistence, and educational achievement despite the harmful aspects of the cultures of HWIs. Grier-Reed (2010) found that when Black students create subcultures and counterspaces on campus, they find meaningful connections that serve as a source of social support to help

them as they navigate the often hostile and stressful environment of HWIs. Consistent with Grier-Reed's (2010) findings, other scholars (Bourke, 2010; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006a; Solórzano et al., 2000) demonstrated how these spaces provide Black students with the opportunity to feel safe and welcome to show up as their authentic selves, express and embrace their cultural identities, feel heard, and have the potential to combat the microaggressions and stereotypes they experience on campus when they are not in these subculture spaces.

Black subcultures can be created within Black student organizations, Black cultural centers, ethnic studies programs, Black cultural housing, Black fraternities and sororities, targeted support programs, and peer groups (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006b, Solórzano et al., 2000). Rodgers and Summers (2008) stressed the importance of Black Greek-letter organizations, as they tend to develop strong senses of identity and belonging for their members and encourage them to be open to interacting with people from different cultures. Campus cultural centers, specifically, “provide spaces of resistance against identity disaffirming campus experiences” (Keels, 2020, p. 161). Additionally, these spaces provide Black students with “compensatory supports they [need] to counterbalance the low-quality guidance that many report receiving from White academic advisers and professors” (Keels, 2020, p. 163). Expanding on what the social bonds created in counterspaces offer for students, Keels (2020) stated that counterspaces “enable marginalized students to move beyond relying solely on individual coping resources” (p. 94). This is extremely important because it alludes to students from underserved and underrepresented populations, who usually do not have the same social capital and understanding as their White peers, being able to “share institutional knowledge,” which can be extremely beneficial to those students as they navigate “administrative difficulties” that arise (Keels, 2020, p. 94).

Counterspaces and subcultures for Black students offer more than just an opportunity to socialize with other Black students and build friendships. These spaces allow Black students to create and maintain positive perceptions of a supportive environment where their experiences and learning are validated, and where they feel that they matter on educational, emotional, and cultural levels (Grier-Reed, 2010; Museus, Lãm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006a; Solórzano et al., 2000). These spaces are critical to students of color as they work to “challenge each other to push beyond stereotypical narratives, develop counterstories, and learn adaptive strategies from others who are navigating similar struggles” (Keels, 2020, p. 161).

Subcultures often allow students to not only build community and informal networks of solidarity, but to express their frustrations with individuals who share their experiences of what it is like to be Black at a HWI (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Keels, 2020; Patton, 2006b; Solórzano et al., 2000). Harper (2013) discusses the term “peer pedagogies” to characterize how Black students enrolled at predominately White schools use same-race peer groups or subcultures to educate each other on navigating the campus climate and productive responses to “onlyness, racism, and racial stereotypes” (p. 199). When Black students are navigating the White environments at HWIs, they can experience cultural conflict, racism, and stigma (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016). Therefore, finding others who face similar circumstances allows for Black students to give and obtain “mentorship, support, connectedness, validation, and resources for navigating a hostile campus climate,” all of which have grave potential for being crucial for social integration and institutional commitment (Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016, p. 383).

According to Guiffrida and Douthit (2010), Black student organizations specifically provide Black students with a break from the dominant culture (White), and a place where Black students can “let their guards down to dress, talk, and socialize in ways that are comfortable and

familiar without fear of perpetuating negative Black stereotypes” (p. 315). These subcultures help to “counter discrimination, build critical group identity, become culturally affirming while fostering institutional belonging, provide psychological and physical safety, support academic achievement, and provide a social community” (Keels, 2020, p. 161). Furthermore, it is important to note that these spaces were created, strengthened, and maintained “in deliberate reaction to feeling marginalized in the broader campus community” (Keels, 2020, p. 64). Two students from Keels’ (2020) study had very specific intentions at the beginning of their college career to create friendships with people from diverse backgrounds. However, these students quickly came to the realization that in order for them to “persist in predominantly White academic spaces, they had to create Black social spaces” (p. 64). In addition to enhancing minority student retention and persistence at HWIs (Guiffrida, 2003), Black student organizations offer a positive academic and social support system and a means of self and racial identity affirmation and growth (Keels, 2020; Thelamour et al., 2019).

Racial subcultures offer a unique opportunity for students of color at HWIs and in predominantly White spaces. As Keels (2020) framed it, when students of color are in these racially-based spaces, “race-ethnicity often recedes into the background, enabling minority students to relax and lower their cultural defenses” (p. 94). When they are engaged in these counterspaces, Black students’ racial identity blends in with the crowd, the sense of being the only Black person in the space is removed, the burden of battling negative stereotypes is eliminated, and the pressure to justify they belong is erased (Guiffrida, 2003; Keels, 2020). This sense of safety allows students to focus on other aspects of themselves and their academic experiences (Keels, 2020). Contrary to what most people may think, racially-based spaces actually increase the likelihood of students of color engaging with majority spaces on campus

(Keels, 2020). Specifically for Black students, subcultures are a useful avenue for students to “become more integrated into the larger campus community and encourage the development of a stronger sense of belonging” (Rodgers & Summers, 2008, p. 175). Students who first feel accepted and welcomed in a subculture that represents their ethnicity will feel more comfortable exploring other social environments, eventually integrating into the larger campus community (Guiffrida, 2003). Participation in subcultures is essential for Black students’ social integration, specifically students raised in a primarily Black neighborhood or community, because the subcultures help Black students navigate certain difficulties that come with adjusting to the White cultural norms at HWIs (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010).

In the typical campus climates of HWIs, Black subcultures are primarily used as a means of self-preservation and resilience, allowing students to tend to their socioemotional needs as well as their intellectual needs, which promotes success (Grier-Reed, 2010; Levin et al., 2006; Patton, 2006b; Solórzano et al., 2000). Academic and social counterspaces for coping with the racial climate at HWIs has been recognized as “essential for the academic survival of [Black] college students” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 182) and as a source of “identity-affirming support that can facilitate the college success of students from historically marginalized groups (Keels, 2020, p. 11). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022b), only 39.5% of Black students who begin college graduate within 6 years in comparison to 61.5% of White students. Most recently, the National Center for Education Statistics (2022b) posted that Black students represented 10.3% of bachelor’s degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions, as compared to White students, who represented 62.3% of bachelor’s degrees. According to Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016), “connecting Black students to spaces where they can find support and resources for coping in the college environment is necessary for their academic success and graduation,

particularly at HWIs (p. 375). In Levin et al.'s (2006) study on Black students, having more in-group college friends was directly related to academic commitment, academic adjustment, performance, and motivation; students felt it was necessary to have ethnically homogeneous friend groups because of the ethnic discrimination on campus.

Counterspaces and identity-affirming groups provide students with “safety, connectedness, validation, resilience, intellectual stimulation, empowerment, and a home base on campus” (Grier-Reed, 2010, p. 187). For example, Black student organizations have been a great source of shelter for Black students at HWIs to combat their experiences with marginalization (Jones & Reddick, 2017). According to Museus, Lâm, et al. (2012), it is essential for university leaders and professionals to “be sensitive to subcultures and promote models of effective practice on their campuses” (p. 122). Institutions can learn from subcultures that efficiently empower students from racial and ethnic minoritized populations and should view them as models for improving the success of specific student populations (Museus, Lâm et al., 2012). Subcultures should be supported, and higher education administrators should get students of color involved in subcultures at the beginning stages of their collegiate journey as these spaces can serve as an avenue for students to share institutional knowledge, common experiences, offer support, and help toward goal attainment (Museus, 2008). Museus (2008) shared a powerful perspective on what happens in the absence of racial subcultures. According to Museus (2008), in the absence of these communities at HWIs,

students of color might be forced to either leave their college campus or dissociate with their traditional heritages and suffer negative consequences in personal development and academic performance. Thus, the fostering, maintenance, and expansion of such communities are critical components in validating racial/ethnic minority students’

cultural backgrounds and fostering a sense of membership in the campus community among those students. (p. 584)

Racially homogenous subcultures for minoritized groups are essential sources of identity-affirming opportunities for these students at HWIs. As Museus stated, without such spaces, racially minoritized students could face developmental hindrances in the areas of racial identity, intellectual growth, and cultural awareness.

There are arguments both for and against subcultures in campus environments. For example, in Tsolidis' (2006b) study on how students from different backgrounds experience their schooling and used subcultures, and their understanding of the dominant culture, to navigate identity development and establish personal areas for growth, the participants associated subcultures with student success in various areas. Conversely, scholars such as Park (2014) and others critiqued by Keels (2020) argued that subcultures, especially racially homogeneous ones, are detrimental to establishing a "common student identity," intensify racial tensions on campus, segregate students into "hostile ethnic enclaves" (Keels, 2020, p. 99), discourage students from forming relationships with people outside of the subculture, and discourage interracial friendships (Park, 2014). Such perspectives don't acknowledge unequal access to resources, cultural bias that impacts how one might define "common student identity," and the social construction of race (and other social norms) that has resulted in vast differences, inequities, and injustices in the lived experiences of people of color (Keels, 2020). Additionally, I would argue that it is the isolation and discrimination faced by the students who form these subcultures that discourage them from forming relationships outside of the subculture and engaging in cross-racial interaction.

Scholars who do not condone racial counterspaces for racially underrepresented students tend to assume that a sense of belonging and feeling welcomed for these students automatically comes with being admitted to their university (Keels, 2020). When critics of race-based organizations and communities believe that institutions, by its own nature, provide a sense of inclusion for all students, then they are likely to look at students who choose to engage in counterspaces as the ones who are intentionally separating themselves from a campus environment that promotes diversity, inclusivity, and community (Keels, 2020). On the contrary, there are other scholars (e.g., Patton, 2006a; Keels, 2020) who have shown that such assumptions are problematic as they ignore the identity disaffirming and oppressive campus experiences these students have at HWIs. Ultimately, I must agree with Keels (2020) comment that,

those arguing against the need for identity-affirming counterspaces do not understand the identity-based challenges that marginalized students encounter—the constant reminders of the aspects of their social identities that prevent them from equal membership in the larger student body, the toll of the psychological and emotional energy and resources they devote to understanding and responding to involuntarily being positioned as a marginalized subject. (p. 18)

The mental, social, and emotional labor racially minoritized students must commit to performing daily as students at HWIs should not be ignored. Subcultures are a great resource for underrepresented students to regroup and recharge from the additional burdens that are not placed on White students.

As HWIs strive to create community across racial groups, these institutions will have to maximize on the operation of subcultures or same-race peer groups utilized by racially minoritized students rather than seek to eliminate them. Creating inclusive educational

environments should involve looking to campus subcultures as a source of knowledge concerning how marginalized groups have been impacted by the dominant culture (Keels, 2020; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012). Because subcultures can take a variety of forms, they can also provide benefits in unique ways that are extremely meaningful to students (Keels, 2020; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Subcultures should be viewed as safe spaces that are necessary to the success, satisfaction, and preservation of Black students.

Social Media Utilization Patterns of Black Users

Social media is undeniably a significant part of society in the 21st century. Today's college students have had easy access to technology from a very young age (Reynolds et al., 2017). Considering that much of the interaction college students have occurs in online spaces and through social media platforms, it is important to understand the role these platforms play in student experiences, especially as it relates to engagement with campus life and perceptions of campus climate. The culture of higher education promotes staying connected to campus, major departments, and student organizations through social media; therefore, social networking is an important factor in the lives of college students (Gin et al., 2017). As the popularity of social media networks continues to grow, higher education professionals must consider the ways in which campus life can extend to online spaces and the position social media spaces play in student experiences.

Social networking sites are viewed as the “the social glue that helps students connect to new friends at their university” (Tynes et al., 2013, p. 104). Students tend to create social connections with peers utilizing social media networks as opposed to physical organizations and locations on campus (Gin et al., 2017). Social media is a vital aspect of social life as it helps users meet new people without regard to geographical limitations (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016),

allows for individuals and groups to collectively share ideas and unite over common interests (Dillette et al., 2019), serves as a platform where youth and young adults receive most of their widespread information (Emerick et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2017; Stevens et al., 2018), and creates a space to share knowledge (Akram & Kumar, 2017). Equally as important, social media sites are a great place to find support, especially for those individuals who lack traditional support systems, such as parents and siblings (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). As students broadcast their daily interactions on social media platforms, the integration of students inside and outside of the classroom is impacted in unique ways (Gin et al., 2017).

While social media sites are an overwhelming aspect of the lives of college students, researchers have discovered the unintended effects social media has on its users. Some scholars (i.e., Akram & Kumar, 2017; Siddiqui & Singh, 2016) documented how time-consuming social networking sites can be for habitual users. Most people spend a substantial amount of time on social media sites, which can develop into an addiction-like pattern and take away from their ability to concentrate (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). The draw toward social media interaction can also divert energy from other tasks that users could be focusing on, such as writing a paper, exercising, or cooking food. Some scholars (i.e., Akram & Kumar, 2017; Issac, 2021) discussed the time spent on social sites can take away from individuals' availability to dedicate themselves to in-person interactions with peers, family, or university personnel in academic or social settings (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Issac, 2021).

Studies have also shown that social media can have effects on the mental health of users as well. Even though Berryman et al. (2018) suggested it is “quality rather than quantity of use” (p. 308) that dictates the extent to which mental health is impacted by social media interaction, such concerns are still worth considering. For example, negative social comparison and digital

bullying (Akram & Kumar, 2017) can lead to depression for some users (Berryman et al., 2018). Social comparison is frequent as most social media sites provide an opportunity to be selective about what information is shared with others. Pinyerd (2013) stated such selectivity results in “picking out only the most flattering photos, highlighting prime vacation experiences, and flaunting ... relationships for [one’s] social circle to see” (p. 53). Most commonly, people do not tend to show the aspects of their life that demonstrate where they may be struggling or experiencing hard times. When an individual only views the positive aspects of another person’s life via social media posts, the individual may assume their peers are far more well off.

Bullying on social media sites is also a fairly common practice as users are more likely to type harmful comments than they are to actually say the same hurtful words in-person (Pinyerd, 2013). Pinyerd referred to “emotional turmoil” as an inherited aspect of using social media and therefore, suggested that social media “be used with caution” (p. 53). Berryman et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine connections between social media use and mental health problems. Findings determined that for young adults, social media use can be associated with “loneliness, suicidal thoughts, decreased empathy, and social anxiety” (p. 312). According to Berryman et al.’s analysis, time spent on social sites is not as critical of a factor in regard to mental health effects as are the ways in which young adults use social media.

Haddad et al. (2021) conducted an analysis of the benefits and detriments of social media platforms and usage specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Haddad et al.’s findings aligned fairly close to the aforementioned reports that focused on the effects of social media on youth and young adults. Haddad et al. found that social media benefited users in that it allowed them to sustain a sense of social connectedness during a time of isolation, was a great avenue for fostering peer-to-peer relationships, and was an ideal means to create and maintain community

via formal support groups. The negative aspects Haddad et al. (2021) found were a bit different than those identified by previous scholars. Aside from the common instances of cyberbullying, Haddad et al.'s findings revealed higher stress levels, anxiety, and disruption in sleep patterns associated with social media use. Additionally, the overwhelming amount of information available on social media made it particularly challenging for users to decipher which information was true and which was simply just widely spread, false information (Haddad et al., 2021).

Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2016) proposed that the ways in which students use social media to enhance their college experiences affects individual and group behavior, campus culture, and ways that students engage with the campus community. College students use social media platforms at very high rates. As many as 90% of young adults (ages 18–29 years old) claimed to be engaged as members of online communities hosted by social media sites in 2014 (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). Facebook has hundreds of millions of users, half of which log in every day. Pinyerd (2013) found that some users log in “before they even get out of bed” (p. 52). In a study by Stevens et al. (2018), 64.2% of respondents reported using social media on an hourly basis. Furthermore, studies conducted since 2015 specifically show there is high use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter among Black college students as compared to their Hispanic and White peers (Lee, 2015, 2017; Stanton et al., 2017; Steele, 2018). Facebook is a specific means through which Black college students actively communicate, primarily with other Black friends, establishing a community or network where they feel free to explore and strengthen their understanding of their racial self (Stanton et al., 2017).

Social media sites influence how students express and present themselves, construct their identity, spread activist messages, socialize with friends, engage with social networks, and

establish and sustain connections (Ellison et al., 2007; McCracken, 2017; Stanton et al., 2017; Stevens et al., 2018). In addition to helping create and maintain interpersonal associations, researchers have argued that social media sites have the ability to be helpful resources as students journey through new social environments (DeAndrea et al., 2011). Because social media sites offer a great deal of insight concerning cultural norms that students abide by, online interactions can socialize students to perform certain roles, abide by frequently exhibited principles, and define their identities (DeAndrea, et al., 2011). For students of color specifically, their use of technology and social media sites can serve as a guide for connections and networks that are essential to their survival in physical spaces at HWIs (Simms et al., 2021).

Social networking relations, modes of online communication, and digital identities are not race neutral; researchers (DiPrete, 2011 et al., 2011; Hofstra et al., 2017; Sharma, 2013; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010) explored how racial segregation has extended into virtual spaces and created new digital divides. Because race is one of the most influential organizing concepts that structure our offline worlds, it can also be viewed as a significant organizing principle for social media users (Florini, 2014). Hofstra et al. (2017) found that online networks, specifically on Facebook, tend to be more segregated by race than any other social identity category. Other studies conducted specifically on the social media use of U.S. college students found evidence of high levels of racial segregation on social media platforms similar to the racial segregation patterns found on college campuses (Lewis et al., 2008, 2012; Mayer & Puller, 2008). Hofstra et al. (2017) argued that social media networks could be a place where segregation by race or social standing might be moderated. The boundaries of social media networks are more permeable, meaning that individuals can create connections with others beyond their local social settings, such as school or community. However, large online networks are replicating the individual's

homogeneously sorted offline relationships (Hofstra et al., 2017). According to some researchers (Lewis et al., 2012; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010), high degrees of racial homogeneity are a notable feature of U.S. social networks because most people have a preference for associating with persons of the same racial background and display a tendency to choose friends who are similar in other demographics, such as age, level of education, and socioeconomic status. These natural selections may breed a type of segregation in online spaces (DiPrete et al., 2011). The same social patterns are evident on social networking sites, such as Twitter, where users mindfully construct networks of “culturally connected individuals” in hopes of avoiding backlash or harassment in online spaces (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 827).

According to Daniels (2012), the internet has become a space where individuals seek out congruity with others who are like themselves, especially in the context of race and ethnicity, for the purposes of racial identity construction and expression. For people of color, social media can be used to explore shared identities and common experiences, and to join groups or interact with others as a way of finding and embracing their sense of belonging (Horvath-Plyman, 2018). Being able to express identity and develop belonging through affirming virtual connections can positively affect health and improve well-being (Stanton et al., 2017). Social media platforms provide opportunities for students of color to connect, collaborate, foster positive identity development, develop collective community, and strengthen social networks (Stanton et al., 2017).

Steele (2016, 2018) encouraged researchers to approach Black digital practice without a deficit lens in order to focus on how Black users articulate and foster resistance, critique the dominant culture, strengthen institutions in the Black community, and challenge oppressive systems through the use of digital technology. Black Twitter, for example, “allows for textual

poaching as resistance, where the user produces content that challenges dominant (oppressive) cultural ideologies and norms, including racial bias” (Lee, 2017, p. 2). Another example is Stewart’s (2019) study which displayed how Black college women engaged in forms of activism and resistance on social media through community building, digital counterspace creation, and the use of the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. Stanton et al. (2017) also discussed the use of #BlackGirlMagic, in addition to #BlackGirlsRock and #CarefreeBlackGirl. Stanton et al. argued that the use of these hashtags allowed Black women to challenge stereotypes and come together to reassure each other in the midst of discouraging, oppressive media portrayals that are ever present on social media platforms. Black college students have employed the use of hashtags on social media for social justice and advocacy campaigns that increase awareness of specific issues, express their views about the discrimination they face, and promote their desire to use social media to result in positive change (Horvath-Plyman, 2018). Some of these hashtags include #itooamharvard (Black Harvard Students), #BBUM (Being Black at the University of Michigan), #DBKGU (Dangerous Black Kids at Georgetown University, and #HandsUpDontShoot (by Howard students in reaction to #Ferguson).

Using highly influential and widespread tactics such as creative hashtags show the ability of Black social media users to not only create counterspaces, but to also resist discourses and ideologies of Black inferiority (Tanksley, 2019). Gin et al. (2017) found that anti-Black racialized hostility was prevalent in social media and that encounters with racialized hostility on social media platforms contributed to racial battle fatigue of the students in the study. Because college students are heavily immersed in social media, it is essential that efforts to improve campus climate account for the aspects of campus life that occur in virtual environments and consider how racial problems could potentially extend to social media platforms (Tynes et al.,

2013). Social media sites, along with the utilization of hashtags, allow Black users a digital space to reimagine and (re)present themselves in ways that challenge dominant ideologies and images that commonly get used against Black women and men in mainstream media (Lee, 2017).

Virtual environments are not free from acts of racism, demeaning messages for people of color, racial slurs, and depictions of violence against people of color (Gin et al., 2017). In a study conducted by Tynes et al. (2013) exploring online factors associated with campus racial climate, findings revealed that Black students in the study experienced more racial discrimination and stress online than the White students involved in the study. Tynes et al. exhibited how many of the social norms and racist behaviors that exist offline get reproduced in online settings. Not only is race a frequently discussed topic on the internet because of the salience race plays in the online life of young people, much of the discrimination online is racially driven (Tynes et al., 2008, 2010).

Maragh (2018) investigated Black Twitter as a critical online environment for the expression of Black culture. The purpose of Maragh's study was to understand the ways in which "racial authenticity" (p. 592) is created and maintained, and how the protection of racial authenticity in online navigations is carried out. Maragh argued that the internet provides a conducive environment for the exploration and expression of Black identity. Similarly, Daniels (2012) found the internet can function as an environment for exploring Black persons' unique identity, much like Black barber shops and beauty salons are a safe space to connect with other Black persons. The added benefit of the internet social community is that it allows persons from other races and ethnicities into the circle of discourse with Black people, offering them the opportunity to interact with and learn about Black identity (Daniels, 2012). Digital race scholarship indicates there are specific insider knowledges that are required to participate in

racial ingroups, online cultural exchanges, the performance of racial identity online, and social commentary and anti-racist humor on social media (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Maragh, 2018; Sharma, 2013). Culturally rooted understandings of race and communication can be found on social media platforms when one examines the collective use of these platforms within racially homogeneous communities utilizing critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA; Maragh, 2018; Steele, 2018). For example, Florini (2014) discussed the practice of “signifyin” (p. 224). Florini stated,

Signifyin’ is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection. It is a longstanding practice in Black American oral traditions, and, as such, serves as a linguistic expression of Black cultural identity on multiple levels. ... It is a space for the expression of Black cultural knowledge, as a vehicle for social critique, and as a means of creating group solidarity (p. 224). ... [Black users offer signifyin’ as a way to speak] to the shared experiences of Black Americans as raced subjects and can be a resource for encoding and expressing experiential knowledge about Black identities. (p. 227)

Steele (2016) also discussed the legacy of oral communication within the Black community and how it has been transferred in online and social networking spaces. Engaging in social media through the use of hashtags, specifically on Twitter, “requires and displays multiple forms of Black cultural competencies, including an understanding of forms of Black American slang” (Florini, 2014, p. 227). Lu and Steele (2019) stated, “hashtags are a platform feature available to all users and were designed to increase visibility beyond an individual user’s immediate network” (p. 827). Black communities create, design, and use hashtags online, often

in ways that “require pre-existing knowledge of African American history and culture for full participation” (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 827) and that contain “culturally specific material that would not be easily discernible by the dominant group” (p. 833). In addition to allowing this community to use word play that draw on culturally specific experiences, knowledge, and oral traditions, social media platforms also provide Black users with an increased visibility to their perspectives and an opportunity to freely develop and use their voices (Stanton et al., 2017). Black social media users create online communities that reflect and endorse their collective identity and racial connections through the culturally relevant content they upload and share (Brock, 2012; Stanton et al., 2017).

In Maragh’s (2018) study, Black participants confirmed the ingroup discourse occurring on social media that contributes to their online identity individually and as a whole. Sharma (2013) also supported this claim by studying the technosocial production of race. Sharma examined the significance of studying the online environments in which race exists, bringing attention to the expression of specific ethnic and racial community characteristics propagated in online spaces through *Blacktags*, “a particular type of hashtag associated with Black Twitter users” (p. 46). In addition to Twitter, McCracken (2017) also analyzed social media platforms such as Tumblr, which is often divided around race, and the ways in which it has served as a site for “enabling the formation of counter-public spaces for marginalized millennial communities and progressives” (p. 151). According to McCracken, Tumblr has been molded into a platform that promotes media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness similar to the ways in which the field of cultural studies approaches media analysis. In order to understand the racial gathering of users in digital spaces, one must consider how race is manifested in social media platforms and how young people engage with media (McCracken, 2017; Sharma, 2013). An

analysis of social media platforms' role in racial identity could certainly inform the current practices and approaches educators utilize both in and out of the classroom.

Other pressures facing Black students, which must be considered, are the emotional burdens of history for Black people and the fear of living while Black (Reddick, 2021). This acknowledgment will emphasize that beyond the hardships that happen directly on campuses, Black students are also carrying with them additional loads that impact how they show up in these environments. Reddick (2021) discussed the many instances where Black people have to constantly prove themselves worthy of respect in historically White spaces. Evans and Moore (2015) stated that in White institutional spaces, people of color must “navigate racial narratives, ideologies, and discourses, while simultaneously attempting to achieve institutional success to reap the material rewards of these elite institutional settings” (p. 439). Florini (2014) examined the ways in which Black users on Twitter come together to network, connect, and engage with others who have similar concerns and experiences.

In my observations, Black people have used social media as a way to discuss such instances and express their feelings, build solidarity, and spread awareness of such occurrences. For example, when Nikole Hannah-Jones was not granted tenure at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Reddick, 2021), there was a significant amount of discourse within the Black online community to discuss the ways in which racism showed itself. I observed how Black people utilized social media to rally support for Nikole Hannah-Jones and how that rallying also gave other people who had similar experiences the confidence to share their stories. Since this incident, several articles have been written about the alarming number of Black women leaving the academy due to issues such as pay inequity and feeling undervalued. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have been known as a space where people

discuss and even debate various current events. Intentionally creating such spaces with racially homogeneous communities could allow for the viewing of affirming perspectives as opposed to ones that could cause more harm. For example, during the coverage of three specific societal situations: the Black Lives Matter movement, debates about removing Confederate statues in public spaces, and the riot at the U.S. Capitol, I was able to see empowering messages on my social media during this emotionally taxing time because all the posts displayed on my timeline were from other Black users who were expressing perspectives that aligned with my emotions and feelings.

Carney (2016) emphasized how different groups can view the same media coverage yet will have drastically different ways of interpreting issues of race. The internet “provides a window into discussions about Black identity and Blackness between group members” (Brock, 2009, p. 31) and allows users to participate in cultural contexts that expand and affirm aspects of racial identity. By creating and utilizing racially homogeneous subcultures on social networking platforms, Black users are intentionally creating a safe space that filters out negative and harmful perceptions, speaking out with other Black people who are facing similar struggles to find “meaningful affirmation, appreciation, and validation of their experiences and knowledge” (Reddick, 2021), to create and maintain group solidarity (Florini, 2014), and to capture Black life without concern for the “White gaze” (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 833).

The social media utilization patterns of Black users are extremely significant for my study because they show that social media is a relevant and appropriate area to analyze in relation to Black college students. The literature not only supports that social media platforms are a valid facet to study, but also displays a variety of ways that Black users create community and express their Blackness in a social space. Black users on social media are intentional with

how they connect with others and engage in culturally relevant conversations. My area of study demonstrated great potential for offering a new lens through which the experiences of Black students can be understood.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite the fact that a large amount of college student interaction now takes place online, researchers have yet to truly examine the role social media platforms play in perceptions of campus racial climate or the navigation strategies for Black students at HWIs (Tynes et al., 2013). Scholars who research social media have studied social media and its capacity for individual and group identity construction, inequalities in social media usage, and the intersections of culture and social media (Cox, 2017). However, these studies lack a specific focus on the experiences of people of color, as we have come to understand that the experiences of this population can be quite different from those of the White majority. The studies that have focused on how people of color use social media have examined the ways people of color use social media to engage in social movements and political activism (Cox, 2017), challenge and combat injustice (Kelly, 2018), challenge racial bias, and address discrimination (Lee, 2017). The studies that have looked specifically at Black communities online often focus heavily on social movements or political campaigns (Lu & Steele, 2019). These studies do not focus on the specific experiences minoritized groups face while enrolled in college, and do not consider how educational environments shape the social media usage patterns of users.

Studies conducted on U.S. college students and social media have investigated ways that social network sites impact the acquisition of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Tanksley, 2019), college transition (DeAndrea et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2013), and the development of relationships and social acceptance (Ellison et al., 2007; Pempek et al., 2009; Yu et al., 2010).

Additionally, researchers (Gin et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2013) explored students' communication patterns for sharing activities, the importance of social media platforms for social connections and campus culture, and ways social media can help first-year students increase their social networks. Furthermore, Tanksley (2019) noted the plethora of research on how social media influences students' civic participation. However, none of these studies centered the experiences and voices of Black students, nor did they consider students at a specific institution type.

The research conducted on the benefits of on-campus subcultures for Black students does not consider how Black students use social media to create and participate in same-race peer groups that expand their sense of community into virtual settings. The results from my pilot study, along with existing literature, indicated that the creation of same-race friend groups and other spaces for racially homogeneous peers to gather stemmed from similar background experiences; a level of familiarity, comfort, and support with Black people; the desire that these students could show up as their authentic selves; and a general discomfort students felt around White peers, faculty, and staff. However, higher education researchers have not examined what motivates Black students to create counterspaces or connect with same-race peer groups on social media platforms, nor have they investigated the potential these virtual spaces have in creating opportunities for Black students to engage in racial identity expression and formation. Scholars have not studied if these spaces play a role in how Black students navigate campus and their college experiences, perceive campus climate, and go about creating safe, affirming, and liberating spaces at HWIs. The research on Black students at HWIs has often examined the academic and social challenges faced by Black students, but there is still a need for more studies that highlight how Black students utilize agency to successfully navigate their college

environment, and resist or oppose the racial hostility they experience in the historically White spaces at HWIs (Graham, 2015).

While there is a growing body of research exploring issues of race and ethnicity in digital environments and how race is manifested online and on social media sites, there is not significant research on how racial campus climate is manifested online nor on how social media impacts Black college students at HWIs specifically. My research explores the intersections of race, cultural identity, digital social networks and social media platforms, and educational environments. While platforms such as Black Twitter (along with Blacktags) and Instagram have received much attention amongst bloggers and news sites, these spaces receive little attention in academic environments, despite being a major aspect of the social lives of college students. My research reveals how Black students freely choose to engage in racially homogeneous spaces on social media platforms and what impact these engagements have on students' college experience.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Building on work that examines how peer groups influence student experiences, the purpose of my study was to explore what role same-race peer groups on social media platforms play in the experiences of Black students at HWIs. By focusing on the support and comfort that same-race peer groups provide for Black students, I spotlighted the ways Black students utilize same-race peer groups on social media platforms to engage in community, cultural affirmation, and expression, as well as use these platforms as sources of resilience, persistence, agency, and resistance to assimilation. This chapter details the design and methods used in this study, beginning with a detailed description of the pilot study that informed the inquiry on Black college students' use of social media platforms to create a subculture within HWIs.

Pilot Study

During the Fall 2020 semester, I conducted a pilot study as a requirement for ELC 774, Introduction to Qualitative Inquiry: A Social Justice Approach. That pilot study was an attempt to understand the experiences of Black students who participate in racial subcultures on campus at HWIs. Three research questions guided the study:

- (1) Why do Black students choose to participate in racial subcultures at HWIs?
- (2) What role does campus racial climate play in Black students creating and/or participating in subcultures?
- (3) How do Black students use the creation of their own social counterspaces on social media platforms to impact their college experience?

Originally, I was only interested in the first two questions. However, the third question containing the social media aspect was added to my research topic as a result of some personal reflection and consideration of the virtual environment that became so relevant in educational

operations at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As I was working on the proposal for my pilot study, I remember specifically thinking about the days leading up to and following the presidential race between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The content I saw on social media was empowering, affirming, and even offered a few laughs despite such a time of uncertainty. I remember thinking this was a result of my social media timeline being curated by all Black social media users. It occurred to me that what I witnessed online was mimicking the patterns of a subculture, but on a social media platform where Black social media users were intentionally crafting and filtering their timelines with content to which they could relate by following and engaging with predominantly Black social media users and pages. For example, Black Twitter was a source of information and humor during this time, filled mostly with jokes that only individuals within the in-group would understand. I would venture off to see other accounts that were not a part of the subculture or same-race virtual space that I created for myself, and the content on those pages did not align with my values, was offensive, and did not affirm my experiences as a Black person in this country. I then took to Instagram and conducted an informal poll where I asked my followers if the social media accounts they followed were mostly Black accounts. Out of the 65 individuals who participated in the poll, 97% responded “yes,” indicating they also were using social media to create and participate in same-race spaces virtually. These informal interactions with my Instagram poll inspired me to add the third research question to further investigate the role of social media in the lives of Black college students, ultimately leading to my interest in studying how same-race peer groups on social media impact the experiences of Black students at HWIs.

The methods used for the pilot study included two interviews and a survey. Considering my interest in how Black students create and participate in subcultures, I initially wanted to

conduct observations of Black students using and engaging with subcultures on campus. However, due to the campus restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in place at the time, I was unable to engage in an observational study. I conducted two rounds of virtual one-on-one interviews on Zoom with three undergraduate students who identified as Black and attended a HWI. the first interview was a semistructured interview and the second interview incorporated the photo-elicitation technique. I also created a survey, which was intended to be a tool to gather some baseline data exploring how Black college students create or extend Black subcultures on social media platforms. The survey was sent via email to about 50 undergraduate students who met the aforementioned participant criteria. Because the survey was employed to collect preliminary data, I sent it to Black students who attended all university types, not just HWIs. I wanted to see if creating subcultures on social media platforms is a common practice for Black students in general, and did not want to limit my focus just yet to only Black students at HWIs. The survey (see Appendix A) included questions that required qualitative responses related to students' social media connections and perceptions of campus climate at their respective institutions.

Pilot study findings revealed that Black students chose to participate in racial subcultures on social media platforms for a number of reasons. The interviews illuminated the experiences of being a racial minority on campus, which influenced Black students to create subcultures as opportunities to grow, connect, and learn from people to whom they could relate. Additionally, findings indicated that having a space where Black students can share with other Black students the experiences they are facing was viewed as a great way for Black students to be challenged and supported in a safe environment. The college experience can be a difficult and complex transition for any student. For Black students from my pilot study in particular, it was very

important, and often essential, to find a place they could call their home away from home to ensure they could succeed and persevere through the challenges that come with college. Black subcultures on social media platforms offered a sense of belonging for Black students at HWIs who participated in the pilot study. Furthermore, the pilot study showed that Black students engaged in subcultures on social media platforms at HWIs because of the power of community created in these spaces. Racial identity was salient for these students; within these social media spaces, students were able to develop and exercise student agency and involvement on campus that promoted and advocated for students who participated in Black subcultures.

The social media survey asked students to consider the people and accounts they followed on social media, with a specific focus on the ones they were connected to through their college or university. Results showed 68% of respondents followed mostly Black people or Black organizations. Roughly 57% of respondents perceived these Black virtual subcultures as contributing to their success on campus and 85% thought the subcultures contributed to creating community within the Black population on campus. The reasons that resonated with the respondents as to why they chose to create and participate in Black subcultures on social media platforms (Q2) were: (a) the content speaks to their racial identity, (b) it provides a support network, (c) the desire to have social interaction with people who have similar and relatable experiences, and (d) having developed associations with mostly Black students on campus. Each of these aspects were also reflected in the community-building theme that emerged from the interviews. Interviewees in both interviews mentioned the election, Black Lives Matter protests, and racial discrimination lawsuits as factors contributing to the campus climate. Results from the survey showed that 75% of respondents agreed that racial problems specific to their campus extended to social media. Furthermore, the survey results showed there are even facets of

campus life that exist on social media platforms. Students mentioned how social media usually is a positive portrayal of campus life, serves as a space for support, and is a way of organizing to create social change. Additionally, campus life on social media was characterized as being a means of interacting with Black student organizations and movements, while many students use social media to discuss campus social events. Social media interactions and the content on timelines were also factors that influenced students' perceptions of campus climate. For one survey participant, their social media timeline "shows that there is a problem but also encourages ways to fix it." Another student stated they check their social media

to see how Black students are responding to major campus decisions that impact us. If what I see on social media is negative, I tend to come away with a more negative perspective if many people are voicing similar concerns.

A third participant shared:

There's clear division and I don't feel included at all. The Black community on social media has been extremely supportive towards me and I feel like I have a safe space on campus, and on social the media I don't feel alone in what I go through at this school.

The interviews and survey responses exhibited the importance of engagement both on campus and on social media platforms. Respondents indicated the interactions amongst Black students were meaningful and necessary. Participants stated that because of these interactions with same-race peers on social media platforms, they felt a part of a community, saw encouraging messages, and found sources of support. Something that did not surface as much in the interviews as I thought it would was the sense of security that subcultures provide for students. Considering that Black students are often immersed in hostile environments when they are a minority, I thought Black subcultures might be a salient source of safety. When I asked

Tabitha about safety, she thought it was not worth mentioning when discussing the impact of subcultures. In contrast, Jasmine mentioned she could not confidently say she felt safe on campus. She stated, “I know there are people here that support Trump. . . . We hear about rape a lot, especially my freshman year when we were staying in those freshman dorms, it was really sketchy over there.” Jasmine’s comments provide more of an intersectionality lens to view safety concerns as opposed to strictly attributing her concerns to race.

The pilot study influenced the design of this study heavily. The methods used in the pilot study were beneficial in learning about the participants’ stories and experiences, causing me to want to use similar strategies with a few modifications and adjustments for this study. As I conducted the data analysis of the pilot study, my interest grew tremendously in further investigating the dynamics of social media and same-race peer groups for Black students. This encouraged a shift in my research to transition to a focus primarily on social media platforms and the role they play for Black students at HWIs who create and/or participate in same-race groups in these virtual spaces. It was during the pilot study that I became invested in how Black students at HWIs use social media platforms, how they create social counterspaces in historically White environments, and how they use social media to navigate their college experiences. In the following sections I will discuss the research questions, participants, data collection methods, and other information to provide an understanding of how the I conducted this study.

Research Questions

In an attempt to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate students who participate in same-race peer groups at HWIs, and to account for aspects of campus life that now take place online, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Why do Black students at HWIs choose to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms, and what role do these spaces play in the experiences of Black students at HWIs?
2. To what extent does campus racial climate influence the decisions of Black students to create and/or participate in same-race groups on social media platforms?
3. How do Black students use the creation of their own race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms to navigate their college experience?

The research questions centered the racialized experiences of this particular population of college students while simultaneously examining the connections between peer groups, campus racial climate, digital social spaces, and student agency. The experiences of students in higher education do not solely take place on physical campuses. Virtual environments must be considered as professionals continue to make informed decisions on higher education practice and policy creation that support college students. A culturally relevant lens must be utilized in our understanding of effective support strategies for Black college students at HWIs specifically.

Methodology

This study was conducted to gauge why Black students choose to participate in same-race peer groups, the influence of campus climate on the creation of same-race peer groups, and race-based digital spaces created on social media platforms. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have contributed to the existing research on the experiences of Black college students. Therefore, to study the meaning Black students make out of their use of same-race peer groups on social media platforms, I conducted a mixed methods study using a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) lens.

CTDA is a technique used to analyze the internet and digital culture with a specific focus on “structure, meaning, interaction, and cultural/social behavior” (Brock, 2018, p. 1017). Maragh (2018) investigated the “complex rhetorics of racial authenticity online, intermixing ethnography and CTDA to understand African American users’ investments in enacting race in their social networks” (p. 591), specifically looking at Black Twitter as an important communal space for African Americans. The CTDA technique was particularly useful for my study because it calls for the incorporation of technology studies, communication studies, and CRT when examining conversations on social media platforms and investigating “underserved information and communication technologies (ICT) users so as to avoid deficit-based models of underrepresented populations’ technology use” (Brock, 2018, p. 1012) and how they express culture through technological discourse (Auzenne-Curl & Carr, 2021; Brock, 2012). The analysis technique also “formulates technology as cultural representations and social structures in order to simultaneously interrogate culture and technology as intertwined concepts” (Brock, 2018, p. 1012).

CTDA was helpful in analyzing social media “platform use and manipulation alongside the rhetorical strategies of users who pursue joy as a mode of resistance” (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 824). The analysis technique assumes that media technologies and platforms are shaped by “offline cultural and social practices its users engage in as they use these digital artifacts” (Brock, 2018, p. 1013), and that society organizes itself using ICT technoculture (Lu & Steele, 2019). Specifically with digital Black communities, CTDA encourages researchers to consider how users leverage a variety of strategies to organize and cultivate discussion through various aspects that require a historical and cultural understanding, such as hashtags (Lu & Steele, 2019). The CTDA approach was significant to my study as I hypothesized that because of the

circumstances and racial campus climate Black students face at HWIs, they engage on social media platforms in authentic and meaningful ways and intentionally create same-race peer groups in these spaces. Using CTDA with its focus on technoculture, along with mixed methods research allowed me to interrogate how the expression of community and racial identity by Black users' on social media platforms "functions as a pervasive cultural experience of resistance and reimagination and is inextricably connected to technological intervention" (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 827) that is significant to Black college students at HWIs.

Research Population

To qualify for my study, students needed to identify as Black/African-American (having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora—i.e., African, Caribbean, and/or bi/multi-racial), be 18 years of age or older, be active Black social media space users/familiar with social media sites (i.e., Twitter, Instagram, TikTok), and be currently enrolled at or be a recent graduate (within the last year) of a HWI. For my study, a HWI was defined as "an institution whose history, policies, practices, and ideologies center whiteness or the white majority" (Sprott et al., 2021, p. 97), whose institutional history has excluded the identities of people of color, and because of that institutional history, the current institutional policies, practices, and ideologies marginalize the experiences, perspectives, and practices of people of color. The study qualifications were listed on all recruitment materials, allowing students to self-identify if they qualified as meeting the criteria.

Recruitment

I utilized two recruitment methods to solicit study participants. First, I emailed my network of higher educational professionals and student affairs administrators requesting their assistance in recruiting a sample of Black students to participate in both the survey and the focus

group portions of my study. I also generated a list of faculty, staff, and student organization contacts at various HWIs using the contact information listed on the university websites (specifically, webpages for student activities departments, Black campus organizations, and the African American studies departments). These specific group of persons were thought to be substantial starting points who would assist in the identification of students interested in participating as they had direct connections with the Black college students at their institutions. The list totaled 200 contacts; I emailed each of contact information to forward to students who would be eligible and potentially interested in participating via survey. I shared a separate email, specifically about focus group participation with faculty, staff, and student organizations at the three HWIs I selected as focus group sites (University A, B, and C). In the outreach emails, I requested that each person widely circulate the invitation to participate to their network of students. The second recruitment method I used was disseminating a call for participants flier. I emailed the flier to a number of listservs, posted it on social media platforms (i.e., Twitter, Instagram, GroupMe), asked Black student groups to hand out fliers at their tabling events on campus, and requested that the flier be posted in campus newsletters (newsletters produced specifically for Black students—e.g., the campus' African American Cultural Center newsletter). The flier outlined the participation qualifications, procedures for the study, and a statement that explained the purpose of the study. The flier shared with individuals at the three HWI focus group sites were given the opportunity to choose to participate in both the survey and the focus group, or just participate as only a survey respondent or only as a focus group participant. The flier also included a URL to my dissertation website and QR codes that directed interested individuals to the survey and focus group interest form. A separate flier was created to share with

individuals who did not attend one of the three HWI focus group sites, which directed them to the survey only.

I used the focus group interest form to gather pertinent information from potential participants, such as race, use of Black social media spaces, reasons for interest in being a part of the focus groups, preferred pseudonym, and availability to schedule the focus group interviews. Once interested students completed the focus group interest form, I sent an informational email describing the study, the purpose of the focus groups, the dates on which the focus groups would be held, topics to be discussed, photo elicitation prompts, and the study's consent forms. While my original goal was to have five to six student participants in each focus group, my sample consisted of two institutions with focus groups of three students each and one institution with a focus group of six students. Although 22 people completed the focus group interest form, only 12 participants were successfully contacted to participate in the focus group. I had at least six to nine students from each institution complete the interest form to participate, however, several students sent email correspondences (in the days leading up to and on the day of the focus group) notifying me they would no longer be able to participate due to other priorities or engagements. In response to such notifications, I offered opportunities for the students to attend future focus groups so they would still have the chance to participate. I did not receive a follow-up response from any of the students who dropped out of the study.

Research Sites

Students who participated in the focus groups were enrolled in one of three selected public HWIs geographically located in the Southeastern part of the United States. These three universities were selected because they had key characteristics desired for this study, such as being a historically White institution, having multiple Black student organizations on campus,

and a close proximity to my location as the researcher. I classified Black student organizations as campus registered organizations dedicated to the support, mentoring, social engagement, and/or academic enrichment of Black students.

Table 1 contains a description of the demographics of the three selected institutions. These institutions offered opportunities to examine the differences and similarities in the experiences of Black college students at HWIs with both small- and moderately-sized Black student populations.

Table 1. Institutional Demographics

Focus Group Institution Sites	Campus Population (as of Fall 2022)	Undergraduate Population	% of Black Students
University A	17,978	14,198	27%
University B	37,873	25,312	6%
University C	31,705	20,029	8.6%

University A

University A was founded in the late 1890s, originally created for the purpose of educating White women. The school began diversifying their student demographics in the early 1930s with the admittance of White men. It was not until the 1950s that the first two Black students were enrolled at the institution. The school has since become even more racially diverse, according to the enrollment dashboard on the webpage for the Office of Institutional Research. The enrollment dashboard displayed the Fall 2022 racial demographics of the student population as 27.2% Black students, 13.5% Hispanic or Latino students, 5.3% Asian students, 42.5% White students, and 11.5% other (e.g., mixed race, international students). University generated retention and graduation rates of students disaggregated by race were not provided. I did, however, find graduation rates of racial group demographics on a different site, Univ Stats (<https://www.univstats.com>). According to UnivStats, the graduation rate within 6 years for

students seeking a 4-year bachelor's degree at University A is 57.55%, with a 60.25% graduation rate of Black students specifically.

While the student population has high racial diversity, the faculty dashboard displayed a heavily White faculty (71.3%) with small representation from Black (9.8%), Asian (8%), and Hispanic (4.1%) communities. The university is located in a city where the current population of Black and White residents is about the same, 43.1% and 43.6% respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021); the institution could try maximize on community engagement efforts that would create a pipeline to increase the representation of people of color in faculty positions.

Because this study focused on the influence of campus climate on the decisions of Black college students to engage in same-race peer groups, I was inclined to research the campus climate data for the university. While the university's webpage for equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives did contain a campus climate dashboard, access to the dashboard was limited to internal personnel. Information was available from a survey launched in Spring 2019 by the Division of Student Affairs with a goal of getting the undergraduate student perspective on experiences of campus climate and ways the university could address students' needs. To embark on this initiative, the university used the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) survey developed by the National Institute for Transformation and Equity. While the CECE survey is based on a conceptual framework that identifies external and internal factors that impact student success, the framework does not specifically list race or racial identity salience as an explicit factor that impacts student success. The CECE broadly lists terms, such as demographics and cultural validation that can cover several social identities.

University A has 4,889 students who identify as Black or African-American, with most (83.7%) attending classes on campus as opposed to being online students (15.5%). With

University A having a substantial Black population for a HWI, I wanted to investigate the student organizations present on campus that represented the interests and identity of Black students. This university provided a curated list of at least 60 *multicultural* student groups that clearly spoke to the racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual orientation identities of marginalized populations. Sixteen of the multicultural student organizations were explicitly dedicated to Black students: the African American and African Diaspora Studies Club, African Students Union, Black Graduate Student Organization, Black Student Athlete Association, Black Student Union, National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing, Neo-Black Society, Sisters with a Vision, Students of Caribbean Ancestry, Wear Your Crown, and six of the nine historically Black Greek-lettered organizations. While University A does not have a Black cultural center, it does have an Office of Intercultural Engagement whose mission is to be “a model of excellence for inclusive student-centered intercultural engagement and education, dialogue, and community building.” The existence of such student organizations and departments could allude to the prioritization the university has on supporting underrepresented populations.

I also researched how University A responds to incidents of racism on social media and to major media-covered events of racial injustice against Black people, as such instances can have an emotional toll on Black faculty, staff, and students at the institution. In June 2020, the university issued a statement that the institution “believes that racism has no place in either our University or our society” as a response to an incident of racist images being posted on social media by a few White students. The university’s statement explained,

While respecting First Amendment freedoms, we will ensure that the language of hate, the images of bigotry, and any acts of discrimination are addressed wherever we find them in our community. We recognize the pain that negative, cruel, or racist social media

postings can cause, and the conflict they can incite. We also know that even some acts that seem innocuous or lack any malice in their intent can have significant negative impacts. We will be as responsive as possible. Yet despite the capacity of social media to escalate issues quickly, we owe it to our community to be thorough, to be fair, and to act based on the facts.

During the trial of Derek Chauvin and the numerous attacks that were happening against Asian Americans, the Chancellor issued a letter to students, faculty, and staff to address the concerns and emotions that were present amongst the campus community. While the two cited statements present a limited number of examples, I found other instances where the university issued statements in response to acts of racism or hate. In each of the statements, the author included links to resources that could help students and university personnel navigate the challenges they were experiencing.

University B

University B was founded in the late 1880s as an institution that was only open to White students. It was not until almost 70 years later that Black students were permitted to enroll. In 2018, University B renamed a building after their first African American graduate, who had received his undergraduate degree about 60 years prior. The first building was renamed to honor a Black graduate of the university happened in the mid-1990s. This building is now the home of the African American Cultural Center. The diversity dashboard on the university website shows that representation in underrepresented minority students, faculty, and staff has increased since the university's founding. In Fall 2022, University B had a student enrollment of 6.17% Black (or African American), 7.01% Hispanic or Latino, 8.11% Asian, 60.38% White, and 11.5% other (e.g., mixed race, international students). While I did not find university provided retention and

graduation rates for students disaggregated by race, the website does display the 6-year graduation rate for undergraduates as 81.4%. According to Data USA (<https://datausa.io>), Black students earn 6% of the degrees awarded from University B. Black faculty are a small portion (5.3%) of the faculty population; however, Black staff almost triples that number at 14.83% of total staff and administrators. Consequently, University B's faculty and staff is predominately White – making up 70% of the faculty and 66% of staff. University B is located in a city where 56.1% of the residential population is White residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), which may influence the limited racial diversity within the organization.

In Fall 2019, University B launched their campus climate survey, which is conducted every 5 years. The survey webpage provides viewers the option to view the overall results of the survey and/or responses to each question broken out separately by academic class, gender identity, race/ethnicity, residency, socioeconomic background, first generation college student status, sexual orientation, and disability status. The Black students who responded to the survey ($n = 178$) assessed the campus climate positively with 65% believing the campus climate was at least somewhat supportive of Black students.

University B has about 2,337 students who identify as Black or African American. With such a small Black student population (6.17%), I wanted to see what university resources and campus organizations were available to support this group. The university webpage indicates University B has several community centers that could serve as affinity spaces to marginalized groups, including the African American Cultural Center, the LGBT Center, Multicultural Student Affairs, and the Women's Center. The university webpage does not provide a generated list of all the multicultural student groups; however, the student organization portal populated a list of 20 organizations when I typed the word *Black* into the search bar. These organizations included

Black Campus Ministry, The Black Artist Coalition, Black Student Union, Black Business Students Association, National Society of Black Engineers, Black Students Board, National Association of Black Accountants, Student Chapter of the National Association for Black Veterinarians, Pushing Excellence Student Association, Queen in You, the Black Male Initiative, and seven of the nine historically Black Greek-lettered organizations. The establishment of cultural centers and student organizations appeared to be necessary at such a large institution to ensure underrepresented groups find a source of connection and belonging.

I also researched how university B responds to racist acts committed by White students on social media. In 2016, screenshots of racist remarks made by a handful of White students in an online chat room were leaked on social media, causing an uproar from the Black community on campus. In June 2020, the Technician reported on two separate instances where videos circulated on social media of White students at University B using racial slurs offensive to Black culture. One video showed an incoming student at the time using a racial slur. As the video spread to the timelines of current University B students, a number of them wanted the university to revoke the incoming student's acceptance. The other video showed two current student using a racial slur, which resulted in the Black students at University B, in addition to alumni and surrounding community members, calling for the university to expel the students in the video. Both incidents happened around the time when communities on social media were expressing outrage concerning the police brutality used on George Floyd. These incidents were just a few of the many racially driven events that impact the Black student population at University B.

University C

University C was founded in the late 1700s, only educating White men. The first Black students were admitted to the university's law school in the early 1950s following a federal court

order. After the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed all forms of segregation in public schools in 1954, the following year federal courts ordered the admission of Black undergraduate men into University C. The school did not begin admitting women until the early 1960s. Enrollment of Black students at University C remained low—there were four Black first-year students in 1960 and 3 years later that number had only increased to 18. In Fall 2022, the enrollment dashboard displayed the following racial demographics of the student population: 8.6% Black students, 8.8% Hispanic or Latino, 12.2% Asian, and 55.5% White. While the university does not provide retention and graduation rates disaggregated by race, I did locate a breakdown of data in the following two categories: *underrepresented minorities* (URM) and *non-underrepresented minority*. The institution defines URM as someone whose racial or ethnic identity is one of the following: Native American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific islander, and two or more races when one or more are from the aforementioned list. In Fall 2021, the retention rate for URM students returning for their 2nd fall semester was 95.8%, which was not far off from the 96.4% retention rate for non-underrepresented students. The 6-year graduation rate for URM students was 89.2%, just a few points under that for non-URM students (91.7%). The high retention rates of URM students compared to the low URM representation in faculty is intriguing considering the literature (e.g., Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Harper, 2013; Patton, 2006a) links the success of URM students to the presence of a diversified faculty. The faculty at University C is 76% White and has very small numbers of representation from communities of color: 11% of faculty identify as Asian; 5% of faculty identify as Black or African American, and 4% of faculty identify as Hispanic. University C is located in a city where the residential population is 70.1% White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), which is close to the faculty demographic for that population. There are small

numbers of racial diversity represented in the city, with 10.6% of residents identifying as Black, 12% identifying as Asian, and 6.8% identifying as Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

From my investigation on University C's website, a campus climate assessment has not been conducted since 2016. In the findings from the 2016 survey, high percentages of students in all groups except White (4%) reported being in situations on campus where they were the only person of their race/ethnicity. The report displayed that Black or African American students (72%) were one of the top two most likely racial groups to report such an experience. This information aligns with the literature (e.g. Grier-Reed, 2010; Harper, 2013; Thelamour et al., 2019) that speaks to the onlyness that Black students face at HWIs. The campus climate survey findings also reported feelings of isolation among Black students due to low numerical representation of their race on campus. Another aspect of the campus climate survey that aligned with published literature (i.e. Berger & Braxton, 1998; Gumport, 2007; Rendon et al., 2000; Tanaka, 2002; Tierney, 1992) was the number of Black respondents reporting the unspoken expectation of assimilation for their race in order to fit in to the campus culture at University C. In addition to the Black student respondents, American Indian and Hispanic students also reported feelings of having to "minimize aspects of their racial/ethnic culture" to help them fit in at the institution. While a large number of respondents (85%) reported they were "comfortable with the climate for diversity and inclusion" at University C, there was a much lower percentage of Black students represented in that statistic.

University C is another large HWI and provides students from underrepresented populations with access to the Office for Diversity and Inclusion, along with six centers for different racial and ethnicity populations, including one for Black students, culture, and history. I

could not locate a university developed list of all the student organizations for multicultural students; however, I was able to use the student organization portal to search for campus organizations that support Black students specifically. I found 22 of these organizations when I typed *Black* into the search bar. These organizations include: Association of Black Journalists, Black in Technology, Black Law Students Association, Student Association of Black Librarians, The Black Entrepreneur Initiative, The Union of Black Men, Black Arts Theatre Company, Society for Black Biomedical Scientists, Black Student Movement, National Society of Black Engineers, Black Graduate and Professional Student Association, Ebony Readers Onyx Theater, and eight of the nine historically Black Greek-lettered organizations.

As with the other two institution sites, I searched for occasions where University C experienced racist issues on social media. My internet search showed this institution had a number of racial incidents that were topics of discussion on social media. For example, there were instances of the university being sued by former Black students for racial discrimination, campus protests concerning controversial statues on campus, and students demanding the renaming of university buildings with names connected to the upholding of White supremacy and violence toward Black people. The institution is now planning to rename one of the buildings after the school's first Black faculty member who was hired in the 1960s.

Sample

For this study, the sample consisted of Black traditional age (18 to 24 years old), current college students who utilize social media to create and participate in same-race spaces. A total of 414 students participated in my study with 12 students participating via focus groups and 402 students participating via survey. All 12 of the focus group participants self-identified as Black/African American. Each focus group contained students who attended the same college.

Eight of the focus group participants identified as female and four of the participants identified as male. Both the focus groups with students from the public urban research institution and the public suburban institution contained three students each. The focus group with students who attended the land grant, public research university contained six students. The same group of students met over the duration of two 90-minute sessions. One student from University A had a scheduling conflict during the second meeting and therefore attended the second session with the focus group students from University B. Table 2 provides a description of the focus group participants' demographics.

Table 2. Focus Group Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Classification	Major	Hometown	Racial Make-up of Primary Neighborhood or Environment
Kyra	Junior	Sociology w/concentration in Criminology	Silver Spring, MD	Predominantly White
JB	Junior	English	Matthews, NC	Predominantly White
Nicole	Sophomore	Sociology	Harrellsville, NC	Predominantly Black
Bobby	Sophomore	Technology, Engineering, and Design Education	Fuquay Varina, NC	An even mix of multiple races
Olivia	Sophomore	Science Education	Apex, NC	Predominantly White
Leanna	Sophomore	Political Science	Chesterfield, VA	Predominantly White
Chantel	Sophomore	Nutrition	Winston-Salem, NC	Predominantly White
Mark	Senior	Industrial and Systems Engineering w/minor in Psychology	Beltsville, MD	Majority white in Elementary School and College, Even Mix in Middle School, Majority Black in High School
Skye	Senior	Anthropology	Pinetops, NC	Predominantly White
Jerome	Junior	Biology (BS)	Zachary, LA	Predominantly White
Bria	Junior	Biology PreMed	Greensboro, NC	Predominantly Black
Christian	Senior	Information Science	Mebane, NC	Predominantly Black

The survey had a total of 402 responses; however, I applied a filter of three qualifying questions that narrowed down the number of responses I utilized during my data analysis phase. Data were only reviewed if the participant responded “yes” to each of the following questions: (Q3) Do you identify as Black?; (Q4) Are you currently enrolled at or recently graduated from (within the last year) a 4-year Historically White Institution (HWI)?; and (Q6) Do you engage

with or use Black social media spaces (defined as participating in social media spaces with Black social media users or Black spaces such as Black Twitter)? Reviewing the data through that filter resulted in most questions having a response count of 295–303. Table 3 provides an overview of the survey participants’ demographics. The totals reflected in Table 3 are less than the response count on most of the survey questions. I would attribute the decrease in responses in the final demographic questions to the length of the survey, which contained 34 questions.

Table 3. Survey Participant Demographics

Classification	<i>n</i>	%	Major	<i>n</i>	%	Racial Make-up of Primary Neighborhood or Environment	<i>n</i>	%
First-year student	24	10.71	Anthropology/Sociology	21	9.25	Predominantly Black	165	72.37
			Criminal Justice					
			Political Science	5	2.20			
Sophomore	44	19.64	Biology	33	14.54	Predominantly white	38	16.67
			Education	9	3.96			
Junior	49	21.88	Business/Management/Economics	19	8.37	An even mix of multiple races	24	10.53
			Engineering	4	1.76			
			Nursing	8	3.52			
			Psychology	4	1.76			
			Other 16	16	7.05			
Senior	39	17.41	Chemistry	13	5.73			
			Communication & Journalism	6	2.64			
			English	14	6.17			
Recent graduate	68	30.36	Computer Science/Information Technology	56	24.67			
			Kinesiology/Physical Therapy	8	3.52			
			Math	11	4.85			
Total	224			227			227	

Data Collection Methods

This study used a mixed methods approach, employing both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) research methods to conduct the investigation. Using a mixed methods approach was the most appropriate for my study because it allowed me to maximize the number

of stories and experiences of Black students that I shared with my research. While both data collection methods helped to measure the utilization patterns and benefits of same-race peer groups on social media and their significance, each did so in a way that differentially contributed to my findings. Furthermore, the use of mixed methods helped provide a more complete assessment of the topics at hand and allowed me to holistically understand the data retrieved from the study. The use of two data collection methods allowed me to use the strengths of each approach in a strategic way to ensure my data were informative, impactful, and robust. Student participants in my study were asked about their experiences with social media platforms, and to take into consideration how “most (Black social media) users actively engage and create content simultaneously on multiple platforms” (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 824) as a resistance strategy that uses video and images to capture and share Black life and Black bodies in humane ways, counter to the mainstream portrayals of Black people. Social media platforms have become spaces that are more than just social in nature, but also constitute environments where cultural engagement and enlightenment occur (Auzenne-Curl & Carr, 2021; Brock, 2012).

I held three focus groups where Black students from three specific HWIs came together to discuss their use of social media platforms. The focus groups ranged in size from three to six students per group, for a total of 12 focus group participants. According to Harper et al. (2011), focus groups are “effective ways of collecting large amounts of detail-rich information while allowing participants to build on the reflections of others and gain previously unexplored insights into their own experiences” (p. 186). The focus groups used a semistructured approach to allow for “authentic participant reflection while maintaining focus, order, and direction” (p. 186), to ensure the collection of data necessary to understand the topic along with the lived experiences of participants, and to provide flexibility to address unexpected ideas, patterns, or themes

(Harper et al., 2011; Museus, 2008; Patton, 2006a; Truong et al., 2016). Although specific questions were crafted (see Appendix B), the discussions became conversational, and sometimes strayed away from the prewritten prompts, as participants commented and expanded on other participants' responses. In addition to the established questions, the responses of participants, along with probing questions, also helped guide the focus group discussion.

The focus groups consisted of gathering three groups of students at each institution for two interviews per group (total of six focus group meetings). Each meeting lasted for a duration of 90 minutes as participants discussed their use of social media platforms. The first meeting consisted of questions central to understanding the personal experience these Black students have had with same-race peer groups on social media platforms, race relations on their campus, their use of Black social media spaces, and their perceptions of the campus racial climate. These questions provided insight to the first two research questions of my study, which were developed to investigate why Black students choose to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms, the role these spaces play in the college experiences of students at HWIs, and the influence of campus climate on the decisions of Black students to participate in Black social spaces.

Each group ended their first meeting by creating six word cloud images. I shared six different open-ended statements and students were tasked with completing the sentences by filling in the blank (i.e., Because I utilize Black social media spaces, I feel _____). This word cloud creation activity allowed the participants to collectively create data and observe common themes and significant shared feelings. The second time the group met, the questions focused more on the collective experiences shared amongst Black students at HWIs who create and/or participate in race-based digital campus spaces on social media (e.g., BlackPack, BlackUNC).

This discussion gave insight to the second and third research questions of my study, the latter asking how Black students at HWIs use these race-based digital campus spaces to navigate their college experience. In the hope of reducing attrition, I sent routine email reminders to participants, offered incentives to participants who attended both focus group sessions, and emphasized the convenience of virtual participation.

The second meeting had a photo-elicitation component (Harper, 2002), a technique that allowed students to use pictures to analyze their experiences within same-race peer groups and race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms in a unique way. The photo-elicitation technique is useful for gaining a “[deep] understanding [of] the beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of people and could overcome the difficulties posed by standard interviewing because it is anchored in an image that is understood by the researcher and participant” (McGowan, 2016, p. 246). Photos have the ability to help students make meaning of their interactions and communicate the significance of their participation in same-race peer groups (Laws et al., 2018). The photo-elicitation specific questions during the focus groups provided insight into the types of engagement and interactions that happen on social media platforms and were also used as a source of data for analysis to gain an understanding of the patterns that Black college students operate in when using these sites. The photos were discussed briefly among the group at the end of the second session. The inspiration for using photos as a source of data embedded into the focus group came from the methods of Carney (2016), Florini (2014), and Maragh (2018). Each researcher analyzed Twitter posts as they studied the modes of interaction that allowed Black users to perform their racial identities on social media platforms. Maragh (2018), specifically, coupled in-depth interviews with an analysis of the participants’ tweets, which also influenced me to include photo-elicitation with the focus group questions. The

participants were also asked to produce written narratives to describe their photos and how each photo reflected their experience and the meaning they attributed to the photo. I provided the following sample photographs and narratives to help familiarize the participants with the assignment.

Figure 1. Example Photographs for Photo Elicitation Assignment

Example Slide 1

Prompt 1: A photo of social media content that Black students find most valuable throughout their college experiences at HWIs. A photo of social media content that Black students find most valuable throughout their college experiences at HWIs.



Photo title: IKDR

Description: My timeline was full of photos like this one on match day. There were so many Black med students posting about their matching at their top choice - it was so inspiring to see. This was important for me because I don't get a chance to see such a high number of Black med students often.

Example Slide 2

Prompt 1: A photo of social media content that Black students find most valuable throughout their college experiences at HWIs. A photo of social media content that Black students find most valuable throughout their college experiences at HWIs.



Photo title: I'm So Proud of Y'all

Description: This is a screenshot of someone else's post but it captured exactly how I feel when I see Black grads posting photos during graduation season. Black students face so many challenges and getting to graduation is such a huge accomplishment.

Example Slide 3

Prompt 2: A photo that represents the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces.



Photo title: Right in my Backyard

Description: This is a photo of what was spray painted on a neighborhood fence. It is one of the daily reminders of racism and the unsafety of Black people.

Example Slide 4

Prompt 2: A photo that represents the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces.

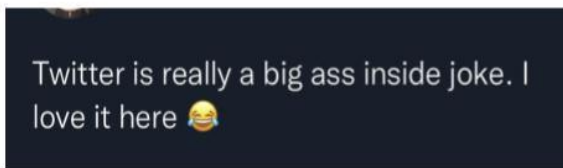


Photo title: The Epitome of Black Twitter

Description: This screenshot shows why I continue to engage with Black spaces on social media. There are so many inside jokes that require the cultural competency that Black people possess in order to understand and engage with the content.

Qualitative techniques are necessary in the generation of in-depth descriptions to gain a rich understanding of a topic (Truong, et al., 2016). I used qualitative focus group interviews not only to learn more about the lived experiences of Black students at HWIs, but also to construct

counternarratives of this population whose voices, in this specific content area, are underrepresented in higher education scholarship (Donovan & Guillory, 2017; Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Gin et al., 2017; Graham, 2015; Keels, 2020; Tanksley, 2019). Utilizing focus groups allowed me to capture student voices in a collaborative manner. Students often were encouraged to share their experiences in more depth as they were inspired by the stories of their peers.

The survey was a helpful source of data in measuring the utilization of same-race peer groups on social media, its significance, the patterns of social media usage among same-race peer groups, and how campus racial climate impacts students' choices in creating and/or participating in Black social media spaces. The survey questions (see Appendix C) were designed to have participants provide information about their social media connections, perceptions of their college's campus climate, and the extent to which Black social media spaces influence their college experience. The instrument utilized both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The survey for this study was adapted from my pilot study and was tested (prior to official dissemination) among a small population of Black college students to ensure construct validity. Surveys were used in multiple studies of underrepresented higher education populations to investigate constructs, such as campus interactions (Furr & Elling, 2002), campus climate (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003), in-group friendships (Levin et al., 2006), and the internet's influence on ethnic identity (Tynes et al., 2008). Most researchers used a survey as part of a comprehensive strategy for data collection. For example, Rankin and Reason (2005) conducted a survey for assessing campus climate for underrepresented and underserved student populations along with focus groups, individual interviews, and document analyses. Tynes et al. (2008) used both closed- and open-ended surveys along with online interviews in a study that explored whether interaction in the context of the internet influences

ethnic identity. It was important that my study also use a survey in collaboration with the focus groups to take a similar approach to other studies on the higher education experiences of underrepresented populations.

Data Analysis

The data analysis stage was heavily guided by methods suggested by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas' analysis process centralizes participants' insights. All focus groups were recorded via Zoom and transcribed. The transcriptions were compiled and analyzed thematically (Maragh, 2018; Patton, 2006). I read each transcript three times. I first read the transcripts to gain a sense of what the participants' narratives were conveying and created an initial code scheme, noting similar terms, ideas, and words that surfaced (Simms et al., 2021). The second reading of the transcripts followed bracketing procedures (Moustakas, 1994; Truong et al., 2016). I bracketed my impressions, which allowed me to reflect on my own experiences, assumptions, and biases in an effort to keep the participants' voices as the experts, leading in the process of analyzing, making sense of, and articulating the experiences they have shared (Truong et al., 2016). During this second reading, I grouped the initial codes into larger, axial codes (Simms et al., 2021). During the third reading of each transcript, I used the theoretical frameworks to inform final coding to account for repeated patterns, highlighting meaningful quotes the participants made (Maragh, 2018; Truong et al., 2016) and writing reflective comments about the data in the margins of each transcript (Harper et al., 2011).

Four aspects of CRT guided the development of coding themes: (1) normalcy of racism, (2) the social construction of race, (3) counter-storytelling, and the centrality of experiential knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Coding data using these tenets connected the study to the historical context in which HWIs emerged and thrived. The codes

were organized into thematic categories and drafted into textual descriptions of what the students experienced and how they utilized same-race peer groups on social media platforms, which guided the findings of my study (Truong et al., 2016). This process informed the development of code words that were assigned to significant quotes to help with the identification of the participants' common experiences and shared feelings (Harper et al., 2011). Because the focus groups incorporated photo-elicitation and the creation of word clouds, the words participants used to make meaning of the photos and prompts discussed were also analyzed and incorporated into the data analysis process (McGowan, 2016). By embedding photos that represented students' experiences with same-race peer groups on social media, I elicited narrative data during the focus groups that revealed important aspects of the meanings of identity-affirming spaces which in turn provided information on how participants navigated college and built community through online social networking systems. Using Qualtrics, I pulled the report for the survey to view responses in terms of percentages and the data visualizations created. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed and coded based on shared experiences amongst respondents. For each open-ended survey question, I organized the raw data by grouping the responses that were similar. Codes were given to each grouping and I also took note of the survey responses that were outliers as they did not fit into any of the code categories.

The research questions were used as guides to ensure that I focused my analysis process on understanding why Black students at HWIs use these spaces, the role that campus racial climate plays in the creation of race-based digital campus spaces, and how these spaces influence the ways Black students navigate their college experience. Data from the study was also used to inform dance choreography for my research-based performance showcase that will display the themes of my research findings through movement. Utilizing the quotes from the focus group

interviews and the qualitative responses from the survey, I created five dances that embodied the stories of the participants. The showcase will also have a photo gallery component, which will take attendees on a journey through Black social media spaces. The gallery will display a number of posts from Black Twitter and will also include videos posted on social networking sites that highlight the experiences of Black college students at HWIs.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

The trustworthiness and findings the study were ensured using a variety of strategies. To begin with, it was important to gain the trust of my research participants in order to create a virtual environment where they felt comfortable enough to provide accurate and in-depth responses. Merriam (2009) suggested the collection of rich descriptions is an effective strategy to ensure trustworthiness. To encourage this level of openness, I reassured participants to speak freely and be as unfiltered as they needed to be able to share their stories and express themselves authentically. I also maintained active communication with the participants in the recruitment, preparation, and post focus group phase to show my commitment to providing a platform to promote their voices.

Additionally, I conducted member checks to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts and ensure congruence between my interpretations as the researcher and the students' perceptions of the stories they shared during the focus groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Member checking helps establish credibility, provides clarification, and allows for consultation with the participants about the data (Creswell, 2009). I conducted member checks for this study via email. I organized three separate documents (one document per institution) attached in one email message to ask participants for their feedback on the data from their focus group sessions. Each document contained the transcript from their focus groups organized by the three guiding research

questions. For each research question, I assigned the number of focus group questions that were designed to address that specific research question. Each participant was asked to review their own responses on the transcript for accuracy and to make any necessary revisions in a different text color. In that same email, I also included a summary of my initial overview and key takeaways from the focus group sessions. I asked participants to review the summary and let me know if there were any aspects I missed or possibly misinterpreted. The participants who responded to the member check email shared that both the transcripts and initial overview were accurate. Communication with the participants in this manner helped me craft a detailed interpretation of their experiences.

Furthermore, the use of a two-session focus group process enhanced trustworthiness of the study. Specifically, the two-session focus group provided participants the opportunity to further clarify and expand upon previously mentioned experiences and allowed me as the research to gather additional data about their experiences through follow-up questions that resulted from the conversation in the previous session. The multiple collection points of data facilitated triangulation, which helped ensure the quality of the data. I triangulated the focus group transcripts, participants' written responses, student submitted photos, focus group notes, interview observations, and survey data. This process allowed me to check the consistency of information gathered during data collection (Patton, 2002). There were no ethical dilemmas with this research as the study qualified as minimal to no risk. Protecting privacy was a main concern and, therefore, I use pseudonyms for the participants in my reporting.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND THEMATIC FINDINGS OF THEIR STORIES

This study sought to understand the experiences of Black college students enrolled at HWIs and their engagement with same-race peers on social media. The research participants shared their personal backgrounds, experiences in college, and sources of support that helped them matriculate through their academic journeys. The study explored the perspectives of Black college students at HWIs by utilizing focus group interviews and a survey. There were three focus groups that consisted of Black students from three specific HWIs. Each group met on two occasions and contained students who attended the same university, for a total of six interview sessions. The focus groups ranged in size from three to six students per group, for a total of 12 focus group participants.

The first meeting consisted of questions central to understanding the personal experiences these Black students had with same-race peer groups on social media platforms, race relations on their campus, their use of Black social media spaces, and their perceptions of the campus racial climate. The second time the groups met, the questions focused more on the collective experiences shared amongst Black students at HWIs who create and/or participate in race-based digital campus spaces on social media, and incorporated photo-elicitation to offer visual representation of the messages and peers that highly influence their experiences and viewpoints. The survey questions asked about the respondents' social media connections, perceptions of their college's campus climate, and the extent to which Black social media spaces influence their college experience. The analyzed survey data were comprised of answers from 300 respondents. The demographics for both the focus group and survey participants can be found in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively in Chapter 3.

The individual stories shared during the focus groups and the survey data were organized into a set of themes. Each theme played a significant role in how the participants interpreted the campus climate and explained their peer connections that serve as sources of support to enhance their college experiences as a Black student at an HWI. The analysis of the research findings, coupled with four guiding principles of CRT (normalcy of racism, the social construction of race, counter-storytelling, and the centrality of experiential knowledge), resulted in the development of my initial research themes: (a) pre-college socialization patterns and experiences with race, (b) the salience of race, (c) impacts of minoritized status, (d) identity affirmation through the creation of community, and (e) social media as a venue for engagement, persistence, and resistance. The normalcy of racism and the social construction of race that CRT considers informed the first two themes. Because racism is the typical experience of many people of color and social meanings and treatment have been created, reproduced, and sustained based on race, I wanted to connect social construction of race to the experiences discussed by the participants. The first theme, pre-college socialization patterns and experiences with race was inspired by participants' discussion about and encounters with racism prior to being a college student, which led to conscious decisions to engage in same-race peer groups. The second theme, the salience of race emerged as Black students discussed how race was an important aspect of their identity and influenced their experiences and their interpretation of the educational environment. Counter-storytelling and the centrality of experiential knowledge informed the creation of the latter three themes. As I sought to uplift the voices of an underrepresented and marginalized community, CRT's counter-storytelling was essential to centering the experiences of Black students and allowing their voices to share their truth to combat dominant narratives that oppress them as individuals. The third theme, impacts of minoritized status, was identified as aspects of the

campus climate caused perceptions of marginalization and other challenging experiences at HWIs. The fourth theme, identity affirmation through the creation of community was highlighted through the support systems the students relied on to uplift and encourage each other. The final theme, social media as a venue for engagement, persistence, and resistance represented the strategies Black students used to cope with and navigate their experiences at HWIs.

Upon a second round of analysis, I determined these themes spoke more to a high-level overview of the participants' experiences and did not highlight what my research revealed as the main outlets Black social media spaces offer to Black college students at HWIs. I went back to my research themes and data to reflect once again on what the participants shared in the focus groups and the survey. This process resulted in presenting the data through a revised set of themes that still incorporate the previously developed ideas embedded in the broader aspects of what Black social media spaces offer. As I present the findings, I discuss the ways in which Black social media spaces provide: (a) racial filters for viewing self, perceiving campus encounters, and identifying safe spaces; (b) the creation of community; (c) social media as a venue for engagement, academic success, and persistence; and (d) sites for resistance. These findings are discussed in depth in the following sections. As I discuss the themes, I will also present select photos submitted via the photo-elicitation prompts, the word clouds created by the participants during the focus group sessions, and tables and graphs that display survey data. I will note that during the focus groups and through the survey responses, the participants conflated physical and digital Black social spaces in most cases. This conflation is evident in my writing of the findings; however, I also tried to distinguish the two when the data allowed. I will also note that the study participants often used the acronym PWI (Predominately White Institutions) to describe their universities. I think this is because the term PWI is more commonly

used as compared to HWI, and therefore, they were more prone to using it. However, all recruitment materials and language used in the focus group protocol and survey questions used the term HWI. The participants seemed to use the two terms interchangeably. While I do recognize a difference in HWIs and PWIs and have intentionally focused on the history of these institutions, some quotes from participants will include the term PWI to show their original language.

As the students discussed their utilization of social media, they shared how they intentionally followed Black peers and organizations on these platforms. While they did not initially acknowledge those actions as creating Black social spaces for themselves, I explained how decisions like this were the exact focus of this study. Our time in the focus groups helped them understand they were utilizing agency when they sought out Black peers and organizations on social media platforms, crafting timelines that would display content that was relevant and affirming to their racial identity. While some students described high engagement with social media, such as posting often and interacting with other users via comments, likes, and reposts, others described being more of a viewer on these platforms. Even for students who considered themselves to be more of a “spectator” (Mark) on social media, there was evidence they benefited from social media in the same ways.

Racial Filters for Viewing Self, Perceiving Campus Encounters, and Identifying Safe Spaces

The stories students shared in my study portrayed a unique experience that Black students have at HWIs. Their experiences were processed through a racial filter that resulted from race being a salient identity. With such a high emphasis on race and their racialized experience, the

students in my study used a racial filter to view themselves, perceive their campus encounters, and identify safe spaces.

Viewing Self

Both the focus group and survey participants seemed to view most, if not all, of their campus interactions through a racial filter. This was evident as they mentioned how their racialized experiences taught them how to govern themselves as a Black body in a historically and predominately White space. Through trial and error, the students learned techniques, such as how they should speak in class, strategies to use when needing to be assertive but not seen as aggressive, and how to associate with White peers who wanted to be allies. As they processed campus interactions, students viewed themselves as racialized beings. This viewpoint had an impact on their identity, their understanding of race within historically White spaces, and how societal views of Blackness impacted their personal experiences.

For a few of the focus group participants, their transition into their HWI initiated somewhat of an identity crisis. As high achieving students in high school, they expected to remain as such in college. However, when they began their collegiate journey, they realized that they were not excelling on the same level they did in high school and also thought they weren't academically performing on the same level as their White peers. For Bria in particular, this caused imposter syndrome and a season of depression. Feeling the need to constantly compare herself to her White peers made her want to drop out of college. However, Bria stated the Black spaces she created at her institution are "a big reason why I don't give up." Bria attended University C where the student population is a little over 31,000, but Black students only make up 8% of enrollment. Because she chose not to go to the HBCU that all her other family members attended, she knew it would be vital to make intentional connections with the Black

community at her school through the Black student GroupMe and targeted programs and groups for underrepresented communities on campus. Other focus group participants also expressed instances where they doubted certain aspects of themselves because they didn't see their racial experience or features represented in the mainstream culture at their institution. For example, JB shared "when you're not surrounded by people that are like you, you start to try to question your identity a little bit." Kyra also mentioned the impact of being in White spaces and the toll it took on how she viewed her hair, which was a signature aspect of her identity. She stated:

Usually, my hair is curly all the time. Throughout high school I was not comfortable wearing my curly hair, because people said "Oh, your hair is so big." I was not comfortable wearing it, and I didn't have a lot of friends who looked like me. So being on TikTok and stuff like that [showed me] I should become more comfortable wearing my own hair...seeing more people with their hair out and curly made me more confident.

Both JB and Kyra were second guessing aspects of themselves that came with their Black identity, however, engaging with Black social media spaces increased their self-confidence. Three other focus group participants also discussed the impact of Black social media spaces on their confidence. Nicole stated that "it [Black spaces] gave me a lot of confidence in my choice, and let me know that I was doing the right thing," when she questioned if she made the right decision of enrolling into a HWI. On a different occasion, Nicole shared that Black students at HWIs have to "learn how to be more confident in yourself" when occupying White spaces. Jerome also shared that his experiences with his Black peers have "boost my confidence and boost my self-esteem when it comes to the mental, physical, and emotional toll that [University C] will put on you sometimes." Bria added that Black social media spaces, specifically those that were campus-based, boosted her confidence "a lot being a Black woman."

Bria's statement introduced a level of intersectionality that should be acknowledged when exploring the experiences of Black college students. Jerome, also enrolled at University C, shared a perspective as a "Black male" when he stated:

I think a lot of times I tend to compare myself to other people from other institutions who might be taking the same exact classes... For me, navigating my success was really just trying to define what success would be like for me at [University C] being a Black male.

Jerome's racial filter was used not only to view his academic performance, but to also consider what success might look like for him. This could have resulted from the hyperawareness the focus group participants stressed on their status as a minoritized population at HWIs. Throughout the focus groups, four participants specifically repeated the phrase "We're the minority" as they shared response to the questions, which I interpreted as the students seeming to be reminded of their minoritized status quite often during their college experience. Chantel said, "It can feel very lonely at times, because you're the minority." In a different focus group Bria used the word "minority" to refer to Black students on four different occasions, Jerome acknowledged "we're the minority" on two different occasions, and Christian also used the phrase when he shared "Because we're the minority, I feel we are alone in a sense." This hyperawareness was also evident through the responses of five other participants' responses that reflected a similar tone. For example, Bobby mentioned that he is "literally probably one of the only Black males in this major, so it's already a difference" in his experience than his other peers majoring in education. Additionally, when Mark was giving a response to the question asking about how Black students are perceived on campus, he stated:

It's hard to say how we're perceived, because, of course, what you do on campus kind of shows who you are. How you are viewed changes how everybody's viewed.... If the

general public sees a particular group that is involved in a lot of perceived negative behavior, though they may not represent all of us, in their minds, they do. I feel like being Black on this campus means that we are unique, and we're also being watched.

Unfortunately, the focus group participants in my study had several experiences with peers who also felt like the behavior of one Black person defined the behavior of all of them and that they were responsible for the actions of other Black students. Chantel and Leanna both agreed with Mark on his views of how the poor actions of one Black student will reflect poorly on all Black students. Chantel agreed by saying "what one person does, they kind of perceive us all the same way," while Leanna shared "if one person is doing like something that perceived negatively, that definitely reflects bad on the rest of us." What Mark, Chantel, and Leanna describe as having one person of their race represent the actions and reputations of the entire race. Expressed the obligation to represent the entire Black community with one's actions is a common experience described by people of color and a burden that the White majority typically do not have to carry. The views they held that constantly made them compare themselves to their peers and have unavoidable feelings of exclusion were reinforced by White norms or normative structures that are deeply embedded at HWIs.

The experience they described is also one that is associated with feeling highly watched or observed by White peers. This was evident in Chantel's statement, "It's like everybody is always looking at us ... like all eyes are on me. ... I'm Black in a room full of predominantly White people. ... I'm different." A survey respondent also shared a similar statement when sharing they used race-based digital campus spaces to discuss "how White our school is and how people stare at us when we walk by for no reason. We also talk about how we've noticed we get dismissed more often by White peers." Skye, however, had opposing feelings by sharing how

she felt “invisible.” This continuous feeling of being a minority, or being set apart, often caused feelings of isolation for the students when they were not in Black social spaces. Leanna shared how being around people “that don’t understand my culture or that are biased and prejudice,” made her feel “ostracized.” Leanna attended University B with a student population of almost 38,000 where Black students make up only 6% of the total enrollment. JB also discussed the “inescapable” instances of being uncomfortable at her HWI, being “looked at a certain type of way” because of her race and feeling alone. She attended University A with a student population of about 18,000 students with 27% of those students identifying as Black. Despite her campus having a Black student population that was significantly greater than University B, JB still shared similar experiences with Leanna – viewing themselves differently because of their race. These institutions served clear messages to Black students that they were the minority and they had to work for acceptance in the institution.

Six of the focus group participants spoke specifically about how race is extremely prevalent in historically White spaces. For example, one student from University B, Leanna, and another from University C, Jerome, acknowledged the historical legacy of racial exclusion in the United States and its impact on the education system, specifically the current operations and campus climate of HWIs. Their mention of these statements seemed to resonate with their peers as they nodded in agreement as Jerome and Leanna named history as an influential factor on their experiences and how they view themselves navigating HWI environments. Jerome stated,

Race is a factor because it’s always been a factor since we came to this country. ...

Inherently, we know that this place technically wasn’t meant for us to be here. ... I just think in a place historically that wasn’t made for you, you’re going to experience some type of issue when it comes to race.

Jerome seemed to see racial issues as inevitable as a Black student at an HWI. The relationship to history that Jerome addresses is supported by the campus climate model that I used for my study, which specifically calls attention to the history of inclusion for some populations and history of exclusion for other populations at specific universities.

Additionally, the historical legacy of the HWIs these students attend, most being built by Black slaves, was also deeply ingrained in the awareness of focus group participants. Because they were not ignorant of this information, they acknowledged race on levels that their majority peers did not have to consider. Jerome also shared “we know that this campus was built on the backs of slaves...it might even be some of our ancestors.” This impacted how they interacted with their White peers and made them constantly aware of the differences that existed between them. JB stated, “even from our language, the slang we use...everything is a reminder that I’m different.” For her, surrounding herself with Black people allowed her to not feel that disconnect that she was feeling in other environments. Additionally, a survey participant shared:

I say it [race] is very important because we as a people know what we go through in PWIs or just in America in general. I feel like it is important to also connect with your own people because if anyone can know what you are going through, its people that are from the same decedents as you.

For these students, being Black on their campus equated to being automatically set apart just because of their race. Because they used racial filters to view themselves and their experiences, they felt that only other Black students would understand the experiences they faced. This was a huge contributing factor to why they wanted to surround themselves with Black peers on campus and online.

Furthermore, in many daily occurrences, the focus group participants discussed receiving messages that their race and Blackness come before any other piece of their identity or position they hold. The focus groups from University B and C had at least one participant share an instance where they were discriminated against because of their race, despite being successful, high achieving, or in a student leadership position. Leanna told a powerful story of how she participated in a recruitment event for the scholarship program she was in. This event was an opportunity for her and other scholarship recipients to answer questions and provide the student perspective to prospective students and their families over lunch. Leanna shared how she was the only Black scholarship recipient there, the other students were White, just like the families of the prospective students who attended the event. She shared how no one sat at her table, noting that “they were even pulling up chairs to fit themselves into the other tables before coming to take a seat at my table.” She felt completely ignored until one Black family came to attend, and they chose to sit at her table and talk with her. That instance for Leanna showed her that even at, what she referred to as “an elite level,” race is still viewed before any status or position one may hold. Leanna closed her story with sharing “I’m here to help your child, and still you’re seeing my Blackness before you’re seeing what I can offer you and how I can help you.” This was just one example of how Black students were constantly reminded how race was a central factor in the institutions they attended. Bobby and Mark also shared instances where their strong work ethic and dedication was not enough to please White peers, faculty, and staff. Their awareness of the work ethic they would have to embody to be successful at HWIs was evident in one survey participant’s response that stated “we go through life differently compared to other races. We already have to work harder just because we’re Black.” These stories shared by the study

participants emphasize how the circumstances they face influence how they viewed themselves and their performance.

The focus group participants described race, racial awareness, and their identity as being engraved into their subconsciousness. These areas impacted the ways in which they saw themselves in historically White spaces. As their racial identity grew in importance, it was necessary to find Black peers to connect with in order to view themselves in a positive light.

Perceiving Campus Encounters

The Black students in my study also used a racial filter as they developed perceptions about the encounters they had in various campus contexts. The racial filter Black social media spaces provided allowed the students to make informed decisions on who they would connect with and validated their uncertainty about their encounters with White peers, faculty, and staff. The perceptions they had concerning these campus encounters encouraged them to use Black social media spaces in ways that would help them find community and connection.

Campus Connections & Perceptions of Black Peers

The ways in which the Black students in my study discussed Black social media spaces displayed how they used the insight gained from these spaces, coupled with their personal experience, to inform their decisions on who to make connections with and the extent to which they would engage with those connections.

Engagement with Black social media spaces proved to be a successful technique for determining which peers they should connect with on campus. One focus group participant, JB, framed the initial migration toward Black peers as choosing those who “obviously won’t dislike me because I’m Black.” In addition to using these spaces to connect with those she thought would appreciate their racial identity, JB also describing using these spaces to eliminate the

constant need to explain herself or explain why matters such as police brutality or White privilege are problematic. JB further shared, “it gets tiring having to be an encyclopedia all the time.” What JB desired was to around people who understand her experience as a Black student at a HWI. Five other focus group participants, Bria, Jerome, Nicole, Christian, and Leanna also expressed this desire for understanding in their responses. For example, Nicole shared “I feel like when I’m with my Black peers, they’re very understanding. I don’t have to explain too much of what I’m talking about. I can just say something that everybody automatically gets.” Leanna shared a similar comment when she stated, “It’s just going to be imperative for me to have a community who I know is going to support me, and who I know understands my struggle and understands my background.” Sharing a common understanding of the Black experience was important for the focus group participants as it provided a pathway to building relationships with their peers. While JB and Nicole specifically pointed out how they don’t have to provide additional context to discussions with their Black peers, Leanna highlights support as a main aspect that results from the level of understanding shared amongst her Black peers.

Because of this understanding they yearned to have present within the same-race peer communities they created, they used their perceptions of their Black peers to determine which peers would or would not have sufficient cultural competency levels to engage in these spaces. When asked to describe race relations and the campus climate at their institutions, students in the University C focus group from mentioned “three different types of Black people” and described how they are classified and perceived. Bria described (a) the Black students who are “just Black,” (b) the Black students who “grew up around predominantly White people ... but they’re not completely integrated with the White people [on campus];” and (c) the Black students who

“hang out with majority White people.” As Bria offered her explanation, Christian nodded in agreement and Jerome followed up with his own interpretation. Jerome stated:

There are three type of Black people at [University C]. You have ... the standard who [was] raised with a Black family. They understand the cookout and they're invited to the cookout. Then ...you got the Black person who is with every single White person...don't know nothing about no Black culture, is just hanging out White people....Then you have someone who was like in the middle and they don't know what they want to do.

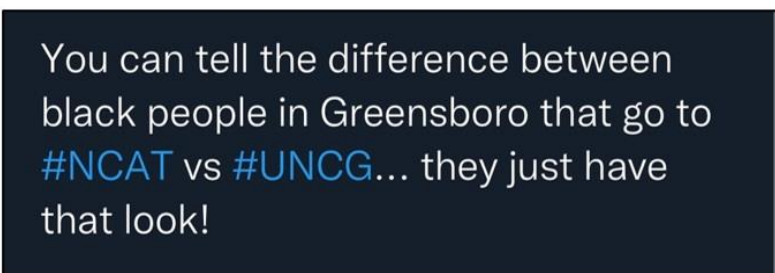
University B also mentioned how they used their assumption of the racial environment of their peers' upbringing to classify students. Two students in this focus group mentioned categories of Black students but used the term “more White-aligned” (Bobby, Leanna) when describing Black peers who grew up in majority White environments, tend to find community in White spaces or choose to mainly associate with mostly White peers at their institutions, and don't hold salience on their racial identity. At least one participant from each focus group highlighted this concept broadly and how they used it to inform their decisions on navigating connections within the Black community on campus. Bobby (University B) shared an experience about finding friends at his HWI, stating,

Personally, I just felt like I didn't know which type of person I was going to run into ... like if it was going to be a Black person that was more White aligned, or if it was a person that I could actually confide in.”

Both University B and University C participants used the racial make-up of their peers' preferred social circle to determine which classification their peers would belong. While the third focus group from University A did not explicitly discuss types of Black people, Nicole shared similar sentiments stating, “Some of those Black people do not really want to be friends with other

Black people, so it's hard to navigate and try to figure out which ones wouldn't mind being my friend." Another participant from University A, JB, submitted a photo of a tweet (see Figure 2) that hinted to a difference in Black people in response to the prompt asking participants to submit "a photo that displays the most impactful or important types of content, discussions, etc. that happen in your virtual same-race peer groups or race-based digital campus spaces." JB viewed posts such as these as problematic as it seems they "perpetuate negative stereotypes and further divide us."

Figure 2. Perceptions of Black Peers



It was interesting to see how the focus group participants spoke about their use of this categorization of their Black peers but only one focus group participant, JB, offered a critique of their use of it when she stated how they "perpetuate negative stereotypes and further divide us." Their acceptance of these guidelines for Black students can act as a catalyst for connection (joining Black students together who also view other Black students in these classifications) or separation (excluding the Black students who do not fit into the category of Black that they ascribe to). The focus group participants displayed a level of complexity in the experiences of Black college students and their Black connections. An additional level of brain power seems to be required to determine which students to connect with and who to extend an invitation to when creating Black social spaces. Participants used these classifications of their Black peers as social cues and to inform their engagement decisions with their Black peers on campus. Participants

believed these identifiers would help them determine which Black students desired connection within Black social spaces. If they perceived one of their Black peers as more “White aligned,” they would not offer membership into their Black spaces. This action seemed to be due to the fear of rejection and/or wanting to keep the spaces reserved for those who hold race as a salient and sacred identity.

Participants’ desire to attend Black events on campus and be around Black peers impacted the individual and organizational accounts they followed on social media. Social media offered information and provided students cues on who to connect with if they desired to get involved. Black students used the photos they saw people post to judge whether their peers were people with whom they would like to connect. Florini (2014) emphasized how race is one of the significant “organizing concepts” (p. 224) that structures how people utilize both physical spaces and technology. When social media users make their racial identities visible online, most people consider their portrayal of their racial identity to be “reliable corporeal signifiers” (p. 224). In addition to using such signifiers, Florini suggested that Black users also determine who to connect with by analyzing how other users perform their racial identities on social media platforms through modes such as “displays of cultural competence,” the use of “social and cultural resources,” word choice, and interaction patterns (p. 224). Social media posts provided information on who the Black students were as a person and helped them connect with people they thought they would have something in common with, people who had similar beliefs and did similar things. This finding aligns with Florini, who discussed how Black social media users engage in virtual paces to connect with “others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices” (p. 225). Leanna shared justification for this peer-seeking technique by saying,

There's just certain people that you know that you're not going to be interacting with from some of the things that they post, from some of the politicians that they repost ... their political ideology and just everything else. You can get a vibe from their Instagram, you can get the vibe from the TikToks that you see that they reposted. You can get the vibe from who they follow, what posts they're liking and all that type of stuff. So when I see that stuff that tells me how I need to move, and who I need to interact with and connect with, and who I need to not really interact with [on social media].

Chantel and Nicole both agreed with Leanna's statement. Chantel said:

Catching the vibe from somebody's social media page or ... seeing what type of content they post, and what or who they advocate for can definitely tell a lot about a person and can let you know what you need to know about them.

Nicole shared that she also uses a similar technique when she stated:

I kind of just watch people's social media and see who they repost, what posts they like, things like that. I only can align myself with people that are similar to me, that have similar beliefs, and like to do similar things that I like to do.

While some question the authenticity of what people post on social media, these three focus group participants chose to accept the posts of others as fact and reality. Contrary to Leanna, Chantel, and Nicole, Skye preferred to follow people she didn't necessarily agree with in order to stay informed on the character and possible actions of those peers. Skye stated:

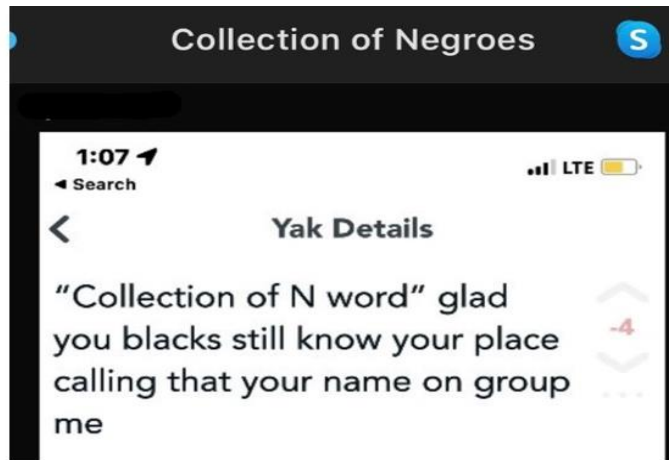
I'm lowkey different. I do watch people's social media and the stuff they post, but I will follow them, because I want to know how racist you are, so I can know to stay away from you. So I do keep certain people like that. My mama always said, 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' So I do watch them.

Skye's perspective was different in that she wanted to be an observer of people who she might not necessarily connect with or build close community. She used a lesson instilled in her by a parent to inform her actions towards peers that could potentially pose a threat or problem.

Black users who choose to engage in the act of performing race as opposed to hiding their racial identity on social media do so as an act of resistance (Nakamura, 2008). By analyzing a combination of photos, "encoded communication" (Florini, 2014, p. 226), and engagement patterns, the Black students in my study determined who they could foster "group solidarity" (p. 226) with on social media platforms. Involvement in Black online communities often requires "experiential knowledge about Black identities," "multiple forms of Black cultural competencies" (p. 227), and correct interpretation and use of Black American slang. According to Florini (2014), such techniques have been vital in the formation and continuation of Black communities.

Leanna and Chantel both recalled an instance that occurred in the Black student GroupMe at their institution where one of the members was sharing information discussed in the GroupMe with their White peers. Leanna submitted a photo (see Figure 3) where one of the Black students posted the Yik Yak post in the GroupMe for Black students, which they named, "Collection of Negroes." This post was the beginning of dialogue in the GroupMe concerning the safety of Black students on campus. The shared information resulted in some "frightening and troubling comments" (Leanna) on Yik Yak that surfaced, alluding to the knowledge of the GroupMe that was created for the Black students on campus. While they were not able to identify which person in the GroupMe was sharing information with outsiders, participants viewed the act as one of mistrust and violation of a "safe space" for Black students (Leanna).

Figure 3. The Collection of Negroes GroupMe

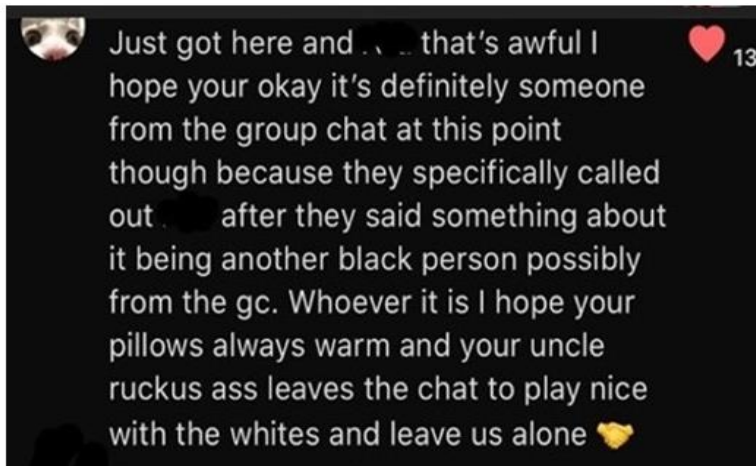


Leanna shared:

This is a screenshot from the GroupMe group chat I created for my Black peers in the class of 2025, the summer of 2021. This message was from April 2022, during [Signature Black Culture Celebration] week at our school. During this week, the app Yik Yak was full of hateful, micro- and macro-aggressive commentary towards Black students. This group chat in particular was the target of a lot of harassment.

Leanna thought that if the person had a preference of friendship with White peers, they should be in those spaces. However, acting like they wanted to be in Black social spaces while they were only occupying those spaces to share in-group conversations with the out-group was viewed as playing the role of a “jester for White people” (Leanna). Figure 4 is another screenshot Leanna submitted that shows the response of a different student from the GroupMe. Similar to Leanna referring to the unknown student who leaked the information as a “jester,” this post refers to the student as Uncle Ruckus, a Black character from the animated series, “The Boondocks,” whose remarks show internalized oppression and a hate for Black people. Thirteen others in the GroupMe liked the post, a response typically selected to show agreement with the post.

Figure 4. The Uncle Ruckus of the Group



Black peers such as the one referred to in Figure 4 were not accepted in the Black social spaces that the focus group participants created. Such individuals did not possess the similar mindset and backgrounds that the focus group participants discussed as a requirement for connection. This was evident through the responses of four focus group participants: Bria, Jerome, JB, and Christian. Bria shared that she likes “to be in spaces where people are similar” to her because it gives her “a sense of home.” Jerome echoed Bria when he offered that Black peers “do make you feel good and make you feel like you have a sense of home and community” when they find those peers with “similar career interests or hobbies.” Christian shared that he got involved with Black social media spaces to be able to “interact with people who are like me [and] come from similar backgrounds” and to “talk with people who are going through similar things.” Christian also shared that:

Black spaces in general, has allowed me to navigate the people who I want to be in my circle. It's allowed me to figure out which groups within the Black community I want to be a part of... it's allowed me to figure out the people who I want around, and who I want to go through this experience with, and who I feel like would do their part in bettering the experience.

The focus group participants were very intentional about who they aligned themselves with and who they connected with in their Black social spaces. Through various social cues, the focus group participants determined who they would and would not interact with in these spaces. The guidelines they abided by, such as the classifications of Black peers or the content posted on someone's page, informed their decisions on how they would engage (or not) with different Black peers on campus.

Encounters with White Peers, Faculty, and Staff

A racial filter was also applied to how focus group participants perceived their encounters with White peers, faculty, and staff. As a numerical minority at a HWI, Black students often viewed their campus interactions with the White majority as racially motivated. Campus related interactions, both online and in physical spaces, motivated the study participants to adopt codeswitching, combat stereotypes, and intentionally navigate experiences with the White majority.

As the focus group participants described their college experience, they shared how they would have to monitor their behavior and speech that they perceived as not acceptable in White spaces. Specifically, six focus group participants (Leanna, Bobby, Jerome, Bria, Christian, and JB) described the pressure they felt to code switch as they interacted within both White classroom spaces and their Black social spaces. Bria referred to codeswitching as “exhausting.” Leanna stated that codeswitching was something the Black students were “getting finely trained in here at this White institution.” Another participant, Bobby, discussed how Black spaces allowed Black students to be their “full self and not have to worry about code switching.” The worry and task of codeswitching these Black students felt over engaging with their White peers was troubling to hear. It was most troubling because these aspects were fueled by race and the

social implications of racial groupings. The need to codeswitch was very much associated with their hyperawareness of stereotypes. Because they felt a responsibility to defy stereotypes, they created standards for how they would present themselves around White people. When I asked what it means to be Black on their campus, each student had a response that showed their commitment to challenging stereotypes and preconceived notions held by White peers at HWIs. Focus group participants discussed influences of media portrayals of Black people as a huge contributor to stereotypes held by peers. Three focus group participants also discussed the harmful effects of the news and other media sources characterizing Black people as “loud,” “uneducated,” or “argumentative.” As they shared their awareness of the racial stereotypes they were up against, they also discussed how these stereotypes impacted how they performed for their White peers. Bria stated, “we have to carry ourselves a certain way, you don’t want it to reflect badly on the Black community.” Their journey through college was more than about learning academic material specific to their major. They also learned how to behave and govern themselves based on what was deemed as appropriate effort and acceptable (or not acceptable) behavior or academic performance. Two other students also discussed stereotypes they felt pressure to combat. Kyra shared:

I know there’s a lot of stuff in the news ... there’s a lot of racist remarks like, “Oh, we’re loud, we’re uneducated, or all this or all this.” And especially because we’re all women...you’re held at a different standard.”

Nicole added:

I feel like they [White peers] kind of just look at it like I’m aggressive or when I answer questions and when I speak to them, the voice that I’m using now [as I speak to you],

they kind of look at it like “Oh, she’s being pushy, she’s being aggressive.” I’m not being aggressive. I’m just speaking fluently and getting my point across.

For these Black students, they thought they couldn’t be their authentic selves in White spaces or speak using culturally relevant terminology. The act of expressing their Blackness amongst their White peers was associated with fear of being judged or stereotyped. The survey participants offered responses that hinted to where the fear of being judged or stereotyped stemmed from. When asked what they discuss or post about when interacting in race-based digital campus spaces, 60 participants provided written responses. Of those responses, 15% reflected discussing issues of racial discrimination and racial issues they faced on campus. Discussions regarding Black students facing racial issues with their White peers resulted in perceptions of White peers that would limit the desire Black students had to engage with them. For example, one survey respondent said, “White people always despise Black people.” Another survey participant shared, “White people are vexing, and even more so in spaces you cannot control your participation in [the classroom].” One focus group participant, Kyra, also offered a similar perception of White people when she stated, “Sometimes when you see White people, you’re like “Oh, they’re racist.” Immediately that’s the first thought.” While these statements are generalizations, those survey participants could have witnessed or experienced instances of racial discrimination and acts of racism that would make them feel this way. Another survey participant said they use Black social media spaces to discuss “racist ideologies upheld by the White students [at their school].” A third survey respondent said “they [White people] try to be so pro-Black that they inject themselves into our spaces.” While this instance discussed White peers as allies, it also shows the importance of allies seeking the approval of the group they are wishing to support before entering fully into those spaces as an outsider. Four focus group

participants also brought up similar concerns. Jerome stated, “A lot of times I feel like they [White people] try too hard to mix with Black culture.” Christian agreed and said:

They do kind of try too hard to be accepted by the Black community...and try to get us to react to some of their actions, or some of the things they say ...and it’s just kind of like... they just do it too much and it just makes us a little bit uncomfortable. It makes us less inclined to get involved with our White peers.

During a different occasion, Christian further explained “it really does seem like they’re just trying to really force themselves to have a relationship with a Black person ...but it seems like it does something for them more so than it does for *me*.” Nicole shared that she has had a number of her White peers “try to prove to me that they are an ally.” Kyra expressed similar experiences and ended her statement with “I don’t need all that.” Without that approval, the efforts to support the group will be overlooked and, instead, interpreted as unwanted and forced. In addition to the White ally, Bria and Kyra also described other types of White people. Bria stated:

It just depends because the way [University C] is, it’s like you have some really cool White people. I would say we would invite them to the cookout. We have some really cool understanding, White people who tend not to stereotype or tend not to have any racial biases. ... But then others are just flat out like ‘I don’t like Black people’ ... flat out racist.

The cookout that Bria mentioned is a hypothetical gathering of the Black community. When White people get extended an invite to the cookout, it signifies that they have earned some level of street credibility within the Black community. When Kyra discussed her White peers that separated themselves from her, as if “they didn’t want to talk” and were “Standoffish,” she also contrasted it by sharing “but then there are some other White people who are like ‘Black

lives matter! I got you!” Just as the focus group participants had guidelines for perceiving their Black peers, they also interpreted their interactions with their White peers to develop classifications for them as well.

Because their White peers lacked the level of cultural competence required to genuinely build connections with Black peers, stereotypical views of Black students became a standard to which they were judged. This caused the focus group participants in my study to limit the number of social interactions they had with White peers outside of academic classes. Seven focus group participants described their desire to keep conversations or interactions brief with their White peers – four of the seven participants actually used the word “brief” to describe this occurrence. Another focus group participant, Bria, shared how she intentionally tries “to make the conversation [with White peers] short lived because it gets exhausting to have to jump into a different persona.” Unfortunately, her experiences with her White peers resulted in her feeling like the only way she can engage with them was if she “tasks” herself with holding back her “real personality.” During the focus groups participants shared instances where they initially tried to develop friendships with White peers. However, these attempts usually resulted in hurtful outcomes, such as the White acquaintances continuing to mispronounce the participants’ name after multiple corrections, or being negatively sanctioned when a conflict emerged. Jerome specifically mentioned his perceptions of a “condescending tone” from his White peers when they spoke to him. As students shared about their less than positive friendship experiences with their White peers, they also discussed the impact such encounters had on their desire for connection with White peers. For some participants, the feelings of disconnection influenced a decision to no longer have White friends or occupy White spaces. For others who had to interact

with White peers (i.e. as roommates or suitemates), the inability to connect with White peers resulted in wanting to keep the interactions they had with White peers on a surface level.

Another reason the focus group participants desired to keep conversations brief were because some of their interactions have resulted in them being on the receiving end of microaggressions not just from White peers, but from other racially minoritized groups such as international students whose interactions with Black peers might be limited. While experiencing microaggressions can be hurtful and at times frustrating, the focus group participants constantly expressed their ability to monitor themselves and their reactions during these damaging encounters. Nicole stated:

I've had that happen a lot. When you're in sociology, and you're talking about things and you're explaining your point of view, or how you feel about it. Some random White woman will be like 'Oh, I feel the same. We're like the same person. We have the same brain.' It's kind of awkward because I don't want to be mean.

Although Nicole did not agree at all to that statement and she felt the uniqueness of her racialized experience was completely undermined and ignored, she chose not to address her White peer. Silence and avoidance was a common response that the focus group participants used in such encounters. JB shared how she has developed a callous to hearing stereotypes when she shared:

You don't want to get upset because then you're perpetuating more stereotypes...you eventually have to get desensitized to it at a certain point. That's kind frustrating at times, but when you do surround yourself with other Black people ... You'll have a place to vent those feelings about being judged.

Both Nicole and JB express a level of emotional control they exercise when enduring microaggressions from non-Black peers. Similarly, a different focus group participant, Bria from a different university stated:

Since we're the minority I feel like we also have to be cautious of how we interact with the majority in order for us not to come off a certain way. So we don't come off ghetto, or aggressive, or try not to give them a reason to fit [us] into the stereotypes."

Bria discusses a connection between the emotional control they exhibit and stereotypes. This could suggest that the reason they exercise this control is so they won't fit into stereotypes that they feel negatively impact perceptions of Black people. The statements shared by the participants show the additional burdens Black students carry with them at HWIs. Not only are they challenged to be academically successful, but in social settings they are using additional levels of brain power to navigate stereotypes, monitor their actions, and deal with toxic misperceptions of Black people. All of which seemed to be a contributing factor to a level of mistrust toward the White faculty and staff. For example, Bobby shared about a time when he was interviewed to be highlighted in campus communications and Olivia and Mark shared about times when they were asked to attend certain recruitment events. During these instances, they felt they were being tokenized and invited only to show there is diversity on their campus. Those three participants did not feel like the invitations for inclusion were coming from a genuine place. Bobby shared an example of this feeling of tokenism when he submitted a photo in response to the prompt, "A photo that represents how Black students at HWIs interpret the meaning of being Black on campus." The photo was a collage of screenshots of the college-wide announcements in which he had been included. In the caption, Bobby stated, "As I look at the photos, I seem to fight the thought between am I being recognized for my work or used as a

diversity quota to promote the college?” While Bobby appreciated the recognition of being selected to promote the college, he struggled with what he perceived might be a lack of true recognition for his accomplishments. That uncertainty seemed to take away from the excitement he may have felt by being allowed to represent his college. Jerome and Bria also mentioned tokenism but in a different context. These two focus group participants thought their White peers who sought to include at least one Black person in social gatherings had ulterior motives. Jerome stated “It’s easy for a group of White people to see that one Black friend as a prize or the token or cool.” Bria added by saying “White people in White spaces are seen as cool. The more Black people they can bring into these spaces, the cooler the party is.” They both highlighted their observations of Black culture, including songs and dances, becoming popular with White people during those times and seeing their White peers on social media using the trendy aspects of Black culture, of which they disapproved. This invasion of their unique culture further contributed to participants’ resistance to socializing deeply with White peers as they did not want to see their culture appropriated. While these accounts of tokenism are different than the ones shared by Bobby, Olivia, and Mark, they still contribute to the mistrust the focus group participants spoke of towards White peers, faculty, and staff.

Furthermore, focus group participants also had negative experiences with White faculty and staff, which consequently had an impact on how they developed their academic relationships. The participants in my study discussed the messages they were given messages through the actions of White staff. For example, Bobby shared how he had a White staff member disbelieve their side of a story when they had a conflict with a White peer. Mark shared how he observed the White staff for one of his campus positions attempt to fire all the Black student

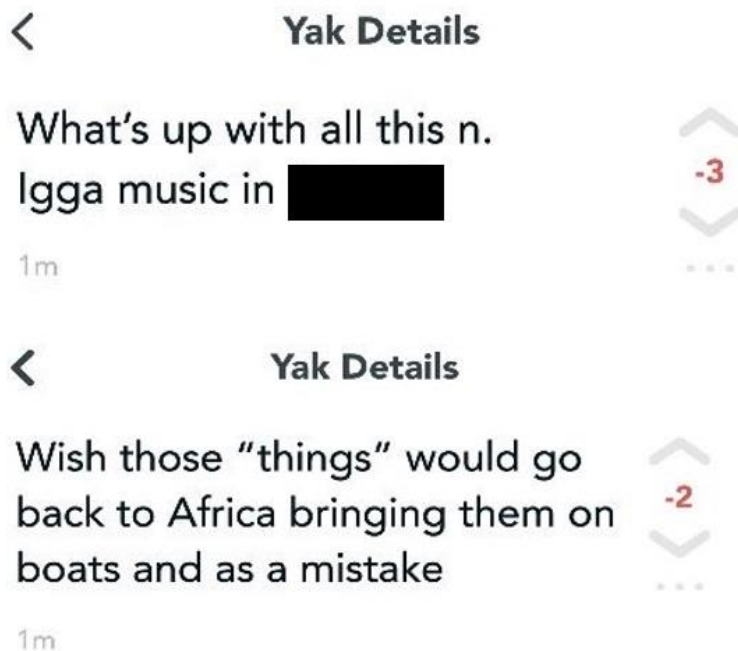
staff. Such instances developed serious trust issues for the Black students in my study. Skye shared that she “noticed some of the White professors have pity” on her. She stated,

I think it’s because I am the only Black student in their class... They see me sitting alone, and so I guess they feel sorry for me... I try not to think that’s what it is, but a part of me think that’s what it is.

Nicole echoed a similar experience when she shared, “Yeah, this actually just happened to me yesterday. Maybe there’s two black people there ... I feel like she [the professor] does feel sorry for me... she like pities us a little bit.” In addition to concerns about White faculty, focus group participants described instances during classes when they felt like their intellect and intelligence was questioned by their White peers. Those experiences, which occurred on the college campus, coupled with incidents of police brutality against Black bodies in the society at large all contributed to participants’ sense of mistrust of White people and a reminder of their minoritized status. During the focus groups, students shared how this level of mistrust as well as their population’s small representation on campus precluded them from showing vulnerability around White people or expressing uncertainty on certain subjects. For example, Jerome shared how he would not ask for help during class because of the fear of being label as “the Black kid who doesn’t understand.” Because of this fear, Jerome stated he would rather “sit there and suffer in silence” as opposed to asking questions of his White peers or faculty. Despite participants’ level of mistrust concerning the social connections they might have with White people, five focus group participants from University B mentioned they would need to professionally network with White people to use the access, connections, and resources White people have to help advance their careers.

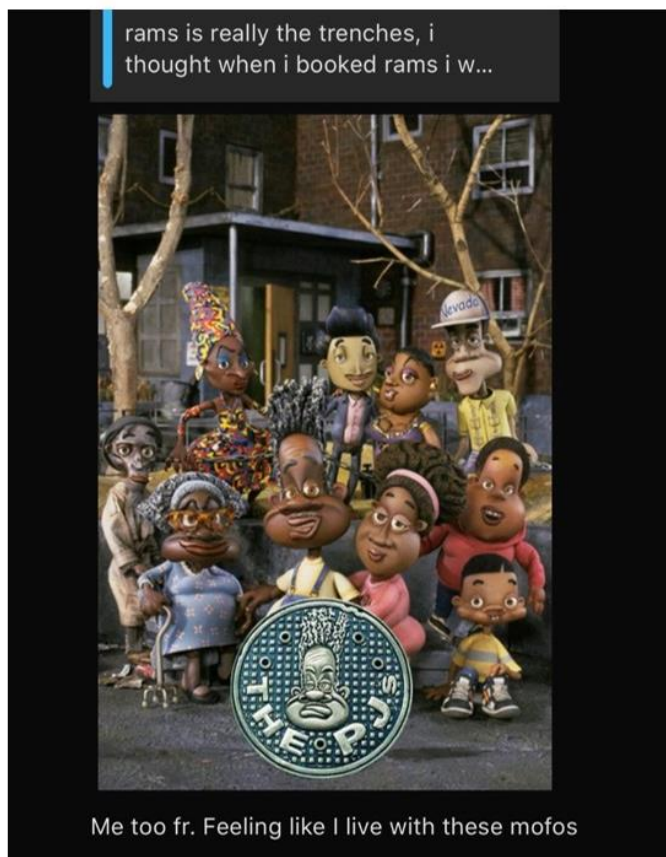
Encounters with White peers were also limited due to specific posts that emerged in race-based digital campus spaces. During the focus groups, the participants discussed a specific app, Yik Yak, as being one of the more problematic social media platforms to engage with as people can post statements anonymously. Yik Yak allows people to post their comments and thoughts namelessly, which leads to individuals posting offensive content without being identified. The students shared instances of Yik Yakers referring to them as slaves, monkeys, and needing to go back to Africa. Figure 5 is a post offered by Chantel when asked to provide “A photo that represents the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces.” The participant captioned the photo, “These are screenshots of things (Yik Yak comments) that were said during a Black event held in the student center. It shows the constant attack that Black people are under for just simply being Black.” Scholars (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Haddad et al., 2021) refer to cyberbullying as one of the negative aspects of social media.

Figure 5. Yik Yak Post: Go Back to Africa



Jerome, a student from a different institution and focus group, also submitted a photo of a White peer posting a stereotypical message, but not on an anonymous platform. GroupMe is an app that allows for group chats to be created with a small or large number of participants for a variety of purposes. The students in my study specifically talked about using GroupMe to join groups of their peers in the same student organizations, in the same course, and in the same classification (i.e., Class of 2024 GroupMe). The screenshot submitted (see Figure 6) of this GroupMe incident was in a chat that was created for individuals who lived in a specific campus apartment.

Figure 6. The Influence of Stereotypical Media Portrayals



The White student posted a photo from a stereotypical Black cartoon show in response to a Black student’s post describing the campus apartment complex as “the trenches.” When the

students discussed this photo during the focus group, they were offended that a White student would publicly agree to the comment about a predominantly Black campus apartment complex and share such a photo along with the comment. While two Black students in the GroupMe responded with laughing emojis, the three students in my study did not find humor in the situation. Bria was the owner of the GroupMe and used her administrative access on the app to remove that user from the chat. Participants did not have a problem that the “trenches” comment came from a Black student. The problem was the commentary from the White student, who was viewed as an outsider commenting on a Black living situation. Jerome submitted this photo in response to the prompt asking for representation of “how Black students at HWIs interpret the meaning of being Black on campus.” According to Christian, this was just another example of why he feels that,

You can't really have a comfortable relationship with White people a lot of times. It's just like they make situations just a little weird. They definitely have their own ways of communicating and expressing themselves and it's very different from ours and what we're used to because we come from different backgrounds.

When the cultural differences in communication and humor arise, the Black students were discouraged from connecting with White peers. While this specific instance occurred in a virtual GroupMe space, it still had a similar impact on the Black students' desires to interact with White peers as some of the in-person encounters.

The focus group participants appeared to be mentally engaged in contemplation on a variety of concerns beyond their academic progress in White educational environments. The difficulty the focus group participants expressed in connecting with their White peers and trusting White faculty and staff was informed by the ways in which they perceived their campus

encounters. Research from scholars such as Harper and Hurtado (2007), Grier-Reed (2010), and Hope et al., (2018) discuss how Black college students encounter negative racial issues at higher rates than other groups and the impact those issues have on Black students making close friendships with peers outside their race. The racial filter through which they perceived encounters with White peers, faculty, and staff immensely encouraged them to engage in Black social spaces on campus and online.

Identifying Safe Spaces

Black social media spaces provided insight that informed the decisions Black students made on what they would consider to be safe spaces for their identity. Utilizing a racial filter, the Black students in the study chose to define for themselves what they would deem as safe. Black social media spaces were deemed as safe spaces for Black students because they knew in those spaces they would not be harmed physically, and those spaces felt safe for them mentally and psychologically.

The survey participants showed a perceived level of safety when in Black spaces. Of the 80 written responses provided to answer survey question 13 that asked about the “purpose Black campus social media spaces play in your college experience,” 13.75% of the responses spoke to Black social media spaces offering a safe space for Black students. Those survey respondents viewed these spaces as safe places to be oneself, feel like they belong, and have open discussions about topics they want to discuss. Three student responses specifically talked about how instances of being singled out in class, dealing with racism, or enduring microaggressions encouraged them to go to Black social media spaces to share their feelings with people who would understand. One survey respondent said, “These social media platforms serve as a safe space for me to share my personal experiences with people who may share similar experiences

with me.” Likewise, another survey participant wrote “Having a safe, cohesive platform to talk about the Black experience can help me feel as though I am not going through issues alone.” One survey participant shared Black spaces “provide access to a space where I feel represented, seen, and appreciated.” Another survey participant discussed that a Black student organization created an opportunity for them to “post anonymous confessions/advice about navigating a PWI as a Black student.” When student contributed to the spaces, they felt empowered to share their experience. Such spaces in this context also helped contribute to the sense of safety of being around Black organizations for this participant.

The focus group participants also discussed their perceptions of safety on their campuses. When they chose to surround themselves with Black peers, they believed they were inserting themselves into “safe spaces” (Bobby, Bria, Kyra, Leanna, Olivia) where they could feel validated, heard, and welcomed. This sense of security or safety stemmed from interactions with White peers that evoked perceptions of intentional mistreatment in their interactions. Nine of the focus group participants used the word safe or safety when describing Black social spaces. Skye discussed the “sense of security or safety” she felt from these spaces because when she is with her Black peers, she is certain “they’re not going to be maliciously trying to hurt or harm” her. Leanna agreed by sharing “the intimate feeling of safety” with her Black peers. Bobby also contributed by sharing “I know I’ll be safe [with my Black peers...it provides a safe space.” Olivia echoed these sentiments by sharing “Black social spaces are important because it’s a safe space for us.” Nicole stated, “it gives you a safe space...at a PWI it’s not a lot of places for Black people to feel safe.” While the focus group participants didn’t specifically state how they defined safety, I think Mark and Christian’s responses alluded to what makes them feel safe. Mark said, “In my Black spaces, I feel it’s more of a safe and comfortable place to express myself.”

Christian similarly shared “I feel like I use my social media personally to express myself, and who I truly am...Black social media spaces allows us to feel at home, safe, and comfortable.” Mark and Christian speak to a level of safety that emerges when they feel like they can express themselves and use their voice to speak without fear of punishment. I thought this was really powerful as I reflect back to the times when Black people were enslaved and not allowed to speak out or up against something. During the civil rights era, Black people’s lives were threatened for speaking up and expressing themselves. JB’s comment highlights this when she says “I think it [Black spaces] provides almost like a safety net, the safer route...you never know how anybody is going to react to you...especially since we’re in the South.” JB’s response acknowledged the racism that occurs in physical spaces, but she also discussed racism that emerges online and on social media platforms. She specifically recalled several anti-Black Instagram pages that were created, such as one named, “Lynch the Black People at [University A].” This Instagram page in particular emerged after a controversial speaker, known for hate speech against Black people, was invited to campus. This example emphasized the focus group participants’ discussions of the importance of seeing Black student organizations post about certain campus events. When they saw Black organizations posting, they automatically assumed those events were both targeted toward the interests of Black students and developed by Black students. Those two factors operated as indicators that such an event would be a safe, identity-affirming space for Black students to socialize and gather. The focus group participants’ responses seem to reflect an awareness of the repercussions that Black people faced when expressing themselves and that is why they feel it is only safe to do so amongst same-race peers.

Furthermore, the Black students in this study tended to feel more able to freely express themselves in Black social spaces, where they believe they are in a safe space where people will

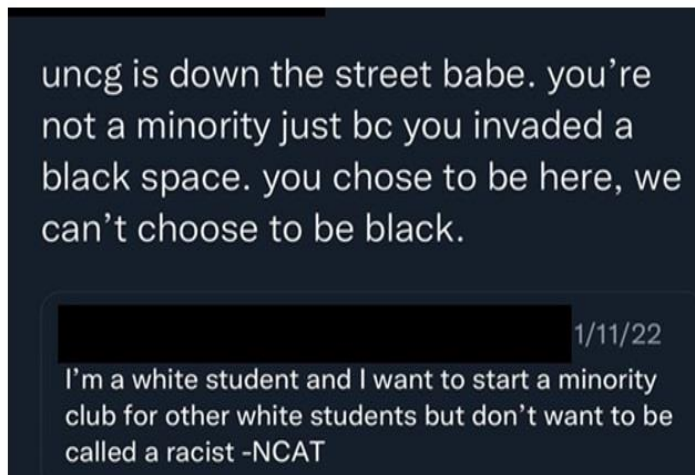
be more open to understanding their perspectives. The students in this study worked hard to create these spaces for themselves as a minoritized population on their campuses. However, there were times where their attempts at creating those spaces were met with threats. For example, when Leanna shared her experience with creating a Black student GroupMe got Black sophomores at University B, she discussed how the intimidating messages on Yik Yak that space received made her reconsider creating those spaces. Leanna shared,

Knowing myself, I'm probably still going to create those spaces ... that just shows how much more essential it is for us to have those safe spaces. ... It just kind of hurt a little bit to see how something that I intended to use as a safe space was used to actually target and attack us.

This specific instance slightly discouraged Leanna from wanting to create more spaces for Black students "that can be infiltrated." Because she was the student who created the GroupMe that was called out in the threats posted on Yik Yak, Leanna felt responsible for putting her Black peers at risk of danger or harm.

This exemplified how these Black students had to be cognizant of the dynamics of occupying racialized environments. The focus group participants from University B created a Black space as a minoritized population at their university and in society at large. While their efforts were met with opposition, a different focus group participant from University A submitted a photo that displayed when someone from the White majority tries to do the same thing as a numerical minority at a HBCU. When asked to bring a photo displaying the "messages and images you have posted by your racial experience," JB, submitted one that speaks to the development of racialized spaces at universities (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Reverse Use of Identity-Affirming Spaces



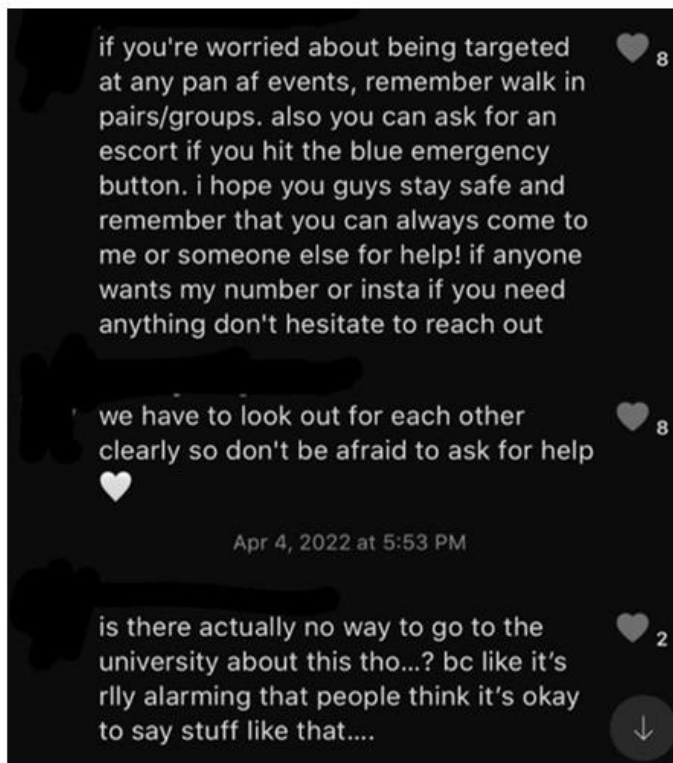
JB provided a caption stating, “Having the feeling of your personal and racial space and boundaries constantly being pushed and provoked is a common occurrence, unfortunately.” The Twitter post shows a White student wanting to create a racially homogeneous group at an HBCU. While White students who attend HBCUs are a numerical minority, they do not occupy the same minoritized status as Black students who attend HWIs. The social construction of race and the normalcy of racism that CRT calls our attention to speaks highly to the difference in that experience. The minoritized status of Black students at HWIs is deeply embedded into the history of these institutions and is informed by the systemic racism in which many HWI policies and practices are rooted.

Furthermore, when campus climates at HWIs prove to have harsh conditions for Black students, students are more inclined to create and participate in Black spaces both on campus and on social media to find safety from negative race relations. Leanna shared, “When race relations are particularly bad ... it’s important to have these spaces where we can confide in each other and where we can say that we’re scared of what may be coming up.” I provided a prompt asking participants to bring, “A photo that represents the occurrences or dynamics on campus that have

encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces and a photo that displays the most impactful or important types of content, discussions, etc. that happen in your virtual same-race peer groups or race-based digital campus spaces.” Leanna also shared a photo of a screenshot from one of the GroupMe chats for Black students on her campus where students consoled each other during a racially-driven situation (see Figure 8). Leanna captioned the photo,

This is a screenshot from the Black GroupMe group chat. This is during Pan-Afrikan Week 2022 at the school where Black students, particularly ones in this group chat were being harassed on YikYak and some were singled out and threatened with sexual abuse. This screenshot is an excerpt of a longer text thread where members in the group chat were trying to think of a way we could garner some outside protection, figure out who was harassing us, and [were] uplifting each other during that difficult time.

Figure 8. Racially-Driven Consoling



This photo exemplifies the support Black students provide to each other in these spaces when their sense of security is threatened. They used this GroupMe to collectively process the incident and find ways to come together to protect each other. There were four students in the focus group from University B that were included in this GroupMe and familiar with the situation. After reflecting on the moment, they were proud of how they handled the situation and how the Black campus community within the group came to each other's defense. It could also emphasize one of the dangers of posting one's whereabouts on social media. For college students, regularly posting one's campus involvement can help friends know which events others are attending on campus and make decisions about wanting to join their peers there based on what they see (i.e., number of people in attendance, perceptions of fun or enjoyment at the event). However, when social media pages are public, such posts also give outsiders access to the same information. In this instance, participants believed the post caused safety concerns as the outsiders saw which events the Black students were attending and threatened to show up to those events to cause harm to them. The focus group participants didn't express a concern of physical harm when only operating in Black social media spaces. It was when the engagement within Black social media spaces led to on campus events and activities that the fear of physical harm challenged their sense of safety they created within these spaces.

Table 4 provides the results from the survey question that asks students about how they express themselves and have conversations about race relations in Black social media spaces. For about 70% of survey respondents, Black social media spaces acted as a safe space for and empowered about 65% of them to have conversations about race. The survey results regarding how Black social media spaces benefit Black students show the potential these spaces have for building up engagement and expression capacities for this group. These spaces could be viewed

as a catalyst for creating physical spaces on campus that also result in racial identity expression and dialogues across difference. Attempts to replicate the aspects of Black social media spaces within physical campus settings could result in similar outcomes.

Table 4. Survey Q12 Responses

Field	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total <i>n</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
	I feel more free to express my racial identity on Black social media spaces than I do on campus.	100	33.90	93	31.53	70	23.73	32	10.85	0	
At my university, I sometimes fear speaking out against race-related issues.	73	24.83	91	30.95	90	30.61	35	11.90	5	1.7	294
Black social media spaces act as a safe space for me as a Black student at a HWI.	88	30.03	118	40.27	69	23.55	17	5.80	1	0.34	293
As a Black student, I feel more empowered to have conversations about race on Black social media spaces than on campus.	92	31.83	94	32.53	78	26.99	24	8.30	1	0.35	289
My experiences as a Black person are affirmed in the content that is posted by the users of Black social media spaces I am a part of.	98	33.91	84	29.07	83	28.72	19	6.57	5	1.73	289

Both the focus group and survey participants used racial filters to determine feelings of safety in Black social media spaces that resulted from a high level of trust that their fellow Black peers would not put them in harm’s way. Students in this study said it was important to surround themselves with people they knew were not going to be harmful or make them feel uncomfortable in virtual spaces because they already felt discomfort in physical spaces on campus.

The participants in this study revealed challenges dealing with the societal perceptions of Blacks, feeling seen in a space that historically was designed to exclude them, and the hyperawareness of their minoritized status on campus. The results echoed much of the literature on their experiences. During the focus groups and survey, participants strongly emphasized the

role race played in their experiences, friend groups, and unique needs that emerge for them at HWIs. One specific experience the students discussed was that of isolation or feeling alone. In Harper et al.'s (2011) study on Black college resident assistants at predominantly White schools, the participants expressed feeling invisible because they felt isolated in a large institution while simultaneously feeling as if "all eyes were often on them because they stood out racially from the majority—similar to a black fly floating in a glass of milk" (Harper, 2013, p. 193). The feeling of isolation exacerbated the pressures they felt at HWIs. Many of the participants' stories aligned with the literature that discusses Black students at HWIs experiencing loneliness, pressures to combat stereotypes, and mistrust of the institution (Ancis et al., 2000; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Gray et al., 2013; Grier-Reed, 2010; Hope et al., 2018; Thelamour et al., 2019). The mental and emotional energy these students had to exert when reflecting on their interactions within White spaces is the same level of energy Smith et al. (2011) discuss when presenting the idea behind racial battle fatigue. Because of their experiences, Black students ascribed to using a racial filter to view themselves, perceived campus encounters, and identify safe spaces for Black students.

The Creation of Community

In both the focus groups and survey, the concept of community continued to arise as an important aspect of the college experience of Black students. Across the six focus group sessions alone, the word *community* was mentioned 106 times. The high number of mentions of the term stresses the importance of community for the Black students in my study and showed how a sense of community developed when engaged in Black social spaces both online and in person. Participants discussed the community they created with their Black peers and the ways in which

the community served as a tool for survival. I wrote to the participants after the focus groups to ask how they defined the word community. Five participants provided a definition:

- Leanna: My definition of community is a group of people that share unique commonalities whether it be geographic, racial, linguistic, economic, etc. This group of people function as a family unit and lean on each other for survival.
- Mark: My definition of a community is a group of people that creates their own identity and/or culture together.
- Chantel: I would say that my definition of community encompasses being able to associate with others that hold the same understanding as you. Having community allows me to feel like myself without the fear of being judged, but also getting constructive feedback from those within the community.
- Nicole: Community to me is somewhere that you feel comfortable and can be yourself; your safe place or your home away from home.
- JB: I define a community as a place where like-minded close people form bonds.

The way the participants discussed community was inspirational and powerful. For these students, their community is a space where they could grow together and explore their identity and their culture in significant ways. Black social media spaces allowed for the creation of community to emerge through the connections that were created, identity affirmation, and knowledge sharing.

Connection

The connection the focus group and survey participants described was the glue that held their Black communities together. They spoke of who they connected with, their motivations for creating those connections, and how Black social media spaces allowed them to feel connected

to their community. Ultimately, the comfort and support that was perceived because of interacting with Black social spaces encouraged them to continue to build upon significant connections created within the Black community at their HWI.

Eighty written responses were provided to answer the survey question that asked students to share about the purpose Black social media spaces play in their college experience. For 28.75% of the survey respondents, this question uplifted the importance of Black social media spaces in finding Black peers, connecting with Black peers, and sustaining those connections through the development of friendships. Survey participants stated that they used these spaces to “network with other Black people on campus,” maximize on “opportunities to make friends,” and to “keep in touch” with their Black friends. One survey respondent stated, “they [Black social media spaces] help me feel connected and like there is a community that understands me.” Similarly, another respondent stated,

These connections on social media helps me make deeper connections with people I’ve met on campus, I feel as if it lets me know what interests we share, etc. These spaces compliment the physical Black Spaces by allowing us to promote and share these organizations so more people like us can connect with each other.

One survey participant shared that the connections formed in Black social media spaces often “serve as roots to developing long-term relationships that go beyond college.” Black social media spaces allow for the connections to be sustained through minimal effort other than following each other on social media. Specifically, when using photo sharing platforms such as Instagram, users can stay connected and often stay updated on different life occasions via the posts—as many users post photos to showcase major accomplishments. One can stay updated on those accomplishments, comment messages of congratulations without having to have their

personal contact information (i.e., phone numbers) or having to stay in consistent communication (i.e., phone calls, texts). Mark, a focus group participant at University B, alluded to this point when he shared

The people in my life that I that I care about so much....they influenced me to stay on these social media platforms because I get to see what they're doing. I get to see them grow. I get to see them now, even if I'm not like always in their lives or [if] we're not always interacting. I can still see the growth in their life and the way that its going... I feel a sense of pride in them, even though I don't really have a right to, but it's great to see them grow up. I remember talking to one of my old friends from elementary school. I have not spoken to her since middle school. There was one trend on Instagram for a while that was like 'what's one word or phrase that reminds you of me.' The answer that I had for her was social media, because I saw her doing well in collegiate sports, I saw her graduating, and just the joy that she was having in life...Those influences [are] what keeps me in these spaces.

Just by following Black peers on campus, those connections remain long after graduation—contingent upon the users remaining active on the sites.

I appreciated the comment of another survey respondent as they framed these spaces as ones that “create a central hub for Black students to connect.” Of the 28.75% of respondents who mentioned connections as a result of participating in Black social media spaces, 10 students specifically wrote about the ways in which Black social media spaces offer an increase in accessibility and convenience when creating and participating in Black communities online. One participant spoke to the difficulty of connecting with Black peers on a campus with over 30,000 students. This comment was supported as the other survey respondents wrote about how these

spaces were “useful” to “connect us even when we aren’t together” and allowed them to interact with people they “don’t get to see often on campus.” Large student populations combined with small numbers of Black students can serve as a barrier to the community that a Black student finds at a HWI. However, the virtual aspect of Black social media spaces allows people to find connection a bit more easily. One survey respondent shared, “It adds convenience to my campus life,” complimenting two other response that highlighted a similar aspect. One survey respondent stated, “These spaces are a way to connect the Black student population without the need for room reservations” and another respondent shared, “Sometimes I don’t see flyers or emails [in physical spaces] but I see many things on social media all the time and it is very accessible.” Another survey respondent shared, “[With a] hectic schedule, it is easier to connect through social media.” Black social media spaces offer an opportunity for Black students to virtually gather and enjoy the company of each other without having to abide by university implemented restrictions or policies concerning gathering together or hosting events. Five focus group participants, across the three different universities, also mentioned the level of convenience that Black social media spaces provides when it comes to creating connections with their Black peers. During University A’s focus group JB shared:

I think it kind of complements it [on-campus engagement] ...especially midterm time.

You don’t really have a lot of time to go out, hang out every day. So just being able to pull up your phone and then just have the support right there... is a nice thing to have.

During University C’s focus Christian and Bria also mentioned how social media helps them connect with people easily. Christian shared, “You want to come to school to have fun and meet new people and be able to build more social relationships. I feel like without social media

it's harder to do that." Similarly, Bria discussed how Black social media spaces helps you to connect with people you might not typically see on campus. She said:

Even meeting people who are at school, that you wouldn't really come in contact with on a day-to-day basis. Even if you are Black that doesn't necessarily mean you're going to come in contact with every single Black student on campus. So meeting them online on social media in these spaces that we've created for ourselves, and then finding ways that we can connect to each other gives you another sense of community.

During University B's focus group, Chantel and Mark shared similar thoughts and related it to the accessibility that Black social media spaces provide. Chantel mentioned,

I feel like it's [Black social media spaces] important in finding your community, but also in bringing everyone together. Say those spaces weren't there, and they weren't readily accessible for us to use. It would be harder for a lot of Black people to a) find each other, and to b) just go to these spaces and release the stress.

Mark then stated that Black social media spaces provide,

More access...more readily available access. Cause with the social media, you can just get on your phone or check a website out, and most areas on campus will have some type of takeover, or they'll be doing some type of social media promo... that's a very easy way ... you don't have to move, or you don't have to have your schedule completely lined up for you to feel involved. I think that's a big difference [from what] on campus spaces provide.

The focus group participants elaborated on the level of convenience Black social media spaces provided to find their people. For example, JB used Black social media spaces as a strategy to navigate the racial dynamics on campus. JB said, "If I can't find community in my

physical community, then I have to seek it elsewhere. So I have to turn to social media to do that sometimes.” She went on to say, “I was able to find a lot of friends and a community that I felt like supported me.” Nine other focus group participants also discussed the concept of finding. As they described their experiences with the community, they also described a process they engaged in that involved finding people to connect with. Chantel said, “Coming into [University B], for me it was critical that I find other Black people like me, and find my community.” Mark shared:

Finding people who look like them, people who act similar to them, people have similar backgrounds, similar stories. You have to find your community as soon as possible and you have to hold on to it as much as possible. Cause it will eat you up if you allow it to. The best way to not allow it to really get to you is to find your people and hold on to them, especially if you plan to go into any profession that is going to be [racially] similar to how your institution is.

Skye shared that her advice for incoming Black students at HWIs would be:

You need to find your people, and it may be hard to find them because we are a small population. But don’t give up. In the beginning it may not work out, but keep trying. You will find them.

Bria shared similar thoughts when she discussed finding her people. She stated:

You find your good group of people, and you stick with them. When you find your group on campus, I feel like that’s just the best experience ever...Personally, I feel like I’ve made my lifelong friends and I can see me keeping these friends when I get older.

Nicole stated:

At a HWI, it's hard to find people or things around [that] you can actually relate to. But when I found my group of people, and when I found more Black people to surround myself with, I started to realize that I belong here just as much as everyone else does.

Jerome shared his thoughts on how he thinks most students seek to find connections with people who look like them. He mentioned, "In the back of my mind, everybody is like, 'I need to find somebody who looks like me' ... If you don't, it can be suffocating to be surrounded by everybody who doesn't look like you." Olivia was in a different focus group but expressed similar thoughts as Jerome when she said:

I was like looking for my people here that I could connect with, because...I knew the statistics of how many Black people were here...just being able to reach out and connect [on social media] that way before I got on campus, so that I wouldn't feel so isolated when I got here.

Each of these focus group participants expressed their desire to search for and locate people who would affirm their identity and experience as a Black student on campus. They realized this would be an important aspect to navigate their educational career at a HWI and to be successful in their environment.

The community they found to engage in while enrolled at their HWI was considered to be essential to their experience, especially when considering that they spend most of their day in classes as the minority. For the focus group participants who attended HWIs with small (i.e. 5-10%) Black representation in student enrollment, choosing to participate in Black social media spaces seemed to foster an increased sense of belonging due to closer connections with fewer peers. Nicole specifically discussed this during the focus groups. Nicole shared "Black spaces

helped me have a sense of belonging. My first year, I did not feel like I belonged here at all.” In order to feel like they belonged, five of the participants discussed how they intentionally focus on creating same-race peer groups and do not leave those connections to change. Leanna stated that she “definitely” focuses on creating same-race peer groups. She noted that:

In person, sometimes we may just happen to migrate to each other. But I definitely think on social media it is intentional with the people you follow....The summer before coming [to University B] I was looking at all the [social media] pages, seeing who was Black, liking their pictures and following them.

Chantel and Bobby agreed with Leanna’s strategies – Chantel adding that “I definitely think that online it [searching for the Black students] is intentional and Bobby noting that “we just group up based off of our circumstances.” Bria and Jerome from University C mentioned the racial segregation of their campus and how the students there also intentionally focus on creating same-race peer groups. Bria said “It really is intentional...I will say that [University C] is super-duper segregated, but it’s by choice. We as the Black community kind of separate ourselves from the White people just to get a break from them.” Jerome shared “I feel like the majority of Black people don’t really mingle that much with the White people...I think it’s very intentional.” They recognized the deliberate decisions college students made when deciding on which people to develop social ties to on campus.

The survey respondents also emphasized the importance of community. Survey question 16 asked, “How much of a sense of community or belonging amongst the Black student population on campus is created by engaging in these Black social media spaces with your campus peers?” Of the 299 respondents, 93% ($n = 279$) said that at least *a moderate amount* of community is created by engaging with Black social media spaces (see Figure 9). Black social

media spaces connected specifically with a Black student organization on campus could further enhance the sense of community developed. When asked to provide written responses to further expand the purpose of Black social media spaces, most survey respondents discussed the ways in which these spaces contribute to Black community. However, one respondent mentioned “I think that community is created in person rather than on social media. People make community, not the internet.” While this survey respondent saw community as something that could only be created in physical spaces, I’d argue that online communities are a valuable source of connection for some people – especially for those who feel less connection in their physical spaces, tend to be shy when engaging in-person with others, and have circumstances that prevent them from occupying in-person gatherings on a regular basis.

Figure 9. Sense of Community in Black Social Media Spaces

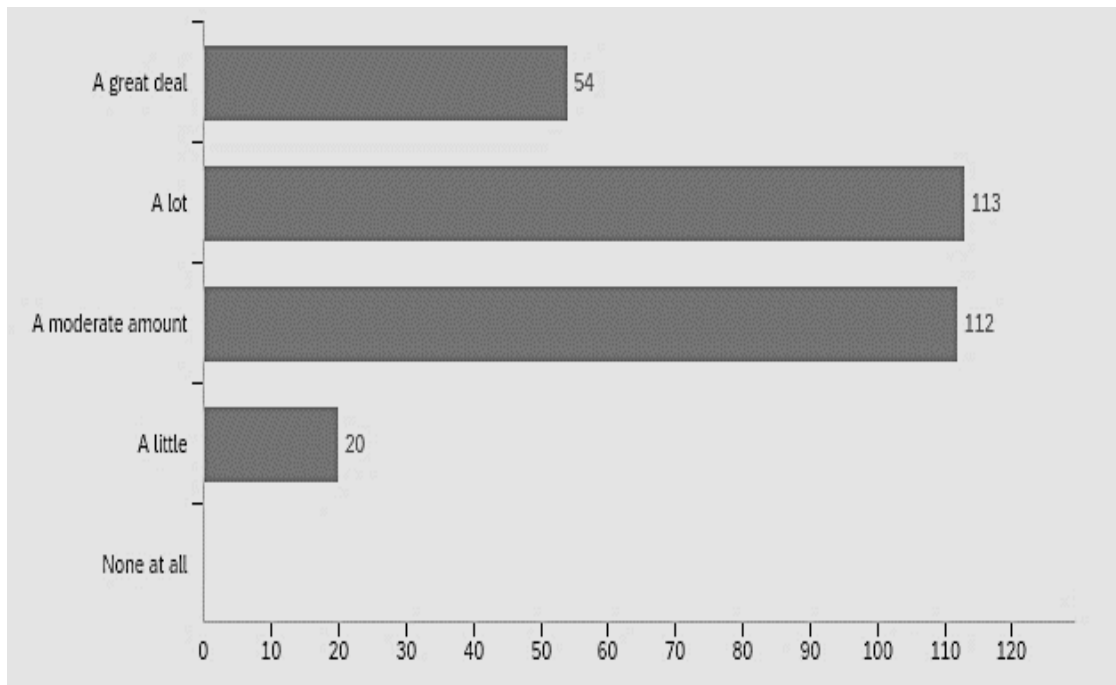
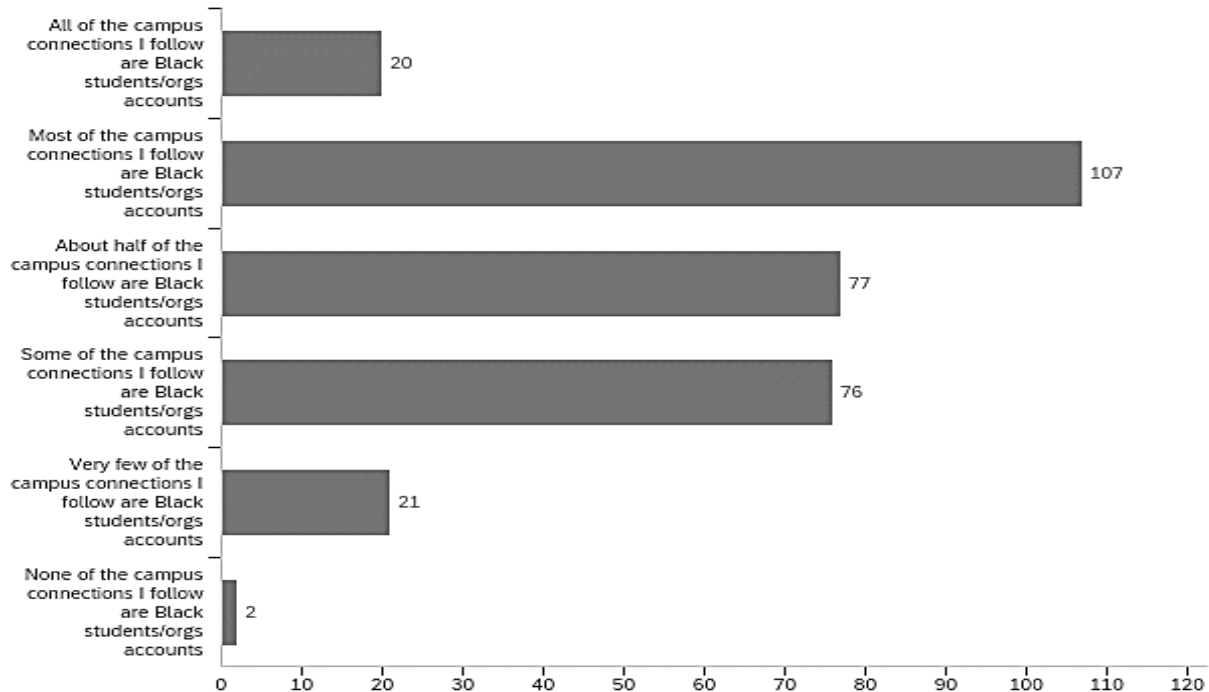


Figure 10 describes the accounts the survey respondents follow that reflect their Black connections on campus. Most of the respondents indicated they have used social media to connect with Black students and Black organizations on campus. The increase in use of social

media could expand the connections Black students have and potentially enhance on sense of belonging.

Figure 10. Number of Black Social Media Accounts Followed



The survey participants also discussed their perceptions of the community created by Black social media spaces. One participant stated, “We are more united,” while another participant shared these spaces “bring us all together,” and “[we] stick together.” Each focus group participant from University C also mentioned their perceptions of the strength of the Black community created at their HWI. Bria described Black [University C] as being a “close knit group.” Christian added that black social media spaces allowed him to “build closer relationships with people.” Jerome shared that his Black community is “really welcoming,” “a good friendship,” and “always a good time.”

As they embed themselves in Black spaces, the collective racialized experience of Blackness served as a foundation for shared experiences and common knowledge, which tends to

be lacking in other social spaces. Both the focus group and survey participants shared that as they created community in Black spaces, they often heard stories shared by other Black students explaining similar struggles. Participants found the stories being shared on social media platforms were ones they could connect with and see themselves in, showing them that “we’re all in this together.” It was during these moments that connections were truly created. Kyra shared that she appreciates the connections Black social media spaces offer because

You see people who are going through the same struggles as me. If I’m going through a hard time with something and then I see someone going through a hard time with some of their friends too. ... I look in the comments, and everyone’s agreeing ... it just makes you feel like [you’re] not alone.

Christian also noted that he values having Black social media spaces to be able to “have conversations about and reflect on how it is being a Black male at a PWI, and in general a Black male in America.” That is an experience that he felt he could only speak about with same-race peers who would understand what that was like. One survey respondent shared “it helps to see that there are people who look like me struggling with the same thing.” In addition to connecting over shared struggles, connections in Black social media spaces were also created because of shared interests, hobbies, career goals and other commonalities and similar experiences. Olivia shared that Black social media spaces allowed her to “find similarities between people” as she could view her peers’ posts, which initiated “conversations about similarities.” Kyra also shared that she likes to “connect with people when I see similar things in common...or similar backgrounds [that show] we all grew [up] together [in the same ways].” Mark also noted that Black social media spaces allow his community to “Connect with the things that we have in common.” On one of the survey questions asking about the impact of connecting with campus

based Black social media spaces, five participants provided written responses that discussed how seeing people who are similar to them succeeding in different areas of their lives, served as a message that they could succeed as well. Participants' experiences empowered one another; as one survey participant stated, "If I see other Black students on social media succeeding at their universities, I am more inclined to do so." Another respondent stated, "I feel like it is important to have people that look like you to push you to succeed."

These connections that are initiated via similarities and struggles will be further explored when I discuss how identity affirmation results from the high level of relatability that is present within Black social media spaces. The examples mentioned here specifically spoke to the ways the focus group participants emphasized connection. They highlight similarities differently when they shared their experiences with how their identity was affirmed in Black social media spaces.

Support and Comfort

The creation of community through intentional connections resulted in feeling support and comfort when occupying Black social spaces. They were supported as they created spaces that allowed them to uplift each other. Additionally, both the focus group and survey participants discussed feeling comforted by the engagement that occurred in Black social media spaces and how these spaces help them feel more comfortable at HWIs.

In addition to finding camaraderie with Black peers in physical and in-person environments, study participants also mentioned having high levels of support within Black social media spaces. Specifically, the ways in which Black students engaged with the posts of their Black peers on social media provided evidence of the deep connection between Black students in predominately White spaces. For example, all three focus group participants from University C mentioned how their Black peers "hype you up" (Bria; Christian; Jerome) by

reposting the videos, business and entrepreneurship ventures, and photos that one posts on their social media pages. Bria shared that:

Black [University C] is a really big community...we are a very supportive group. If you're utilizing these [Black] social media spaces, and you're posting things, whether it's academics or career-wise, or even just individually posting pictures or anything...they're gonna hype your head up ... everybody gonna repost your videos like.

Jerome agreed and shared that in Black social media spaces, "you're going to get put on the spotlight. They're going to hype you up. They're going to promote you. They're going to always do something to help you out." Christian followed up by describing how their fellow Black peers at University C use Black social media spaces. He expressed "People are definitely supportive of you and what you're doing. They'll definitely hype you up and whenever you do things like post pictures on Instagram... you get a feel for who is really there for you ...supporting you." Two survey participants also used the phrase "hyping each other up" when referring to how Black students support each other through sharing of each other's posts on social media. These acts of support help to boost the confidence of Black students as their Black peers show their support through the sharing and reposting of photos and promotion of others' efforts on social media. JB discussed the importance of having community as a source of support by saying,

I feel like no matter where you go, because you are Black, you are going to be looked at a certain type of way. But there are a lot of experiences that do make up for that within the community and through social media. I was able to find a lot of friends and a community that I felt like supported me.

Nicole mentioned the importance of finding and surrounding herself with the “right group of people” in order to feel supported. For her, the right group of people were Black women who served as a “support group” for each other. Nicole described their dynamic by saying, “If one of us is lacking, then another one of us would be like, ‘let’s help you build this up so you won’t be lacking anymore.’ We build each other up with our own strengths.” This was a deeper level of “hyping” each other up. Nicole’s friend group seemed to be able to use the creation of their community to support and empower each other so that they all can advance and grow together.

The focus group participants discussed how Black social media spaces were used not only to show support for individuals on a personal level, but also to support Black student business ventures as well. During the photo elicitation phase of the data collection, one prompt stated, “[Bring] a photo that represents the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces.” In response to this prompt, JB submitted a photo that demonstrated how Black students create opportunities to spotlight and support Black student businesses (see Figure 11). JB captioned the photo, “It is always a sight to see when you get the feeling of community bringing each other together.” This example shows how the Black community unifies to uplift the business goals that are present within the space.

Figure 11. Promoting Young Black Entrepreneurs



The practice of promoting Black business and projects allows Black students in historically and predominately White spaces to spotlight and support each other, even when the majority population fails to do so. The focus group participants from University C were very adamant about expressing the importance of using Black spaces to support the work of their Black peers. For example, Jerome discussed the creation of Black spaces that uplift Black students in environments where they are minoritized:

Without said spaces, it would diminish the impact that Black students have. ... Black students are here doing a lot of good things, and sometimes it can be overlooked.

Sometimes you don't get highlighted as much. ... I just feel like if Jimmy Joe is going to get posted before DaQuan gets posted for doing the same research ... without said Black spaces ... it would be really hard for Black students to get the spotlight they deserve.

This perspective was supported by Christian who mentioned "I feel like without these spaces we really wouldn't have a voice at all...we would be swept under the rug. It wouldn't be an ideal space for us to be apart of.... it just wouldn't be a positive experience at all." Bria also shared a similar sentiment on the opportunities Black students on campus develop, stating,

I can't think of a non-Black space that highlights minority students. ... most of the reasons why we're celebrated is because we celebrate ourselves. ... there's not many spaces that uplift us. We use the spaces that we created to uplift ourselves, and that just comes from the fact that we're really overlooked because we are the minority. Because of our race we don't get seen as spectacular. We may be very spectacular individuals, but they're going to look at Sally and Susan before they look at Brianna.

In this statement, Bria once again highlights the impact of her minoritized status and a racial filter through which she perceives the ways in which Black students are not recognized at

her HWI. In a different conversation, Bria also shared that “Black spaces are important because it gives Black students an opportunity to uplift each other when others don’t.” The photo-elicitation submissions and focus group discussions support Bria’s statement. There were no photos submitted to the elicitation prompts nor mentions of university-sponsored events in the focus groups that celebrate Black culture in the same ways that Black students have decided to celebrate it. The events that supported Black culture were all provided by Black student organizations, or centers for multicultural engagement.

University C students really stressed the role Black spaces played as they represented one of the only opportunities they had to be able to support each other in an environment that often did not recognize them as they desired. During this conversation, however, Jerome also brought up one particular Instagram page that was created for Black students at University C. This race-based digital campus space that was created actually sparked some controversy within the Black community at University C. The purpose of the Instagram page was to be a central hub on social media that would uplift Black students on campus and different events happening on and off-campus that would be of interest to the Black student population. While the Black community at University C was in agreement that the purpose of the page was appropriate, it was the name of the page that caused a bit of a divide. The creator of the group named it “Historically Black [University C Name],” causing mixed feelings within the community as there were some students who thought the name was problematic since the school was not a historically Black institution. The creator did provide justification of the group naming, connecting it to the history of the institution, which was built by Black slaves. Jerome shared that the conflict that resulted from this situation was a bit discouraging for engagement. Focus group participants from University C also discussed other aspects of Black spaces, such as cliques and toxic masculinity

that prevented some Black students with engaging in Black social spaces both on campus and on social media. Bria and Christian spoke to the clique aspect and Jerome briefly mentioned toxic masculinity when he said the Black men in his family didn't talk about emotions and would frown upon crying. Bria initiated the conversation as she was reflecting on the positive aspects of the Black community at University C. She transitioned to say,

But at the same time, I will say we're super cliquy. One of my friends brought up the fact that it's also because we came during the Covid year, so we didn't have a lot of those face-to-face interactions. A lot of our interactions were just based off of social media...we pick a group, and we stick to Even when we go to these spaces and events that we've created in-person, everybody just kind of has their group and they interact, but it's always still a good time.

Bria recognized that the pandemic could have had some impact on their social skills and compacity to explore connections outside of the "close knit" groups they developed. Christian followed up by sharing "It is cliquy in certain ways. It was a little bit harder last year, and it's gotten a little better. But I just feel like we got a long way to go with that." One focus group participant from University A, Kyra, also shared an experience of how friend groups can be exclusive. She shared,

There's a lot of groupings on campus. It's like, 'Oh, if you speak like this, you can't be a part of my group.' I've been told [that] by a friend... She was like, 'You're not like me, so I don't want to really be your friend anymore.'

When a similar conversation concerning the downfalls of the Black community emerged in the focus group with University B, five students chimed in to add their perspectives. Chantel sparked the discussion when she was sharing what it's like being a Black student at a HWI. She shared with the group that,

Yes, like the community is very small. So in theory, you would think that [if] there's only so many Black people here...[then] we can converse and have a community with each other. But I feel like kind of the opposite in a sense...There's back and forth between a lot of the Black groups different ... I just feel like we're not like as unified as we should be.

When I asked where they thought some of that contention stems from and what causes it four students from University B offered responses. Similar to Bria and Christian, Bobby shared, "Coming last year as a freshman, I felt like it was kind of cliquish." Skye thought that "it probably comes from the leadership and [how] the White people framed it....people who do sports, the athletes, they praise them more than they praise my [Black] sorority." Leanna added to the conversation,

I think it could possibly be just the environment that we're around. I'm going to say a very generalized statement, but White people compete a lot... that's the way of life for them. So, when we get around people who compete a lot and idolize certain groups of people that can also rub off on us. We definitely do show up at each other's events and stuff like that. But in the back of our minds, we definitely know that it is kind of cliquey here. Black students that transfer from other places, find it hard to find friends here...

find it hard to be accepted in friend groups and stuff like that.

Both Skye and Leanna talked about the influence of White norms on how the Black community governs itself. The historical legacy of White supremacy and power would provide context for understanding their views on this. Mark shared a different point of view and thought the size of the institution had more of an impact on the divides they observed. Mark stated,

I think the divide is that [University B's] campus is too big.... What I've seen most is that if you don't have a centralized space, it's not going to work... You have those [students] where [they say] 'I could hang out with them...But I got to walk all the way over there. I gotta do all this [and] I don't even know them like that yet.' Then it becomes the mindset of 'Okay, well, I have my people. I don't need to go venture out more. I have my group.'

While most of the survey respondents provided positive outlooks on how Black social media spaces contribute to community, one survey respondent wrote "It just depends, because sometimes I feel like we are at competition with each other so sometimes it can be hard to connect in person, too." These considerations that the participants mentioned are important when thinking about the creation of community and the support Black social media spaces provide. Although the majority of the participants' experiences reflected positive interactions within Black spaces, they also recognized these spaces, and the Black community, are not perfect. While they contribute to the support Black students receive at HWIs, the community created in Black spaces could benefit from activities that increase the unity and cohesion of the various groups represented within the Black communities on these campuses.

In addition to Black social media spaces creating community that support Black students, the focus group participants also discussed the comfort provided by Black social media spaces. The terms "comfort" and "comfortable" were used by six focus group participants, and usually on multiple occasions. For example, Kyra and JB mentioned how Black social media spaces help them to feel more comfortable when you are surrounded by "people who are like you." As they gravitated toward their fellow Black peers, focus group participants found their main sources of comfort. When they expressed how isolating it was to be one of the only Black faces in a room full of White peers, they framed their isolation as a highly influential factor that encouraged them

to intentionally seek comfort in Black social spaces with Black peers. Christian shared “One of the things I enjoy about these [Black] spaces is that it allows you to feel more comfortable, especially coming into a PWI.” On a different occasion, Christian also mentioned “I feel like these spaces have allowed me to be more comfortable with my freedom of expression.” Kyra shared that in Black social spaces she was able to speak their mind and not feel like “the oddball.” Bria also expressed similar sentiments when she acknowledged how her engagement with Black social media spaces helped her to be more extraverted and learn to use her voice. Jerome echoed Bria’s remarks with attributing the boost in his social skills to his interactions within Black spaces.

Chantel shared a similar thought when she mentioned “I feel like it is very important that we have these communities that we can let go and be free and feel comfortable and feel safe. I feel like that’s the most important thing.” Chantel’s statement reinforces my previous point of how they used Black social media spaces to identify safe spaces. Mark provided a different spin on the same concept when he said,

But without that [community], you’re more likely to feel isolated and feel like you don’t belong and have imposter syndrome. When you have that community [and when] you have those spaces, it’s a lot easier to feel like you deserve to be there.

Kyra shared an instance when she was on an intramural softball team at her HWI where she felt isolated and like she didn’t belong. The team was predominately White, with only two Black players. Kyra explained how she perceived her White peers separating from her and the other Black player. Kyra stated, “We were the only two on the team and they kind of put themselves away from us ... we were by ourselves.” The experience was very isolating and made both Black players feel somewhat uncomfortable as she further explained, “There were 13 of the

girls against us two. ... They didn't want to talk ... they were standoffish." In Kyra's opinion, she was forced to band together with her fellow Black teammate to find some level of comfort in that situation as the team was not welcoming and inclusive of their Black identities – Kyra stated, "Because they grouped themselves away from us, we came together." Nicole echoed Kyra's feelings when she said that she doesn't "really feel as comfortable there" as she feels in all Black spaces when referring to her comfort levels as she occupies various spaces at her HWI. She then mentioned that being in Black spaces "makes you feel more comfortable." Chantel also discussed her thoughts going where you feel comfortable,

You go where you feel most comfortable. If you come to a PWI and you don't find your people ... then you wouldn't want to stay in an environment where you don't feel wanted or appreciated. I feel like having these Black spaces and having these Black communities ... allows us to thrive and survive in this environment because we have each other, and we have the support of our Black counterparts.

In this statement, Chantel discusses the importance of finding your people, comfort, and support. For eight of the focus group participants, being with "your people" (Bria; Chantel; Christian; Jerome; Leanna; Mark; Olivia; Skye) was defined as peers who were of the same racial background. When they were with their people, they were in the place they felt most comfortable. This motivated them to intentionally seek out Black peers and create community with them.

The focus group participants further displayed how the communities created with their Black peers served as a tremendous source of comfort in the word cloud activity. Figure 12 displays one of the word clouds that was created during the focus groups as participants shared about the positive impact Black social media has on their feelings. When word clouds are created

with a group of people, the words participants enter on their devices come on the screen as they are submitting their responses. The participants could submit multiple responses and the same word clouds were used for all three focus groups at the three different universities. This allowed for the thoughts of all the focus group participants to be captured on the same word cloud that each group used.

Figure 12. Positive Impact of Black Social Media Spaces on Students' Feelings



Word size during word cloud activities indicates how common a response is amongst the group. The words that are mentioned by multiple participants increase in size, while the words that are only mentioned by one specific participant are displayed in a smaller font. As the participants viewed the word clouds developing, they could see the sizes of each word change as more responses were entered. The larger words were visual indicators to participants that those thoughts and/or experiences were shared across multiple study participants. During this word cloud creation activity, comfortable was the word entered by most of the focus group participants. In addition to feeling comfortable, the word cloud also shows feelings of validation, confidence, community, and acceptance, all of which are essential to the holistic development of Black college students.

When they discussed comfortability, the focus group participants described feeling like they could be themselves in Black spaces and not have to perform and act a certain way, which they believed would be necessary around their White peers. For example, Chantel emphasized how their peers within the community they create on campus become “like family” and Bria mentioned she felt “a sense of home.” There is a certain level of relaxation one can exhibit when in the company of family and at home.

Study participants expressed how hard it is to find a place on campus where they can feel support and comfort. When they are in historically and predominately White spaces, they can feel like they do not belong. However, the more they surrounded themselves with Black peers, the more support and comfortable they felt with being a Black student on campus and expressing their Blackness on campus and on social media. Social media allows for “a quick and easy way to receive compliments or flattery, which in turn boost a user’s self-esteem” (Pinyerd, 2013, p. 53). Participants discussed using social media platforms to provide moments to uplift each other as they actively sought to preserve Black connections. Through a process of finding their people, they developed strong connections in the Black community that offered a level of support and comfort they would not have found elsewhere at a HWI.

Identity Affirmation

Black social media spaces were vital sources of identity affirmation for Black students at HWIs. Identity affirming spaces are critical for the success of racially minoritized students at HWIs (Keels, 2020). The community created by Black social media spaces was affirming to the students because they felt seen by others who understood not only what they experienced at HWIs, but also understood the life of a young, Black person overall. These spaces aided in identity affirmation that allowed them to have a sense of relatability and representation, provided

feelings of acceptance, and offered additional opportunities of connection via shared pre-college socialization patterns and experiences with race.

Relatability and Representation

Both the focus group and survey participants discussed how being able to relate to their peers and seeing their racial identity represented were meaningful experiences as they positively affirmed their identity as Black students. Relatability emerged when connections were created within a community of peers who they felt had similarities and commonalities that increased social bonds. Representation was achieved when Black experiences were reflected in the content and stories shared on Black social media spaces – an aspect that was missing from the curriculum and professors on campus.

The concept of relatability came up often when students discussed identity-affirming communities. Specifically, as students became involved in Black social media spaces, they enjoyed seeing content to which they could relate to and discuss with each other. Four of the focus group participants mentioned that Black social media spaces provided validating content to their experience. For example, Leanna shared about her use of Tik Tok by saying “I like seeing that my experience is being validated by other Black people at other PWIs. [It’s] like, ‘Okay, I’m not the only one thinking this.’” Olivia also shared that Black social media spaces “provides us validation” and JB similarly mentioned, “Black social media spaces makes you feel a bit more valid.” This level of validation was able to be achieved as they used social media to see relatable experiences, especially when it came to encounters with peers from other racial groups. Nicole also mentioned how Black students use Black social media events to see what Black events are available to them on campus. She stated that when Black students see events that are specifically

targeted to support their racial identity, “you feel validated, and you feel heard a lot more. . . . You feel welcome.”

Focus group participants shared that they felt a sense of ease when interacting and engaging with Black peers that was not present when they had to interact with people with whom they initially perceived as having nothing in common. I wanted to dig a little deeper into the participants’ feelings; I asked them to give me some other words or feelings they could use that could replace the commonly used phrase, “it’s just easier,” when referring to their interactions with their Black peers. The students in the University B focus group shared words, such as “natural,” “comfortable,” and “flows together” – this was a question that only came up in this particular focus group. All of these concepts are highly important when existing as a Black person in White spaces, which can be exhausting in and of itself. The participants shared that because of the relatability aspect, they did not feel like they were forcing relationships. They felt like they could communicate with other Black peers at a higher rate and could make authentic friendships.

Additionally, focus group participants felt their identity was affirmed when they had the opportunity to relate to people who looked like them and had similar interests. Kyra shared the importance of “Seeing that I can relate to the things that they’re talking about” and “relating with my peers on Black social media spaces” when I asked what Black social media spaces offer for her college experience. JB shared that she appreciates “being able to relate to the community on social media spaces via common interests, trending topics, and musical artists specific to the Black community” when she shared how “Black social media spaces offer a sense of relatability.” Nicole agreed with JB by saying, “Having Black spaces and something that I can relate to has helped me a lot.” Olivia revealed that having posts Black students can relate to help

them “feel apart if they felt lonely.” In the focus group with University B students, I asked why was relatability important to a Black student at a HWI. Olivia and Leanna offered responses.

Olivia stated,

I feel like, because we don't feel like we relate to a lot of the stuff and people that goes on at PWIs. ... They have their culture ... and you'll walk around and see some of the stuff that they're doing or some of their music ... I don't relate to that at all. So having posts that you see, or just having people that you see from those digital campus spaces provides a sense of belonging.

Leanna agreed by saying “I definitely think belonging, and also it furthers people's perspective.” When Black students can't relate to the culture at HWIs, they turn to Black social media spaces to relate to their subculture that is celebrated in those spaces.

During the focus groups, I inquired about why relatability is important for Black students attending an HWI. Many of the participants mentioned that it is hard to find people or things that Black students can relate to at an HWI, from the lessons being taught in their classes to their White peers not really understanding their experiences as Black people in our society. Olivia described the lack of relatability to the dominant culture at HWIs and how she often found herself questioning the things she observed her White peers doing. It is the Black social spaces that helps provide a sense of belonging for Black students, especially when the dominant White culture can make them feel marginalized. For the participants, these connections were often created or occurred seamlessly. As JB put it, they “automatically feel a sense of connection” when with their Black peers. What was somewhat perceived as effortless connections created in this identity-affirming community that was characterized by a high level of understanding and not having to explain oneself because “everybody automatically gets it.” A survey respondent

shared, “I think social media fuels the natural sense of community of Black students. Knowing we have shared experiences while maybe not knowing each other personally makes you feel more secure in your Blackness.” Another survey participant stated that these spaces provide students an opportunity to “connect on a deeper level.” When considering how these students discuss these connections, one must also consider how some of the focus group participants discussed determining which Black peers to make connections with as they described the different types of Black peers they encountered. One would believe the automatic or seamless connections would result when they are in community with Black peers that identify as those who also hold race as a salient identity, are not viewed as White-aligned, and who desire community with Black peers.

One common aspect that the focus group participants expressed was the identity affirmation they feel when they can relate to the struggles that other Black students shared on Black social media spaces. For example, Kyra and one survey participant appreciated when they created community with other Black peers who “know what we go through” (Kyra & survey participant). This signified that the Black students had a shared experience, which helped motivate Black students to exist in a predominately and historically White space and, as Christian put it, “get through this whole thing together.” Christian expanded on this thought during a different occasion when he said,

Being able to build closer connections to our Black peers due to us coming from similar backgrounds, and I going through life and being able to relate to one another in our past experiences. ... I feel like that’s kind of allowed us to be able to want to be around each other. ... Because we’re going through college in a similar way, because we are a part of

the Black community, we have to be tight so that we actually have good relationships in college.

For Christian, being able to relate to Black peers from similar backgrounds impacted his “sense of belonging and well-being.” Similarly, when the survey respondents were asked what they discuss or post about when interacting with each other in Black spaces on social media platforms, they also mentioned that they talk about the problems they face while also indulging in discussions concerning the “struggles and triumphs of being Black in this world and at the university we attend,” and the schools’ responses to certain events. One survey participant shared, “Using Tik Tok I can see people on campus that can relate to me being a Black person at a PWI.” For another survey respondent, this level of relatability “allows for a more comfortable transition into college life” and helps with feeling “less homesick or lonely.” Another survey respondent mentioned, “We as Black students often share similar experiences, both good and bad, and being able to connect with someone who understands what you are going through can be very helpful.” Another survey respondent stated,

I don’t follow many but they give me a sense of closeness. Not being at a HBCU feels weird and sometimes I wonder if I’m just attending here for diversity’s sake. Seeing other Black social media places or even events catering to Black people is just refreshing and reminds me that being here matters.

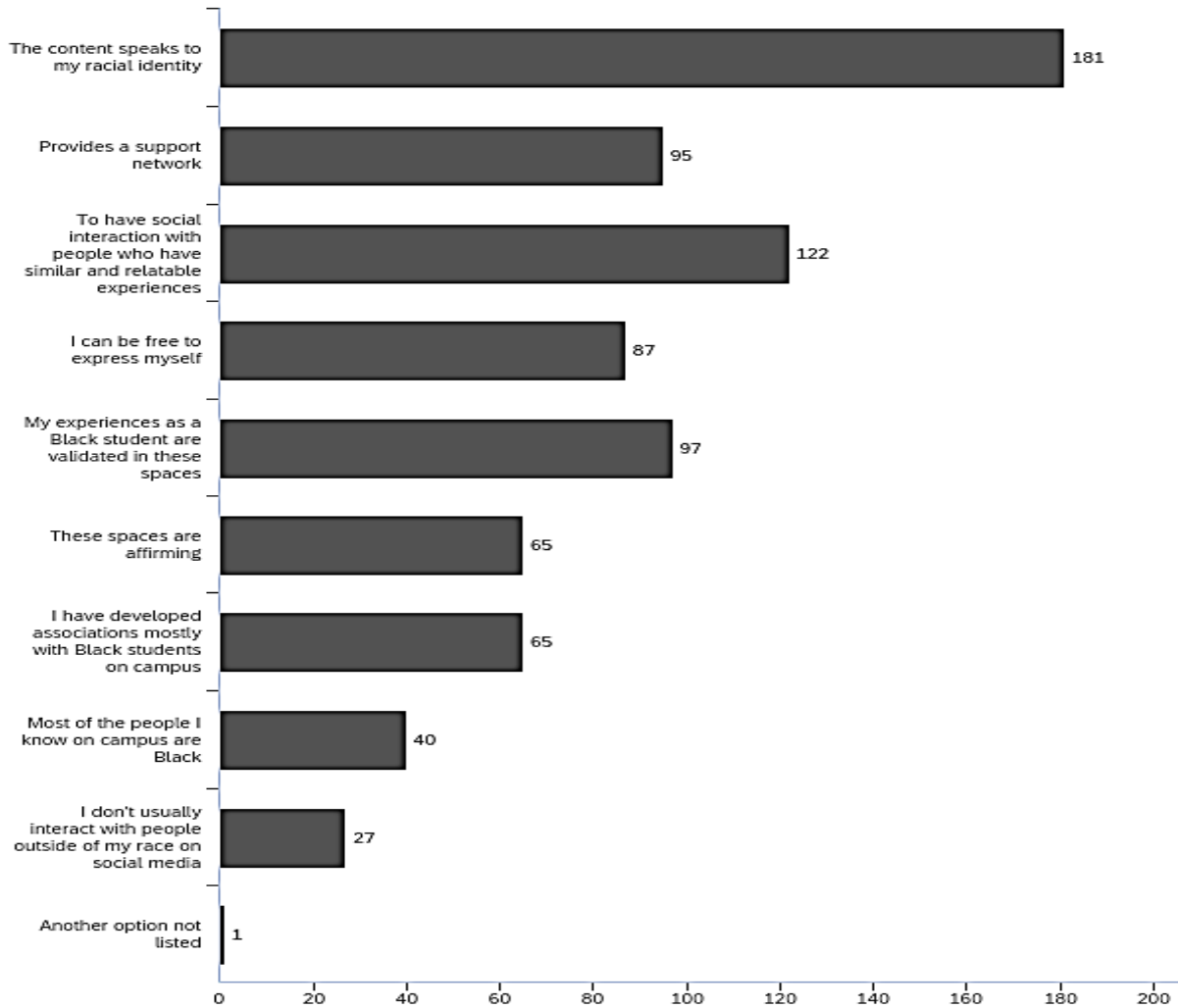
This respondent’s comment is a bit different than the relatability aspect, but it is important to show that these identity-affirming spaces help serve as a reminder that the presence of Black students at HWIs is necessary.

Of the 80 written responses provided to address the survey question gauging the purpose served by Black social media spaces and race-based digital campus spaces, 18.75% of the

responses spoke to Black social media spaces helping students feel seen, like they were not alone, and that they had people to whom they could relate. One participant mentioned, “they [Black social media spaces] help me feel at home in a place that is generally alienating to my identity.” Another respondent shared, “It makes me feel better that I am not the only one experiencing some things, especially racist things. Hearing other stories lets me know it’s everyone, not just me.” As a racial minority at HWIs, Black students can feel like they do not relate to the majority on campus. However, these Black social media spaces provide students with an opportunity to view content that is relatable to their unique experience as Black students at PWIs. Survey respondents to question 13 mentioned the content on Black social media spaces “reinforce similarities” of the Black community and offer “a space to talk about experiences that someone who isn’t Black just wouldn’t be able to understand or relate to.” In that same manner, a different respondent shared, “Finding people to relate to can be difficult for Black students at HWIs.” Likewise, a different survey participant stated, “There are very few persons of color that attend my institution. With that being said, it can be difficult to connect with others because we have no similar or shared experiences.” Another respondent connected relatability to why they only seek friendships with Black peers by saying, “All my friends are Black simply because they are the only ones I can relate and connect too.” Both focus group and survey participants appreciated how the creation of community affirmed their identities as they were able to relate to content discussed and shared within Black social media spaces in ways that were meaningful. Figure 13 shows the survey responses to the question asking them why they choose to create and/or participate in Black spaces on social media platform. I think the responses displayed speak to what I have highlighted in this section and my research themes overall. The survey respondents used Black social media spaces because they affirmed their racial identity, provided

support and connection with people who had similar experiences, and it was an opportunity for them to express themselves. The one person who selected “Another option not listed” wrote in a response that stated “it’s funny” – which I will explore further in a later them with other responses that show how Black students use joy and laughter as resistance.

Figure 13. Reasons for Creating and Participating in Black Social Media Spaces



The focus group participants also discussed the importance of having their identity represented within Black social media spaces. When they felt seen in these spaces, their identities were further affirmed. Eight focus group participants discussed this idea around representation. Leanna shared that she used Black social media spaces to see “other Black people

in my same field or that have graduated and got a job with a political science degree.” She continued to share the significance of this representation by saying,

That’s always a point of stress for me. . . . Seeing that people are being successful with similar majors, and pursuing similar career paths, and going down the same path that I’m currently going down...[lets me know] this isn’t just a fantasy. People are actually being successful. People are actually making money. I can actually do this and go somewhere with this.

For Leanna, she needed to see Black people in her career field to indicate that she could reach the same levels of success—seeing meant believing. In a similar fashion, Olivia also mentioned how she used Black social media spaces to inspire her career goals. She stated,

I have somehow made my way on to Black teacher TikTok, and it’s been really amazing because there’s just many days out of the week where I’m like ‘Is this something that I even want to do?’ Especially being surrounded by White women all day in my classes. So that just really uplifts me, and it makes me realize I could do that, too. I love seeing like their classroom, and things that they implement in their room to promote diversity and equity and inclusion in their classroom. It just makes me excited about my future in my career path rather than anxious because of my experiences in the College of Education here.

Jerome also appreciated being able to see people from similar career paths on Black social media spaces. He shared, “I really enjoyed being able to see and find people who had similar career interests...who looked like you and had the same career goals.” These participants shared how it was affirming to see Black people on social media embarking on successful careers, as it shows current students how they can also be successful in that area of their lives in the future. Posts

about other Black students' or alumni career successes helped the students become excited about a potentially fruitful career, eased some of their anxiety, and provided reassurance that they can also be successful like the Black professionals they see on social media.

The focus group participants from University A discussed their desire for representation of Black people in their faculty. JB started the conversation by sharing,

There's kind of like a natural desire for representation...to be able to see yourself in somebody else. ... And once I do enter those [Black] spaces, it's nice to be able to know that I'm not alone in what I'm going through.

JB went on to say, "There's not a single Black professor in the English department. There's not a single one. There's only one Hispanic professor and two Asian professors, and then the rest are White." JB was really disappointed in the lack of Black representation because she felt that having a Black professor in her department would enhance her experience. Nicole agreed with JB and shared her experience with low Black representation in her professors by sharing,

Yeah, I feel the same way. When I'm in a sociology class [on] race, class and gender, and it's being taught by a White woman. ... I mean she's a really nice lady, she really is, but she doesn't get it, you know. It's certain things that she wants to talk about ... in the class ... like intersectionality and Black women. But when it comes time to talk about that stuff ... Black women don't really get the spotlight, or we don't get the chance to speak about it in class.

Nicole went on to say,

Some of the lessons they are teaching really don't resonate with me. Sometimes it's kind of hard to find somewhere you feel like you're comfortable. ... Sometimes when I'm in

classes it kind of feels like, I'm taking up space from someone else. So having Black spaces and something that I can relate to has helped me a lot.

Having a Black faculty member in those instances would help to diversify the lessons being taught, with hopes that the black faculty member would include material that reflects Black authors and experiences. A Black faculty member would also be useful in this instance for Nicole to have someone to create space for her to contribute her voice during class discussions.

Jerome discussed his desire to have representation in similar ways as JB and Nicole. On one occasion, Jerome stated,

Even going up through high school, I really didn't have that many Black teachers. I think I might have had like two or three... I lived in a predominantly White area, but my school was actually majority Black. So it was kind of weird that all my teachers were pretty much White...I'm not going to say it's never really bothered me or affected me, because I never really understood what it was like to have a Black teacher...I've never really had a Black teacher who taught me anything in STEM. So I feel like a lot of times when I'm thinking about it now in my brain, it's kind of reconstructed to think that we [Black teachers] can't teach STEM. That's not the case at all...but in my brain, that's kind of what it's become inclined to [think]. I wish there was more teachers who were Black in STEM at this University, cause it'll make me feel a lot better. I feel like seeing people that look like you is one of the most important parts of it.

Jerome alludes to how he has subconsciously internalized Black teachers as not belonging in the STEM field. Internalized oppression is damaging to the self-concept, confidence, and success of minoritized populations. He went on to say White people

Don't understand the void of having [a lack of] representation because they never had to really have a void, because the void is always filled. For Black people, I feel like the void is very persistent...when it's always persistent, you always go searching for the thing to feel the void.

Bria concluded this portion of the discussion nicely by simply stating "it's just nice to know that you can find a space where people look like you." What seems so simple was a truly impactful aspect of Black social media spaces.

Seeing successful Black people was important for them, especially because they felt those narratives were not included in their curriculum, nor in the racial make-up of their professors. Such representation of the Black experience was helpful to see on social media and was a message to them that they were not alone in their pursuit to success, and their goals were achievable. In a positive campus racial climate, students, faculty, and administrators of color express feelings of inclusion in the campus environment, the curriculum is reflective of the experiences of people from minoritized backgrounds, and the recruitment and retention of students, faculty, and staff of color are supported (Lascher & Offenstein, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000; Thelamour et al., 2019). The lack of Black representation in these institutions could potentially mean the campus climates should be assessed to see how such representation can be better supported at the department and university levels.

Acceptance

Findings revealed that in addition to relatability and representation, the communities created within Black social media spaces provide Black students with acceptance. According to Museus (2008), finding meaningful acceptance within one's environment helps students from

underrepresented backgrounds transition into HWIs and persist in college. For the participants in my study, acceptance resulted in validation and continued connection within Black social spaces.

The level of acceptance was evident as focus group participants indicated the ways in which they used Black social media spaces to find a place they could fit in. Leanna shared, “not feeling as accepted here, obviously forces me to want to use those [race-based digital campus spaces on social media] spaces and create those spaces.” In the same manner, Nicole also shared that Black social media spaces makes students “feel more validated and more accepted if you can be in those Black spaces while you’re somewhere your Blackness probably isn’t accepted as it should be.” The feelings of being validated were mentioned twice in the written responses on the survey. One survey respondent mentioned shared that “Black spaces have been a really good tool to feel validated in my experiences and relax with other students who I feel are rooting for my success,” while the other wrote that Black social media spaces give them “a space to feel validated since it can be isolating being Black at a PWI.” The latter statement was similar to that of another survey participant who stated, Black social spaces helped the student “feel at home in a place that is generally alienating to my identity.” Likewise, Chantel shared during a focus group that, “It can feel very lonely at times because you’re the minority. ... Just seeing other people going through the same things and that you’re not alone in a sense makes me feel that sense of community.” Chantel’s comment illustrates how community with Black peers help ease the feelings of isolation due to the acceptance that they feel amongst the company of same-race peers. Figure 14 is one of Chantel’s photo elicitation submissions that depicts what it can feel like to be isolated at a HWI.

Figure 14. Isolation and Alienation of Black Students



Chantel captioned the photo, “In a lecture hall full of predominantly White students, Black students often times feel ignored and overlooked.” Chantel attended University B, a large university where only 6% of the students identify as Black, as compared to the 60% that identify as White. The other focus group participants from University B also expressed similar sentiments of being the only, or one of the only, Black students in their classes. Olivia shared how those experiences resulted in how she registered for classes. Prior to her advising session, she coordinated with her Black peers in her department to discuss which classes they would like to take together. This technique can help alleviate the pressure of being a numerical minority in classroom as she would have at least one friend in class that would openly accept her racial identity. The experience of being the only Black student also came up in moderation in the other two focus groups at University A and University C. Nicole discussed being one of the only Black women in her sociology courses and Jerome discussed being the only Black male on the research team at his science lab.

The lack of acceptance felt by Black students in HWIs encouraged them to create communities where they would be accepted. Nicole expressed the importance of having Black social media spaces as it made her feel like her views and opinions would be more accepted than

if she expressed them elsewhere. She stated, “you can go on Twitter or Tik Tok or Instagram kind express yourself and most of the people...if not everybody, will agree with you.” Her response connected to that of Jerome and JB who expressed they had less fear of being judged when engaging within the community created in Black social spaces. Jerome discussed his friend group as he shared, “They don’t judge. ... Even on differences of opinions, we don’t judge, we don’t do malicious things to each other.” JB also stated that in Black social media spaces “there is less fear of being judged.” This sentiment slightly contradicts their earlier grouping of the types of Black people on their campus. Maybe they didn’t realize they were judging others when they decided which category certain peers would fit into, however, I would say that they exercised a certain level of judgment when doing so.

Figure 15 shows the word cloud made when asked during the focus group what they know because of their engagement with Black social media spaces. As the students thought about what to contribute to the creation of the word cloud, I encouraged them to think about the feelings, thoughts, or experiences that were affirmed because of their involvement with these spaces on social media. The word cloud uses words such as *celebrated*, *welcomed*, *accepted*, and *connected*. Offering students an opportunity to finish the statement with their own words helped me better understand the key aspects of these spaces students valued.

Figure 15. Messages Black Students Receive From Black Social Spaces



Acceptance seemed to be an important value for them as they perceived their Blackness was not accepted at their HWIs. Students also referred to the histories of their institutions and attributed those histories to be a contributing factor to the lack of acceptance of Black people in White spaces. Leanna elaborated on these sentiments as she shared, “When we’re in these spaces it’s essential for us to be together. It’s essential for us to support each other. It’s essential for us to be the backbones of each other, as we’ve been the backbone of this country.” Ultimately, the Black social spaces where participants found community were a source of identity affirmation and offered participants reassurance and acceptance.

Pre-College Socialization Patterns and Experiences With Race

Pre-college experiences with race had an immense impact on the focus group participants in my study. In Black social media spaces, participants are able to connect over the common racialized experiences they have regarding parents, family, and upbringing. As they discussed shared experiences, their identities were affirmed in knowing the lessons, challenges, and encounters that occurred in their upbringing were also experienced by their fellow Black peers. Utilizing CRT and CTDA to analyze the research findings allowed for a specific focus on how the socialization patterns of Black college students are associated with the racial make-up of

neighborhood and school environments, combined with parental and family influences, that result in a culturally affirming experience for Black users.

Across each of the three focus groups, at least two students in the group shared about the racial make-up of the neighborhood and school environments in which they lived. This topic came up when students were asked why they were interested in the study, to describe what their experiences have been like with their Black peers, how they got involved with Black spaces on social media, and the impact participation in Black social media spaces had on their college experience. Of the nine students who discussed the racial make-up of the neighborhoods and schools, only one of the participants, Nicole, explicitly shared that she grew up in predominately Black neighborhoods and school environments. Jerome noted that his neighborhood was predominately White, but his school was predominantly Black. For the six focus group participants (Olivia, Chantel, Skye, JB, Kyra, Bria) who spoke about attending predominantly White schools before college, they found themselves turning to social media to connect with Black peers, view Black student organizations, and instill more self-confidence. For those participants in particular, social media was used to be able to increase the number of Black people they could see, considering their daily environment was mostly White peers.

Chantel and Mark both offered accounts of how the racial make-up of their neighborhood or school impacted the current navigation strategies they choose to use when developing community with Black peers. Chantel shared with the group,

Growing up ... I wasn't surrounded by a lot of Black peers. A lot of my friends were predominantly White...Social media was definitely one of those things that I leaned on to find my friends and my social group ... to get involved with the Black clubs on campus.

In a separate instance, Chantel also stated,

Growing up, I went to an all-White private high school, so I didn't really have a lot of Black friends that I could feel like I could be myself around. When I got older [I looked more into] getting some more Black friends.

Chantel described her upbringing as one where she was not surrounded by many Black peers. However, when she went to college, she made it a priority to find a Black social group, with social media being one of the main ways she initiated engagement with Black peers on campus. There was something developmentally that happened as Chantel transitioned from high school to college that shifted the salience she put on her racial identity and the community she immersed herself in to affirm that identity. Chantel attributed social media as being a main source to accomplish two "critical" tasks: "find other Black people like me" and "have Black friends that I could feel like I could be myself around." JB and Kyra also shared similar experiences growing up in predominately White environments and expressed great value in having the opportunity to develop close relationships with Black peers and be immersed in Black spaces. Both participants talked about how it feels when you are "not surrounded by people that are like you" (JB) and the implications of not having "a lot of friends who looked like me" (Kyra). Social media connections allowed JB and Kyra to fill the area that seemed to be missing from their experience. Skye attended a predominately White high school and valued the "fashion and hairstyles" that she had since been exposed to in Black social media spaces, something she did not "normally get back home." On the contrary, Mark shared his upbringing in Black school environments. He noted,

I can say that I've been given pretty much every message you can get about being Black on campus. From where I'm from, and my parents both graduated from HBCUs...I got

those talks ...in high school, it was all Black or majority Black. [My parents said] “Now you go on to a campus where you’re the only [Black] one in your class. Watch out for the racist teachers, watch out for the racist faculty, watch out for the racist cops.”

Mark discusses the pre-college socialization patterns that he was raised on by his parents. The lessons and messages instilled by Black parents will certainly have an impact on the perspectives and techniques Black students use when creating community at HWIs.

Of the written responses provided by survey participants, only three mentioned the racial make-up of their neighborhood. One survey participant stated:

When first entering campus I was very nervous about the lack of Black people I saw. I went to a very diverse middle and high school, so I was used to seeing so many different types of people. [University Name] is a decently diverse school compared to other PWIs, but it was still a culture shock. Through social media I found out about events held by the Black Student Union, African Student Association, Black Greek life, and even as specific as the Ethiopian/Eritrean Student Association. Being at those events eased my nerves a great deal.

Another survey participant stated, “We talk about how we grew up and the difference in how we do stuff verses other races” in a written response to the question asking what they discuss in race-based digital campus spaces. The lack of discussion of the racial make-up of neighborhoods in the survey respondents’ answers was interesting considering 72% of the survey participants responded they grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods (see Figure 16) and 67% attended predominantly Black high schools (see Figure 17).

Figure 16. Racial Make-Up of Neighborhoods

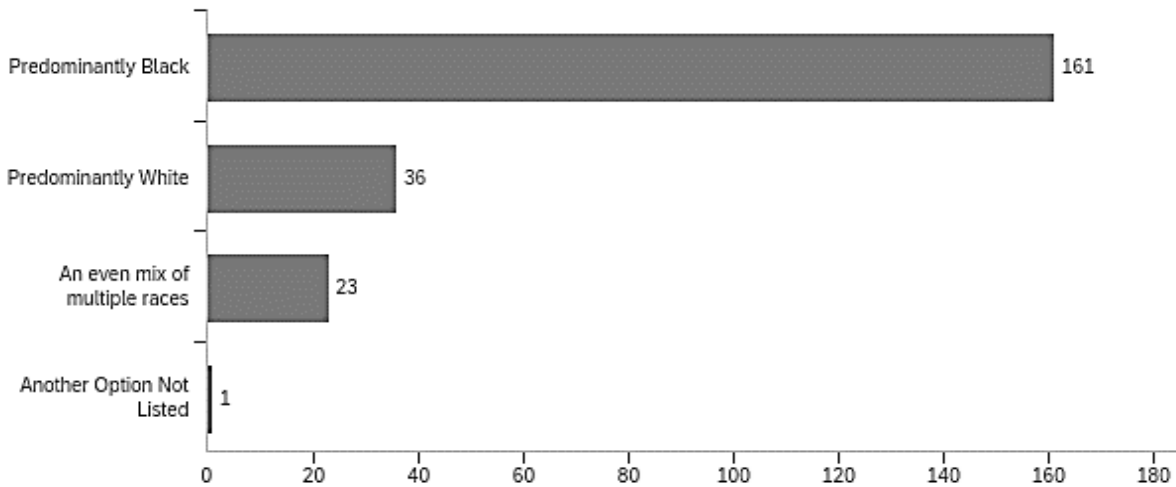
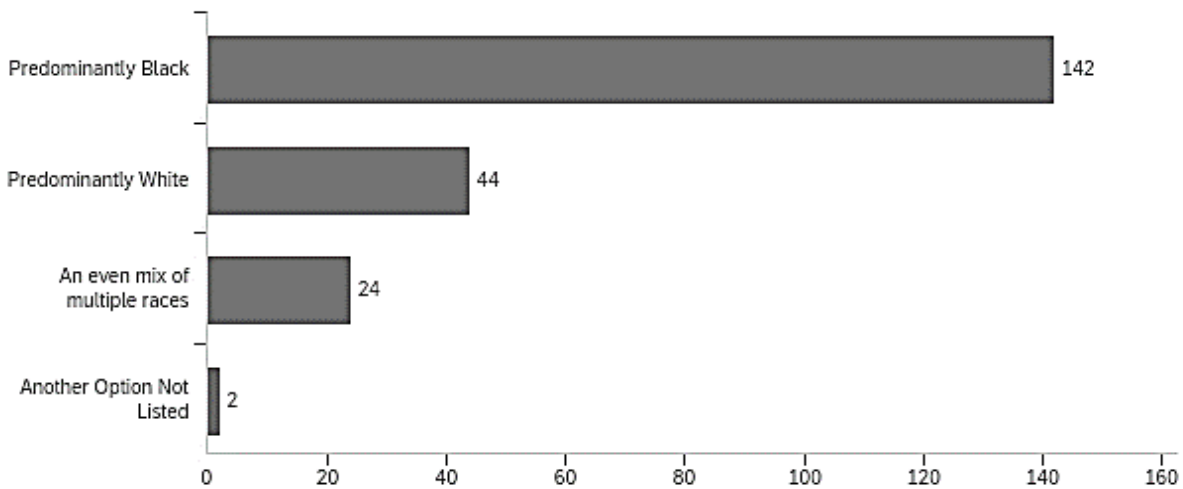


Figure 17. Racial Make-Up of High Schools



For the focus group participants that grew up in White environments, they found themselves currently using Black social media spaces to see more of the Black experience. In the White environments that they grew up in, they were socialized to question the racial aspects of their identity (i.e. hair). Their use of Black social media spaces worked to affirm their identity, as opposed to having them question it. JB described growing up “surrounded with White people.” This type of upbringing resulted in her being pleasantly surprised once she began attending her HWI and was able to build community with what she considered to be a significant number of

Black women. For JB, these connections with Black women increased her confidence as a Black woman and decreased her desire to seek approval from White peers. She offered up a great realization that she had come to, one that she didn't have when she was growing up in majority White spaces, a simple yet powerful statement, "I'm different and that's okay." A participant with a similar upbringing, Kyra, also shared how being around White peers throughout her high school journey caused her to not be comfortable with wearing her hair in its natural state. Because she didn't have a lot of friends who looked like her, she was extremely self-conscious about her appearance. While hairstyles can seem small to some, for the participants in my study, not being able to wear their hair as they desired impeded their ability to show up as their authentic selves around their White peers. The focus group with students from University A were all Black women and this group in particular connected over stories they shared about their hair. While the participants did not explicitly connect pride in their hair to how they were raised, the commonality in experiences suggests that similar principles are instilled in young Black girls about their hair. In Steele's (2016) work that analyzed connections between blogging platforms and the Black barbershop and beauty salon, Steele discussed how these spaces have a legacy of being a safe space for Black culture, making Black hair care an "in-group activity" with traditions and practices that have been passed down for generations" (p. 3).

The upbringing of Black students in predominately White spaces encouraged several participants from University B to actively take a role in creating opportunities for themselves where they could be surrounded by other Black peers on campus. Six of the focus group participants commonly expressed how their longing for Black peers and social spaces during their college career resulted from them having limited access to Black peers before college. Additionally, the racial environments they grew up in also impacted their achievement. Some

participants, such as Nicole and Kyra, stated their achievement levels were negatively impacted by their environment, other participants, like Olivia and Bria, developed methods to be successful despite the harsh climate for Black students. Olivia shared, “I’ve been in predominantly White spaces my whole life. So, it kind of doesn’t matter the environment, [I was] still going to achieve and do well. ... That’s been my upbringing.” Olivia exhibited a level of persistence and resistance that seemed to develop as she matriculated through higher stages of education. While she expressed that her parents raised her in a way that “engrained in me to just keep going,” there was still a level of determination she had to embody in her actions in order to actually achieve academic accolades despite racially driven challenges. Olivia felt her previous educational experiences prepared her for what she might endure at her HWI. Olivia identified patterns she had observed in previous settings and utilized familiar coping strategies to navigate the terrain. The focus group participants who grew up in predominately White spaces used their college experience to engage with Black peer groups strategically and actively. In contrast, there were other participants like Nicole and Jerome who discussed growing up in majority Black schools before college, which also influenced the experiences they crafted for themselves at their HWI. For these participants, they were confident in their ability to find a community of Black peers at a predominantly and historically White institution because they had strong ties to the Black community in their hometowns.

Furthermore, the focus group participants discussed the pervasiveness of parental wisdom that was instilled in them. There were quite a few commonalities across what Black parents taught their Black children, what my study participants affectionately referred to as, “how I was raised.” The common experiences with parental figures the participants shared allowed them to relate on a deeper level. Christian framed it as, “They know what we go through, they know what

our parents have taught us.” Nicole submitted a photo of a tweet that jokingly discussed the way Black parents assist children with homework (see Figure 18). The high number of retweets and likes that the post received indicates a common or shared experience across other Black users. Nicole’s photo is a prime example of discussions on Black Twitter that emerge from cultural familiarity regarding one’s upbringing. There was a collective assumption that the students had concerning being raised in similar ways. Their discussions about interactions with parents, family, and peers resulted in a sense of shared experiences, allowing them to find comfort and comic relief in their fellow Black peers. Such aspects present in Black social media spaces create a sense of belonging for Black users and increases the likelihood of them continuing to engage with these spaces.

Figure 18. Common Experiences With Black Parents



The ways in which the students talked about the messages received from their parents was a display of the care that their parents used in their socialization techniques. Nicole shared with the group how her parents encouraged her to seek Black social spaces:

My parents always encouraged me ... they would say “no matter what room that you’re in, find somebody that looks like you”... my dad used to always tell me “Do not be the

Blackest in the room ...where it's a bunch of White people and then it's just you." He was like "you have to insert yourself in a space ... where it's not just White people."

This certainly influenced the spaces that Nicole sought out once she arrived at her HWI, especially since attending an HWI was a decision that her parents and family didn't necessarily approve of as they had raised her in predominately Black environments. Other participants also discussed how their parents socialized them to behave in very specific ways when it came to interacting with White peers, faculty, staff, and police (Bria, Chantel, Jerome, Kyra, Mark). From the stories shared, the participants' Black parents' socialization patterns seemed to be informed by their personal experiences with race. As the participants discussed how their parents talked about race relations, it was evident that their parents heavily swayed the perceptions students held of their White peers on campus. Across each of the three focus groups, the participants mentioned a certain level of discomfort they feel when around their White peers. When I inquired about where that comes from, one student mentioned the way her family socialized her to behave around White peers. Kyra stated:

I think it just comes from learning, and with my family [saying] "You have to hold yourself to a higher standard, because ... some of them think less of you." So it's kind of ingrained in my brain that I have to hold myself to a higher standard, that they look down on us. I think that's where it comes from mainly.

Considering the feeling of needing to hold themselves to a higher standard, levels of discomfort around White peers, and what the literature says about the challenges Black students face at HWIs, I wanted to ask the students how they still achieved academic success despite the harsh climate and racial hardships. Five of the focus group participants attributed their persistence to their parents. Olivia shared "I think it's like that because my parents ingrained in me to just keep

going.” This speaks to the lasting impact parents have when telling their children about building resilience. Bobby acknowledged his parents and mentors when he said,

I was just raised like you gotta keep going. You gonna figure out a way, you know? But also I’ve been able to confound in mentors and people that can help me out during my time at University B to know how to navigate this space, because I have to admit that sometimes it did get rough even though I’ve been in predominantly White spaces most of my educational career.

Three other focus group participants noted that they watched their parents endure challenges and persevere through, which then inspired them to do the same in their own lives. For example, as Skye reflected on the things her mom had experienced, she said,

My mom is kind of like a warrior. ... She’s like, “I don’t care how hard they fight, you get up and fight back to the end.” So, I think that’s what I play in my head all the time to help me get through.

Additionally, the two participants from University B (Leanna and Chantel) who had immigrant parents shared similar experiences of both having observed their parents struggle and being told by their parents that they should keep going despite the challenges they faced. Chantel shared:

Growing up my parents were immigrant parents. When they came to this country they had to start from scratch. So growing up around that, seeing that perseverance that they always had, no matter what, because they went through a lot of trying to raise us and build a foundation for us. So, I feel like I’ve always held that with me throughout my high school career and now well into college. They were always like, “no matter how tough, cry your cries...get your frustration out, get your anger out.... But at the end of the day what matters is that you pick up and you keep going.”

Leanna also shared how the stories of her immigrant parents and ancestors have strongly encouraged her to persist. She stated,

I also have an immigrant background and they [parents] had to get multiple degrees in White spaces. So, me saying “Oh I can’t do this because I’m surrounded by White people” would be no excuse for them. They’ve crossed oceans for me to be here and be successful and that’s what I’m going to do. ... I need to be successful ... especially after what my ancestors have gone through, which is a lot more than what I’m going through.

The students from University B referred to their parents as sources that encouraged a high level of perseverance in the work ethic and character of their children. This in turn impacted how they strived for achievement in their educational environment and who they sought out for friendship. In addition to impacting their behavior in the academic and social settings, another student discussed how her parents also had an influence on how they carried themselves on social media platforms. Bria shared with the group:

My mom is from a strong educational background. She’s an educator. ... I’ve always be taught professionalism is key. So I always knew I have to watch what I post on social media. It can’t be anything too crazy on social media for the simple fact that it can come back and negatively affect you in the long run.

Participants like Leanna and Bria were able to discuss connections between their parents’ educational achievements and their own decision-making processes about college. For example, Skye decided to enroll in the same college that her mother attended and Mark decided to go a different path after having both his parents graduate from HBCUs. However, others like Jerome did not have that same narrative. While he shared his parents also told him to “just keep going,” he felt like his parents did not truly understand the challenges he faced because neither of his

parents went to college. Jerome finished his statement by saying, “[Hearing] just keep going [from my parents] is kind of hard when you don’t know what I got to keep going from.” Jerome preferred to get his encouragement from those who have experienced or are currently experiencing the different things that come with navigating success in the university setting.

The lessons instilled in my participants from a young age continue to impact how they govern themselves on campus and in virtual settings. While the participants spoke specifically about their parents, there were also a few vague references to the family unit in general as well. Parents and upbringing were very influential in how these students perceived their surroundings. Ultimately, their socialization patterns and experiences with race prior to coming to college impacted how they engaged (or chose not to engage) with their environment and peers on campus.

They discussed how aspects such as their background, the way they were raised, how their parents socialized them to behave, and other family influences all had some level of effect on their current experiences. Parents and family tend to be the dominant source from which children receive support, knowledge, encouragement, and social cues. Experiences with race and discussions regarding racism before entering the collegiate environment were highly used sources that informed the extent to which the students chose to engage with college peers.

Knowledge Sharing

Black social media spaces and the communities created in these spaces operate as a source of knowledge sharing. As Black students create and engage with these spaces, the sharing of culturally relevant information that speaks to the Black experience is represented in ways they would not have access to at their HWI alone. In Black social media spaces, knowledge was circulated about fashion trends, campus events, navigating academic life, and social advice.

To begin with, one area of information on social media platforms that was deemed as important to the focus group participants was content displaying fashion trends and different hairstyles they could try with their unique hair texture. Six of the focus group participants discussed using Black social media spaces for this reason. Kyra mentioned how her upbringing in all White schools caused her to use platforms such as TikTok to see how she could wear her hair in ways that would make her feel confident and to learn from Black creators with similar hair textures about techniques and products to use to have the best results for her Black hair. Kyra stated that Black social media spaces made her “feel more comfortable with my own hairstyle, showing that I shouldn’t be scared to wear it.” Using Black Tik Tok, she said she “saw a lot more people who look like me, who were wearing their hair out, and...found different styles” to try. For JB the spaces helped increase her confidence and helped her to know that “Black is beautiful”—a message she was not receiving in the physical spaces on campus. Chantel mentioned, “since I’ve come to [University B], I’ve stepped more into my fashion sense. Being on social media and seeing some of my other Black peers and how they dress gives me a little bit of inspiration too.” Bria mentioned how fashion is a big part of Black culture at her institution. She shared,

People here are big on pictures and big on photography...style and fashion is the way that Black students express themselves here. That’s a big part of Black [University C’s] culture...that wasn’t something that was as big where I had originally come from. So that has changed since I’ve been a student here.

The focus group participants put a high value on sharing information in regard to fashion as they saw their own sense of style get developed through this process. Knowledge sharing about fashion and hairstyles affirmed their racial identity as they were able to see styles that resonated

with their culture. Fashion and appearance are very important in the Black community. The students' focus on this topic seems to be in line with the Black cultural experience that emphasizes the importance of attire – evident through common phrases such as “Sunday’s Best,” and other references in song lyrics.

Hairstyles were also listed by the survey participants, among other topics, that were mentioned when asked about the content they viewed that was specifically curated because of their Black social media connections. When asked what they discuss or post about when interacting with Black peers in race-based digital campus spaces, 60 survey participants provided responses. Of those responses, 20% reflected discussions of everyday life and hobbies and interests that were culturally relevant for them. For example, Black pop culture, food, braiders in the area, and other hair styles were commonly listed as topics discussed. Another 10% of respondents discussed how they shared knowledge on the academic opportunities available as well as academic advice for younger students and warnings about certain professors. The focus group participants shared that intentionally seeking out Black peers on campus and social media helped them navigate unfamiliar academic territory, especially when entering into new environments (i.e., transfer students new to a university, going into a new class, joining a new club). For example, Jerome discussed how his community, especially Black upper-class students, helped him through certain classes he found to be particularly challenging. Jerome stated,

Especially if you're in the STEM community, and you're in the pre-med community ... you're going to do what you can to help the next person. ... You're gonna have to have other people to help you make it through, and those other people, upper classmen who have helped me through and guided me through certain classes and held my hand through certain situations and different classes and professors.

Jerome's comments show how the communities students create are also a good source of knowledge sharing to help each other get through academically challenging courses and majors. This level of community and knowledge sharing was only created in Black social spaces. Black students pass down information they gained from their experiences in certain classes, with certain professors, and in certain situations, so that the Black students that come after them will have some insight and may avoid having negative experiences.

The focus group participants also used social media to learn about which spaces they can go to on campus where they can find other Black students congregating regularly. Bria named three specific spaces on campus that are the "main Black spaces" the Black student population at her institution uses. She shared, "If I wasn't connected with the Black social media spaces, I wouldn't have known that." Similarly, JB mentioned that her friends used Black spaces to discuss campus resources that were not affirming to Black student identities. Specifically, she noted that her friend shared about a bad experience had at the University's counseling center. Her friend shared that experience with their community to warn them of the kind of experience they might have if they chose to utilize those campus services.

Furthermore, when asking what Black students discuss in the race-based digital campus spaces, the survey respondents spoke to the culturally relevant information sharing that happens about campus events. Of the 80 written responses provided to answer the survey question assessing the purpose Black campus social media spaces and Black campus connections, 30% of the responses spoke about how these spaces offer information that keeps Black students aware of campus events and of opportunities to connect with each other. As one respondent stated, "I wouldn't know about a lot of the events that are happening without social media." This comment shows how Black social media spaces compliment the campus engagement of Black students

with events and Black spaces. Another survey respondent mentioned, “These [Black] spaces [and events] are very hard to find if you aren’t following them on social media.” Another respondent mentioned that attending events on campus helps them feel “more connected to my peers.” Although the respondent was speaking of events happening on campus, according to that student, those connections and engagement would not happen without involvement in Black social media spaces. As a Black student at a HWI, it can be hard to know what events will speak to their identity. However, according to another survey respondent, Black social media spaces “keep Black students informed of events specifically catered to us.” A different survey participant shared “Black social media spaces give you information on events and activities for Black people organized by Black people.” Nine of the focus group participants also discussed how Black social media spaces was a source of information regarding campus events. Bobby shared, “Social media is one of those things where it keeps me in a loop of what is going on campus.” Similarly, Chantel stated,

Social media definitely helps with keeping up with events. Quite honestly, if I didn’t have social media, I’d probably just go to class and come home and that’d be it. I wouldn’t know that there are all these amazing Black events going on, and things that I can go to.

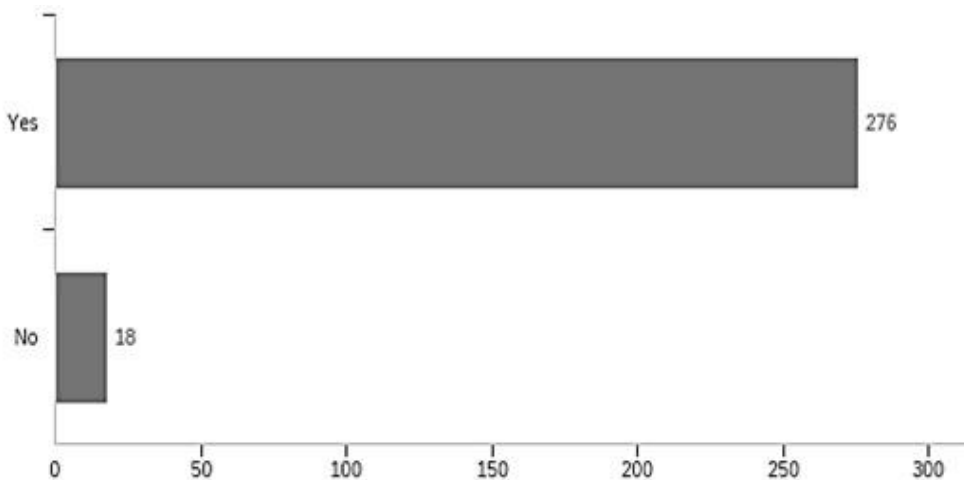
Chantel specifically talked about the Instagram page of the Black student programming board being a main way for her to keep up with activities “specifically for the Black community.” Jerome also shared, “If you didn’t have social media, then you wouldn’t know what was going on. If you didn’t follow the pages, you wouldn’t know what’s going on.” As they used social media platforms to learn information, participants also used the platforms to share information with others by posting or reposting content concerning events that were hosted by Black student organizations on campus. Skye spoke to using social media spaces to help her

become “Aware of what’s going on.” She went on to say “I look at people’s stories and what they post. [When I see they are there], I’m like ‘Let me go hang out with them!’” Christian also said he used Black social media spaces to see what “people post on their stories about the different events.” Olivia stated, “I see what other Black students repost. It makes me aware of what’s going on, on campus. I think it’s definitely impacted me, and being able to go to different events that I may have not seen otherwise.” As I mentioned previously, reposting things on social media shows your support for what is being advertised or promoted in the post. When students repost flyers for events, that communicates messages to their followers that they will likely be at the event and that this event is something they deemed worthy of receiving their attention.

For the Black students in my study, social media was not only a primary source of information concerning relevant campus events, but also provided information about current events happening in the larger society. Survey Question 21 asked, “Do racial issues that happen on your campus become topics of discussion on social media platforms?” Figure 19 shows 94% of survey respondents indicated that racial issues that happen on campus become topics of discussion on social media. During the focus group with University A, JB and Kyra both discussed how Black social media spaces were used to discuss racial issues that happened in the local community as well. For example, JB discussed a Twitter thread that warned students not to go to a local restaurant that was typically popular for the college students. She said that in the thread people were saying things like “Don’t go to [Restaurant Name] if you don’t want to be [a] hate crime.” She said the thread included a couple of stories about Black students having negative experiences there and notes that “I still haven’t gone back.” Kyra agreed that she also uses Black social media in similar ways and recalled a similar instance that happened with a

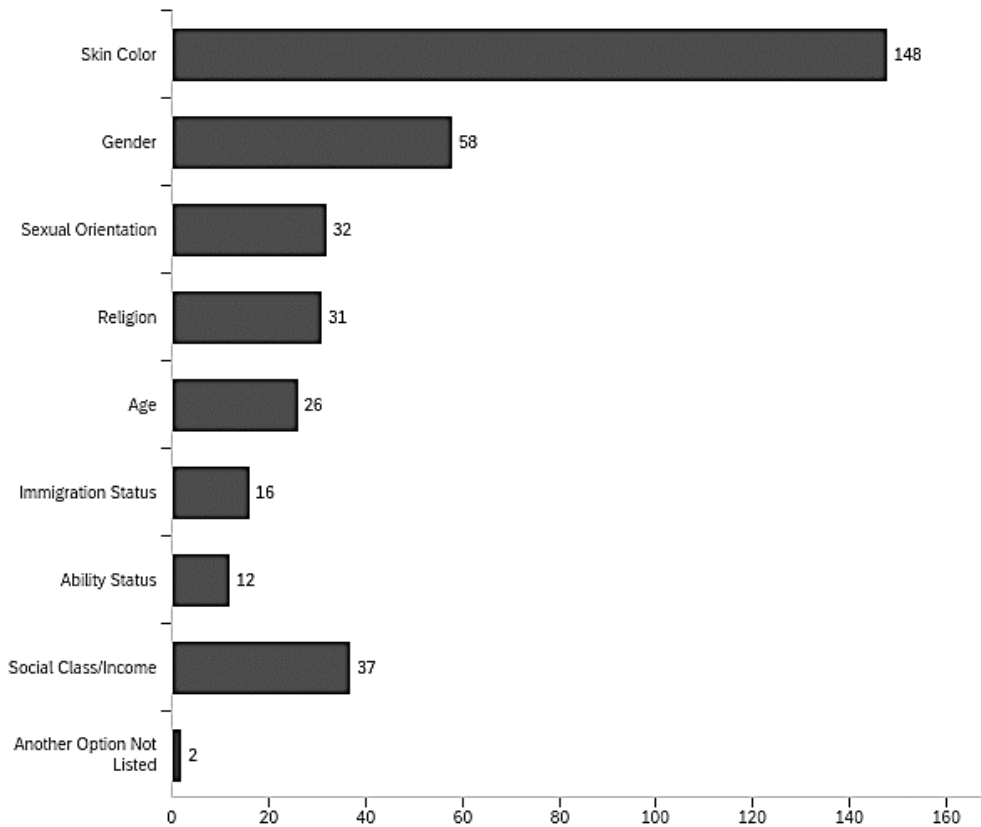
local Pizza shop. During one focus group session, Skye mentioned how Black spaces are important because of how whitewashed the news seems to be. She stated, “They (the news) don’t really show things about Black people on the TV or headlines, like if a Black girl was missing. The Black spaces creates news for us that we need to know.”

Figure 19. Importance of Black Social Media Spaces for Discussing Racial Issues



The survey respondents also mentioned using Black social media spaces to stay informed about announcements from Black student organizations, ways to support Black businesses, and to “keep up with news and information about other Black people” and “the Black community on campus” which ultimately helps to “foster friendships.” I appreciated the response of one survey participant who stated Black social media spaces “serve as spaces to share pressing information and continue ongoing conversations around current events.” As the survey respondents discussed information gained from these spaces, three respondents mentioned these spaces help them learn more about themselves. One respondent even mentioned these spaces provide them with “a deeper understanding of skin color.” This was interesting for a student to mention as 40% of survey respondents selected “skin color” as a prominent identity that influences their educational experience (see Figure 20).

Figure 20. Social Identities That Impact Educational Experiences



Additionally, Bobby specifically stated that he used social media to learn about college.

Bobby stated,

I use social media to get an understanding of what college is; because I was a first-generation student, everything was fairly new. I used Black Twitter a lot to get insight, trying to navigate a PWI. ... Social media is one of those things where it keeps me in a loop of what is going on campus. Being a part of this study I'm learning how much I depend on it in my daily lifestyle.

Furthermore, Black social media spaces serve as a space where Black students learn about Black culture. Leanna was the daughter of an African immigrant parent who “grew up in solely White spaces and didn't know much about Black American culture at all.” For her, social media helped her learn about Black American culture in ways that she could interact and adopt

that culture to be fully engrained with what she referred to as “my people.” These spaces serve as positive reassurance for Black students. Similarly, Nicole shared, “Watching Black creators [on social media] I saw that I do the same things and this was normal. It wasn’t something that I should be questioning.” Mark’s thoughts somewhat supported this view as he stated that using Black social media spaces also means students are “able to explore ourselves in different ways and use that to grow with each other.” This level of knowledge sharing further supports the powerful impact of the Black community as they were able to learn more about each other, Black culture, and themselves.

Additionally, Black social media spaces increased their awareness of the circumstances other Black students face, providing them with insight they would not gain in other spaces. Both focus group participants and survey respondents discussed using social media to see the experiences of other Black students who attend other HWIs. Skye shared, “It gives a little comfort to know others have been through it. It brings awareness to me.” Three other students also shared similar thoughts. Nicole stated,

It just made me a little more aware. ... Being a part of Black social media spaces has taught me that there’s a lot of people going through the same thing that I’m going through. So it’s made me a lot more aware of my situation and other people’s situation.

Chantel also shared that “just seeing that other people are going through the same things, and that you’re not alone in a sense, makes me feel that sense the community.” Leanna followed up with sharing “it’s important to hear those other stories so you can be like, ‘I’m not crazy’ ...it’s definitely affirming to know that we’re having shared experiences.” Figure 21 is a post submitted by a participant when asked to provide “A photo that represents the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces.” Kyra noted

that posts such as this one encourages her to use Black social media spaces, specifically Black Twitter, because she has had similar experiences like the one discussed and they are able to laugh about these instances when they realize they are not the only ones who have experienced them. The knowledge sharing benefited those who were on the receiving end of the information but also empowered the story tellers to use this as an opportunity to share their experience and use their voice.

Figure 21. Expectations of the Black Spokesperson



Black social media spaces allow students to inspire and motivate each other through the process of knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing was particularly important to stay aware of fashion trends, campus events, and increase awareness of ways to navigate hardships, especially culturally specific struggles. Black social media spaces and knowledge sharing were vital to bringing the Black student population together at HWIs to feel supported and like they could navigate the various circumstances that would arise at their university.

The creation of community through Black social spaces allowed for an opportunity where Black students could gather and learn about other Black peers who were going through similar, if not the exact same, situations, problems, stressors, and concerns. The community demonstrated that these students are indeed not alone, which can be hard to realize when they are isolated daily in classroom environments. Instead of social comparison having a negative effect on the students, as Akram and Kumar's (2017) findings suggested, the students in my study discussed the beneficial messages they received as they compared their current situation to the circumstances of other Black peers in college and in their careers. As they created community, they made meaningful connections, were provided comfort and support, their identities were affirmed, and they were able to share knowledge with their fellow Black peers. Harper (2013) discussed how Black students share knowledge with each other, a process Harper referred to as "peer pedagogies" (p. 200). In Harper's study, the Black students described the role their fellow Black peers stepped into, "assuming responsibility for socializing them to racial realities" (p. 200) of their institution. This level of responsibility was evident through the community fostered by the Black social media spaces.

Social Media as a Venue for Engagement, Academic Success, and Persistence

Black social media spaces offered Black students an opportunity to be engaged at HWIs, inspiration to be successful academically, and motivation to persist in spite of discouraging challenges and circumstances. Platforms such as GroupMe and Instagram play a vital role in encouraging student engagement and expanding the ways in which they can engage with and support student organizations. The connections Black students make with their Black peers within Black social media spaces were vital to their engagement, academic success, and

persistence through the college experience at HWIs, as the connections provided opportunities for assistance, reassurance, and inspiration.

Engagement

Black social media spaces can inform Black students' decisions on which individuals and organizations to engage with on campus and online. As participants found themselves being the racial minority on campus, they expressed a desire to not only create Black spaces on campus, but to further extend their on-campus engagement with Black student organizations and peers to virtual environments. The strategies Black students used to engage on social media platforms encouraged them to increase their engagement efforts with peers and student organizations.

Focus group participants in this study indicated that social media was a major factor in their transition to college, especially since half of them entered college amid high COVID-19 campus restrictions. For example, Bria shared how technology was a large aspect of her introduction to the PWI she attends. Other focus group participants such as Chantel, Olivia, Bobby, and Leanna discussed when they were incoming students they used social media platforms, specifically GroupMe and Instagram, to find other Black students who would also be new to the university to initiate relationships before getting on campus. For the focus group participants who were juniors and seniors, they discussed using social media to be more engaged with the campus community as they had to transition from being on campus to virtual only engagement when the pandemic occurred. During that time, the focus group participants used technology and social media to continue engagement with Black student organizations and to meet other Black students who were also processing the transition from on-campus engagement to virtual settings.

GroupMe was a heavily used platform for specifically creating race-based digital campus spaces that enhanced engagement. All twelve focus group participants mentioned creating or joining groups on GroupMe that were specifically for the Black students on their campus. According to the focus group participants, GroupMe was used as an avenue for getting to know people, meeting Black peers for lunch, and provided a great tool for transitioning into and navigating through their HWI. Olivia shared,

On GroupMe, there are different group chats that are strictly for Black students at [University B]. This is where I find out about things that are going on at campus, meet new people, and stay informed about the Black community.

In addition to GroupMe, focus group participants also discussed the role that Instagram played as most Black student organizations created Instagram pages to continue engagement with the Black student population on their campus. One survey respondent offered a critique of Black student organizations and their reliance on Black social media spaces by stating, “I feel a lot of the Black organizations on campus are great but they don’t plan a lot of activities or just ways for us to get to know others outside of social media.” While that survey participant wasn’t so appreciative of the high use of social media by Black student organizations, most of the focus group participants’ comments reflected a great regard towards the use of social media to influence student perceptions of engagement. For example, Leanna discussed how she used these spaces to encourage her campus involvement when she expressed “just seeing how other people interact with those spaces and how other people appreciate those spaces definitely propels me to keep being involved and to keep helping and hosting those spaces.” Additionally, the newsletters created by institutional offices such as the African American Cultural Center specifically highlighted minority students or culturally relevant content for that population that further

encouraged involvement. Using such methods to circulate information about campus involvement opportunities allowed users to have access to a larger number of sources for engagement in a centralized location.

In the previous theme, I discussed how Black social media spaces were powerful spaces for students to learn about campus events and groups with which they could become involved. The study participants expressed appreciation for Black spaces as it exposed them to opportunities that would increase students' involvement. One survey respondent shared, "I don't feel very connected to the Black student population on campus when I am not engaged in these social media spaces because I feel like I miss out on events or conversations a lot." During a focus group, Nicole stated,

It's (Black social media spaces) helped me be more involved, because my first year here I was just like I don't want to be around any of you. I just kind of stayed to myself. But when I got more involved in Black spaces on campus and on social media, I [decided to] get involved, expand my circle, and make more friends.

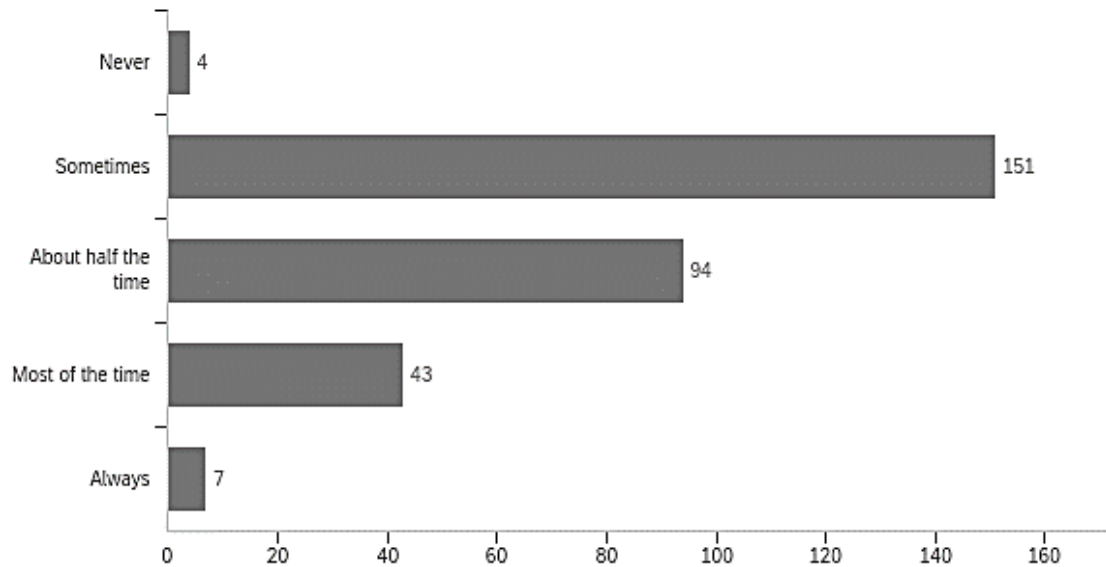
Chantel agreed with Nicole's sentiments and shared with the group,

I would definitely say the same thing for me...if I had the option, I would just sit in my room all day. I wouldn't go hang out with anybody. But seeing how much fun people be having at the Black events...I'm like "Ima try that." And then when I do get out there and I do experience those events, I'm like "okay, that was actually fun."

Chantel makes a claim that the more she views Black events on race-based digital campus spaces, the more likely she is to continue to try and attend different events on campus. One survey participant also mentioned how Black social media spaces encourage them to attend more events when they shared, "It [Black social media spaces] also makes going to Black spaces

[on campus] even more comfortable because I see familiar faces even if I've never actually seen them in person.” Figure 22 illustrates how involved the survey respondents found themselves in Black spaces, social events, and organizations at their college. Only four students (1%) said they were not involved in any capacity.

Figure 22. Involvement in On-Campus Black Spaces, Social Events, and/or Organizations



The focus group participants were also a group of students that had high involvement in Black spaces on campus and on social media. Getting involved in student organizations, receiving academic guidance, and attending social events all contributed to participants' ability to be successful holistically. Mark mentioned two student organizations, National Society of Black Engineers and Black Male Initiative, as “strong” organizations that develop academic, social, and leadership skills for the members. Two focus group participants in particular discussed how they used their involvement outside of Black social spaces to advocate for their Black campus community at their institution. For example, Bria stated,

Me being the chair of the Board of Directors...this is not necessarily a space that was created for minority students but that's another reason why I became the chair. Because I

want to create spaces for Black students on campus. That's one of the things that I'm working on this year to do.

Similarly, JB also mentioned this concept when she stated how she is using her position on the campus activities board to "help organize more spaces that are catered to African American students." During a different focus group, Leanna shared,

I'm also involved in campus. I do hold a leadership position in a Black organization so I try to post a lot of events especially for African students and Black students. ... I do try to go to the events from most, if not all, the Black organizations. I am also in student government this year. So my focus is to see how I can provide more funding to Black organizations, especially since I can't be as involved in all of them as I would like to be.

In addition to highlighting how she uses her position to increase resources for Black students, Leanna's statement also compares the unlimited support one can show on social media (via posting or reposting about events) to the limited on-campus involvement one can commit to when it comes to physically attending events or meetings for student organizations.

As Black social media spaces encouraged students to be more involved on campus, the connections and engagement opportunities also contributed to the sense of belonging Black students felt at HWIs. The idea of belonging and connection was evident in survey participants' written responses, specifically. Across four of the five open-ended questions, eight students specifically mentioned "sense of belonging" and feeling "welcomed." Sense of belonging was also mentioned during the focus groups, but in a different manner. For example, Christian shared "I think it does something positive for us all, and it keeps us engaged with one another, despite going to a HWI ... and being one of the only or the few Black people in our classes."

Additionally, Jerome acknowledged engagement as a pathway to sense of belonging for some students, but not necessarily for him. Jerome shared,

I do like the atmosphere and the community that it builds and provides for students. I think without it some people would feel lost on campus. I don't feel that way, because for me it's not really that way because I don't look for events to bring me a sense of belonging. But I think they may aid in helping people find their way and find their people. So I think they're important and impactful in that way.

Just as students were intentional about seeking Black connections, they were also intentional with using social media to find involvement opportunities, student activities, and student organizations that catered to their racial identity. These findings contrast to what earlier researchers (i.e., Akram & Kumar, 2017; Issac, 2021; Siddiqui & Singh, 2016) reported on the negative effects social media, noting that social media platforms decrease in-person engagement within physical settings.

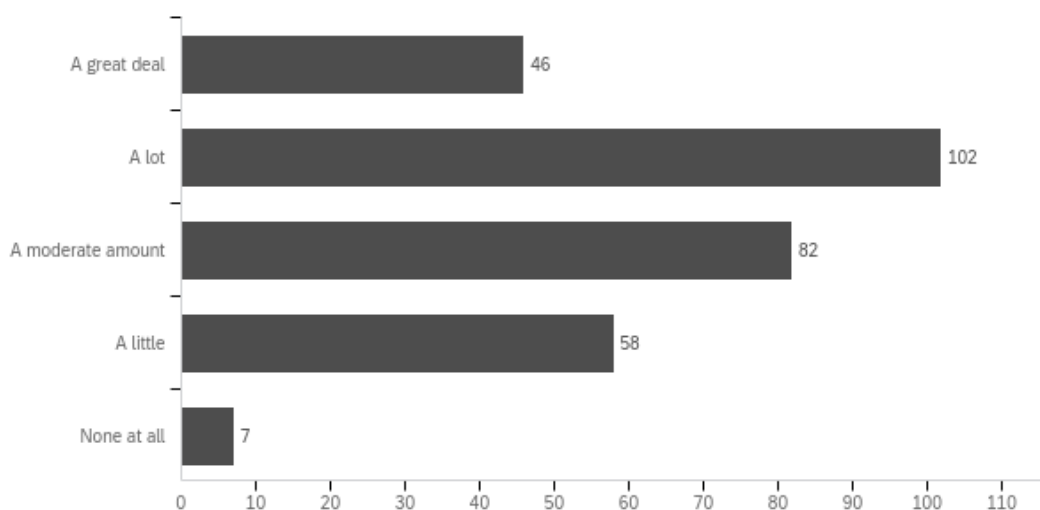
Academic Success

The ways in which Black social media spaces impact academic success also emerged through study participants' stories. Considering how Black social spaces online and on campus can positively contribute to the academic achievement of Black students is important when striving to develop tactics that support the graduation and retention rates of this population. As the sense of community was created in these spaces, the participants were encouraged by that community to do better in school and focus on their academic performance.

Survey Question 14 asked, "How much do you think connecting with campus-based Black social media spaces (i.e., following other Black students at your school or using a hashtag that talks about the Black experience at your school) contributes to your academic success on

campus?” Figure 23 illustrates how survey participants attributed connecting with Black spaces to their academic success. Of the respondents, 78% indicated that connecting with campus based Black social media spaces contributed *at least a moderate amount* to their academic success.

Figure 23. Influence of Black Race-Based Campus Connections on Academic Success



Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide a written response to explain their multiple-choice selection; 68 responses were provided and varied in how connecting with Black peers on social media contributed to students’ academic success. While most of the responses spoke to how these spaces generally provide help with students’ studies, 20 students provided more detailed descriptions of how the spaces impact their academic success. Of those 20, six survey respondents specifically attributed their use of Black groups with specific connections to their major or careers (i.e. GroupMe for Black students pursuing careers in Tech and Computing) as opportunities to learn about professional development, study groups, mentor programs, find people who are taking the same classes, resume tips, and career fairs. One student in particular named these groups as “vital” to their academic and professional success. Another student stated,

I think feeling connected with the Black community on campus really eases my stress. Whenever I am having a tough time with academics, it's even worse if I feel lonely on top of it. However, Black spaces have been a really good tool to feel validated in my experiences and relax with other students who I feel are rooting for my success.

One survey participant mentioned that Black social media spaces helped them enjoy their environment, and according to them, "when I am able to enjoy my environment, I do better in school. For example, in high school I did not really like the people who went to my school so I felt unmotivated to do my work or try harder for grades." During a focus group, Kyra mentioned a similar point when she shared,

I feel like when I'm having fun, when I'm actually enjoying the people I'm with, and when I have a group of people on campus that I know and I like to be around...they encourage me to do more and better in school. In high school, it was a lot of people who were a lot smarter than me. My school was very competitive...I think I didn't enjoy my environment then, so I didn't do too well in school. But now I'm doing a little bit better in school, because I'm enjoying my environment.

In Kyra's case, she did well in school because she enjoyed the environment she created for herself by being immersed in a community of Black peers. Another survey participant shared, Using social media (specifically a hashtag) is a form of communication between students of color. When we students of color use a hashtag, it's a symbol of our shared experiences. It's a way we communicate and shows that we agree with one another or are experiencing the same things on campus. It even allows us students of color to know what to look out for (opportunities personalized for people of color, tutoring, study groups, etc.). This contributes to my ability to be successful academically and to also

develop relationships with individuals like me. I use lots of hashtags/social media platforms that other students of color use on campus. Hashtags also birth or support social movements that we believe in as a whole.

Of the 20 detailed responses provided to question 14 (assessing impact of Black social media spaces on academic success), eight respondents spoke about how Black social media spaces help them feel more comfortable and ease some of the pressure they feel while attending HWIs. Those survey respondents framed these spaces as stress relievers that help them “find confidence,” “let me not feel inferior,” “and [be] more comfortable to ask questions to peers and study with them,” all of which the students viewed as positively impacting their academic success. Another survey respondent stated:

Finding an affirming space to share your thoughts and feelings with people you know won't judge you or ridicule you because they have also experienced those things is very special. Comfort and a sense of belonging contribute to better mental health, which in turn can relate back to better grades in the classroom.

Similarly, a different survey respondent shared,

College is difficult academically but it can also be difficult emotionally. Whenever I feel stressed out it's nice to have people who can support you through it. Especially people who have similar identities to you. I definitely have felt lonely going to a PWI because I can't relate as much to a lot of the people I have classes with. It just makes the experience so much more comfortable.

Both of these statements combined the subthemes of identity affirmation, comfort, and connection and the impact those aspects can have on academic success. These statements

confirm the interconnectedness of the themes and how they impact the Black student experience at HWIs. Another survey participant stated,

I feel like as Black people we always want to support each other and push ourselves.

Seeing another Black girl doing well, acing her classes, getting an internship or whatever it may be is inspiring and also opens up the door for questions. That person can serve as a mentor or a role model for so many below them.

Of the 20 detailed responses provided to question 14 (assessing impact of Black social media spaces on academic success), five participants did not believe the spaces helped them with their academic success. Four of those five respondents did, however, identify the community and support provided by Black social media spaces as helping them feel accepted and allowing them to make friends. These students did not specifically connect those aspects to having an effect on their academics.

Figure 24 illustrates another word cloud created during the focus groups that asked participants to share what they have found themselves committed to because of their engagement with Black social media spaces. This word cloud displays the necessity of Black social media spaces for helping Black students become more committed to things such as their success, self-preservation, and awareness. Success is the largest word on the cloud, indicating that this was the most common response across focus group participants.

Figure 24. Influence of Black Social Media Spaces on Commitment to Success

Because I engage with Black social spaces, I am committed to



As disparities continue to exist in the graduation rates of Black students, campuses should encourage the strategies Black students use that positively contribute to their educational accomplishments. Black social media spaces were a contributor to the academic success of Black college students at HWIs as they enhanced their academic connections, knowledge about development opportunities, and the sense of enjoyment within their academic environment.

Persistence

Black social media spaces impacted the persistence of the study participants' in different ways. The study participants discussed using Black social media spaces to push through challenges and to support and uplift each other to persevere. As these spaces contributed to student persistence, it also positively impacted relatability, sense of community, and well-being.

The connections created in Black social media spaces became vital sources of persistence as the students encouraged each other to remain enrolled at their HWI. This was evident through the six of the focus group's responses. The campus climates at HWIs encouraged Black students to create and participate in race-based digital spaces, which helped them persist despite harsh climates. Bria shared, "There's people here who feel like we're not welcomed [on campus]."

Leanna also mentioned “Not feeling as accepted here obviously forces me to want to use these spaces and create these spaces.” On different occasions, Nicole and Christian also hinted at their struggles with the campus climate while explaining how Black social media spaces help them “push” through the challenges they face. Nicole stated,

Having Black social media spaces and seeing all these Black people relate to me, [make me] feel like I’m not alone in this and they got through this so I can do this, too. It helps me push through and get through school or get through days where I’m just kind of like I don’t know about this.

Christian also mentioned how relatability impacted his persistence as he shared,

When it comes to the academics or just life in general, it helps to know that you have someone else who is feeling similar to how you’re feeling. It just helps that they are Black, and they are similar background...I definitely think that impacts or helps out with your sense of belonging and well-being overall...When you see messages posted on Instagram and when you see people connecting in that way, and being able to relate, it definitely pushes you.

A survey respondent also mentioned this idea of pushing as they shared an “inspiring” aspect of Black social media spaces was “having someone to push you through” because “they’ve been in your shoes and they got out.” Similarly, Bria stated,

When you see people who are in similar situations as you, it just kind of shows that we’re all in this together. ... It just kind of gives you a little bit of motivation that you’re not alone in the situation.

Black social media spaces, according to both focus group and survey participants, provide students with the motivation and encouragement they need to know they are not alone in

many of the situations they are going through, especially racially-related issues. Although relatability was discussed in a previous theme, I think it is still worth highlighting here as the students specifically attribute it to their persistence through college. Bria went on to say,

These [Black social spaces] are the only reason why I haven't dropped out. The only thing that keeps me here is the spaces that we've created, or the spaces that Black students in the past have created that people have continued on, and the friends that I've made from these spaces.

In this statement, Bria brought up an important aspect to consider: the legacy of Black student organizations at HWIs. Many of the Black student organizations active on HWI campuses were started by Black students who came long before the current students arrived on campus. The longevity of Black student organizations and social spaces on campus further contributes to the success, maintenance, continuation of, and engagement with Black spaces on social media platforms.

The focus group participants used Black social media spaces to create community and sources of support and comfort that would allow them to help each other. For these students, Black social media spaces were an essential tool to encourage their fellow peers to remain in school. Five focus group participants (Bria, Christian, Jerome, Kyra, Olivia) shared how they use Black social media spaces to “uplift” and guide each other in the right direction. A survey participant also spoke of this notion when they stated,

Because the community is small, we must uplift and guide each other in the right direction. There are frequent references (whether posted online or announced in meetings) to resources that will help us if we struggle in our classes. I haven't used them, but I know others have found them helpful.

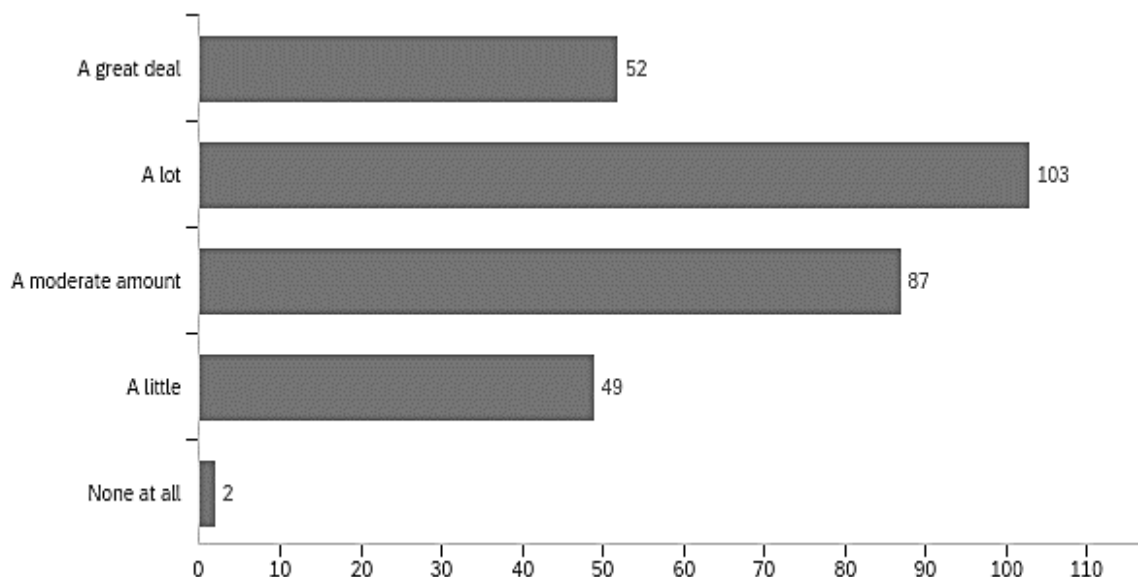
Another survey respondent mentioned Black social media spaces are “good for me to finish school.” During one focus group, Mark discussed the impact of community on supporting students through other struggles. Mark shared,

Creating that community ... is really the difference between somebody staying in college and dropping out or staying at a school and switching schools. If you have a community, and you feel loved and cared for, and you feel supported, then you're a lot more likely to stay where you are and push through. ... But without that you're more likely to feel isolated and feel like you don't belong and have imposter syndrome. So, when you have that community ... it's a lot easier to feel like you deserve to be there.

Mark's statement emphasizes the role Black social media spaces, and the community created through them, play in the retention, persistence, and care for Black students that engage in these spaces. It also speaks to the potential hazards that Black students are exposed to when they do not occupy Black social spaces and community. Nicole also shared a similar perspective as she discussed how she initially considered transferring during her first year enrolled at her HWI. She shared, “participating in Black spaces, and being a part of Black spaces and hearing the stories of other Black people ... in a way encouraged me to stay where I am. ... My first year here, honestly, I really was going to transfer.”

Figure 25 depicts how the survey respondents answered Survey Question 18, “How much do you think connecting with campus based Black social media spaces (i.e. following other Black students at your school or using a hashtag that talks about the Black experience at your school) contribute to your persistence through college?” Responses indicate how students valued using Black social media spaces and the influence it had on their persistence through college.

Figure 25. Influence of Black Social Media Spaces on Persistence



When the survey respondents were asked about how much they thought connecting with campus-based Black social media spaces contributed to their persistence through college, 60 participants provided qualitative responses to justify their multiple-choice selection. Of those responses, 15 participants talked about the power of the support, help, and comfort provided in Black social media spaces that contributed to their persistence through college. Four survey responses stood out as it relates to this contribution: “It feels good to have people to commiserate with;” “It makes me stronger,” “it makes me braver;” and “[The] community is inspiring.” A different survey participant shared how the more they expand their network and Black campus connections, “the easier it becomes to persist in times of hardship and adversity.” One survey respondent framed their social media involvement as,

Finding an affirming space to share your thoughts and feelings with people you know won’t judge you or ridicule you because they have also experienced those things is very special. Comfort and a sense of belonging contribute to better mental health, which in turn can relate back to better grades in the classroom.

This survey respondent, along with others, recognized the importance of Black social media spaces on their mental health. A different survey respondent stated,

I think feeling connected with the Black community on campus really eases my stress.

Whenever I am having a tough time with academics it's even worse if I feel lonely on top of it. However, Black spaces have been a really good tool to feel validated in my experiences and relax with other students who I feel are rooting for my success.

Another survey respondent also mentioned the impact of Black social media spaces on their mental health by sharing "I don't know where my mental would be if it wasn't for these Black communities." Additionally, a different survey participant offered, "if I weren't able to vent and rant to those who understand me I would have been even more miserable than I was."

Four focus group participants also discussed the importance of Black social media spaces on their mental health, especially because they were able to use these spaces to come together to release race-based stress and other college-life stressors that came their way. For example, Bria stated, "It [Black social media spaces] gives us an outlet...it allows us to decompress from the stressors of the world of being a minority." Both Black social spaces on campus and on social media also proved to be vital to the focus group participants' sanity. Jerome shared a statement with powerful imagery:

I will say being in the STEM department really just ties you by the feet with a rope, and just drags you through a cornfield. It's just not good. ... Identity crisis, imposter syndrome ... kicked the s*** out of me. ... In a sense, they [Black social spaces] kind of just are that little bit of peace sometimes. My life may be in turmoil, in shambles ... like broken porcelain just on the ground ... just shattered. ... These groups can be brooms and dust

pans, and they mold you back together, and they'll help you get to where you need to be, offer a little shoulder to cry on.

Jerome shared his view of the support he receives from his community in a way that describes how the harsh conditions at HWIs, and in certain academic departments, present the need for Black students to utilize Black social spaces and community to restore themselves. Similarly, Olivia shared.

We don't get the privilege of walking into a class, and it's a classroom full of us, [or to] just feel at ease. White students do get that so having our space on social media, readily accessible, is important for us to like keep sane.

In the same focus group, Mark stated "I have my community, I have my people that I keep with me to keep hold of my sanity." Mark also shared how others have called the police on him and his Black student organization multiple times which was a detriment to his mental well-being. For Mark, Black social spaces help calm him after such stressful situations.

There were two survey participants that offered up different viewpoints when they were asked how much they think connecting with campus based Black social media spaces contribute to their persistence through college. One respondent stated, "I would be persistent regardless because of my desire to succeed." Another survey participant shared,

Regardless of who is at my school, I will complete my degree. I have gone through experiences that required me to go to other schools for things that my school was lacking, so that is nothing new. But it is great that I have that community just in case I need them.

These two were the only participants who viewed these spaces as not impacting their persistence.

When Black students enjoy their environment and the people they are surrounded by, they are more likely to feel motivated to do academic assignments, put effort into focusing on

their academic achieving, and more committed to letting that motivation inform their actions of working hard in their classes. While the literature discusses how people use social media to find sources of support (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016), there are other studies that suggest social media can lead to depression, loneliness, and social anxiety (Berryman et al., 2018; Haddad et al., 2021). The results in my study more so align with those from Simms et al. (2021) study that show how students of color use social media in ways that are essential to their survival in physical spaces at HWIs. The ways in which the study participants revealed the impact of Black social media spaces and its ability to help them to be more engaged, academically successful, and persistent emphasized the work of Berryman et al. (2018), who essentially stated studies that examine the impact of social media should focus on how people use social media (*quality*) as opposed to how much they use it (*quantity*).

Sites for Resistance

Black social media spaces offered sites for resistance for Black students at HWIs to utilize agency to resist assimilation, use joy as a form of resistance and reimagining, and to escape the White gaze. These aspects were unique to Black social media spaces as they allowed Black students to create their own spaces without the need to fully consider the typical stipulations or limitations that arise when creating one's own race-based spaces in physical settings. The different ways Black students choose to actively engage in racial identity expression in historically White campus environments are important sites for resistance and worthy of acknowledgement and honor.

Resistance to Assimilation

Study participants used Black social media spaces to resist assimilation which is contrary to the explicit and implicit expectation of students of color attending a HWI. While some Black

students, among other students of color, choose to assimilate into the dominate White culture that persists at these institutions, the Black students in my study were adamant about resisting that level of assimilation. The participants discussed the ways in which they choose to resist assimilation as they seek to express their racial identity, advocate for Black issues, and create spaces that celebrate Black culture and students. For these students in particular, assimilation was simply not of interest nor an option.

The survey participants discussed how they used Black social media spaces to support their racial identity exploration, affirmation, and expression. For example, one of the survey respondents stated that Black social media spaces allow Black students to “not lose their identity on a campus like this.” Actively choosing to engage in Black social media spaces so that one continues to develop their racial identity can be viewed as an act of resistance when occupying historically White spaces. One survey respondent explained a bit about their transition from not holding salience on their racial identity to now viewing it as something they should explore and embody more. They stated,

I haven't always been connected to my Blackness and when I started college I had no intention to make amends with this until I started to realize how important my racial identity is. Since then I have [tried] more Black spaces on campus and because of that I have slowly [become] more secure in my identity.

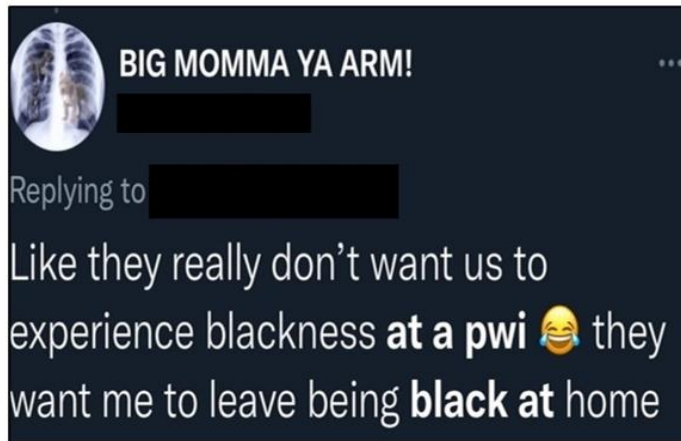
Similarly, a different survey participant shared how they use Black social media spaces to embrace their race, even though they are racially underrepresented.

Using these platforms ensure that you have a safe space throughout your college journey. It's a reminder that you can always reach out to the people who represent you are there to help. Continuously engaging in these platforms helps me to strive to do good and thrive,

even in a place where I'm least represented (race). It gives me motivation to appreciate my skin color, who I am, and to embrace my individuality.

Race was proven to be a large factor in how these students understood the Black experience, which issues they chose to address, and how they went about advocating for themselves as they chose to resist assimilation. This was evident in both the survey responses and the photo-elicitation submissions from the focus group participants. For example, one survey participant mentioned their engagement with Black spaces and their advocacy for the Black experience "helps the campus know we are here and will be heard." Similarly, when asking about the impact of campus based Black social media spaces, another survey participant shared "social media allows us to vocalize our issues with the university and bring awareness to them. I believe it is important to talk about Black experiences so that we could improve existing conditions." Christian shared a related statement when he mentioned that Black social media give students "a way to stay connected and push towards that possibility of us being heard and seen." The students felt that using their voice, along with resisting assimilation, would allow for them to see positive changes at HWIs that would contribute to the advancement of Black student populations on campus. Figure 26 shows a photo Olivia submitted in response to the photo elicitation prompt calling for visual representation of how Black students at HWIs interpret the meaning of being Black on campus.

Figure 26. Blackness at a PWI



Olivia captioned the photo by sharing,

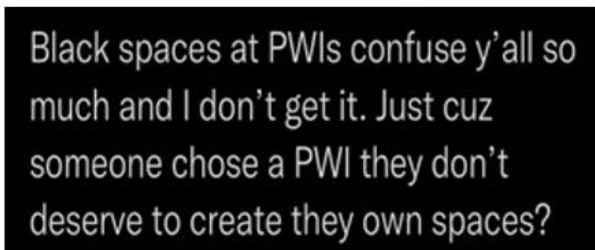
I came across this tweet and it captured how I feel being at [University B]. The Black voices and experiences are always being silenced or adjusted to the White person's liking because they really don't want us to experience/show our Blackness here.

This photo in particular exhibits the desire Black students feel to be able to express their Blackness in White spaces. As students resist assimilating into Whiteness, they are finding themselves speaking out against the structures and behaviors that act to limit the ways in which their expression can take place. In addition to supporting students' desire to show up in spaces authentically and to operate in Blackness, I would argue that it is necessary to supply formally structured opportunities for Black students to express and celebrate Blackness at HWIs. While Black social media spaces are helpful in providing such an experience, campus climates and cultures would be seen as more inclusive if they supported the racial identity expression of Black students regularly.

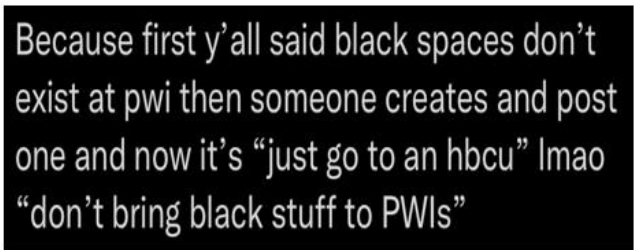
The focus group participants also submitted photo-elicitation samples that displayed their desire to create spaces and platforms that allowed them to uplift, highlight, and celebrate Black students and their accomplishments – something they perceived as lacking on the university

level. Creating such platforms is another act of resistance as they were creating new ways to support Black students instead of simply accepting the lack of recognition. Figure 27 shows a photo submitted by one participant of a snippet from a Twitter thread discussing how Black students wish to create Black spaces at HWIs. In response to the prompt, “A photo that represents how Black students at HWIs interpret the meaning of being Black on campus,” Bobby captioned this photo, “This tweet talks about how there is a constant argument about choosing a PWI over a HBCU and creating spaces there.”

Figure 27. Black Spaces at PWIs



Black spaces at PWIs confuse y'all so much and I don't get it. Just cuz someone chose a PWI they don't deserve to create they own spaces?



Because first y'all said black spaces don't exist at pwi then someone creates and post one and now it's "just go to an hbcu" lmao "don't bring black stuff to PWIs"

While Bobby interpreted this as contributing to the constant online discourse regarding Black students who choose to attend HWIs as opposed to HBCUs, I interpreted these images as displaying the agency Black students use to create race-based spaces that are affirming to their Black existence in historically and/or predominately White spaces. Interesting enough, two of the three focus groups also discussed their thoughts about how HBCU students viewed them for making a decision to attend an HWI. For example, Chantel and Leanna felt that Black students at HBCUs tried to invalidate her Blackness. They had viewed a number of videos on TikTok from HBCU students who expressed disappointment in Black students who choose to attend other institution types. Leanna stated that her choosing to go to an HWI “doesn’t make me any less Black.” She went on to share,

I don't even want to go on a tangent here, but I mean there is lowkey like a HBCU beef with the Black people that attend PWIs, at least on Tiktok. ... Black people have been getting attacked and I understand that there are certain Black people that did come here for different reasons...because they are more White-aligned, but that is not all of us, and that is not the bulk of us. It's already hard when we're being attacked on campus, and then also to be attacked on social media.

Chantel followed up in agreement when she stated, "Your Blackness is validated. ... Going to a PWI doesn't make you any less Black than somebody who went to an HBCU." In a different focus group, Bria and Jerome shared similar thoughts, stating, "Just because we go to a HWI doesn't make us any less Black than you are" or "a sell-out." Bria and Jerome felt that HBCU students tried to gatekeep Black cultural experiences and spaces, as they had also viewed conversations on social media where HBCU students expressed disapproval of certain signature HBCU aspects such as majorette dancers being represented on HWI campuses. Bria contested this notion by sharing, "We still need Black spaces. If anything, we need these Black spaces more because we have to be surrounded by White people all the time." One point that is worth considering here is that each of the students who brought up this issue also shared that they attended their HWI because of the amount of money they were offered. Bobby, Olivia, Leanna, Bria, Jerome were offered very competitive scholarship packages to attend their university. Bria and Jerome specifically mentioned being at University C on full ride scholarships, which was significantly larger funding opportunities than they were offered by the HBCUs to which they applied. In contrast, very few survey participants mentioned any consideration of HBCUs. For example, when responding to the question that asked what they discuss in race-based digital

campus spaces, one survey respondent mentioned that they do discuss their experiences at an HWI and how different that is from what they perceive HBCU student experiences to be.

As Black students resist assimilation and create spaces and opportunities to support themselves, the focus group participants mentioned two of the reasons they do this is because (a) they feel like they occupy a minoritized status at their HWI, and (b) they feel like they are an overlooked population at their HWI. Bria spoke to this exactly when she stated “since we go to a PWI, we’re the minority on campus. We make our own spaces.” Figure 28 shows a photo Jerome submitted in response to the prompt asking for a “photo that represents the occurrences or dynamics on campus that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces.”

Figure 28. Promoting Black Culture at HWIs



Jerome captioned the photo, “A photo that shows an event called ‘Culture on the Lawn’ that showcases everything Black students at a PWI have to offer.” This screenshot is from a video posted on Tik Tok that was recorded at the event. Culture on the Lawn is a signature

program held annual, hosted by one of the larger Black student organizations on campus. The event was created to encourage the Black student community to come together to celebrate Black culture despite the lack of celebration in the mainstream culture of the university. Culture on the Lawn encouraged Jerome to participate in Black social media spaces because this was an event that he was excited to attend as another opportunity to showcase Black existence on campus. Creating such events is a great display of resistance to assimilation as it shows their commitment to honoring the legacy of Black culture at their institution, being active participants in the Black experience, and further cultivating opportunities to celebrate Blackness – an identity and experience that has historically been excluded, marginalized, and silenced at these institutions. This particular screenshot displays high engagement on Tik Tok as it has over 6,000 likes. The other icons show the number of comments, the number of people who saved the post to their account, and the number of people who shared the post by sending it to another Tik Tok user. The high number of engagements in each category speaks to the high support of the event, the excitement people shared about the event across the social media platform, and how the event was a popular topic of discussion on the platform for that day.

As the focus group participants discussed resistance to assimilation through the creation of Black spaces that celebrate the Black experience, five participants correlated this with their desire to pay it forward. As they have benefited from these spaces, they also wanted to take an active role in crafting opportunities for other Black students to also benefit in the same way.

Chantel stated,

I just really found importance in having a Black community. ... So when I got to college I not only wanted to get involved, but I also wanted to help. So in some of the organizations ... I've been trying to lend a helping hand.

Mark offered a similar idea when he stated, “I try to be as heavily involved in our women and minorities engineering program so I can get to know all the Black students and the underrepresented students there to help them out as much as I can.” Leanna also shared her desire to help others by using her voice. She shared with the group,

Since I am looking at a career where I do want to help others, I’m like I need to get past these hurdles so I can actually utilize my voice and utilize my platform for other people and so they don’t have to go through as many struggles and tribulations as we’re currently going through.

Christian and Jerome discussed how they are resisting assimilation with hopes to pave the way for future Black students that enter University C. Christian stated,

[Black social media spaces] allows us to push towards something bigger that can be created for us in the future ... for future students who come to [University C] or even other schools. Hopefully, Black spaces can continue to grow and prosper.

Jerome followed up with stating they try to be “that group of people for the next generation to know, if you come, you’re going to have a space for you.” Similar to the legacy of Black student organizations being created at HWIs because the interests of Black students were missing or severely lacking on campus, these students are also working toward leaving a legacy that will continue to provide space for other Black students to enter these institutions with a strong foundation upon which to build their engagement and racial identity expression.

Black students use Black social media spaces to define relevant ways to celebrate Black culture and utilize agency to implement events and activities that affirm their racialized experiences in manners that are enjoyable and beneficial. By taking advantage of such opportunities to create Black spaces, Black students are resisting assimilation into White culture

at HWIs. As they resist assimilation, they are making space to express their racial identity in ways that they have identified as genuine and authentic, and that feel good for them.

Joy as Resistance and Reimagining

In Lu and Steele's (2019) article, "Joy is Resistance," joy is presented as a method of resistance for Black users online. Lu and Steele discussed how different cultures and contributors to those cultures describe joy, arguing that "conscious acts and expressions of joy are vital forms of resistance in a society shaped by oppression, racism, and violence. ... [Black users] expressions of joy online may be overlooked by members of the dominant group" (pp. 823–824). On social media sites, Black users "defiantly assert their humanity with a rich collection of posts that exhibit joy, happiness, laughter, and imagination" (p. 832). Black users routine utilization of joy to reimagine and create a new outlook on their life and circumstances can work to combat the negative (and at times inhumane) ways in which Black life can be presented in mainstream media. While they could view their circumstances as depressing, discouraging, and debilitating (which some students do), the Black students in my study took those instances and applied laughter to them to resist the negative toll those feelings could take on their experience and academic success.

The focus group from University C mentioned how injustices against Black Americans often caused a switch in focus of some Black student organizations on campus and encouraged students to post about Black issues on social media. Jerome discussed how the Black student organization at their institution formerly had more fun, leisure-based activities. However, when instances of injustice became more prevalent, the organization stopped doing entertaining activities to focus more on activism and support Black students as they navigated any feelings of anger or grief. Jerome stated,

[Black student organization name] used to be a really fun type of organization. I don't want to say it's not fun anymore, but with...I guess police brutality and all the other things that would happen in the media against Black Americans, it became a really, really radical, political thing. It seemed like every event that they would throw or everything that was connected to [Black student organization name] would only be about activism, which I mean we do need. But at a certain time, it just becomes very draining to just only think about the activism, only think about okay, we're always trying to fight for our spot. Can we not just have fun as Black people?

To compliment Jerome's sentiments, I will offer a statement from one of the survey participants that discussed how Black social media spaces "add some fun to my campus life." The Black student experience at HWIs can be one that is difficult to navigate as it comes with unique racial challenges. However, the desire to have fun and express joy in these spaces should be attainable and viewed as an act of resisting the negative aspects of the campus climate.

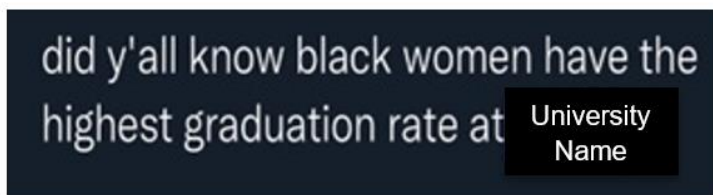
When asked to provide written responses about what they discuss or post about when interacting with each other in Black social media spaces, 60 participants provided responses. Of those responses, 15% reflected discussing Black joy and jokes relating to the Black experience. Three survey participants within that 15% highlighted the importance of using race-based digital campus spaces to provide "uplifting and encouraging statements," "a positive outlook on life," and an opportunity to "feel like we are in a happy space." Another survey respondent shared, "I say it is very important because we as a people know what we go through in PWI or just in America in general. Even when harmful things happen, we still can joke and laugh about them."

The survey respondents commented on how they used Black social media spaces for jokes and appreciated the humorous posts they viewed on their timelines. This was similar to what Olivia mentioned during one focus group where she shared,

Black social media spaces definitely impacts well-being because I know if I'm feeling like down or off, if I go on Black Twitter or like Black Tik Tok, I can get a good laugh. So it definitely helps, and with stress in general. I love just going on my phone and going to those Black spaces because I know I'll laugh.

In addition to being able to have a place to discuss similarities in the Black experience and unpack their reactions to various occurrences, Black social media spaces offered several survey respondents a positive outlook on life, a place of peace, and a space to celebrate Black joy. This was evident in how the focus group participants shared how extremely overwhelming it can be for Black students to constantly see their community being isolated or harmed both on campus and on social media. To contest this phenomenon, focus group participants expressed using joy as resistance when they use Black social media spaces to focus on positive representations of Black people. When asked to provide “A photo that represents how Black students interpret the meaning of being Black on campus,” JB submitted the photo in Figure 29, as an example of social media posts that help her focus on positive aspects of Black life and achievement as she reflects on what it means to be Black at University A.

Figure 29. Points of Pride



JB captioned the photo, “Being Black on campus means being successful. Going to a university is something to be proud of as some people who identify the same way we do, do not get the same opportunity.” Such images and messages on social media are important to the persistence and successful matriculation of Black college students as it influences their self-concept. In connection with this photo, JB shared,

It [social media] can also be used as a method of escapism ... where you're in a world that's negative and someone's dying every day, just being able to have a space that you created, that you know is safe for you to be able to cope is important.

JB went on to further explain how she can become “mentally drained” and exhausted from the intake of constant information concerning negative events or acts of violence against Black people. When asked what they discuss or post about when interacting with each other in Black spaces on social media platforms, some survey respondents discussed the racial discrimination they view on social media platforms and how they use these spaces to combat violence against Black bodies. Therefore, some students turn to social media for joy and laughter as a way to escape and cope. When asked to submit a photo that represents the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces, Kyra shared a photo providing the caption, “This helps me relate to others and it's very common for uncontrollable laughter to happen. I like seeing stuff like this on my feed because it makes me laugh more.” Figure 30 is the photo she submitted to show how laughter and humor are common coping strategies Black people use. According to Kyra, jokes allowed these Black students to “ease off the tension.” Finding humor in commonly shared experiences amongst their fellow Black peers seemed to increase the likelihood of them continuing in the social circles they created and maintaining relationships.

While Yik Yak is a specific app that posed negative issues for the focus group students, other apps, like Twitter, Tik Tok and Instagram, were noted as positive sources of engagement for them. Kyra mentioned that “Tik Tok talks about things that I can laugh about.” JB agreed and stated, “it kind of helps you to find humor in a bad situation.” Mark mentioned how he highly appreciated the exclusivity of Black Twitter. In agreement with Mark, the focus group participants stated that Black Twitter particularly requires the in-group to possess cultural competence and culturally relevant knowledge, which helps members be involved and actively engage with dialogue occurring in these spaces. Participants’ Black Twitter timelines and the content they see on social media were highly influenced by race. Most Black students saw similar posts on their accounts, causing them to create inside jokes that other racial groups did not understand because their timelines were crafted in different ways. For example, Skye mentioned, “these spaces bring me joy. They bring me laughter...I like how we all know something by saying one word, and we all can get the joke, or inside jokes. I like that.” Bria similarly noted “even the jokes...[we] laugh at similar jokes that maybe the White students wouldn’t necessarily laugh at.” Bria’s statement highlights the cultural differences in humor that are exacerbated on social media and highly visible via the racial discourse that takes place. Chantel shared,

I know for me one big thing is when we’re [black peers] together ... the constant amount of laughter ... but also I like to look back at my Snapchat memories a lot. ... I get to kind of relive those moments, in a sense, but it just like reinforces the whole aspect of community.

Two students from University C, Jerome and Bria, also reflected on memories they had within their Black social spaces that allowed them to experience joy as resistance. Jerome shared that

during the weekly gathering, which they call “Pit Popping Fridays,” they meet from 12-2pm. He described it as a time where “you’ll find all the Black people on [University C’s] campus just out there having a good time, listening to music, and dancing.” Bria followed up with sharing,

I feel like [the Pit] is a really essential part of Black [University C]. ... Pit Popping Fridays is basically where all the Black people come together ... you sit out in the Pit ... and you eat and you talk. People be putting on the best fits ... That’s part of the culture. You’re supposed to pop out. So that’s why it’s called Pit Popping Fridays. ... The Greek organizations stroll and music’s playing. ... It’s a really good experience. ... [The Pit’s] a really essential space for us that gives us a sense of sanity, especially when you’re in class with White people all the day. It’s like, “Ok, let me go to my people.”

Bria describes a moment in time where they can come together and collectively experience Black joy, if only for a short part of their day. The location of the space where the Black students gather during this time is also meaningful. While this is an on-campus Black social space, they use Black social media spaces to promote their engagement with and support of the initiative created by and for Black students at University C.

Through expressions of and engagement with joy, Black students were able to enact resistance to conforming to the negative experiences that are present within Black existence at HWIs. Although they faced challenges, they used moments of joy to reimagine their circumstances and apply a positive outlook via laughter and jokes. Utilizing joy as resistance and reimagining is a powerful strategy Black students use as they create and participate in Black social media spaces that result in transformative outcomes for Black students.

Escaping the White Gaze

Initially, I wanted to name this theme, “Rejecting the White Gaze.” The participants shared their perspectives that I interpreted as a desire to reject the standards put on their behavior and governance by the White majority. However, as I continued to analyze the data, I realized what the students were describing was having Black social media spaces as a moment to escape the White gaze. If they were completely rejecting it, they would not try to do things such as codeswitch when they were around White peers or feel the need to perform in specific ways that the dominant majority has named as socially acceptable or appropriate. Instead, they used Black social media spaces to get away from the pressures they felt to conform to White normative structures, language, and behaviors that were enforced by the encounters with White peers, faculty, and staff.

The comfort that Black social media spaces provide allows Black users to escape the gaze and concern of the dominant White majority, but not completely reject it. Outside of Black social spaces, the lack of comfort and confidence present in Black students during these interactions causes them to heavily monitor their vocabulary and actions. One survey participant mentioned, “Black social media spaces help students to feel more comfortable and confident and willing to express themselves.” As I read this, it made me question, Why aren’t they as willing to express themselves outside of Black spaces? What is it about their environment or non-Black peers that causes this automatic reaction to perform in ways that are different from how they would with their Black peers? As I continued to reflect on the participant’s stories, it was clear that Black social media spaces present an opportunity for Black students to express themselves in ways that do not have to consider judgment from non-Black individuals. As one survey participant shared, when they operate in Black social media spaces “we talk with each other in a way that we can’t

when other groups are around, specifically White people.” When occupying a minoritized status on campus, Black students felt that creating Black social media spaces was the only way they could participate in racial identity expression authentically. This is supported in the survey participant who offered the following statement,

On campus I can often count how many [Black] people I have seen that day. The campus is so large and there are so few Black people that this is the norm. However, on these platforms we can become the majority and it becomes less of an instance of counting Black faces on one of my hands and simply existing in a space made for us by us.

While Black students weren’t able to reject the White gaze fully, the focus group participants described this struggle of going back and forth between with wanting to be themselves with their Black peers and also feeling the need to censor themselves because their actions could be viewed by their White peers. For example, Bobby’s statement reflected this assumption he held (along with other focus group participants) that Black students are held to a specific standard for how they should govern themselves. He shared that Black social media spaces “allows me to be my full self and not have to worry about code switching...they know what I’m saying.” Bobby uses Black social media spaces to escape the White gaze that comes with judgements that are informed by White, dominant culture. This awareness Bobby holds influences his decision to code switch when he is amongst White peers, faculty, or staff. As I reflected on similar responses, I sensed that the participants had a feeling that they couldn’t be completely separated from the gaze of White peers, faculty, and staff while attending a HWI.

Although they couldn’t fully disengage from the White gaze, two focus group participants did discuss how they have used Black social media spaces to reject the approval they once felt they needed when they were immersed in White spaces. JB and Kyra mentioned how

their engagement with Black social media spaces has also allowed them to appreciate their racial identity more now that they have these Black social media spaces to engage more closely with their Black peers as opposed to having predominately White friendships. JB connected her experience to her upbringing when she stated,

I think even just myself growing up ... being surrounded with White people, and then suddenly going into an environment where there's Black women everywhere. I definitely feel more confident in myself and finding less desire to ... I don't even know what I was looking for some sort of approval or whatever ... there's like way less need for that now.

Kyra appreciated JB's statement and added to the conversation by saying "seeking approval...I feel like I did that a lot and it's just like, wow! I look back at myself, and I'm like, why was I doing that?" JB and Kyra both grew up in predominately White schools and didn't really have the desire to express their racial identity in those spaces as the only or one of the few Black people in the school. Now they have found themselves utilizing Black social spaces, both online and on-campus, to embrace their identity and reject the need to fit in and be accepted by their White peers. Bria, Leanna, and Jerome also discussed their active choice to not develop close friendships with White peers as their way of not having to deal with the White gaze. Bria stated "I just choose to stay with my people," and Christian shared a similar statement, "I stick with my people."

However, when speaking about being in their Black social media spaces, two focus group participants communicated how they felt the need to monitor themselves on social media because of their White peers. Leanna shared:

Before coming here, when all the incoming class began following each other, I saw the influx of White people that were following me, and so I just knew that there were certain

things that I couldn't post anymore, and certain language that I couldn't use anymore, especially with a public account. I mean I could. But I guess I just didn't feel comfortable doing that anymore. ... There are certain things that I just feel a little bit uncomfortable posting now knowing the audience that I have from this particular school. I have to choose my words more carefully when I make commentary on social media. ... I definitely utilize my private stories and close friends a lot more than I did before coming here.

Content posted on private stories or posted using the close friends feature allows the social media account owner to only share posts with self-selected friends or social media connections that they have manually added to their specific list of close friends followers. Bria shared a similar story when she discussed how she feels like she must be more aware of what she posts on social media. Bria stated,

I feel like it's made me super cautious, too, as to what I post on social media, going to a PWI specifically. For the simple fact that I know we do have to carry ourself a certain way, and so you don't want it [what you post] to reflect badly on the Black community.

Both Bria and Leanna's statements show that Black social media spaces are helpful in creating interactions with predominately Black peers, however, with social media (by its design) there isn't really a way to create completely Black spaces. While they preferred to engage with Black social media spaces, they also realized they couldn't entirely disconnect from their White peers.

The survey respondents also expressed the feeling of having to be more cautious and careful with what they post. Because of how they perceived race relations on campus, they wanted to express themselves on social media but tended to do so more freely using the close friends feature that social media platforms provide. The survey participants also stated their

comfortability levels with expression on social media. About 65% of respondents agreed that they feel freer to express their Blackness within Black social media spaces as opposed to physically on campus at their HWI.

The study participants described how Black social media spaces provide opportunities to temporarily escape the White gaze. These moments, along with Black social media spaces, encourage students to express themselves in authentic and liberating ways. These conditions are vital to the racial identity expression of Black students at HWIs. Scholars such as Evans and Moore (2015), Keels (2020), and Solórzano and Villalpando (1998), have discussed the power in students of color choosing to resist marginalization when occupying structures that exclude their cultural experiences. They view such forms of resistance as mechanisms that protect their identity, enhance their critical navigational skills, and encourage counter-storytelling.

Conclusion

Through the voices of the participants in this study, the experiences of Black college students at HWIs were explored. Interview and survey data revealed that social media provided participants with opportunities to engage in community building and identity-affirming spaces that were essential to their success in White educational environments. The normalcy of racism that is embedded in HWIs caused Black students to use specific navigation strategies vital to their persistence. During our focus group sessions, Black students shared counter-stories about the importance of finding community within same-race peer groups at their HWI. The students in this study discussed the value of Black social media spaces as a place where they were able to see even more people who look like them. The spaces provided access to pertinent information for Black college students, and helped students to find community, get involved in Black student organizations, and maintain connections. Using Black social media spaces allowed students to

extend their on-campus engagement with Black student organizations and became a great source of information for current events both on campus and in society at large. These spaces served as a site of affirmation and validation of the Black experience despite the many stereotypes students felt they had to combat on their college campuses. Furthermore, Black social media spaces provided Black students with a sense of safety and relatability that they might not have otherwise and offered an escape from having to code switch and monitor their actions in palatable ways for their White peers. Participants in this study were intentional about seeking out Black peers and connections because they were aware that Black social spaces are a critical tool to survive and thrive at HWIs. As a result of being a numerical minority on campus, battling stereotypes, and developing a double consciousness, an overwhelming majority of participants turned to Black social media spaces to experience joy, laughter, and a moment of liberation from a racially challenging reality. By centering the experiential knowledge of Black students at HWIs, this study provided greater understanding of Black students' perceptions of the campus climate, their experiences with race, and how they continue to push forward in their quest for higher education. While participants stated the same-race peer groups and social media platforms serve as a great source of identity affirmation, support, mentorship, confidence, and pride despite harsh campus climates; however, these groups and platforms do not come without faults. Students also discussed other aspects of these spaces, such as cliques and toxic masculinity. Participants felt these types of spaces are a hinderance to the inclusivity of Black spaces and could discourage students from participating in any Black social media space. However, in most of the instances shared, the community they created for themselves was discussed as a refreshing space that offered Black students a moment to be surrounded by their people. Ultimately, these findings

support the establishment of institutional resources, supports, and programs that can adequately address the specific educational experiences of Black college students at HWIs.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, & CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 5 contains the discussion, recommendations, and conclusions to this study on the role of social media platforms in providing same-race social groups for Black students at HWIs. This chapter will address the research question questions, deepen the interpretation of the research findings through the literature, and address the study limitations. The chapter ends with using information gathered in this study to provide recommendations for higher education and climate assessment policy and practice, along with recommendations for future research.

The role of social media platforms in the navigation strategies of Black college students at HWIs is a neglected consideration in higher education research. Because platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram are such a large aspect of the social lives of contemporary college students, a qualitative study examining social media's role in facilitating peer-based social groups for Black students at HWIs was warranted. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Black students at HWIs, with a specific focus on how they create and participate in same-race peer groups on social media. Ultimately, this study was conducted to explore if these social spaces impact how Black students navigate HWI campuses and their college experiences, make decisions on peer groups, and facilitate the expansion of students' sense of community, racial identity expression, and sources of support in predominantly and historically White environments.

The problems identified in this study stemmed from the academic challenges and social obstacles Black students face when enrolled at HWIs. Specifically, Black students face higher rates of discrimination, isolation, and racism on HWI campuses (Hurtado & Ruiz Alvarado, 2015). In response to such conditions, Black students often find safety, belonging, and joy in the creation of racially homogeneous peer groups (Keels, 2020; Levin et al., 2006; Solórzano et al.,

2000). Same-race peer association patterns among White students usually do not draw much attention. However, when students of color are observed associating in same-race peer groups, they are viewed as employing a self-segregation technique that exacerbates racial divides on campus. This claim completely rejects the culturally relevant practices that students of color engage in to preserve their cultural identity and find community, while persisting to degree completion. Considering the historical and current racial landscape of college campuses, this study illustrates that it is essential to understand what role same-race peer groups play in the lives of Black students enrolled in HWIs from an asset-based lens. This study accomplished its purpose by exploring the effects of the campus climate at HWIs on Black students and their decisions to participate in same-race peer groups on social media platforms.

This inquiry sought to understand what same-race social media counterspaces offer to Black students' educational experiences by centering the following three research questions:

1. Why do Black students at HWIs choose to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms, and what role do these spaces play in the experiences of Black students at HWIs?
2. To what extent does campus racial climate influence the decisions of Black students to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms?
3. How do Black students use the creation of their own race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms to navigate their college experience?

To answer the research questions, I disseminated a survey and conducted focus groups to obtain data that captured the experiences of Black college students who engaged in same-race peer groups while attending HWIs. Creating opportunities for Black students to communicate their stories of their experiences increases the awareness of the challenges these students encounter at

HWIs and relevant support strategies Black students use during their time on historically White campuses.

Research Questions

Research question 1 asked, *Why do Black students at HWIs choose to participate in same-race groups on social media platforms and what role do these spaces play in the experiences of Black students at HWIs?* For many of the students, social media was their first view into campus life. Social media platforms connected them to other Black students who were also at their institution before they even arrived on campus. For students who entered college during the peak of COVID-19 restrictions and campus shutdowns, social media and other technologies were great resources as students started their college experience and sought community. Equally important, students used same-race peer groups on social media platforms to inform their decisions on which events to attend, which identity-affirming student clubs and organizations to be involved with, and which social circles would offer the most potential for friendships. Black social media platforms (i.e., Black Twitter) were viewed as the glue that helped Black students' peer groups stay engaged with each other and aware of the campus events offered to enhance their college experience through extracurricular activities. Many of the participants found the connection with same-race peers who had similar career goals and aspirations particularly motivational and beneficial. Students connected through academic major-based organizations that also had a racial-identity focus, such as the National Society of Black Engineers. Furthermore, social media platforms, when used for same-race groups and spaces, provided Black students with insight on matters, such as how to navigate their HWI; cues on socially acceptable norms that guided student behavior; current events on campus, in the community, and in society at large; and gaining an understanding of college overall.

The literature on the coping skills of students of color indicates some students arrive at their college campuses already having experience with cultural marginalization (Keels, 2020). Students of color who grew up in schools and neighborhoods that were predominantly White were more prepared to deal with feelings of isolation than those students of color who did not come from those backgrounds. Students in this study who grew up in predominately White schools prior to college did not discuss previous experience with coping skills. However, they found social media helpful in identifying close friendships with Black peers. As a racially minoritized student at an HWI, they questioned their racial identity because of encounters with their White peers. Specifically, Black social media spaces served to affirm them and enhance confidence after experiencing a variety of microaggressions. The students who grew up in predominately Black schools prior to college found Black spaces on social media affirming and relatable. For example, some participants realized the fears, doubts, concerns, and other experiences they were having were also being shared by other Black students. Similar to Keels' (2020) research that displayed the importance of students of color utilizing and creating counterspaces on campus, the students in my study showed how the social media spaces were vital to crafting opportunities to communicate with and encourage each other, be empowered to share their thoughts and voice, and validate each other's feelings. Such engagement became especially important when major events happened, or issues arose that impacted the Black community. Participants often found themselves turning to social media to have conversations (and at times express their outrage) concerning acts of racism or injustice.

A crucial aspect of why the students in my study chose to participate in same-race spaces was because they felt the spaces offered them a place where they could relate to their peers over common interests and racialized experiences. In these virtual communities, students were able to

escape the discomfort they felt in physical spaces at their HWIs. Scholars (e.g., Levin et al., 2006; Solórzano et al., 2000) suggest that in addition to the academic and social pressure Black students face in general, perceptions of ethnic discrimination and the culturally unsupportive environments they encounter at HWIs are influential factors for Black students to create racially homogeneous counterspaces. In this study, students stated their parents and family also influenced their decision to join virtual communities, encouraging their Black children to connect with their racial group in these spaces as sources of support, understanding, and solidarity.

The joy and laughter same-race spaces provided sustained their engagement with same-race groups on social media platforms. Students discussed a variety of inside jokes and common concerns that are centered in online conversations, which require a level of cultural competence and culturally relevant knowledge to actively engage in these spaces. The result is a unique culture created online—one that only the in-group can understand and appreciate. The joy the participants discussed emerged from a high level of relatability felt when engaged in these spaces. Unfortunately, relatability for Black students in my study was severely lacking in the predominately White spaces they occupied on campus. The body of literature that discusses the role of subcultures for Black college students did not mention joy explicitly as an outcome of same-race spaces. However, for these participants, Black social media spaces brought joy as they were encouraged to feel more confident, show up in ethnic clothing and hairstyles without fear of judgment or microaggressions, and surround themselves with people who made them feel safe. In addition to joy, the same-race spaces served as a major source of reassurance and affirmed the participants' existence as Black students at a HWI. Such occurrences nurtured my participants as they continued to grow, develop, and explore their identity as Black students on campus.

Research question 2 asked, *What role does campus climate play in the decisions of Black students to create and/or participate in same-race groups on social media platforms?* Most of the students in my study described their campuses as racially segregated. Scholars, such as Antonio (2004) and McGowan (2016) discussed how race is a determining factor in students' decisions to make peer connections. My study participants had a desire to connect with Black students upon their entry to the HWI. They entered their college experience with an assumption that it would be difficult to connect with Black peers at a predominately and historically White campus as they would be a numerical minority of the student population, which is one aspect of the campus racial climate framework (Hurtado et al., 1998). My participants used platforms such as GroupMe and Instagram to connect and network with their fellow Black peers on campus, what some participants described as a cycle that repeated itself as networks expanded. Often, the assumptions the participants came to college with were a direct result of the negative and discouraging stories they heard from family members and friends who either attended or heard discouraging stories about Black student experiences at HWIs. As students created community within their same-race spaces, they gave themselves permission to feel more comfortable and express themselves freely amongst persons who shared their experiences. This finding is consistent with the literature demonstrating how same race spaces provide Black students with the opportunity to feel safe and welcome, show up as their authentic selves, express and embrace their cultural identities, and feel heard (Bourke, 2010; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006a; Solórzano et al., 2000). All of the focus group participants in my study expressed the need to monitor or filter themselves when around their non-Black peers. The predominately White campus environment served as a constant reminder of how different the students in my study were from the majority. Due to perceptions of a limited number of peers from similar

backgrounds, about half of the focus group participants in my study stated they sometimes felt invisible or ostracized. Same-race peer groups and social media spaces were a small piece of comfort where the students could express themselves and feel a sense of connection with others who not only understood their experiences but also lived them.

Connecting with other Black peers who are enduring similar hardships proved to be vital to students' success and overall well-being. Both focus group and survey participants were encouraged to persist through their HWIs each time they heard stories of other Black people who also struggled in similar environments. This finding is in alignment with the literature that centers the necessity of social support for college students and emphasizes how vital social support is to college student success (DeBerard et al., 2004; Dennis et al., 2005; Gloria et al., 2005; Grier-Reed & Wilson, 2016; Morosanu et al., 2010). While the students in my study initially perceived themselves to be the only ones experiencing racially driven challenges at their HWIs, they used the connection and community found in same-race spaces to increase awareness of the situations their peers were also enduring. The exposure to the lived experiences of others was a clear indicator that my participants were not alone in their individual encounters. Horvath-Plyman (2018) discussed how people of color use social media to explore shared identities and common experiences, and to join groups or interact with others as a way of finding and embracing their sense of belonging. The literature on the connections between campus cultures and racial and ethnic minoritized students proposes that safe spaces for minoritized students will help facilitate success, persistence, and resistance against identity-disaffirming campus experiences (Guiffrida, 2003; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Keels, 2020; Museus, Lâm, et al., 2012; Patton, 2006b).

The students in my study believed campus climate and race relations had an impact on their decision to create and participate in Black social media spaces. Same-race spaces on social

media served as safe environments for the participants to unpack and address racially driven instances that happened individually, collectively across campus, and in society at large. Because college campuses are microcosms of the larger society, occurrences such as police brutality and social justice movements impact the campus climate at these institutions. Another student shared how a prominent speaker who had racially-biased views against people of color was brought to their campus as a featured guest. Soon after, at least three social media pages arose on Instagram with names that specifically called for violence toward the Black students on campus. In such instances, Black social spaces were vital to coping with the intended harm directed toward Black students, helped the participants to feel less alone in those moments, and eased their fears of being attacked by other students on their campus.

While the social norms of HWIs continue to reproduce patterns of discrimination and hate, Black students use their discretion and agency to choose when to enter different racialized spaces on campus. The students in my study expressed hesitancy around entering White spaces specifically because of certain aspects of the campus climate they experienced. In particular, they discussed the fear of being tokenized, used for status or clout, being on the receiving end of microaggressions, witnessing cultural appropriation, the task of codeswitching, being held to stereotypical norms of behavior of Black students, and the perceived lack of reciprocity from White peers when it comes to initiating engagement with Black students. This finding is consistent with the literature that discussed how Black students are at an increased risk for racially tense campus climates, concerns of being accepted by their White peers, and pressure to combat stereotypes (Gray et al., 2013; Grier-Reed, 2010; Hope et al., 2018; Thelamour et al., 2019). Negative experiences Black students face in social and academic settings impact their desire to create and participate in Black social spaces. The environment my participants were

often immersed in was one that exerted a mental, physical, and emotional toll, which served as an additional burden for the students on top of academic rigor. The students in my study expressed instances when their intellect was questioned and their tendency to refrain from asking questions so they would not seem incompetent, both of which they perceived to stem from being a racial minority and biases associated with their race. Students also discussed the lack of Black professors in certain departments, which socialized them to believe Black people do not belong in or deserve academic roles. In turn, students' views were influenced regarding the lack of diversity and representation in lessons, textbooks, and accounts of historical events presented in classes.

Research question 3 asked, *How do Black students use the creation of their own race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms to navigate their college experience?*

From the students' perspective, there is an intentional focus on the creation of racially homogeneous friendship groups on campus and in online environments. When Black students cannot find community in their physical environment, they seek out race-based online spaces to initiate connection with Black peers. In addition to helping create and maintain interpersonal associations, social media sites can be helpful resources as students journey through new social environments (DeAndrea et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007; McCracken, 2017; Stanton et al., 2017; Stevens et al., 2018). The students in my study described how they observed a pattern among various racial groups on their campus. The groups were inclined to gravitate toward each other when entering a new setting, such as new classes at the beginning of the semester. The students in my study also noticed that these initial connections were usually the foundation on which their Black social spaces were built. Often fueled by their desire to find someone who looked like them, Black students actively sought out Black peers across campus. .

Social media spaces served as resources for information on a variety of factors that also influenced the participants' campus connections and community building. For example, students in my study used online campus spaces to inform their decisions on the campus-related clubs and organizations they joined, particularly race-identity affirming organizations. Such organizations, along with campus offices for racially underrepresented students, provided a number of communication outreach efforts to students so they would be aware of identity-conscious events and sources of support. Shaw (2017) discussed the importance of race-based student associations, linking them to the survival of Black students, and Black women specifically. Black student associations and support groups operate as safe havens at HWIs, meet the needs of the Black student population, and help them resist assimilation to the dominant White culture (Harper, 2013; Leath & Chavous, 2018; Shaw, 2017). Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) posited that same-ethnicity peer networks help students from minoritized backgrounds adjust and persist through their beginning years of college. Harper (2013) supports this with his study that reported many ethnic student organization meetings were spent "validating members' individual and collective experiences" with racism (p. 203). Such instances show how same-race spaces can be used to feel less isolated and help students to surround themselves with peers who experience similar forms of marginalization and oppression.

Likewise, students in my study used social media to determine who they should or should not associate with on campus. According to Stanton et al. (2017), social media platforms provide opportunities for students of color to connect, collaborate, foster positive identity development, develop collective community, and strengthen social networks. Digital campus spaces help inform students about *which* Black students they should connect with, a very important distinction to make as all Black students at HWIs do not hold salience on their racial identity and

therefore do not wish to be immersed in Black social spaces. Through their encounters with different Black students on campus, they use social cues to determine how to navigate connections with their fellow Black peers on campus. If they perceive a Black student as being more White-aligned or not having the desire to engage in racial identity expression, they tend to not connect with such a person. As the students in my study built upon their network of peers, they found peer mentors and friends who guided them to achieve in the classroom, in their career goals, and to show up in spaces boldly. Black students who use their agency to choose to surround themselves with Black peers in historically White spaces do so as an act of resistance in and of itself (Liston, 2020). Their actions result in opportunities to communicate and self-express in ways that are unique and authentic to their Black identity. According to Daniels (2012), the internet has become a space where individuals seek out congruity with others who are like themselves, especially in the context of race and ethnicity, for the purposes of racial identity construction and expression. Creating these communities on social media has proven to be vital to Black college students' success. These spaces also help students show up more confidently in physical spaces on campus because they are able to constantly view identity-affirming content and show support for each other by liking and reposting content of their peers. The students in my study described the community created within these spaces as one of the largest influences they had for staying enrolled at their college. Students used the development and lessons they gained during each semester to encourage their peers to persist through adversity, get involved in Black social spaces, and join Black student organizations. Collectively, my participants' experiences made them want to help other Black students and give back to the Black campus community in ways that would prevent those who came after them from enduring the same racial challenges.

Students also use same-race online spaces to collectively organize. For example, if the participants in my study wanted to create or promote events, they would use their networks on social media to do so. If they witnessed racist posts on social media, they used their networks to collectively strive for justice by spreading awareness of the act, contacting university leadership, and holding people accountable for addressing the situation. Additionally, when racially motivated or tense events would happen on campus, my participants used their online spaces to discuss amongst themselves, console each other, and discuss possible solutions to move forward. Steele (2016, 2018) suggested that Black digital practice displays how Black users foster resistance, critique the dominant culture, and challenge oppressive systems through the use of digital technology. Creating Black social media spaces helped the students in my study cope with the issues they experienced during their college journey. These spaces allowed them to find humor, joy, and community despite bad situations, while occupying environments that were judgment free. As the students recognized the reality of their institutions, they also used digital spaces to showcase the accomplishments of Black students, which often was not celebrated by the larger university. Students challenged the norms of how Black students are treated by creating their own platforms to spotlight their excellence.

Furthermore, online race-based spaces were used to acknowledge the racist histories of the participants' institutions and the impact of its history on the current operations, policies, and practices they witnessed on their campus. The term *historically* was used in my study to refer to the institution type rather than the term *predominantly* for this exact reason. The students' accounts were directly aligned with Keels (2020) who emphasized that it is the institution's past and foundational ideologies that continue to inform the current operations. These perpetuated

beliefs, and not just the demographic composition of the campus, make HWIs hostile places for historically minoritized student populations (Keels, 2020).

Finally, the online spaces helped keep students informed on which physical spaces are safe for Black students to congregate, which campus events to attend, and which campus resources and offices to use. According to Simms et al. (2021), for students of color specifically, their use of technology and social media sites can serve as a guide for connections and networks that are essential to their survival in physical spaces at HWIs. As conversations continue about supporting diversity and inclusion on campuses, racially minoritized students' same-race peer groups must not be looked at as the problem, but as valid social responses to historical and present-day circumstances on campus, in virtual spaces, and within the larger society.

Limitations

As with all studies, this study carries several limitations. First, I was not able to speak with every student who is currently enrolled at a HWI. However, similar to Patton (2006b), my goal was not necessarily to have results to generalize, but to have transferability of the findings of my study. This study's findings are not intended to be applicable to all Black students at HWIs who engage with social media. Its transferability is contingent upon practitioners, researchers, and scholars identifying findings and conclusions that may be relevant for their particular student population, the unique campus climate at their institution, and the current patterns of social media engagement utilized by the population of Black students at HWIs. Second, it should be considered that this study captured a specific facet of student engagement with same-race peer groups, only accounting for what takes place on social media platforms and same-race peer groups or activities on campus. There are other ways students engage with peers that are also worth investigating. Third, the focus group participants mainly discussed their engagement with

four social media platforms specifically, Twitter, Instagram, GroupMe, and TikTok. There are other social media platforms that students may use that were not as thoroughly analyzed due to the heavy engagement experiences of the participants on a small number of platforms.

Furthermore, only the participant's perception of their university's campus climate and support was included. I did not reach out to university personnel about the programs, services, or campus climate on the different campuses. Finally, there may be other Black students who did not receive nor respond to the recruitment solicitation but who could have shared different valuable insights into the experiences I sought to highlight in my study.

Discussion

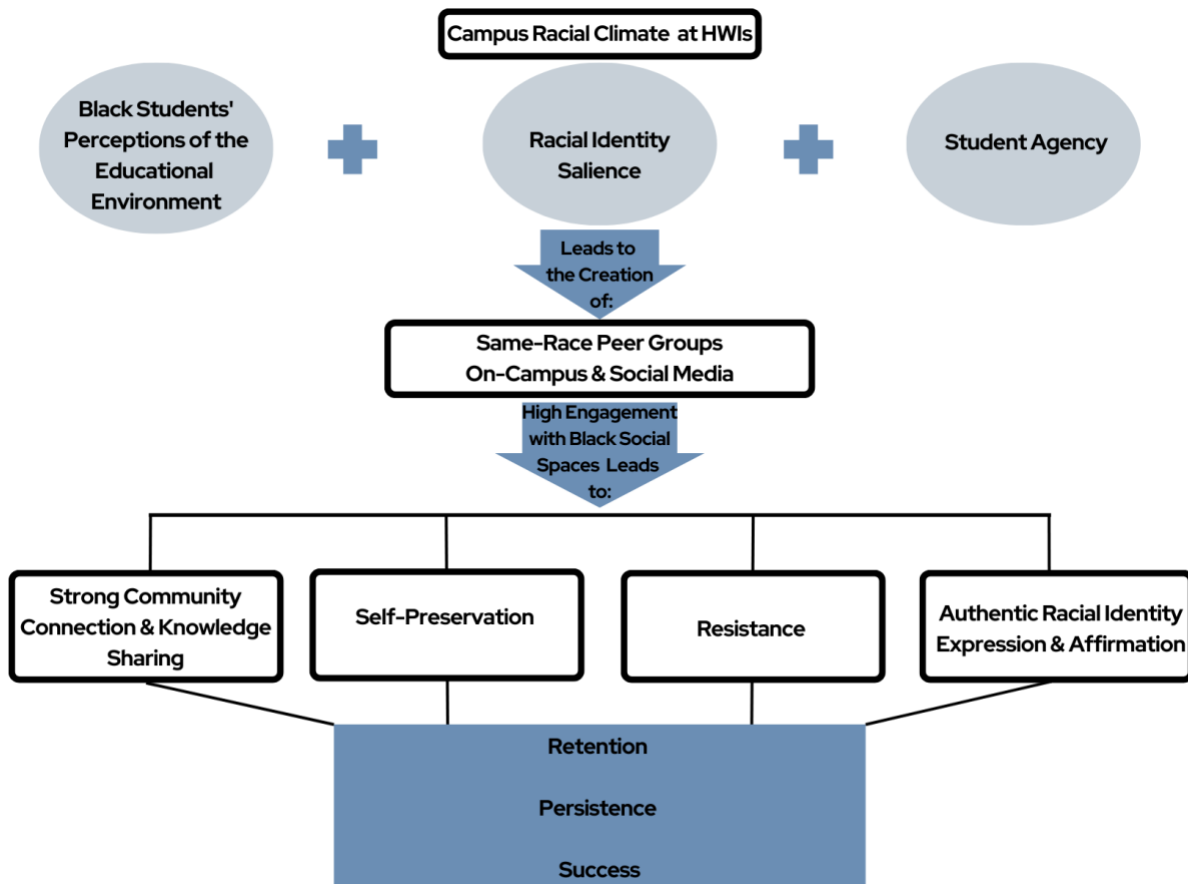
This study centered on same-race peer groups and their connection to acts of resistance, navigating success, identity affirmation, and community development for Black college students. In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the importance of examining the impact of campus climate on Black student enrollment, retention, and graduation at HWIs. One thing remains the same - navigating academic success amid racially hostile climates has been and continues to be a challenge for Black students. The historical legacy of exclusion described by the campus racial climate model (Hurtado et al., 1998) is still prominent in most HWI campuses and impacts present-day race relations on these campuses. As racial discrimination and inequities continue to be reproduced at HWIs, Black college students will persist in utilizing strategies that have proven to be successful for navigating a hostile environment. Despite hardships, Black college students at HWIs have discovered coping mechanisms that are highly effective, some of which include creating racially homogenous friend groups, joining race-based student organizations, and using social media to further connect with Black peers experiencing similar issues. While there have been a number of strategies implemented on college campuses with the

hope of supporting the enrollment, retention, and graduation of Black students, a culturally relevant approach must be used to inform institutional support programs and strategies. The coping mechanisms Black students have developed for themselves provide Black students with community and support within a place that historically has not supported Black students or their racial identity expression effectively. Studies such as this dissertation offer additional data that can inform higher education leadership decisions on how postsecondary institutions can enhance strategic support initiatives targeted specifically to Black students.

As a result of my study, I understand the ways in which different racial campus climates impact the engagement patterns of Black students with same-race peer groups on social media. Using the data from my dissertation, I designed an analytical tool to help recognize the dynamics that collectively contribute to the social responses to campus racial climates at HWIs, the operational aspects of the development of racial subcultures, and the outcomes of participation in Black social media spaces. The model shown in Figure 32 depicts campus racial climate at HWIs. The HWI is placed at the top of the model to acknowledge the context in which these experiences happen. The perceptions of campus climate, coupled with racial identity salience and student agency lead to the creation of same-race peer groups on campus and on social media platforms. If racial identity wasn't a salient identity for a Black student at a HWI, then they would not seek to create or participate in these spaces. Likewise, if Black students didn't utilize agency, Black social spaces on campus and on social media would not exist. It is the combination of all three that results in the creation of these spaces. My study's findings revealed that engagement with same-race groups results in positive outcomes for Black students, including strong connections and knowledge sharing within the Black campus community, self-preservation, resistance (i.e. joy as resistance, resistance to assimilation, etc.) and authentic racial

identity expression and affirmation. These navigation strategies were vital to the retention, persistence, and success for the students in this study. This model is one that professionals in student affairs, culture climate, and equity, diversity, and inclusion can use to implement culturally responsive practices and ways of being more conscious of the identity-affirming spaces and needs of those from racially minoritized populations.

Figure 32. Inputs and Outcomes of Same-Race Peer Groups



Research Inspiration

This study inspired the development of a research-based performance showcase where I presented my research findings in imagery and dance. The research showcase served multiple purposes that were meaningful to my educational journey. First, my research showcase was my unique approach to sharing this work with my community and supporters in a manner that was

easily accessible to them. Certain aspects of the dissertation, such as its length and academic jargon, can create barriers in the consumption of such information by people outside of the subject area. However, the use of images and the performing arts helps to present a complex topic in, what I hoped was, a way that was more manageable to understand. Secondly, I wanted to make a special contribution to the literature with my work, but I also wanted to find a way to financially support the Black college students my work seeks to uplift. The research showcase also served as a scholarship fundraiser event where all ticket proceeds went toward the Artistic Intellectual Scholarship Fund. This fund awarded two \$1000 scholarships to Black college students who demonstrated leadership potential and an interest in community involvement. In addition to the scholarships, I also planned on using ticket proceeds to award a monetary donation to a Black student organization registered at a HWI. The literature, along with my research data, spoke to the great impact Black student organizations have on the support, retention, and persistence of Black college students and I wanted to honor those efforts through financial resources. I invited several Black student organizations to the showcase, but none attended and therefore, those funds were not disseminated. Finally, as a self-proclaimed artistic intellectual, I was led to honor the artistic and creative side of my identity. Creating dance choreography informed by my research helps me to further make meaning of my work and allows me to express my research in a different format. While written documents are widely accepted and expected in academia, other presentations of knowledge can be valued. It was an amazing experience using the quotes to inform choreography, especially since I remember feeling goosebumps on my arms as I listened to some of the stories shared by the focus group participants. As they shared their stories, I could visualize choreography that would embody their stories—a truly invigorating experience.

The showcase entitled, “Asé: The Power of Black Community,” was my event that highlighted the impact of community created by Black college students at HWIs. It began with a photo gallery curated from screenshots of posts from Black social media spaces and videos that speak to the experiences of Black college students at HWIs. Utilizing the photo-elicitation submissions from the study, along with images from my timeline, I highlighted aspects of Black social media spaces that encourage Black users to continue to engage with same-race peer groups in virtual settings and provide a glimpse into the Black cultural discourse that takes place. After the data analysis phase and development of my initial research themes, I reflected on the experiences that resonated with my artistic vision and the phrases that were repeated across the focus groups (i.e., “finding my people,” “community,” and “building connections”). This reflective process resulted in developing a list of six specific aspects that I want to present in movement: (a) isolation, (b) parental support and socialization patterns, (c) finding your people and building connections, (d) fighting racial stereotypes, (e) power of community, and (f) resistance to assimilation. The order of the aforementioned dance themes was crafted with purpose and intentionality. It was my hope to take the audience through a journey of the experience of Black college students at HWIs from when they first enter campus (isolation) to when they graduate (strong community and resistance to assimilation). Utilizing the quotes from the focus group interviews and the qualitative responses from the survey, I created choreography for five dances that embody the stories shared by the participants. I created a document with each of the themes listed as headings and organized participant quotes under the corresponding heading. That document was referenced each time choreography was created to ensure I was aligning choreography for that theme with the participants’ stories. For the theme of parental support, I provided the inspiration to the two choreographers that created the movement for that

piece. The dance displaying parental support was choreographed and performed by a mother and daughter duo who have lived the experience of having a very supportive parent who encourages their Black college student who is enrolled at a HWI through the challenges and triumphs that comes with that experience. I created a video ([view here](#)) to accompany my dissertation defense presentation to show a brief overview of how I will use choreography to display the participants' stories in movement during my research showcase. Similar to the dance order of the showcase, the clips in this video were also organized intentionally. It begins with a soloist to represent the isolation the Black students initially felt when they first came to campus and that they continue to feel when they are the only Black student in their classes. The lighting for this is set to a black and white setting to show how it can feel when you are lonely. The next clip transitions to a group of dancers representing how students find their people on campus to build connections. They then use the community to uplift and support each other, which is represented by a lift. As you watch this portion, the lighting of the video transitions to blue to represent the security and trust that is developed during this time in their college experience. The video concludes with the group dancing together in a way that represents their choices to actively engage within the Black community at their HWI, a use of agency that allows them to resist assimilating into the White culture that persists at HWIs. The lighting for this final portion is red to show the strength, courage, and determination Black students exhibit during this phase of racial identity expression.

The dances performed in the showcase reflected the following experiences, which emerged as relevant for Black college students at HWIs who utilize same-race peer groups on social media platforms: isolation, parental support and socialization patterns, finding your people and building connections, fighting racial stereotypes, power of community, and resistance to assimilation. The videos of the performances have been uploaded onto YouTube and can be

viewed [here](#). The event program provided to attendees included one of the quotes that went into informing each piece of the choreography. The quote was presented in the format of a social media post, which I provide in Figures 33–39. I input the participants’ quotes into various designs that display as posts on Twitter, Instagram, Yik Yak, GroupMe, Facebook, and LinkedIn. The figures below are not screenshots of actual social media posts from the participants. Rather, I designed my own templates for social media post and put the participant’s quotes in the template accordingly. These images utilize the pseudonym of the participant and internet generated profile pictures.

Figure 33. Connections to History



Theme: Black History

Description: The social construction of race and the implications that has on the status of Black people is deeply tied to the history of the United States. This theme seeks to honor the roots of Black culture and acknowledge the historical legacy of exclusion that Black people endure(d).

Social Media Template: Twitter

Figure 34. Connections to Isolation

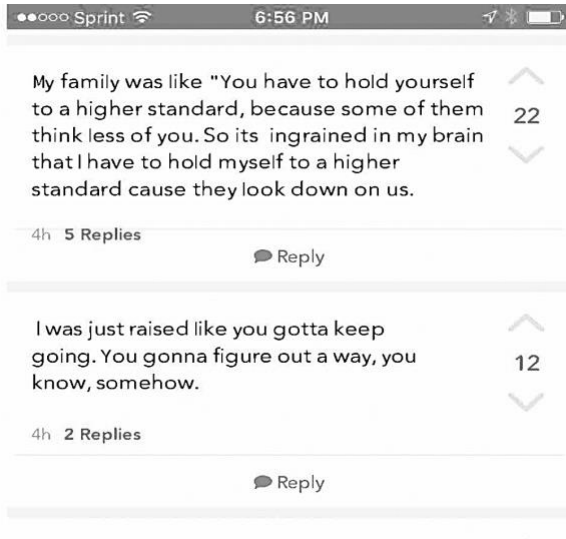


Theme: Isolation

Description: The experience of Black college students at HWIs was described as isolating. Initially the students felt alone on their campus as they navigated racial climates that were alienating.

Social Media Template: Instagram

Figure 35. Connections to Parental Support

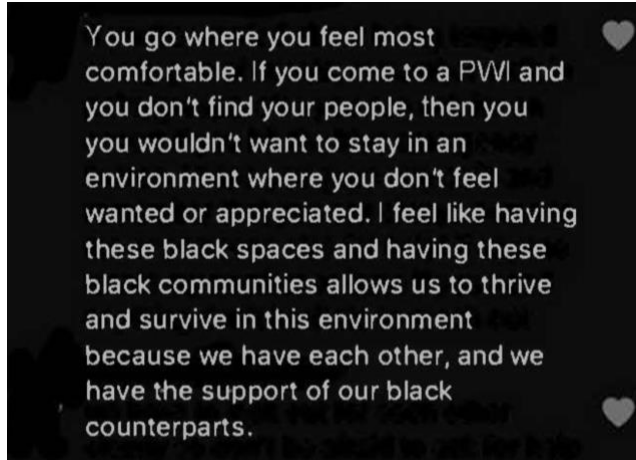


Theme: Parental support and socialization patterns

Description: The Black students in my study discussed the encouragement and motivation they received from their parents as a source of perseverance. The ways in which the Black parents of students in the study socialized their children to behave and to recognize race impacted how they engaged with their environment and peers on campus.

Social Media Template: Yik Yak

Figure 36. Connections to Finding Your People



Theme: Finding your people and building connections

Description: To combat feelings of alienation, the Black students in my study became very intentional about finding their people and building connections within Black social spaces. These same-race peer groups resulted in a strong sense of community, identity affirmation, and a support system that helped them to persist through college.

Social Media Template: GroupMe

Figure 37. Connections to Combating Stereotypes



Theme: Fighting racial stereotypes

Description: A common point of connection in these communities is the feeling of having to combat racial stereotypes in academic and social settings that are historically and predominately White. Most Black students in my study adopted the behavior of code switching, where they spoke a certain way around their White peers, faculty, and staff in order to not stand out or fit the mold of racial stereotypes the dominant group held. In the company of same-race peers, they felt more comfortable to show up as their authentic selves.

Social Media Template: Facebook

Figure 38. Connections to Community

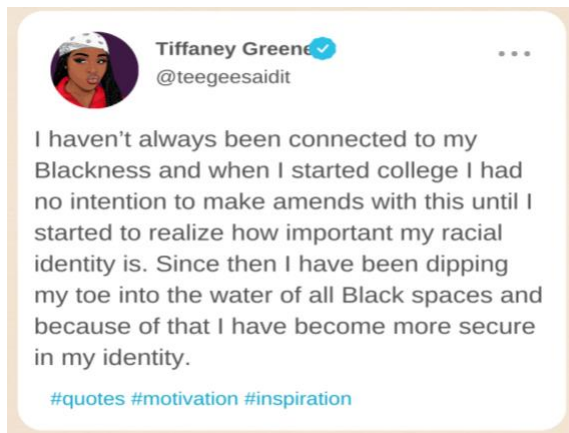


Theme: Power of community

Description: Black students who engaged in Black communities, both on campus and online, reaped great benefits that supported their success and matriculation through their HWI. Black community encouraged students to remain in school, aided in mental wellness, allowed them to share information, learn about themselves, served as a point of identity affirmation.

Social Media Template: LinkedIn

Figure 39. Connections to Resistance



Theme: Resistance to assimilation

Description: Ultimately, creating these Black spaces on campus and on social media displayed the ways in which Black students utilize agency and foster racial identity affirmation. Making a conscious decision to create and participate in Black social spaces on a historically and predominately White campus is an act of resistance to assimilating into the dominant White culture that persists at these institutions

Social Media Template: Twitter

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the nature of my study, I provide the following recommendations specifically related to increasing the retention, persistence, success, and support of Black college students at HWIs. These recommendations can provide insight to inform the decisions of campus administrators, faculty, and staff, and are not listed in any specific order of importance or rank.

- Black students have identified ways they would like to be uplifted and celebrated that feel authentic and genuine to them. Let their voices be the leader in designing opportunities to spotlight Black students. This would require university personnel to create platforms and

opportunities to elevate the Black student voice and perspective. Black students have a story to tell, and they must be the ones to share it.

- Respect, acknowledge, and support the counterspaces and subcultures Black students have created. These spaces should be viewed as valid social responses, sources of knowledge on how to engage Black students, and resources of support and success, especially as the spaces seek to fill a void created by HWIs.
- Institutions should support racial minoritized groups decisions to create counterspaces, and should also encourage engagement with and assist the sustainment of counterspaces created by these groups. Institutionally supported counterspaces for students with minoritized identities would result in attitudes that accept, encourage, and normalize counterspaces and promote them as spaces that deserve resources for their maintenance.
- Many efforts go into the recruitment of diverse student populations at HWIs, but more effort should be made to retain and graduate diverse students and ensure they feel inclusion and a sense of belonging, based on the definition for inclusion and belonging offered by the specific student demographic on that campus.
- Understand that representation matters. Institutions should continue efforts to support the diversity and inclusion of campus faculty and staff, by prioritizing the allocation of resources (specifically financial resources) to enhance the diversity of the university employee base. Institutions can create opportunities (e.g. speaker series, panel discussions, etc.) that showcase the talent and voices of faculty and staff of color. Presenting people of color as sources of knowledge can combat the messages sent to students that people of color do not belong in academic roles. The students in my study discussed the deprivation they felt when they saw little to no representation of Black

culture in faculty and staff, textbooks, and curriculum (specifically for students studying sociology and education).

- Provide equitable resources for Black student groups and organizations to support their events. Funding and resources will show institutional support for these valid and important organizations. While Black students want institutions to show their support during times of racial injustice, they also desire institutional support of Black joy; students in this study stated there are times when they simply want to have fun together. Moments of activism should not be the only time when institutions rally around their diverse groups.
- Use the university website and social media accounts to be transparent about diversity and inclusion efforts (e.g., current faculty and staff demographics and any efforts in place to diversify the employee base, mentoring programs for Black students, multicultural affairs events). The website and social media handles can also be used to advertise campus resources for students from underrepresented populations and to post university communications or stances on acts of racial discrimination or injustice that happen on campus. Many universities leave diversity posts to the specific groups or departments that focus on diversity, such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs. These posts can also be placed on the main university pages, which tend to have a larger following.
- Campuses should use social media to foster student engagement and promote the work and experiences of students. Use these platforms to be honest about racial representation on campus by posting videos and photos from campus events.
- Campuses should identify the benefits that social media brings to campus life and students using a critical race lens. This could help students more critically consider how

they use social media, the impact it has on their college experience, and inform how they navigate these spaces.

- Consider how the political climate and government decisions or mandates impact the creation and utilization of Black social media spaces or other identity-affirming spaces. For example, certain states are putting a stop to DEI efforts in educational settings through legislation. This could impact how people use identity-affirming spaces on campus and online.
- Be aware of what current students are posting on social media as it relates to racially motivated incidents, racial attitudes, and social justice campaigns on campus. Careful monitoring of social media will help institutions to proactively address problems and concerns as they become apparent.
- It is important to view the deficiencies present in the institution, as opposed to having a deficit-based view of the students who are underperforming in the areas of GPA, retention, and graduation. Institutions have areas of deficiency that should be addressed; more resources should be put toward examining and rectifying the institution's challenges in the areas of academic success, retention, and graduation rates.
- Make diversity and inclusion credits apart of general education requirements. It is important that lessons about diversity and inclusion are not limited to just people of color. White students can use information learned in such courses to help foster more inclusive environments for their peers, to become aware of how bias can impact how they engage with others, and to use their privilege and access to advocate for the needs of diverse communities.

- Institutions should craft intentional opportunities for students to create relationships across differences and to discuss racial issues and tensions that exist on campus. Such dialogues cannot be left to chance and need to take place in structured settings.
- Institutions should continue to assess their campus climates to be aware of problem areas. As assessments are completed, action plans should also be created that outline the steps the institution will take, with dates or deadlines, to hold themselves accountable.
- Institutions should refrain from grouping all students of color together when discussing diversity and inclusion. Diversity data often gets reported in categories of “URM” and “Non-URM” when displaying the racial demographics in enrollment and campus climate assessments. The distinctions between the issues and needs of different racial demographics are important and disaggregating that data helps to acknowledge large disparities that may exist for specific communities of color.
- Diversity and inclusion efforts on campuses must reflect a critical consciousness of the historical legacy of exclusion that Black students have faced and its implications for the circumstances encountered by students today. Creating inclusive environments in higher education should not only refer to promoting cross-racial interactions for students. It should also mean creating space and opportunity for minoritized students to embrace their racial identity and express it in ways that these specific student populations have identified as helpful and supportive, allowing them to organize themselves in ethnic enclaves with no shame or fault. The HWIs the focus group participants attend didn’t create opportunities for Black students to do so, but more so tolerated the Black student organization events.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several related topics emerged from this study that warrant further research and exploration. I recommend continued research on the following topics:

- As social media platforms will continue to evolve, it will be important to study the trends in how students engage with different platforms, the varying purposes each platform serves in students' social lives, and content students find useful to their success and persistence.
- It could also be helpful to study the patterns of utilization of social media spaces in different states. The different racial population demographics in different states could further exuberate the tensions felt by Black students – especially those enrolled in institutions located in cities or states with little to no Black people.
- The participants did not mention any negative effects social media engagement had on their mental health or overall well-being. While Siddiqui and Singh (2016) discussed how people use social media to find sources of support, Berryman et al. (2018) suggested social media can lead to depression, loneliness, and social anxiety. It could be beneficial to research mental health effects specifically when analyzing engagement of Black college students within Black social media spaces.
- A study that investigates the potential virtual same-race spaces have in creating opportunities for Black students to engage specifically in racial identity development and expression in-person and online should be conducted using racial identity development theories specific to Black communities.
- While this study only focused on the Black college students use of Black social media spaces, a study could be conducted on the use of same-race peer groups on social media

platforms for different racial and ethnic groups of students. This would provide information on any commonalities and/or differences in patterns that may exist.

- Black students are enrolled at various institution types. It could be useful to explore the use of same-race peer groups on social media platforms for Black students at other institution types that are not classified as HWIs.
- Conduct a study that focuses on understanding the influence social media interactions have on campus climate or how racial campus climate is manifested online. Similar to the campus climate framework designed by Hurtado et al. (1998), there could be aspects of social media and online environments that contribute to the virtual campus climate for institutions.
- My study did not disaggregate responses by academic classifications (i.e. first year, second year, senior). Differences in the social media engagement patterns of Black students may be revealed when an intentional focus is put on the experiences of different student classifications as students mature through their college experience.
- This study looked generally at the influence of the campus climate on the decisions of students to create and participate in same-race peer groups on social media. It could be helpful to conduct a study that explores how specific educational environments (i.e. research lab experiences, classroom settings, etc.) shape the social media usage patterns of students in specific demographic groups.
- Just as the historically legacy of exclusion of different groups is considered in the current circumstances of HWIs, it could be useful to explore the impact of Black history on the current patterns Black students use to express their identity and on the types of content they produce and consume. For example, the students in my study talked about how they

take pride in expressing themselves in their clothes and using social media to learn about fashion and hairstyle trends. It would be worth investigating if Black people's desire to enter spaces wearing the latest fashion trends has any connection to the legacy of wearing your "Sunday's best" – referring to the one day a week Black slaves had to put on their nice clothes for church.

- Community was very important for the study participants. New findings could arise from a study that explores how different racial groups define community and how they use community to support their college success, persistence, and resistance to assimilation in historically and/or predominately White environments.
- Multicultural affairs offices and other administrators should research ways to use social media to engage students in conversations about race relations on campus, their racialized lived experiences, and to expand the development of affinity groups and other student resources into virtual spaces.
- The students in this study discussed a hyperawareness of their minoritized status and experiences with codeswitching. A future study could explore the roles of critical and double consciousness in racially minoritized student populations who develop same-race peer groups on social media and how it impacts their decisions to do so.

Conclusion

The intent of this study was to explore how Black students at HWIs use social media to create and participate in same-race peer groups and to understand if these spaces impact how Black students navigate their college experiences, make decisions on peer groups, and engage with sources of support. Most prior research on Black students at HWIs did not fully consider the role of social media in campus climate considerations and Black student experiences on HWI

campuses, which was a gap addressed by this study. The participants of the study revealed that race-based digital spaces expand Black students' sense of community, racial identity expression, agency, resilience, and resistance to assimilation. The findings from this dissertation contribute to the growing literature on social media on college campuses by describing the ways in which social media is utilized in culturally relevant and racial identity-affirming patterns for Black students at HWIs. By advocating for same-race peer groups for Black college students, this study sought to support and encourage Black student communities through social engagement to support the success, retention, and persistence of Black college students. As higher education institutions continue to seek ways to increase the graduation rates of Black students and narrow achievement gaps, HWIs specifically should consider the great benefits of same-race peer groups and social media for the experiences of Black college students who hold race as a salient identity. Through the stories the participants shared, it is hoped that HWIs will be more conscious of the agency Black students utilize to navigate collegiate environments and achieve what they define for themselves as success. Ultimately, this study showed how these social spaces play a role in the overall college experience of Black students, and specifically on the navigation strategies Black students employ on HWI campuses to make peer groups create race-based digital campus spaces in predominantly White environments. People often look around at HWI campuses and ask, "Why are all the Black students always together?" What some may perceive as self-segregation is actually an intentional and powerful strategy Black students use as they create same-race peer groups that have the potential to operate as a site of self-preservation, community, solidarity, racial identity expression, agency, and resistance to assimilation.

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APPENDIX A: FALL 2020 PILOT STUDY—SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEY RESULTS

Q1. Think about the people and/or accounts that you follow on social media because you are connected through your college or university. Are these people and/or accounts that you follow mostly Black people or Black organizations?

	Answer	Frequency	%
1	Yes	17	68.00%
2	No	8	32.00%
	Total	25	100%

Q2. By choosing to follow Black people on social media, you are creating and participating in a virtual Black subculture. Why do you choose to create and/or participate in Black subcultures on social media platforms? Choose all the apply.

Answer	Frequency	%
The content speaks to my racial identity	11	21.15%
Provides a support network	10	19.23%
To have social interaction with people who have similar and relatable experiences	8	15.38%
I can be free to express myself	5	9.62%
I have developed associations mostly with Black students on campus	7	13.46%
Most of the people I know on campus are Black	6	11.54%
Other	1	1.92%
I don't usually interact with people outside of my race on social media	4	7.69%
Total	52	100%

Other: Text

Shows Encourages Black-Owned Businesses and Academic Excellence

Q3. Do racial problems that are specific to your campus extend to social media?

	Answer	Frequency	%
1	Yes	9	75%
2	No	3	25%
	Total	12	100%

Q4. Have you ever been victimized, discriminated against, or harassed on social media by your followers on the basis of your race?

	Answer	Frequency	%
1	Yes	4	30.77%
2	No	9	69.23%
	Total	13	100%

Q5. Which social media platforms are most used to participate in Black subcultures? (Select all that apply)

#	Answer	Frequency	%
1	Instagram	13	34.21%
2	Twitter	8	21.05%
3	Snapchat	6	15.79%
4	Facebook	5	13.16%
5	GroupMe	6	15.79%
6	Slack	0	0.00%
7	Other	0	0.00%
	Total	38	100%

Q6. Do you think following mostly Black students from your campus on social media contribute to your success on campus?

	Answer	Count	%
1	Yes	8	57.14%
2	No	4	28.57%
3	Unsure	2	14.29%
	Total	14	100%

Q7. Do you think following mostly Black students from your campus on social media contribute to creating community within the Black population on campus?

	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	85.71%	12
2	No	7.14%	1
3	Unsure	7.14%	1
	Total	100%	14

Q8. What types of campus life exist on social media platforms?

- Postive campus life/positive portrayal.
- There are mostly spaces of support and spaces to organize to create social change.
- Black Student Association, Greek life, black student movement
- Mainly discussing events on campus

Q9. What do you and your college peers discuss or post about when interacting with each other on these social media platforms?

- Events surrounding my HBCU's atmosphere/social events coming up/sorority events/football gamedays; Activities hosted by the school or student orgs
- Humorous posts.
- Trends, popular culture (i.e. celebrities, fashion), new music, etc.
- Current events such as election
- Social justice issues, racial or social struggles we experience, racism, racial issues
- Different things in our personal lives & things that happen day to day stuff (i.e. daily stresses/struggling on work & accomplishments [academic achievements, book/music launching, entrepreneurship], night out with friends

- Things they can relate to
- Encouragement

Q10. Campus racial climate looks specifically at how racial and ethnic groups feel on campus. In a positive collegiate racial climate, students of color can articulate inclusion in the campus environment, there is a curriculum reflective of the experiences of people of color, and there are programs that support the retention of students of color. How does your social media interactions and/or timeline influence how you view the campus racial climate on your campus?

- The racial climate of my HBCU campus is majority African American and to my knowledge, there are no racial tensions between any groups of people. We are an HBCU but we do accept all people who chooses to come to CSU.
- I check my social media to see how Black students are responding to major campus decisions that impact us. If what I see on social media is negative I tend to come away with a more negative perspective if many people are voicing similar concerns.
- I don't feel like there's a positive racial climate at TCU. There's clear division and I don't feel included at all. TCU Black Community on social media has been extremely supportive towards me and I feel like I have a save space on campus and the media and I don't feel alone in what I go through at TCU.
- I think the minority, particularly Black, student population on our campus is so small that it is hard for social media to make a significant impact.
- I interact with the African American Association on my campus via social media often. Being at a predominantly white school we are trying to build a Black culture that educates and promotes unity and awareness
- It shows that there is a problem and it encourages ways to fix it

Q11 What is your gender?

	Answer	Frequency	%
1	Male	0	
2	Female	13	100%
3	Non-binary	0	
4	Transgender	0	
5	Other	0	
	Total	13	100%

Q12. What is your classification?

	Answer	Frequency	%
1	Freshman	4	30.77%
2	Sophomore	5	38.46%
3	Junior	2	15.38%
4	Senior	2	15.38%
5	Already graduated	0	
6	Other	0	
	Total	13	100%

Q13. What type of institution do you attend?

Answer	Frequency	%
Historically Black College and University (HBCU)	1	7.69%
Predominately White Institution (PWI)	11	84.62%
Minority Serving Institution	0	0.00%
Other	1	7.69%
Total	13	100%

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Meeting 1 Agenda

- Welcome & Introduction

Welcome and thank you again for agreeing to participate in the study. Before we begin the focus group interview, I'll review a few introductory items. Please also feel free to ask me questions or tell me your concerns. We can stop the group interview at any time.

- First, is everyone 18 years of age or older?
- Did everyone have a chance to review the study information sheet?
- Please let me know if you have any questions.
- In a focus group interview, it is important for all group members to take part and be heard. It is OK if you and your peers agree or disagree on certain subjects. I ask that everyone not share what is discussed in the focus group. However, I cannot ensure full confidentiality.
- Is it OK if I video record and start the interview?

- Review agenda/consent and purpose of focus group

- Introductions (students will choose pseudonyms) - I'll ask that each of you change your name on Zoom to display the alias that you have chosen.

- Focus group questions

- Wrap-up and Thank you

- Share how data will be used for my dissertation and distributed in my publications
- Share that I will offer a chance to do member checks
- Answer any questions

Meeting 2 Agenda

- Welcomes & Re-introductions

Welcome back and thank you for joining me again for a second conversation.

- As a reminder I will record this session. You all can also change your Zoom name to display your pseudonym.

- Focus group questions

- Wrap-up and Thank you

- Reminder that data will be used for my dissertation and distributed in my publications
- Reminder that I will offer a chance to do member checks
- Answer any questions

Meeting 1 Questions

1. Please share what interested you in participating in a dialogue about Black students at a HWI and their experiences with social media.
2. You are in this study because of your participation in Black social media spaces. Tell me about that in your life.
 - a. What do you enjoy?
 - b. What do these same race social media spaces offer you?

Probing questions:

- i. Why did you get involved in these spaces on social media? How do these spaces make you feel?
- ii. Do these spaces help you develop your Black identity in a historically White institution?
- iii. In what ways have these spaces benefited or not benefited you?

Probing area: Ability to find a liberating space

- iv. What do you find most appealing about these spaces? Least appealing? Why?
- c. How did you get involved in (or create) same-race groups on social media?
3. What impact has participation in Black social media spaces had on your college experience?

Probing questions:

- a. What about in relation to your academic performance, persistence, or achievement?
- b. What about in relation to your sense of community & belonging?
- c. What about in relation to your well-being, feelings, & race-related stress?

4. How would you describe race relations and the campus climate (defined as your ability to be included and respected as a racial minority) on your campus?
 - a. What have your experiences been like with your White peers?
 - b. What have your experiences been like with your Black peers?
 - c. How does the campus racial climate impact your decision to create or participate in same-race spaces on social media platforms?

Probing questions:

- i. Have you had a negative experience with the campus climate (where you were not included or respected) that you attribute to you being a Black student on campus?
 - ii. To what extent is there space for Blackness and Black people on your campus?
 - iii. Where do you feel the most comfortable being Black on your campus? With whom (what type of followers) do you feel the most comfortable being Black on social media? Why?
 - iv. Where do you feel the least comfortable being Black on your campus? With whom (what type of followers) do you feel the least comfortable being Black on social media? Why?
 - v. How has the campus climate encouraged or discouraged you from connecting with your Black peers on social media?
5. Have you faced any racially driven or motivated obstacles or challenges while attending your college/university? If yes, please share an instance. If no, please explain what you think has contributed to you not having such challenges.

- a. Have these instances influenced your decision to engage with Black social media spaces?
6. Do current events regarding race affect what and how you post on social media regarding race?
 - a. Do they impact the people you engage with or follow on social media platforms?
 - b. Tell me what you do when you come across or experience an offensive or insensitive post on social media related to race or ethnicity?
7. What does it mean to be Black on this campus? How do you think Black students are perceived on campus?
 - a. What is it like to be a Black student on a historically White campus? How would you describe the experience of being a Black student on this campus?
 - b. What messages have you been given about Blackness on your campus? How were those messages conveyed? Who conveyed these messages? How have these messages influenced you?
 - c. How does this meaning and/or your race influence your decision to be involved with Black social media spaces with your Black peers on campus?
 - d. How does this meaning inform how you navigate your campus or college experience?

Probing questions:

- i. How do you define yourselves in relation to stereotypes?
- ii. How do you learn how to balance institutional versus personal identity and group belonging?

iii. How do you navigate any identity challenges all while focusing on achieving academic success?

8. Finish these statements: (Will use poll everywhere to create a word cloud with their responses)

- a. Because I utilize Black social media spaces, I feel_____
- b. Because I engage with Black social spaces, I think about _____
- c. Because I engage with Black social spaces, I am committed to _____
- d. Because I engage with Black social spaces, I know that_____
- e. Because I engage with Black social spaces, I do more _____ (action)
- f. Because I engage with Black social spaces, it is important that I share _____

9. Is there anything we haven't talked about related to the influence of being a part of Black social media spaces that you want to talk about? Is there a question you wanted to address that we haven't addressed?

Meeting 2 Questions

Prior to coming together for the second meeting, participants were asked to send in photos that represent their experiences with same-race peer groups on social media (prompts listed below). The researcher provided sample photographs and narratives to help familiarize the participants with what they needed to complete for this task. Participants were asked to provide a written narrative to describe their photos and how each photo reflects their experience and the meaning they attribute to the photo.

Photo-Elicitation Prompts:

- Photos of social media content that Black students find most valuable throughout their college experiences at HWIs.
 - Photos that represent the content and occurrences on social media that have encouraged you to participate in Black social media spaces
 - Photos that show messages and images you have posted about your racial experiences
 - Photos that display the most impactful or important types of content, discussions, etc. that happen in your virtual same-race peer groups or race-based digital campus spaces.
 - Photos that represents how Black students at HWIs interpret the meaning of being Black on campus.
1. From your perspective, do students intentionally focus on the creation of racially homogeneous friendship groups on campus & on social media platforms or does it just happen? Please explain.
 2. Do your experiences on social media ever change how you portray or conduct yourself as a Black student on campus?

3. Tell me about how you all perceive race as impacting the creation, use, and importance or relevance of race-based digital campus spaces for Black students at your HWI?
 - a. How does race matter in the formation of race-based digital campus spaces online among Black students at HWIs?
4. How has the campus climate encouraged or discouraged you from creating and/or using race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms?
5. What role, if any, do race-based digital campus spaces play in helping you navigate the college? Examples of race-based digital campus spaces are hashtags such as #BlackatNCState, Instagram pages such as @Blkatpwi.
 - a. How, if at all, has your involvement in these same race social spaces helped you connect with your peers, the campus, or find sources of support?
 - b. Do you feel like your experiences with these race-based digital campus spaces contribute to you feeling connected to your campus community? Why or why not?
 - c. What do these spaces mean for you and your college experience?
 - d. What do these spaces offer you that other campus spaces do not provide?

Probing areas: cultural validation & affirmation, racial identity expression, advocacy, perseverance, resilience, persistence, agency, & resistance to assimilation
6. Do the race-based social media groups substitute or compliment on-campus engagement and interactions?
7. What do you think other people should know about your experiences as Black students at a HWI?

8. What do you think other people should know about your experiences with race-based digital campus spaces and how you use them?
9. What recommendations would you make to university leaders concerning ways to support Black student use of same-race peer groups or race-based digital campus spaces on social media platforms?
10. Is there anything we haven't talked about related to the influence of being a part of Black social media spaces that you want to talk about? Is there a question you wanted to address that we haven't addressed?

APPENDIX C: SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEY

Q1 Social Media Survey

You are invited to participate in a research study that will explore how Black college students at Historically White Institutions (HWI) use social media platforms. In this survey, you will be asked about your social media connections, your social media engagement, and your experiences with connecting with Black people on social media platforms. Essentially, it would require you to reflect on your experiences as a Black college student at a HWI and what connections that may have with you seeking to create or participate in Black spaces and engage with Black peer groups on social media platforms. I am administering this survey for my dissertation to develop a better understanding of the extent to which Black social media spaces influence the college experiences of Black students. The survey usually takes about 15 minutes to complete. I deeply appreciate your input on this topic, cooperation, and willingness to provide information.

The survey will ask you a few questions about your identity; however, your responses are anonymous. You must be 18 years or older to complete this survey. Your involvement and participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop taking the survey at any time or choose not to answer particular questions. If you wish to stop taking the survey, simply leave the survey and close out of your browser. We will not record your responses until you hit the final arrow button on the last page. Participants who complete the survey in its entirety will be entered into a drawing for one of four \$25 gift cards and a t-shirt. You will have to complete a separate

form to be entered into the drawing, which you will be directed to upon completion of the survey.

To view the consent form click [here](#).

By moving forward with this survey, you are agreeing that you are openly willing to consent to take part in this study.

Yes, I consent to participating in this research study. (4)

No, I do not consent to participating in this research study.(5)

Q2. Participants eligible for this study must identify as Black college students who currently are enrolled at or recently graduated (within the last year) from a Historically White Institution.

Please answer the following questions to see if you qualify for participation.

Q3. Do you identify as Black - having racial and ethnic origins in the African diaspora (i.e., African American, Caribbean-American, African immigrants living in the U.S., or bi/multi-racial)?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q4. Are you currently enrolled at or recently graduated from (within the last year) a 4-year Historically White Institution (HWI)? HWI is an institution whose history, policies, practices,

and ideologies center whiteness or the white majority and by design, tend to marginalize the identities, perspectives, and practices of people of color.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5. Do you regularly use social media (i.e. viewing, scrolling, and/or posting on a regular basis)?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

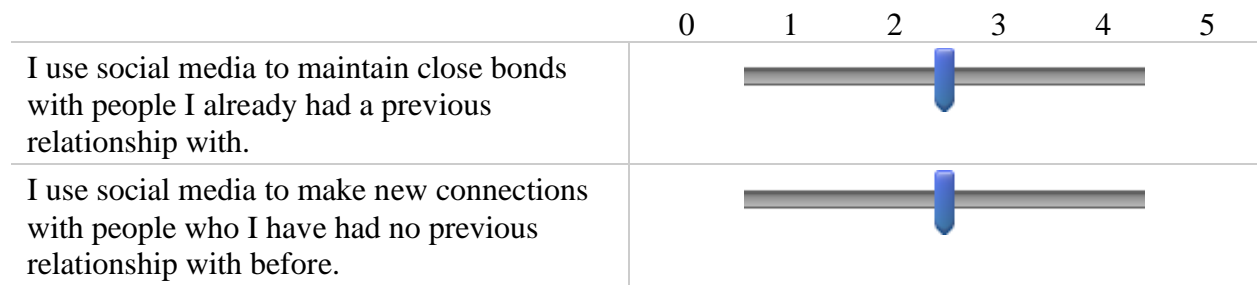
Q6. Do you engage with or use Black social media spaces (Defined as creating or participating in social media spaces with Black social media users or Black spaces such as Black Twitter)?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q7. Please rate the number of accounts that you follow that are associated with Black people, Black organizations, Black current events, or other aspects of Black life (i.e. Black fashion, Black marriage, Black celebrity news, etc.).

- All of the accounts I follow are Black accounts
- Most of the accounts I follow are Black accounts
- About half of the accounts I follow are Black accounts
- Some of the accounts I follow are Black accounts
- Very few of the accounts I follow are Black accounts

Q8. I am interested in knowing who you are connecting with on social media - people you already know or new people you have not met before. Move the cursor to show how likely you are to use social media based on the listed statements with 0 being not likely and 5 being very likely.



Q9. Why do you choose to create and/or participate in predominantly Black spaces on social media platforms? Black social media spaces are defined as predominantly Black spaces on social media platforms that allow you to interact with or view content from Black people, organizations, and/or peers? Choose all the apply.

- The content speaks to my racial identity
- Provides a support network
- To have social interaction with people who have similar and relatable experiences
- I can be free to express myself
- My experiences as a Black student are validated in these spaces
- These spaces are affirming
- I have developed associations mostly with Black students on campus
- Most of the people I know on campus are Black
- I don't usually interact with people outside of my race on social media
- Another option not listed _____

Q10. On average, how often do you engage (view, scroll, post, like, comment, etc.) on Black social media spaces?

- Once a day
- Multiple times a day
- Once/ Twice a week
- 3-4 times a week
- More than 5 times a week
- 3-4 times a month
- Once/twice a month
- Other _____

Q11. How involved are you with on-campus Black spaces, social events, and/or organizations at your college?

- Never
- Sometimes
- About half the time
- Most of the time
- Always

Q12. Think about the accounts you follow that reflect your campus connections (i.e. your college peers, campus organizations, etc.). Please rate the amount of accounts that you follow that are

associated with Black students from your campus or Black organizations represented on your campus.

- All of the campus connections I follow are Black students/orgs accounts
- Most of the campus connections I follow are Black students/orgs accounts
- About half of the campus connections I follow are Black students/orgs accounts
- Some of the campus connections I follow are Black students/orgs accounts
- Very few of the campus connections I follow are Black students/orgs accounts
- None of the campus connections I follow are Black students/orgs accounts

Q13. What purpose do Black campus social media spaces or Black campus connections you follow on these platforms play in your college experience? How do these spaces compliment the physical Black spaces (i.e. African American Cultural Center) on campus?

Q14. How much do you think connecting with campus based Black social media spaces (i.e. following other Black students at your school or using a hashtag that talks about the Black experience at your school) contribute to your academic success on campus?

- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount
- A little
- None at all

Q15. Please share more about your answer above. Explain how or why.

Q16. How much of a sense of community or belonging amongst the Black student population on campus is created by engaging in these Black social media spaces with your campus peers?

- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount
- A little
- None at all

Q17. Please explain your answer above. Explain how or why.

Q18. How much do you think connecting with campus based Black social media spaces (i.e. following other Black students at your school or using a hashtag that talks about the Black experience at your school) contribute to your persistence through college?

- A great deal
- A lot
- A moderate amount
- A little
- None at all

Q19. Please explain your answer above. Explain how or why. _____

Q20. What do you and your college peers discuss or post about when interacting with each other in predominantly Black spaces on social media platforms? _____

Q21. Do racial issues that happen on your campus become topics of discussion on social media platforms?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q22. Rate the level to which you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly Disagree (5)
I feel more free to express my racial identity on Black social media spaces than I do on campus. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
At my university, I sometimes fear speaking out against race-related issues. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Black social media spaces act as a safe space for me as a Black student at a HWI. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
As a Black student, I feel more empowered to have conversations about race on Black social media spaces than on campus. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My experiences as a Black person are affirmed in the content that is posted by the users of Black social media spaces I am a part of. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q23. Is there anything else that you'd like to say about social media use as it relates to how you use Black social media spaces as a college student?

- No
- Yes _____

Q24. Please rank the social media platforms below based on which ones you most heavily use to participate in Black social media spaces.

- _____ Twitter
- _____ Instagram
- _____ Facebook
- _____ Snapchat
- _____ GroupMe
- _____ Slack
- _____ Other

Q25. How would you classify your gender identity?

- Female
 - Male
 - Transgender Female
 - Transgender Male
 - Gender Non-Conforming
 - Another Option Not Listed _____
- Q26. What is your classification?

- First year student
- Sophomore

- Junior
- Senior
- Recent graduate
- Other _____

Q27. What is your major?

- Anthropology/Sociology
- Biology
- Business/Management/Economics
- Chemistry
- Communication & Journalism
- Computer Science/ Information Technology
- Criminal Justice/Political Science
- Education
- Engineering
- English
- Kinesiology/Physical Therapy
- Math
- Nursing
- Psychology
- Visual and Performing Arts
- Another Option Not Listed _____

Q28. What school do you attend? _____

Q29. How do you racially identify?

- African
- African-American
- Afro-Caribbean
- Afro-Latina/o

- Black
- Caribbean
- Bi/Multi-racial _____
- Another option not listed _____

Q30. How old are you? _____

Q31. What are other important or prominent identities that influence your educational experiences? (select all that apply)

- Skin
- Gender
- Sexual Orientation
- Religion
- Age
- Immigration Status
- Ability Status
- Social Class/Income
- Another Option Not Listed _____

Q32. Using the identities you selected above, please rank the order in which these identities most heavily influence to least heavily influence your experiences. For example, 1. Age, 2. Ability

Q33. How would you describe the racial makeup of the neighborhoods you mostly grew up in?

- Predominantly Black
- Predominantly White
- An even mix of multiple races _____
- Another Option Not Listed _____

Q34. How would you describe the racial makeup of your high school?

- Predominantly Black
- Predominantly White
- An even mix of multiple races _____
- Another Option Not Listed _____

Q35. Thank you for taking this survey. In order to be entered into the drawing for one of four \$25 gift cards or a free t-shirt, please click [this link](#).