USER ID/ENTITY: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF ONLINE INTERACTION IN BLACK RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION

by

DAVID ALAN MARTIN JR.

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Sociology
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2017

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: David Alan Martin Jr.

Title: User Id/Entity: Examining The Role Of Online Interaction In Black Racial Identity Formation

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Sociology by:

Jiannbin Shiao	Chairperson
CJ Pascoe	Core Member
Jessica Vasquez-Tokos	Core Member
Gordon Hall	Institutional Representative

and

Scott L. Pratt	Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded June 2017

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

David Alan Martin Jr.

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology

June 2017

Title: User Id/Entity: Examining The Role Of Online Interaction In Black Racial Identity Formation

Racial identity formation has been extensively studied but lacks an adequate accounting of one of the dominant forms of modern communication: social media interactions. Existing literature acknowledges an implicit and complex relationship between various forms of communication and racial identity formation. Nevertheless, the role of online interactions, and how they affect the development of multi-layered and complex identities, remains largely underexplored. This dissertation explores how the Internet, and its related technologies, provide new forms of communications that facilitate the formation, negotiation, and presentation of racial identity for African American young adults in college. By examining the intersection of communications research and race and ethnicity scholarship, I reveal new mechanisms for racial identity formation, explain how social media interactions moderate existing identity formation processes, and shed light upon new sites where existing processes are enacted. All of these outcomes provide new insight into how the process of identity formation unfolds for black Americans in the "information age."

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: David Alan Martin Jr.

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids
Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Rapids

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, Sociology, 2017, University of Oregon
Master of Science, Sociology, 2011, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Science, Sociology, 2009, Grand Valley State University
Associate of Arts, Sociology, 2006, Grand Rapids Community College

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Racial Identity Formation
Racial Stratification
Social Media & Internet Studies
Qualitative Methods
Digital Ethnography

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Assistant Professor, Aquinas College, 2017-Present

Visiting Professor, Grand Valley State University, 2016-2017

Adjunct Professor, Grand Valley State University, 2015

Student Engagement Coordinator, Center for Diversity & Inclusion, Aquinas College 2014-2015

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Leon Culbertson Scholarship, University of Oregon, 2016

Norton Cowden Scholarship, University of Oregon, 2016

Graduate School Research Award for Data Collection and Presentation, University of Oregon, 2016

Charles W. Hunt Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, University of Oregon, 2016

Distinguished Alumni, Grand Valley State University, 2015

Wasby-Johnson Sociology Dissertation Research Award, University of Oregon, 2015

UO Diversity Excellence Scholarship, Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence, University of Oregon, 2015

Research Support Grant, Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, 2015

William Stout Scholarship, College of Arts and Sciences, University of Oregon, 2014-2015

Lawrence Carter Graduate Student Research Award, Dept. of Sociology, University of Oregon, 2014

Graduate Fellowship, Office of the Dean of Students, University of Oregon, 2011-2012

Promising Scholar Award, Graduate School, University of Oregon, 2009-2010

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, 2009-2017

Competent Communicator Award, Toastmasters International Communication Program, 2009

The "Outstanding Student in Sociology" Award, Department of Sociology, Grand Valley State University, 2008

Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program Fellowship, Grand Valley State University, 2007-2008

Dean's List, Grand Valley State University, 2007-2009

National Dean's List, Grand Valley State University, 2007

Dean's List, Grand Rapids Community College, 2005-2007

PUBLICATIONS:

Martin Jr., D. 2009 "Mini-Kingdoms and Ivory Towers: A Critical Analysis of Higher Education in Modern Civil Society" Michigan Sociological Review. Vol. 23

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is no array of words, in all the languages spoken in the history of human kind, that would sufficiently express the immense gratitude I have for all who, on this long path, helped me to achieve the greatest pursuit of my life.

I am in your debt, always.

Doris Bawardi (mom), David A. Martin Sr. (Dad), Nadya Taylor, Isaiah “little-biscuit” Taylor, Tracy DeHaan, Rob Molinar, Jason DeHaan

Professor Juan Carlos Heredia, Professor Gertrude Croom, Professor Cedric Williams, Professor David Tower,

Professor Brian Phillips, Professor Michael Ott, Professor Jennifer Stewart, McNair Director Dolli Lutes

Professor Jiannbin Shiao, Professor CJ Pascoe, Professor Jessica Vasquez-Tokos, Professor Caleb Southworth, Professor Ryan Light, Professor Jim Elliot

DEDICATION

This, my life's work, I dedicate to all that is good in this world.
For all who strive and work for equality.
For all those who survive oppression and indifference.
Be encouraged. Justice prevails in the end.

With love.
In solidarity.
Forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

I. INTRODUCTION 01

The Central Argument 15

Overview of Methodology 21

Research Design 21

Limitations of Prior Studies 23

Data Collection and Fieldwork Summary 25

African-American Youth as the Population of Interest 25

Offline Research Site 27

Summary of the Survey and Interview Process 29

Summary of Digital Content Analysis 30

Participant New Media Use 34

Limitations of Research Design 39

Variation in Sample Size 39

Changes to Social Network Application Program Interface and Built Environment 39

Limitation Of Online Data Type And Amount Collected 40

Lack Of Inclusion In App-Centric Online Interactions 41

Key Conceptual and Operational Definitions – New Media And Online Interactions 41

Overview of Major Theories and Bodies of Scholarship Grounding This Project 44

Organization of the Dissertation 46

Chapter Page

II. MANAGING THE CULTURE SHOCK: EXPERIENCING BLACK IDENTITY IN A PWI AND THE ROLE OF ONLINE INTERACTIONS 51

Sites for Identity Formation 52

Identity Formation Processes 59

Familial Influence and Community Demographics 59

Appearance 62

Social Networks 67

Language and Discourse 69

The Problem of Hostile Campus Climates 70

Sources of Black Student Emotional Labor and The Causes of Hostile Campus Racial Climate 72

Metastereotypes and the Affects on Minority Student Success 80

Offline Encounters Triggering Online Action and the Emotional

Toll of Attending a PWI 84

Coping Strategies for Managing Metastereotypes and Microaggressions 89

The Strengthening of Black Student Ties 93

Online Strategies for Managing Hostile Campus Climate 97

Summary of Findings 104

III. SOCIAL MEDIA ECOLOGIES: THE PROPERTIES OF DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS AND THE AFFECTS ON IDENTITY 111

Digital Divides and Inequalities 113

The First Digital Divide: The Haves and Have-Nots 113

The Second Digital Divide: Stratification Within the User Group 114

Chapter Page

From Digital to Digital Inequalities 115

Expansions to the Scholarship 117

Beyond Bricks And Mortar: How The Built Environment Of Social Media Spaces Shape Online Interactions 121

Structure And Properties Of Online Environments And Interactions 122

Distance & Reach 122

Confusion 127

Anonymity 129

Asynchronicity 131

Integration 133

Permanence 135

Media Multiplexity 137

Multi-Site Integration And Cross-Posting 141

The New Media Hub And Strategic Site Use: Building And Breaking Symbolic Barriers 150

Facebook 152

Twitter 153

Instagram 156

Domain-Centric Analyses 159

Hierarchy Of Social Media Activities And "Genres Of Participation" 163

Liking To Hang Out 167

Messing Around And Geeking Out Combined: Posting As "Geeking Around" 169

Chapter Page

Sharing And Tagging As Geeking Out 172

Summary Of Findings 179

IV. CONSTRUCTING THE (DIGITAL) SELF: CREATING BLACK COUNTER NARRATIVES AND IMAGES & BUILDING DIGITAL BLACK COMMUNTITIES 183

Online Space As Racialized Space 185

The Difference Between On- And Offline Oppression 187

Trolls Under The Digital Bridge: Anti-Black Racism In Digital Environments And Strategies For Managing Online Oppression 192

Challenging Deficit Notions Of Blackness 205

Creating Counter Narratives 213

Constructing Positive Images Of Blackness 218

Creating Black Communities – Building Black Counterspaces 228

Aspects of online community formation 230

The Role Of Digital Black Communities 241

Summary Of Findings 246

IV. CONCLUSION 250

Findings 252

Limitations And Future Scholarship 259

Discussion 260

Conclusion 267

REFERENCES CITED 269

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Reblogged Tumblr Images – African Model in High Fashion 02

2. Eric Garner Twitter article – Cross-post to Facebook 03

3. Tumblr - Reblogged Black Simpsons Meme..... 04

4. Triple A Flowchart..... 16

5. Triple A Framework – Subprocess chart 20

6. Proportion of Survey Respondents Using Social Media Site 36

7. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Check SNS 37

8. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Post Updates..... 37

9. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Comment on Posts..... 38

10. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Share Posts 38

11. Yarra Triple A – Armoring (Subprocess Activation Chart) 98

12. Triple A Framework – Armor/Anxiety Pillars (No subprocess activation)..... 101

13. Triple A Framework – Armor/Anxiety Pillars (Anxiety Exposure)..... 103

14. Triple A Flowchart (Offline Life Provoking Online Action) 109

15. Rosalyn Facebook – Asynchronicity 136

16. Rosalyn Facebook – Asynchronicity Caption & Thread 137

17. Teddy's Edited Facebook Comment – Cross-Posted To Instagram 144

18. Teddy's Edited Facebook Comment – Cross-Posted To Instagram
- Comment Thread 145

19. Teddy's Cross-Posting – Triple A Activation Chart (Major Pillars Activated) 146

20. Teddy's Cross-Posting – Triple A Chart (Subprocesses Activated)..... 149

Figure Page

21. PEW Social Media Trend Data 1 150

22. PEW Social Media Popularity Data 153

23. Gayle – Instagram Post – Identity Affirmation 1 157

24. Gayle –Instagram Post – Identity Affirmation 2 157

25. Tiarra – Facebook Meme Photo – Audience restricted 1 160

26. Tiarra – Facebook Meme Photo – Audience restricted 2 161

27. Tumblr Meme Photo – #KanyeShrug 162

28. Adrianne's FB Status Update – Charleston 168

29. Alexis – Like of Adrianne's FB Status Update – Charleston 168

30. London – Facebook Shared Content 174

31. Holly – Facebook Shared Content to Tumblr 176

32. Gayle – Facebook Shared Content 178

33. Tommy – Facebook – Racial Identity Signaling 183

34. Facebook Ads Collage – Level 1 Access for Multiple Users 191

35. Russel – Confrontation Strategy - Facebook Anti-Stereotyping Post 196

36. Russel – Confrontation Strategy Facebook Anti-Stereotype Post Comment Thread 197

37. Russel's Performance – Triple A Chart (Subprocesses Activated) 199

38. Tommy – Interpersonal Confrontation Strategy– Indirect Confrontation Post on President Obama's Legitimacy (birtherism) 200

39. Tommy – Interpersonal Confrontation Strategy– Indirect Confrontation Post on President Obama's Legitimacy (birtherism) – Comment Thread 201

40. Holly – Facebook Status Update – Hair Related Microaggression 214

Figure Page

41. Tiarra – Facebook – Detroit Native 215

42. Gayle - Triple A – Affirmation Subprocess Activation Chart 216

43. Gayle – Facebook Counter Narrative Caption + Image 217

44. Teddy– Facebook Selfie W/P. Collins + Comment Thread 220

45. Teddy - Triple A – Affirmation Subprocess Activation Chart 221

46. Rayanne – Instagram Collage
Photo Caption 1: "Worrying never looked good on me, living stress free
Photo Caption 2: "Bare & Black 222

47. Rayanne – Collection of Individual Tumblr Posts 223

48. Tony – Facebook Share – Black Graduates Affirmation 224

49. Holly – Tumblr post – Michael Brown Tribute 225

50. Holly - Triple A Framework (full) Subprocess Activation Chart 226

51. Tony – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital 1 234

52. Tony – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital 2 235

53. Tony – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital 3 235

54. Tiarra – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital – Detroit Housing Bias 236

55. Tiarra – Facebook Non-dominant Cultural Capital
Caption "I'm tagging out…I can't…Tears. Tears!!" 237

56. Holly – Tumblr – Non-dominant Cultural Capital - Drunk in Love Meme 237

57. Holly – Tumblr – Non-*dominant Cultural Capital* – Police Encounter
Instructions 238

58. Triple A Framework (Full) – Subprocess illustrations 248

Figure Page

59. Holly – Tumblr
Caption: “Same 249

60. Triple A Flowchart..... 250

61. Triple A Subprocess Flowchart 251

62. Visualization – Du Bois Double Consciousness..... 265

63. Visualization – Digital Double Consciousness..... 266

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

1. Descriptive Statistics on Interviewees 30

2. SNS Accounts and Usage Proportions..... 35

3. PEW Social Media Trend Data..... 151

4. PEW Twitter Trend Data 154

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

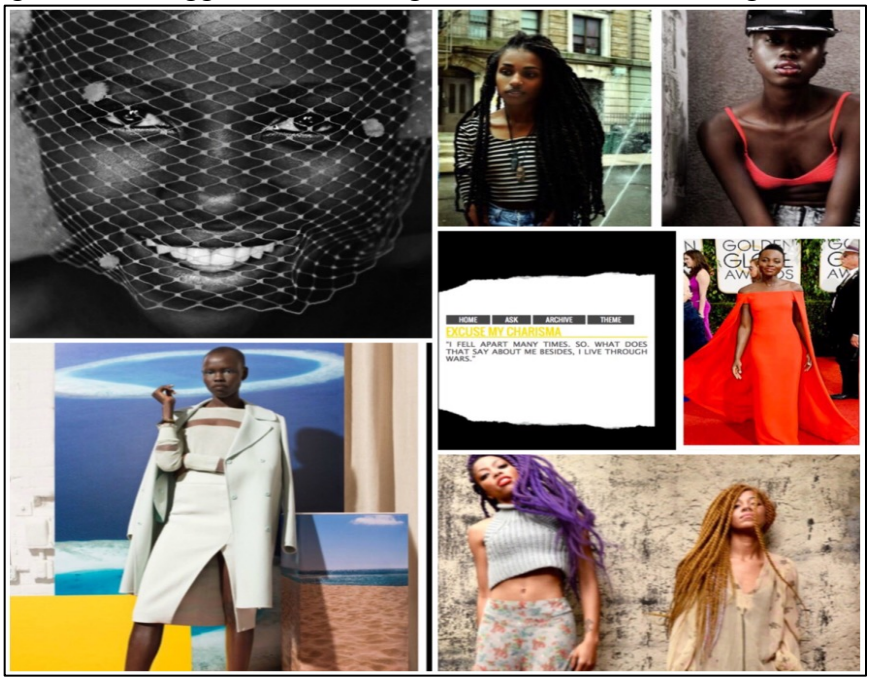
6:45 AM. It is pin-drop quite - gusts of wind and the occasional spatter of rain against the windowsill the only sounds breaking the early morning silence. Suddenly, ruckus chimes blare out in the sleepy darkness of the pre-dawn world. Blue-white light leaps forward, reaching outward toward the once dark corners of the room - a brilliant cacophony bursting outward from a thin rectangular object placed carelessly on nightstand the evening before, immediately next to the bed. It rumbles to life in a familiar morning wake-up ritual, just before the sun creeps lazily past the horizon, rays of light burning through the dank morning haze. Bleary eyed and still half asleep, a hand clumsily darts out from under a mess of covers, pillows and jostled bed sheets, frantically searching for the source of the commotion. Squinting and unenthusiastic, absentmindedly brushing a wild shock of prettily loc'd hair away from their face, they bring the object into their field of vision, temporarily blinded by its' luminous glow. Sleepy eyes squint and narrow as busy fingers begin robotically opening applications, swiping and scrolling through lists of twitter notifications, direct messages (DMs), text messages, and Instagram posts.

Eager to catch-up on the goings on of the evening before – mind becoming alight with curiosity about what may have transpired in the hours between bed time and morning, they breaks the physical and temporal constraints that have traditionally bound people to specific offline domains, entering into an online social world filled with a vast array of others, images, and multi-media interactions. This scene, perfectly ordinary in

the day-to-day lives of my respondents, highlights the ubiquity of online interaction in the lives of Black Millenials.

One respondent's first morning stop, Tumblr - a popular micro-blogging site in which each user is able to visually design their own personal online space with a plethora of pics, gifs, text, audio and other media. Stunningly flawless dark brown skin, high fashion attire and accessories, dread locs that seems to reach down to the floor and into forever, fill Yarra's gaze, first thing in the morning, as she scrolls through her personal Tumblr page. She continues a habit developed purposefully over the years - reblogging pictures of African runway models, and other women with darker complexions, in a series of positive affirmations of her own dark skin, gender identity, and African heritage. Finding an immersive satisfaction in the imagery, she takes the photos and DMs them to a relative, then shuttling them off through online space, cross-posting to Twitter and Facebook, the next stops of her morning affirmation ritual.

Figure 1. Reblogged Tumblr Images – African Model in High Fashion



A quick twitch of the fingers initiates the switch to another application, and destination two fills the screen – Twitter, a social networking site where users can post 140-character micro-messages known as tweets, in addition to a multitude of other media. To her dismay, an all too familiar headline rolls into her vision. Another variation of the anxiety-inducing, yet increasingly common, "Unarmed Black Male Killed By White Police Officer." The prior joy of the high fashion foray into positive racial identity affirmation, which raised her self-esteem and lifted her spirits, is now nearly forgotten as she, heavy hearted, follows the link to the article. With conviction, she retweets the article to her followers in hopes of illuminating the reality of mass incarceration and police brutality. With this identity-work and emotional labor, she also she takes the step of cross-posting the article to Facebook with the hashtag #policebrutality. When doing so, she makes sure to limit the audience who can view it to only those people in her anti-racism student group, which she joined in undergrad and has belonged to for many years.

By leveraging Facebook privacy tools and adjusting the accessibility of the post, she creates a sort of shield around her online interactions, effectively "Armoring" herself from the potential backlash she might face.

Figure 2. Eric Garner Twitter article – Cross-post to Facebook

Seeking emotional reprieve after reading that tweet and article, she switches again, going back to Tumblr, and begins scrolling through meme pages in an effort to find some much needed levity – an act of self-care accessible only because of the reach and mobility of social media. First scrolling past and then backing up to see more clearly, she reads the following post and immediately reblogs it as a warm smile spreads across her face.

Figure 3. Tumblr - Reblogged Black Simpsons Meme

In this pre-dawn flutter of activity, spanning a mere 15 minutes due to an efficiency bred from years of online interaction, the day has begun totally immersed in a

torrent of social media - each image and interaction shaping, freeing, and constraining various aspects of her identities. Notably absent from these goings on is any engagement with what has been traditionally been the primary Internet-enabled communication tool – email. Though still widely used by Millenials, and older generations alike, the primary form of online interactions for African American young adults has shifted to what they consider the most salient information and communication technology (ICT), social media and smartphones. Within the sea of dog photos, food porn, selfies, and Buzzfeed quizzes that tell you which Grey's Anatomy character you are, there are vital identity formations processes being enacted. For African American young adults in particular, that immersion and interaction with social media affects how they think and feel about race, racism, and racial identity in contemporary American society.

In the examples above, we see multiple components of how online life affects racial identity formation for black Millennials. In the illustration, three key processes are being enacted in an effort to leverage online resources in the development and management of racial identity. These three major processes – Armor, Anxiety, and Affirmation - make up the principal components of the Triple A Framework for understanding and categorizing online identity formation. To preview the Triple - A framework - In the first instance, Tumblr functions as an "Affirmative" interaction, whereby Yarra takes enjoyment from seeing someone with a similarly dark complexion in situations often absent from mass media imagery. This example is indicative of the reactions of black Millennials to the lack of positive representations of people of color in traditional mass media, and the colorism that permeates those images that are present.

The move to Twitter highlights the capacity of online interactions, while often positive, to have an "Anxiety" inducing quality that then creates added emotional stress and labor to the daily lives of African American young adults. Simultaneously, Yarra is able to disseminate that difficult information, and in doing so exercise agency in addressing it by informing her peer network of the realities of race relations and racial progress in the United States To compensate for the negative impact, she exercises an "Armoring" strategy with which she limits access to posts when pushing them to Facebook, also placing the content in a particular space on Facebook where she feels confident she will receive some form of support and commiseration from her geographically distant peers – people with whom she maintains equally vibrant on and offline connections.

Racial identity formation has been extensively studied, but lacks an adequate accounting of a dominant form of modern communication: online interactions. Despite exceptional work on racial identity, and what is routinely called "digital inequality," research has not sufficiently examined the intersection of race and new media to explore how the Internet, and its related technologies, affect identity formation for African American young adults. Existing literature, however, acknowledges implicit and complex relationships between various forms of offline communication and racial identity formation. Nevertheless, the role of online communications, and how they influence the development of multi-layered and complex identities, remains largely underexplored. The Internet and its related technologies provide new forms of communications that facilitate the transmission, construction, selection, and presentation of racial identity – altering

both the inputs to- and availability of racial identity options for African Americans college students in early adulthood.

Despite the ubiquity of the Internet and its related technologies, little is known about how use of these technologies impact contemporary identity formation for black Millenials. As such, I build on and extend that prior scholarship with the central question of this dissertation: What is the role of social media interaction in the contemporary identity-work of African American young adults in college?

Related questions are: How are racial boundary-work processes moderated by the use of ICTs and online interactions? How does the mobility, autonomy, and media multiplexity (picture, video, voice, music, text, animation) of ICT-mediated interactions uniquely affect those processes? How do respondents view online interactions – Is there consensus as to whether the Internet is a democratizing force that mutes the deleterious affects of white supremacy on black college student success? Are online interactions merely another avenue through which power is maintained over disadvantaged groups? Do online interactions function as bridges, decompartmentalizing traditional sites for identity formation, or does their use erect new barriers that further separate domains? Do online interactions provide a type of "counterspace" for African American students to combat deficit notions of blackness in predominantly white institutions of higher education?

Answering these questions is integral to incorporating modern communication practices into the larger sociological debate addressing identity formation, specifically that of African American students. By examining the intersection of communications research and race and ethnicity scholarship, I reveal new mechanisms for racial identity

formation, explain how ICTs moderate existing identity formation processes, and shed light upon new sites for existing processes to be enacted. All of these outcomes provide new insight into how the process of identity formation unfolds in the "information age."

Due to the history of racial inequality in the U.S. – from institutionalized slavery and Jim Crow segregation (Wacquant 2002), to mass-incarceration and colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2010) – having autonomy in the formation and presentation of racial identities is a privilege of whiteness that is often denied to people of color. Waters (1999:342) noted that African Americans faced the problem of self-definition regularly, routinely portrayed as failures, dangerous, and morally unstable. African Americans are often presented with a limited set of accepted racial identity options (Obasogie 2010).

Within the sociology of race and ethnicity, researchers such as Tuan (1998), Waters (1999), and Dhingra (2007) examined racial identity formation for various demographic groups. These scholars identified sites such as the home, work, and school, and the processes appearance, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood demographics, as impacting identity formation. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002:54) argue that to be black in the United States means that an individual occupies a racially defined ascribed status. They note that these socially defined roles have "significant impacts on the social-psychological well being of African Americans." Since being black is a racial identity, people with certain somatic traits – dark skin, tightly curled 'kinky' hair, etc. – are defined as black regardless of their individual choices, or whether or not they have ancestral ties to the African continent (Waters 1999).

These factors have contributed to the placement of African Americans perpetually at the bottom of the U.S. racial hierarchy (Mutua 1999). Tuan (1999:6) offers an account

of how the efforts to assimilate into white culture have been unsuccessful for black people, arguing that "racial options" as ethnicity have long since faded from black identity. She further notes that this reality has led to disillusionment amount African Americans resulting from the perpetual roadblocks that negate their efforts to integrate. She argues that this has helped to foster an increasingly salient need in the black community to develop a sense of unity rather than seeking opportunity to blend into white culture.

In the United States, black people are presented with a limited and rigid set of accepted racial identity options. For black Millenials in particular, many of whom navigate predominantly White institutions of higher education, the identity-work and added emotional labor associated with these conditions have negative effects on psychological well being, as well as student retention and overall academic success (Torres and Charles 2004; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Sherman, Giles, and Williams-Green 1994; Hurtado 1994; Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Allen 1988).

How one thinks of and perceives identity, both their own and others, occurs through a lifelong series of interactions and socializing processes. According to Waters (1999), identity is a, "conception of the self, a selection of physical, psychological, emotional or social attributes of particular individuals; it is not an individual as a concrete thing. It is only in the act of naming an identity, defining an identity or stereotyping an identity that identity emerges as a concrete reality." That socialization occurs through the continuous building, breaking, and adjustment of symbolic boundaries that designate what an identity is, how to be it, and what being that identity means.

Importantly, contemporary scholarship on identity formation shows that identity is not singular. Individuals hold and manage multiple identities, the formation of which is a manifold, ongoing, and fluid process with multiple inputs and points of tension. The various identities people embody come with a variety of disadvantages, privileges and shifting commitments that are context specific (Dhingra 2007). These processes are linked to various pressures and releases anchored to the social institutions, locations, communities, and larger social milieu in which individuals reside. For African Americans, each input to identity formation modifies to greater and lesser degrees what it means to be black in America. Those inputs, and their affect on black identity, have been thoroughly examined. With the emergence and salience of new media for young adults, racial identity formation today, however, needs reconceptualization.

Identity formation is the negotiation of social pressures, societal expectations, and internally held dispositions and preferences (Snow and Anderson 1987). As stated by Dhingra (2007:44), "A group identity is not static but is instead an assertion, even an intervention, to promote one's place within various hierarchies. Social statuses based on race, immigration, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to shape the meanings and salience of these group identities, as do local and community-level factors." Through the 1990s, much racial identity research was conducted on the Black population in the U.S. (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). While robust scholarship on racial stratification continues, the emphasis on black racial identity has relatively declined, with subsequent studies focusing largely on Asian (Tuan 1998), Latinx, (Roth 2012), and multi-racial identity (Renn 2004). There is a need, as a result, to update the literature on African American identity formation within sociological scholarship.

It has been argued that there are moments where identity formation shifts based on the prevailing sentiments and technological advancements of the day (Cerulo 1997). With that sentiment, Anderson (1991) asserted that, "cultural (language) and social factors (capitalism, print technology) convene in a particular historical moment, effectively remake collective images of the national self." Throughout this dissertation, I take the position that the rapid growth of social media interactions, supported by increased access to affordable and high-speed mobile Internet connections, is such a moment.

In sociological studies addressing racial and ethnic identity formation, the role of digital communication practices, and how they interact with the development of multi-layered and complex identities, is largely underexplored. Communications scholars addressing racial inequalities, meanwhile, have included race as an independent variable in statistical models of Internet adoption (NTIA 1995, 2000, 2002), investigated racial differences in online skill and "digital literacy" (Hargittai 2002), examined the association between income inequality and Internet access (DiMaggio and Bonkowski 2008), and explored social network site usage across demographic groups (Hargittai and Litt 2012). These studies illustrate the dimensions of what is routinely called "digital inequality." Few works in Internet and communications research, however, explicitly address the role of online interactions in the development of complex racial identities (Grasmuck 2009; Hughey 2008; Lee 2012).

Despite that exceptional work on black racial identity and the "digital inequality" experienced by African Americans, scholars to date have not adequately explored how the increasing ubiquity of the Internet and new information and communication

technologies (ICT) have mediated and expanded the contemporary identity work of African American young adults in college. These new technologies, however, have transformed the processes by which racial identity is negotiated and presented. They have also allowed for the creation of new online social spaces that provide mobile, autonomous, and sometimes anonymous sites for racial identity formation.

Identity formation processes rely on sets of communication and interaction practices that relay the parameters of various identities through socializing agents and institutions. The changing landscape of modern communication, which includes the advent, expansion, and mobility of new media and Internet technologies, continuously adjusts modern information seeking, receiving, and sending behavior.

Online interaction is an increasingly important component of everyday life for all demographic groups in the United States, especially teens and young adults (Rainie and Wellman 2012; PEW 2010; Ito et al 2012). The study of how ICTs complicate the analysis of race and identity formation, as such, should be an area of interest for race and ethnicity scholars, as well as Internet and communications researchers. As Hughey (2008:553) noted, African Americans have struggled to acquire legitimacy and control over their identity and autonomy in self-representation. In his study of black students participation in a black Greek letter organization online community, he found that those interactions have "redefined social relations" in such a way that they provide people of color a means by which they can construct authentic racial identities, and mange their shared experiences with, "racial oppression, alienation, and a multivalent "double-consciousness."

The black community has historically been shut out of the mass media apparatus in the United States, limiting their ability the shape public perception of black identity and culture. Online interactions are altering the traditional outlets for the selection, dissemination, and consumption of the components of black identity. Moreover, with new media black people now exercise a different kind of agency in naming, shaping, and circulating self-determined components of black identity.

In the small body of scholarship that has focused on racial identity and online communities, the consensus is that the Internet is indeed a site for identity construction and community formation for people of color (Daniels 2012; Ignacio 2005; Hughey 2008; Grasmuck et al. 2009). Those studies illustrate how digital spaces provide avenues through which racial boundaries and discourses are (re)negotiated online. Online communications and social spaces now serve as digital "counterspaces" in which black students can find reprieve from what they consider to be hostile campus climates (Cruz 2013; Beckles 2001; Torres and Charles 2004; Hurtado et al. 1998). Counterspaces are locations on and around campus where African American students challenge deficit notions of blackness and gain emotional cultural, and academic support (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000:70). In effect, online counterspaces serve to mitigate some of the damaging impacts of racism and discrimination on campus for black students: doing so by providing an arena for the development, maintenance, and performance of positive racial identities.

There are currently a number of converging factors that heighten the salience of online interaction in racial identity formation: (1) the increasing ubiquity of mobile ICT and internet access, (2) the large-scale accumulation of social media skill and digital

literacy for Millenials as a result of that ubiquity, (3) the normalization of online social life and the expectation of online participation, (5) and the reduction in stigma associated with tech, geek, and gamer culture. Each of these factors are shaping a historical moment in which racial identity formation is more fluid and autonomous for African American young adults than has ever been the case.

New media has been subsumed into the zeitgeist of the Millennial generation and is now a taken-for-granted aspect of daily social behavior. These factors permit a heightened accessibility to black cultural history and greater visibility of the heterogeneity of black identity for African American young adults.

Virtual communities and ICT mediated interactions have been viewed as utopian democratizing third places (Gonzales 2015), where race and racism are no longer contemporary problems for marginalized populations. More critically, they have been seen as yet another venue where entrenched racialized social hierarchies intersect with gender, sexuality, and class, among others factors, to further disadvantage oppressed groups (Beckles 1997; Hughey 2008). The truth lies somewhere between these positions.

Online spaces now serve as new publics in which people share commonalities, interests, and dispositions. However, just as it has been argued that online "third places" are still "home territory" in which people are surrounded by those with whom they have much in common (Hampton, Livio, and Goulet 2010; Oldenburg 1989; Lofland 1998) – a conversation taking on larger national significance as controversies regarding the impact of "fake news" and damaging affects of homogenous online networks permeates political discourse - online spaces are also sites of possible attack and anxiety. The importance of these online spaces and interactions reside in their accessibility and autonomy,

particularly for those who have less power in controlling the aspects of their geographically bounded locations.

Black Millenials are consciously and strategically leveraging social media interactions to (1) manage interpersonal experiences with bias and discrimination as they aspire to achieve successful social, academic, and financial outcomes, and (2) reconfigure local and national discourses on race, racism, and black racial identity.

Today, communities of color are still grappling with the legacy of institutionalized slavery, a short and inadequately robust period of reconstruction, decades of Jim Crow segregation, the war on drugs, contemporary mass incarceration and police brutality. Due to this history, there are clear and unmistakable systemic inequalities that continue to create differences in life chances for people of color and other historically oppressed groups. This dissertation will narrow that focus to an understanding of how black college students experience the academic setting, and how they manipulate online interactions and resources to exercise agency in racial identity formation.

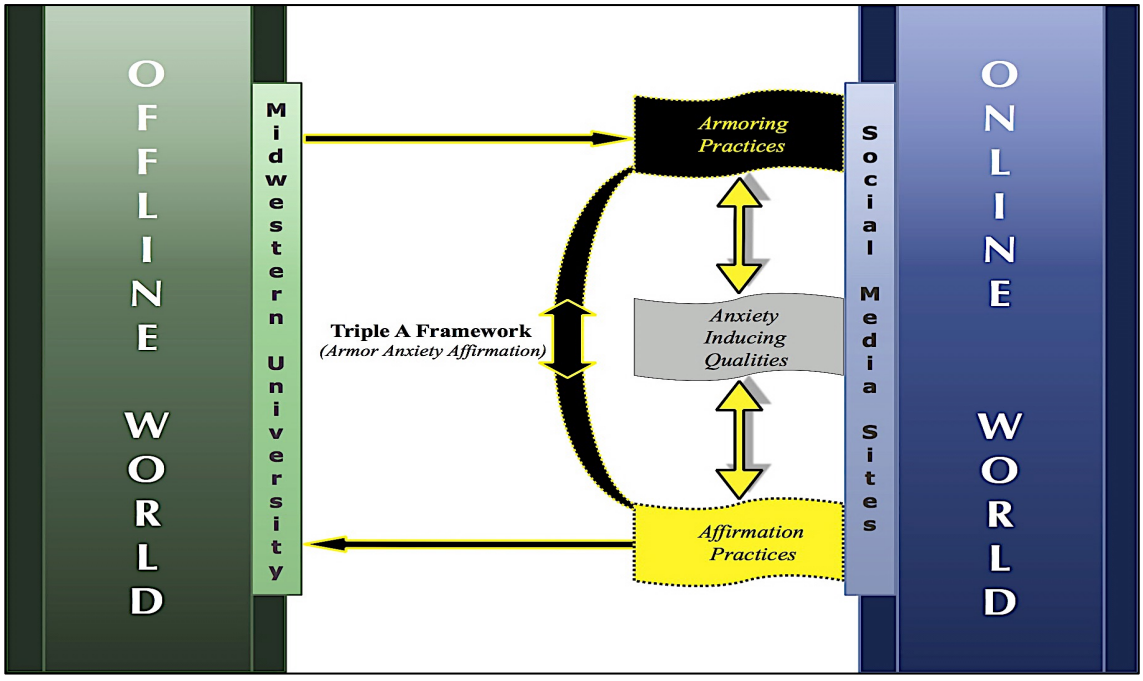
The Central Argument

The development of racial identity is affected by media type, quantity, and tone of multi-media racial discourse observed in online sources. Beyond a venue for socializing with peers, black youth view digital spaces as a kind of shield - a barrier allowing them to steel themselves against discrimination that is present in their offline lives. My study participants explicitly describe their online profiles as "armor against the outside world."

The initiation of Triple A processes is provoked by the offline context in which individuals reside. For African American college students, the primary offline local and

socializing institution that dominates their daily lives is the academic setting and the individuals who occupy it. In their offline lives, black Millenials face bias and social pressures to conform to narrow, and often negative, conception of blackness. That offline reality provokes online actions centered around an interest in race and racial identity. Once online and engaging in Triple A – Armoring processes, their social media accounts act as buffers that provide safety and autonomy in the construction of racial identity. African American young adults manage exposure to discrimination, and other negative content, through manipulation of privacy/security settings, and with the purposeful selection of friends and followers. Additionally, Black Millenials leverage social media as a means of locating positive identity images and information, as well as a way to commiserate with distant peers. In this framework, Armoring practices and Affirmation practices are directly linked in a two-way flow of online action.

Figure 4. Triple A Flowchart



While online interactions serve positive functions, the domain is still an arena where black students are exposed to various forms of oppression. They view participation in multiple, and often less private, online interactions as essential to social integration within their peer networks – black young adults being the most active age cohort and racial demographic group using social media communications (PEW 2013). Full participation, in their view, is integral to both their psychological well-being, as well as a means of academic success and upward economic mobility through professional networking. Withdrawing, then, is not seen as a viable option despite the added emotional labor necessary to maintain their digital presence.

Triple A – Anxious processes – the second pillar of the Triple A Framework - are particularly significant for black college Millennials. They report being routinely confronted with a torrent of overt racism and subtle microaggressions in newsfeeds, comment sections, and other social network site (SNS) communications. Despite that, they feel an obligation to be engaged and up to date with their peers in online spaces, making withdrawal from new media less acceptable as a means of avoiding the anxiety-inducing quality of online interactions. The collective emotional toll of those experiences is lessened only by the solidarity expressed to them by their peers within online interactions. When engaged in Triple A – Anxiety processes, black Millenials initiate a sequence of Triple A – Armoring processes to counteract those affects. Participants, and their network of friends/followers, routinely rally around each other in moments of severe distress, sending supportive private messages and directly opposing racially hostile others. Those acts reinstated the "Armored" quality of the digital space and provided

respondents with a stronger sense of racial solidarity, despite being isolated in non-diverse offline locations like the Midwestern University (MU) campus.

Beyond the protective function of Armoring, and the Anxiety-inducing quality of some encounters, my respondents also manipulate and leverage online resources in the construction of positive aspects of their racial selves, in addition to countering and challenging deficit notions of blackness. With the enactment of Triple A – Affirmation processes – the third pillar of the Triple A Framework – black students strategically shape and present the heterogeneity of black identity, affirmations of dark complexions and natural hairstyles, the incorporation of international perspectives and aspects of the black diaspora, and they also build connections to a larger black community. In doing so, they create numerous digital identity commitments that anchor their self-esteem to a more accurate and positive representation of black culture and identity; aspects largely missing from mass media controlling images.

Movement through Triple – A processes are continual and sometimes rapid, vacillating through the pillars even within single online exchanges. These processes emerged out of necessity as strategies for managing sources of emotional labor for black students. African American young adults co-opt the aspects of online interactions, folding new innovations into the range of Triple A processes, as trends in online interaction rise and recede in the rapidly changing new media landscapes.

They Armor against racial stereotypes by consciously choosing what, when, and where to post content. In Affirmative acts, they strategically construct counter-narrative and images that promote and affirms positive aspect of black identity, reshaping and

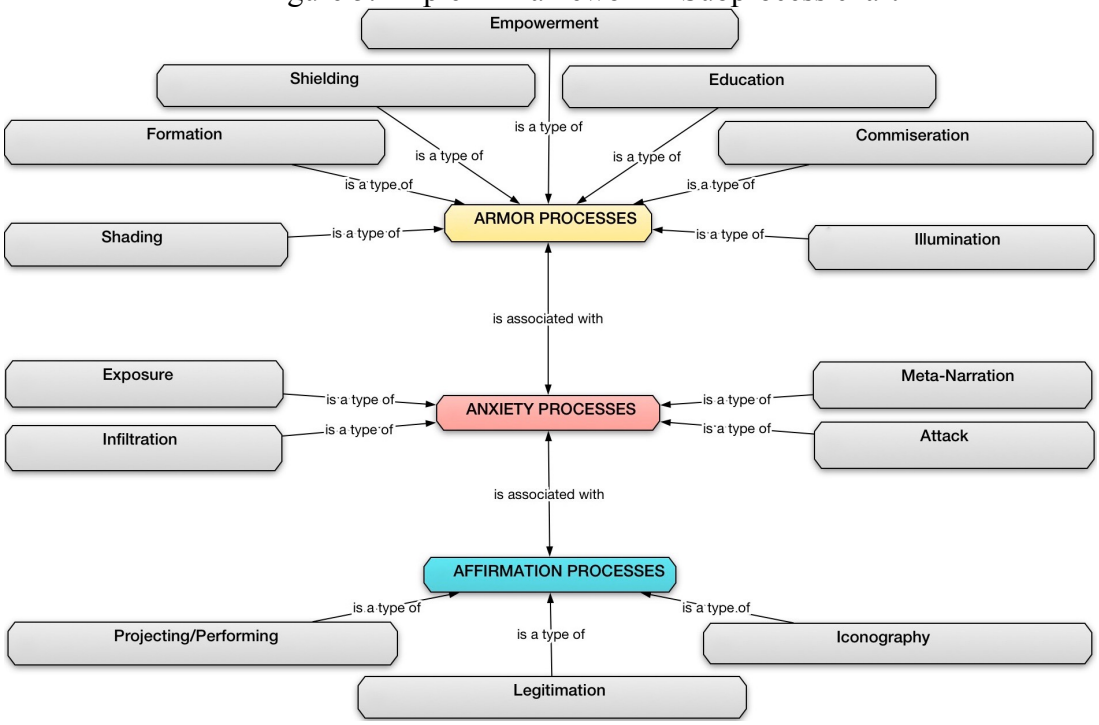
deconstructing deficit notions of blackness. In Anxiety inducing situations they exhibit a nimble creativity, initiating sequences of Armoring and Affirmation processes – Constantly revamping and repurposing various aspects of social media sites and interactions for their own personal development and successes. The results of those Armoring and Affirmative acts, then filter back into their offline lives, thus providing them with the social, psychological, and academic support necessary to persist in predominantly white institutions of higher education. In sum, the Triple A Framework is a device with which identity scholars can understand the processes and internalized meanings attached to particular online behavior for historically marginalized groups.

Within the three primary pillars of the Triple A Framework are a multitude of subprocesses that provide finer and more detailed accounting of online identity formation. When focused inward, the Triple A Framework can be viewed as a complex tree of vital identity formation processes and subprocesses that categorize and explain specific online actions. Triple A – Armor subprocesses include: Shielding, Formation, Empowerment, Illumination, Shading, Commiseration, and Education. Triple A – Anxiety subprocesses include: Exposure, Attack, Meta-Narration and Infiltration. Finally, Triple A - Affirmation subprocesses include: Projection/Performance, Iconography, and Legitimation.

The function of each subprocess illustrates the nuances of its major pillars. Armoring subprocesses explain the efforts to protect and defend one's self and others in online interactions. Anxiety subprocesses illustrate the existence and persistence of online bias, and the emotional/psychological toll black Millenials pay for being online. Affirmation subprocesses demonstrate the exercise of agency in combatting deficit

notions of blackness through individual and group-level online action. Each specific subprocess, throughout the proceeding chapters, is explained and demonstrated through a presentation of multiple data types.

Figure 5. Triple A Framework – Subprocess chart



Taken together, I make several scholarly contributions with this dissertation: (1) I deepen the conceptualization of Black racial/ethnic identity, going beyond the quantitative "sense of closeness to other Blacks" measure typical of previous scholarship (Harris 1995). Doing so provides a richer qualitative conceptualization of Black identity, as "situational strategy," in line with current scholarship addressing Asian American (Tuan 1998) Latinx American (Roth 2012), and multiracial identity formation (Renn 2000, 2004). I also explain the role of social media interactions as a new domain for racial identity development and performance for African American young adults in

college - thus providing a more complex construct of racial identity in both traditional sites such as educational institutions, as well as within the online domain.

Pawan Dhingra (2007:122) argued that to understand individual's adaptations, that it was "necessary to analyze how they actually lived their ethnicity and race in daily life in their life-course decisions." Through the chapters of this dissertation, with these findings and contributions, I demonstrate how black college students live their racial identity in their on- and offline lives.

Overview of Methodology

Research design

This qualitative project takes advantage of a case study research design. According to Creswell (2007:98), "case study research involves the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting" that makes use of multiple sources of information. The case study method is especially well suited to analyzing a specific phenomenon (racial identity formation) through a case (black Millennial student use of ICTs while in attendance at a PWI) within a bounded system such as the university campus and surrounding community (Creswell 2007; Yin 2009). The case study approach is especially well suited to examining contemporary events and phenomenon rather than historical incidents (Yin 2009). Considering the rapidly changing new media and ICT landscape, the case study design provides the flexibility to interrogate how the most current new media practices, through a variety of data sources, interact with identity formation processes for African American college students.

Due to the scarcity of scholarship and theory addressing racial identify formation and online interactions, I make use of a modified grounded theory approach. While I

come to my central and supporting research questions with some *a priori* assumptions, the theoretical contributions of this study are mostly inductive. According to Charmaz (2006:5) constructing a grounded theory incorporate several components: (1) Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; (2) Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses; (2) Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of analysis; (3) Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis; (4) Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps; and (5) Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness.

Qualitative methods are intended to explain participant meaning. By investigating the role of online interactions in identity formation, I explore the meanings attached to online communications and how they impact the identity formation processes of my respondents. Kinnevy and Enosh (2002:121) stated that, "The use of [qualitative] approaches is particularly useful in capturing the flow of communication and interaction between members of a virtual community, since such communities are by their nature discursive communities." As such, qualitative methods are particularly well suited to answering the research questions of this dissertation.

To assist in data management and analysis, I use qualitative coding software. Collecting social media data from a variety of online platforms produced large qualitative data sets. To compensate for the volume, I take advantage of the processing power of Atlast.ti. This program allows me to conduct an intricate coding process by creating series of linkages between individual data points that span the gamut of media types and

online platforms. I am able, then, to "de-linearize" that sequential information and re-contextualize it with the major themes identified through the coding process. In doing so I visualize the interconnections between information scattered across each individuals collection of preferred social networking site accounts, in which they engage in their daily online interactions through an array of multi-media content.

Each person's collection of active accounts is potentially fluid, though most respondents developed deep ties to particular sites and types of online interactions - staying close to them throughout the data collection period. Each collection of preferred social networking sites act as a digital nexus that allow users to create a multi-directional and hierarchical arrangement of interactions. Those interactions impact the internal and outward creation and expression of racial identity. Through my analysis, I explored the seemingly tenuous connections between various online interactions, which reference various components of the self, ultimately finding that the relationships are far more explicit than they appear.

Limitations of prior studies

There are some key limitations of qualitative scholarship addressing online communities and interactions. First, according to Beneito-Montagut (2011) there is little research addressing both on and offline data simultaneously. Second, existing fieldwork has primarily focused on changing Internet applications or websites. Third, research has focused almost entirely on textual exchanges. While the lack of prior scholarship dealing with both on and offline processes provides little foundation to inform current research designs**,** by employing a three stage, multi-media and user-centric data collection effort, I avoided these common problems. The case study design is well suited to studying the

media-multiplexity that characterizes today's online social environment, as it allows for the analysis of local meaning, processes, and contextual influences affecting complex social phenomenon such as racial identity formation.

I gain empirical leverage on my research questions with an iterative and reflexive data collection process, gathering in-depth interview data, survey data, and the social media interactions of my respondents. By gathering multiple forms of information, a necessary step in case study research (Yin 2009), I rigorously examined the complexities of racial identity formation for black students through a triangulation of the various data gathered through the life of the project.

Qualitative approaches require the investigator to examine the meaning-making processes of their respondents, rather than to assert the validity or invalidity of particular actions based on assumptions or other non-respondent driven priorities. In order to achieve this mandate, I place each data type in conversation with the others, providing a higher degree of confidence in my conclusions. The inclusion of digital data presents the opportunity to frame qualitative analyses in ways previously unattainable. Online data allows for the dilution of some of the troublesome aspects of interviewer bias, time journaling, and other traditional data collection techniques. Social media records social interaction within the built environment of SNSs. Daily social life online provides a living record of sorts, with individuals chronicling the major and minor events in their day-to-day activities. It is useful and fitting to treat social media data as a robust, and in some ways more complete, personal journal - a first hand account of participant meaning-making processes. Social media provides insight into the internally held narrative of users, and by extension, previously closed off aspects of an individual's set of identities.

This rich data pulls back the curtain on the presentation of multiple selves, across a range of preferred social media platforms.

Data Collection and Fieldwork Summary

African American youth as the population of interest

In addition to the selection of African Americans as my population of interest, I also focus on young adults, specifically the Millennial generation. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), Millennials are persons whose ages range from 18-34 as of 2015. This age cohort now numbers approximately 75 million. They further noted that the Millennial generation is projected to surpass both Generation X (ages 35-50) and Baby Boomers in population by 2028, with immigration adding more numbers to this group than any previous generation.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2012) reports that 18-29 year olds, the group most represented on the university campuses, engage in daily online activity at greater rates than any other age group, with 94% general use, and 88% *mobile* Internet use. Next, 30-49 year olds go online at 87% with 76% *mobile* Internet use. Online activity rates fall with each remaining age cohort, with 50-64 year olds and 65+ with 74% (53% mobile Internet use) and 41% (21% mobile internet use) respectively.

Moreover, Pew (2012) has shown that African Americans (46%) and English speaking Latinxs (51%) are outpacing non-Hispanic whites (33%) in their use of mobile ICTs. There are, however, no differences in the odds of smartphone ownership by demographics variables (Gonzales 2015). While the gap has narrowed since 2012, African Americans still outpace white people in their use of mobile ICTs in daily internet activity (PEW 2016). Other research demonstrates that race and ethnicity are predictive

of the propensity to have home access to both desktop and laptop computers, with African Americans having 1/16 the odds of their White and Asian counterparts of owning one of those devices (Gonzales 2015). When considering education and race, this study also demonstrates that those with some college experience are 7 times more likely to have home internet access, and 23 times more likely to own a computer.

As of April 2013, 56% of all Americans owned a smart phone, with 79% of 18-24 year olds and 81% of 25-34 years olds owning one. Additionally, 25% of Americans from all demographics groups use smart phones as the primary means of going online. Taken together, these circumstances demonstrate that focusing on young adults, and leaving older age cohorts to be addressed in later studies, provided the richest data from which to draw my conclusions.

It may be that older age cohorts use ICTs differently for identity formation, as they occupy different social locations with varying cultural scripts and domain codes than their younger counterparts. For the purposes of this project, however, it is most appropriate to study the users who have the most intense and varied Internet activity. This provides the most comprehensive picture of how today's online interaction practices impact identity formation. Further, by focusing on this particular age group I establish a reference point with which I can draw comparisons in future research on the affects of online interactions on identity for African American young adults.

Grasmuck et al. (2009:161) remarked that we still know little about what it means to construct identity online, "in environments where visual cues about race…are *offered* to the audience." They note that little is currently known about what it means to construct identity online, and that the performances of college students are "fruitful terrain" for

examining the processes by which identity is formed in the "information age." Moreover, Millennials incorporate social media into their daily lives as a primary method with which they communicate among their peer groups and networks. Importantly, the means by which interactions unfold, that is to say the medium in which it occurs, also impacts the content, quality, and significance of the message itself.

Scholars have long theorized that the way people communicate affects the perception of the message content (Mayrowitz 1994). My data corroborates this assertion, as will be illustrated in the following chapters, by demonstrating how the online site, type of media involved, and the race of the sender affect the perception of the interactions had by black Millenials. Additionally, my respondents strategically select interaction types based on both the meaning they hope to convey, and on relationships they develop to certain types of online interactions.

Offline research site

My sample of respondents is drawn from the African American student body at Midwestern University. MU is a public Liberal Arts institution in the Midwest region of the United States. The total enrollment as of Fall 2013, the academic year prior to my data collection, was approximately 24,000 students. The total enrollment of all students of color was approximately 3,500, representing 15% of the student body. The largest racial minority group was Black or African American, with approximately 1,600 students. Multi-ethnic (1,200), Hispanic or Latino or Chicano (1,000), Asian (800), and American Indian/Alaskan Native (400) make up the remainder of the minority student population respectively. The student body is 59.2% female and 40.7% male, with an average undergraduate age of 21.

MU has two campuses located in adjacent cities. As of the 2010 census, the secondary campus is located in the second largest city in the state. It is predominantly white, but with substantial communities of color. All racial minorities in the larger city account for approximately 45% of the total population. Of the 200,000 people in the larger city, 21% identify as Black or African American.

The primary campus is roughly 15 miles away, and resides in a much smaller city that has a population of approximately 17,000. Around the primary campus the total minority population is just 12.9%, with only 3.3% identifying as Black or African American. This information shows that while the secondary campus is located in an area with more substantial racial diversity, both the university itself and the primary campus city are almost entirely non-black. These circumstances indicate conditions where community and institutional support for black students is less available than perhaps more diverse universities and locations. While there is some black community around the secondary campus, MU is primarily situated in a predominantly white area.

I developed my pool of respondents by contacting MU, who then relayed my invitation email to all self-identifying Black/African American students through the university email system (N≈1600). Respondent selection criteria were self-identification as Black or African American students enrolled at MU, and a minimum age of eighteen. This dissertation does not contain a representative sample and is not be generalizable to wider populations. Though conclusions are valid with regard to the population and subjects involved in this study, beyond that, parallels to equally non-diverse campuses, institutions, and communities may only be cautiously drawn at best.

Summary of the survey and interview process

To initiate my three-stage data collection effort, I administered my online survey to all self-identified black or African American students attending MU. Consistent with prior identity formation research the preliminary survey was a means of fielding background and contextual information. I received 182 completed surveys in total. Survey results remained anonymous unless the respondent indicated that they would welcome a follow-up interview.

After survey data collection, I conducted 47 semi-structured interviews. I used quota sampling in order to obtain roughly equal numbers of men and women. Ensuring equal sex representation allowed me to ascertain if there are significant variations in the impacts online interactions on identity formation for men and women. I also explicitly sampled for heterogeneity in class standing, complexion, sexual orientation, age, and extra-curricular engagement in order to limit particular background factors from unnecessarily influencing the data collection and analysis effort.

The interview guide consisted primarily of open-ended questions. This format allowed me the flexibility to pose follow-up questions that revealed nuances of the identity formation process. By directing the conversation, but allowing for discourse between the myself and the informant, semi-structured interviews provided a detailed exploration of my respondents meaning-making and identity formation processes. As Grasmuck et al. (2009:161) argue, "there is a tendency for scholars of the Internet to exoticize youth practices by focusing too much on the technologies themselves rather than talking to young people about their communicative needs." I remedied this

shortcoming by allowing my respondents talk me through their daily ICT use, online interactions and/or social networking sites as part of the interview process.

Interview locations were determined through consultation with each respondent and were done in a space of the respondents choosing. All 47 interviews lasted approximately two hours and were conducted on or near campus grounds (e.g. Library, student union). Once complete, I fully transcribed each interview and initiated the process of initial, focused, and theoretical coding to identify patterns and generate themes from the data.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics on Interviewees

Descriptive Statistics for Interviewees		
Interview Sample		47
Sex	Female	**27** (59%)
	Male	**19** (41%)
Age range		**18-34**
Class Standing	First-year	**6** (13%)
	Sophomore	**6** (13%)
	Junior	**14** (30%)
	Senior	**12** (26%)
	Graduate	**8** (17%)

Summary of digital content analysis

Gathering social media data for content analysis of online interactions was the third and final stage of the data collection process. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked each respondent if they would welcome an analysis of their social networking site profiles and online communications. From the pool of 47 interviewees, 43 elected to provide me access to the social media content.

The digital data collection took place after the interview without the respondent present. I collected participant status updates, tweets, hashtags (e.g. #research), posted

videos/photos, blog posts, “likes” & interests, shared articles, shared videos, forum discussions posts, bios/about me section content, and other site-specific media. I collected this information from each respondent’s social media profile(s). This process included registering the data via screen-shots, saved links, downloading photos/videos, and copy/pasting textual data into word documents and/or spreadsheets.

The breadth and depth of digital data collection was massive. To manage the scope of online content created and shared by my respondents, across all of their preferred social network sites, necessitated a strategy for gathering an adequate yet practical sample of those data. In order to avoid the academic calendar biasing the type and intensity of online content, I collected data in two-week intervals, one at the beginning, middle, and end of each semester, and the summer. Online data collection spans from January 2014 to July 2015. Two-week data collection windows were chosen after multiple test runs indicated that range would provide the best balance between breadth and depth of data, and practical concerns with time and resource constraints. Those windows limited the data to a manageable amount while preserving the integrity and representativeness of the sample content.

I also selectively sampled digital data from the most recent two-weeks from the beginning of digital data collection for each respective participant. Additionally, I sampled data from the week before and after the interview, and the two weeks around the grand jury decisions in Ferguson and Baltimore, the shooting of Mike Brown, the choking death of Eric Garner, the alleged suicide of Sandra Bland, and other significant moments that sparked the progression of the BlackLivesMatter online movement. Taken together, the 16 data collection windows equal approximately six months of total online

activity, per respondent, for each of their respective social networking accounts in 2014 and 2015.

I implemented a tiered digital data collection process that provided respondents with three options for participation. The digital data collection tiers are as follows (in order of greatest to least access):

Tier-1 Full Access: I requested login information for the social media accounts my respondents indicated in the interview were most important to their social lives (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest). Login information provided full access to the respondent's digital content. Once logged into their accounts, I registered content of the respondent for the designated periods of time.

Tier-2 Friend/Follow/Add: In the event the respondents did not wish to provide login information, I initiated a process of "friending," "following," and "adding" them on the sites they indicated were their preferred forms of social media. I created dummy profiles on the respective sites solely for the purpose of data collection. All accounts identified me by name, university affiliation, and status as a doctoral candidate conducting research. Upon "friending/following/adding" respondents, I began registering digital content for the designated period of time.

Tier-3 Guided Walkthrough: In the event respondents do not wish to provide login information or be "friended/followed/added," no digital content will be collected unless directly shown/provided to me while the respondent was present. In this third case, respondents "walked me through" their profiles, web browser histories, smartphones, and/or computers with no other data collection taking place without their consent. During

the walkthroughs, content would be registered in the methods listed above, at the respondent's discretion.

Sixteen of the interview participants choose option 1, providing full passwords, usernames, and other pertinent login information. The remaining twenty-seven respondents involved elected option 2 for digital data collection. Friend/Following/Adding with the project dummy accounts was established even on those who selected option 1. While there was some variation by online site, the types of data collected (e.g. photos/videos, tweets, status updates, hash tags) were consistent across platforms. As the structure of social media sites varies and affects the accessibility and function of those data, there was be no standardized collection process for digital content across sites. Despite this difficulty, I collected a full range of digital content available for each respondent. In doing so, I assembled a complete view of their online persona(s).

To the degree social scientists have studied the affects of ICT use on identity formation for racial minorities, they have mostly focused on text-based online communications (Turkle 1999; Ignacio 2005; Hughey 2008; Grasmuck 2009; Lee 2012). These researchers typically pre-select a single online site on which they focus their analysis. This is problematic for several reasons. Due to the rapidity with which online social norms, ICTs, mobile applications, and sites of interest change for young adults, pre-selecting the type and form of online interaction to examine is less than optimal for the most robust findings. I remedied this inadequacy by allowing my respondents to drive the analysis toward the sites and forms of online interaction most relevant to in their day-to-day lives.

While scholars have found rich data and drawn conclusions from pre-selected online sites and interactions (Grasmuck 2009), I questioned whether it is true today that one digital self is uniformly presented, constructed, and maintained across multiple ICTs and social networking sites. As Ito et al. (2012:20), indicated, youth often maintain a "dual-identity structure," with multiple online profiles used to associate with multiple and non-overlapping friendship networks. They went on to note that they observed, "many youth crafting multiple media identities that they mobilize selectively depending on context." The content analysis, considering this, was directed by the respondents' descriptions of which ICTs, sites, and forms of interaction most speak to their identity formation processes. A key strength of the case study design is the ability to collect and analyze multiple forms of data such as observations, interviews, artifacts, documents, videotapes, and photographs (Yin 2009). Pascoe (2012) noted that a respondent's computer, cell phone, web browsers, and social network profiles can themselves be "technological artifacts." Including the online content of my respondents, then, falls within the scope of the case study research design and indeed provides fruitful data on identity formation processes of my participants.

Participant new media use

Information collected in the preliminary survey gave me insight into the social media activity and intensity of use of my participants. Of the 182 completed surveys, 135 participants answered the social media usage questions. This section of the survey included a battery of questions gauging frequency and intensity of use by online actions (e.g. posting photos, sharing articles, commenting), as well as site preferences.

The 135 respondents had a combined 422 social media accounts across 9 different social media platforms. It should be noted, however, that 35 of the total respondents, and

5 of the interviewees reported using what I call “App-Centric” social media. App-Centric sites are those in which full functionality is only accessible through the mobile interface within smartphone application software. Because I did not collect data from the phones of my respondents, I am likely missing valuable components of their online interaction, a key limitation of this project.

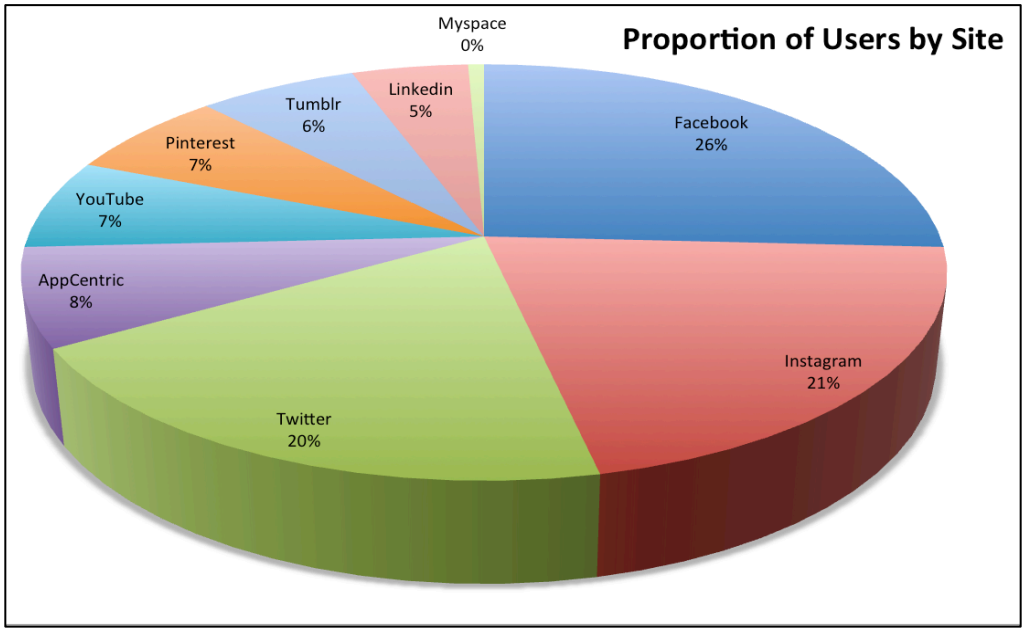
Table 2 SNS Accounts and Usage Proportions

Site	Accounts	Proportion of Site Usage
Facebook	118	28%
Instagram	95	23%
Twitter	91	22%
YouTube	32	8%
Pinterest	31	7%
Tumblr	30	7%
Linkedin	22	5%
Myspace	3	.01%
App Centric	35	8%

The respondents averaged 3.9 social network sites per person, with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram making up the vast majority of online activity.

My respondents are consistently and intensely active online and in a variety of ways. 77% of respondents report checking their social media accounts either constantly (31%) or a few times per day (46%). On the other hand, however, just 20% report posting status updates constantly (4%) or a few times per day (16%). The majority posts updates just a few times per month (29%) and a few times a week (23%). There is the propensity by some to cast Millennials as self-indulgent and narcissistic - perpetually focused on their smart phones as they perform their lives through the eyes of quickly shuttering smartphone camera lenses.

Figure 6. Proportion of Survey Respondents Using Social Media Site



To the contrary, 49% of respondents report posting photos only a few times per month, with just 2% posting pictures constantly, and 3% doing so a few times a day. While this does not suggest that these individuals do not take a large number of photos, it does indicate that the motivations for doing so may not necessarily be the desire to become "Instagram famous." As I will explain in Chapter IV, self-portraiture serves a function far beyond self-indulgent narcissism, especially for black students navigating predominantly white spaces and who are exposed to disproportionately negative controlling images of black identity.

With regard to engagement with other people's content, 25% of my respondents comment on posts on a daily basis, with the largest proportion of users (30%) commenting a few times per month. The remaining comment a few times per week (26%), once a week (10%) and those who never comment (9%).

Taken together, it is clear that my respondent's are engaged in daily online activity, but the means by which they do so fluctuates dramatically by type of online

action. The following charts illustrate how intensity of online interactions varies by type of online activity.

Figure 7. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Check SNS

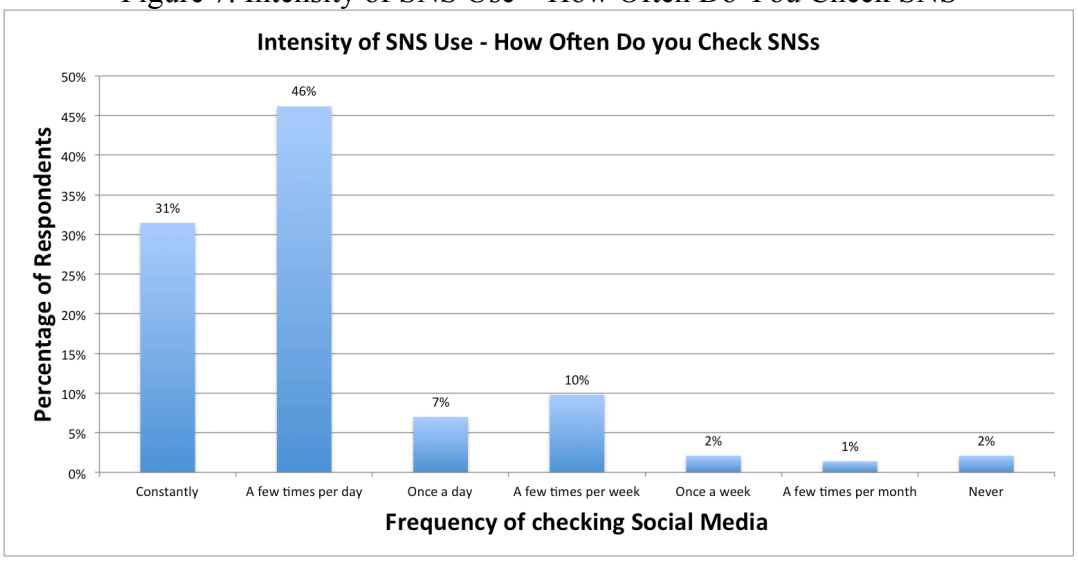


Figure 8. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Post Updates

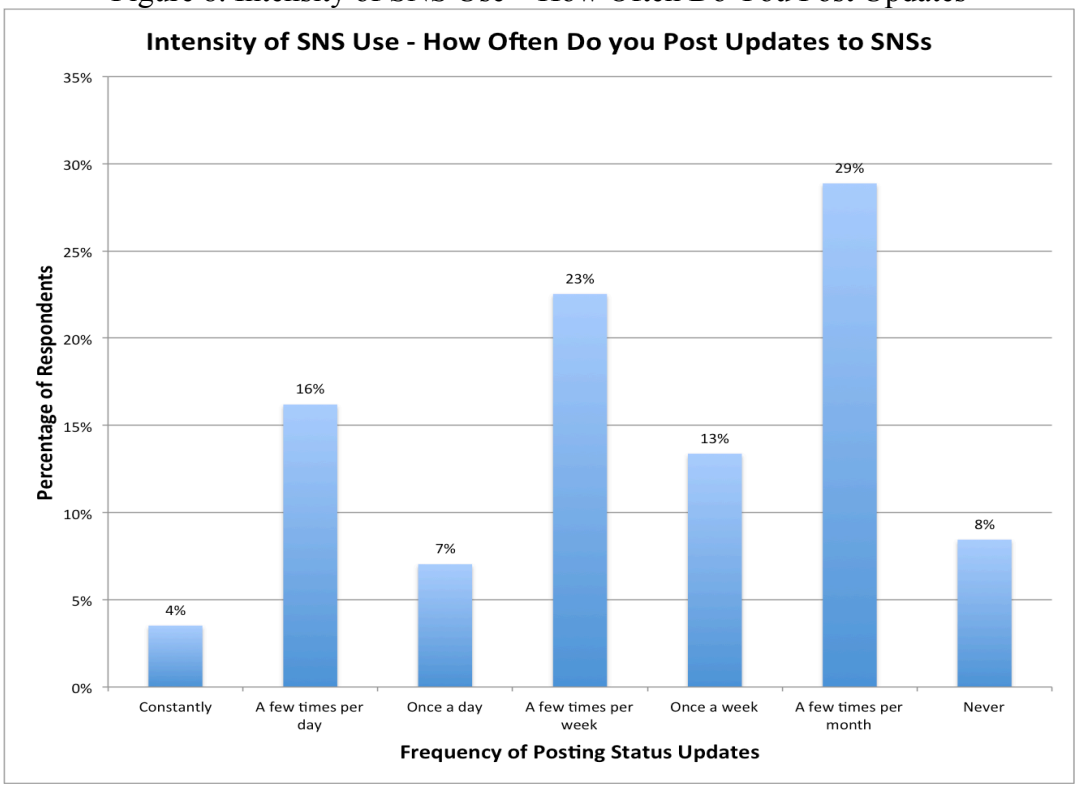


Figure 9. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Comment on Posts

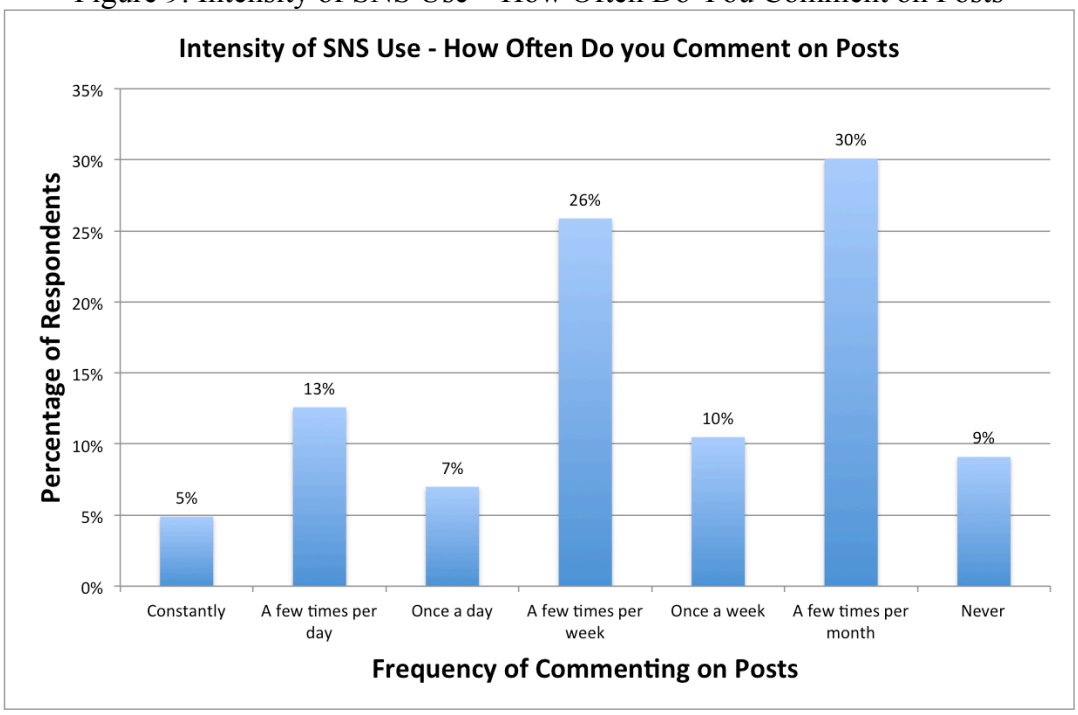
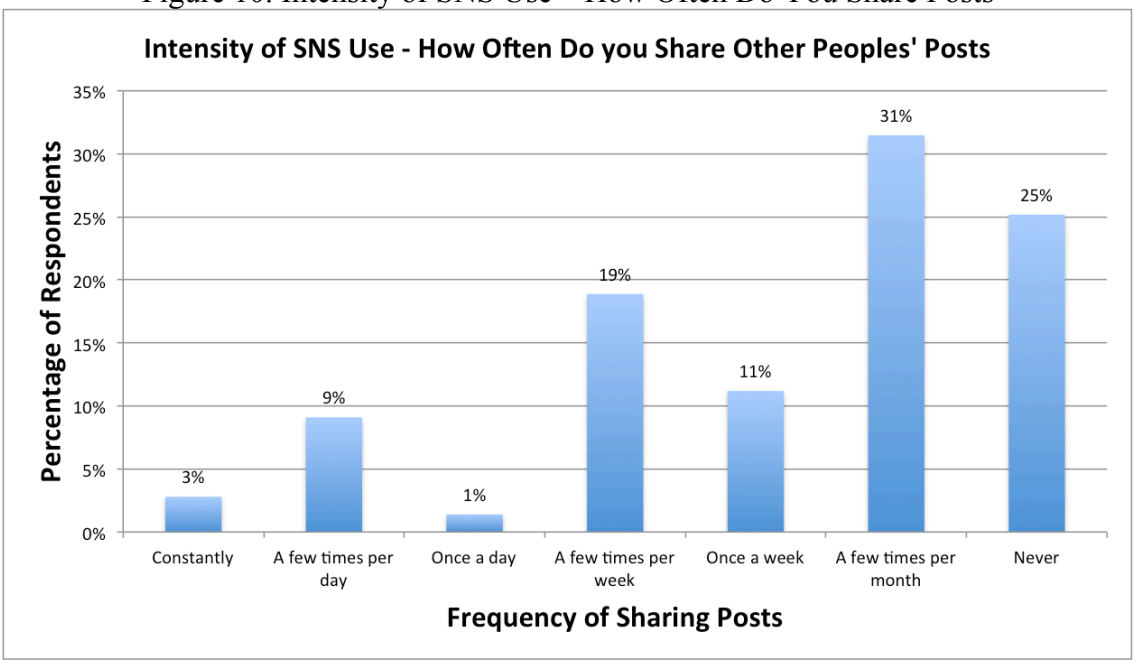


Figure 10. Intensity of SNS Use – How Often Do You Share Posts



Limitations of Research Design

The following section will illustrate the drawbacks of my research design and approach. This dissertation has 4 primary limitations that are unique to my study of online interactions and racial identity formation.

Variation in sample sizes

As notes above, each data collection stage resulted in an increasingly smaller sample size – dropping from 182 (surveys) to 87 (interview volunteers) to 47 (interviewees) to 43 (digital content participants), leading to inconsistency in the breadth of data per respondent. To address this limitation, the major findings and conclusions of this project are based primarily on those respondents whose participation runs the entire length of the data collection process. While I do use the entirety of the survey and interview data sets to establish background and contextually important foundations, the major conclusion of this study lie in the triangulation of all three forms of data provided by the 43 African American students at MU who fully participated.

Changes to social network site (sns) application program interface (api) and built environments

At the onset of this project, each SNS had a particular configuration, with a set of structural limitations, operational rules, content and activity types, and the cultural norms and scripts that developed on each site as a result of those configurations. Since data collection has concluded, Facebook, for example, has added additional features that were not available during my collection process. "Reactions," are now a feature on the site that was not yet implemented in 2014. Reactions are the act of indicating a response in the form of emoji and other Facebook specific visual icons (e.g. love, crying face, laughing face, angry face) to interact with site-based content beyond the traditional "like" feature.

Due to this change, the range of collectable content has shifted slightly in the months following my project. I should note, however, that while minor site-specific changes are frequent, they do not necessarily alter the impact of those interactions on identity formation.

Limitations of online data type and amount collected

While my online data collection yielded an enormous data set, time and resource constraints required that I limit the scope and types of available data I collected. Due to this, it is possible that I have missed a valuable component of online interactions in racial identity formation as a result of leaving entire data types out of the analysis. For example, though I had access for participants who chose Option 1, I did not collect any private messages or emails. Also, while I did have access to them, I did not analyze the composition of their contact lists or friends pages (i.e. friend lists, followers, following).

It has been suggested (Hine 2008) that since the "fields" of online research are fleeting and constantly changing, the certainty with which scholars can make claims becomes precarious. This interjects a few points that are noteworthy, though based on potentially problematic assumptions. First, it assumes that offline fields are more stable than online fields, which is not necessarily true, and would require specific empirical testing and comparison to draw those conclusions. Two, it assumes that rapid changes to online fields significantly alter the meaning-making processes enabled and enacted by and on them. This too, may not be true, and is a point not born out in my data. Three, the magnitude and impact of changes to a particular online field vary by perception of those changes for each respondent, as it likely does offline. Additionally, some changes may have no impact on the primary function each site serves for a given user. As I will

illustrate in the following chapters, users often develop deeply personal bonds to types of online interactions, in addition to individuals with whom they interact. Lastly, changes to the aesthetic and built environments of some SNSs does not necessarily alter the type of interactions preferred by a user, and if it does, that change may improve rather than inhibit a researchers ability to extract meaning from the data. Despite those justifications, I cannot say for certain if site-based changes impact the applicability of my results going forward.

Lack of inclusion of app-centric online interaction

Most SNSs have both browser and app-based user-interfaces (UI). It is important to note that the functionality and user experience does differ on some sites depending on which versions one uses. Popular mobile applications like Snapchat, YikYak, and WhatsApp, which have substantial usage rates for Millennials, are not included in my data sets. According to PEW (2016) 56% of smartphone owners (ages 18-29) use "auto-delete apps (e.g. SnapChat), more than four times the share of those 30-49 (13%) and six times the share among those 50 or older (9%)." Moreover, they report that 42% of smartphone owners ages 18-29 use messaging apps like WhatsApp or Kik. Because I only collected data observable from the browser versions of each site, some valuable information unique to the mobile application UI may have been disregarded. The resulting affect is that despite the breadth of my data collection efforts, some vital components of online interactions are likely not included in my analysis.

Key Conceptual and Operational Definitions – New Media And Online Interactions

The term "online interactions" is implemented in my study because it encompasses a large and more complex array of interpersonal and/or inter-group

communications, verbal and non-verbal, and includes a range of internet-enabled ICTs and social media platforms. ICTs and social media sites, in turn, fit into a larger "new media ecology" that includes both multi-media and traditional forms of communication. According to Ito et al. (2012:10) the term "new media" is used in place of "digital media" or "interactive media" because, "the moniker of 'the new' seemed appropriately situational, relational, and protean, and not tied to a specific media platform." These exchanges need not be intentional or reciprocated. The unique nature of online interactions is such that creating online content, or transmitting information through an ICT, is to declare some bit of information available for consumption by a selected audience(s), and/or to process internalized emotional energy. These communications often receive some form of response, but not necessarily so. Importantly, a response is not always wanted or expected.

ICTs and social media platforms allow the transmission of multiple forms of information, such as audio, video, pictures, music, and media, all of which indicate some form of preference, taste, or presentation of a cultural self (Lee 2012). Prior scholarship has classified "virtual communities" as discussion groups formed around specific interested shared by geographically dispersed groups (Burnett 2000). This definition is unnecessarily broad in that it potentially encompasses nearly any online discussion (Smith and Stewart 2012). Simultaneously, this definition is narrow. By limiting "virtual communities" to only those individuals communicating online with geographically distant people ignores more current scholarship that indicates online associations are often born from offline local social worlds (Ito et al. 2012)

Students, for example, often integrate their offline peer networks into their online social circles, while also participating in associations that are initiated and remain solely online. Considering these points, I use a more nuanced conceptual definition of online interactions and communities to include all network ties and other associations with whom my respondents engage in their day to day online activity.

Social media, for the purposes of this project, encompass all sites my respondents provided where they engage and interact with others, and where they interact with or create online content. To limit inclusion to only those sites that carry specific forms of media and interactions would needlessly limit the scope of this project. By opening up the data collection and analysis to all sites my respondents prioritize in their lives, I am allowing first hand accounts of identify formation to drive the analysis. Moreover, users often co-opt online sites and interactions for purposes not intended by the site creators. In doing so, complex cultural norms and scripts emerge in various online environments that color the activity on that site with unique meaning that is not necessarily transferrable across platforms. What is meaningful and impactful with regard to an individual's identity formation process on Facebook, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, does not necessarily carry the same weight or even the same meaning on Tumblr or Twitter.

Because of the complexity with which black Millenials construct symbolic boundaries around racial identity, and the inputs to those processes, I entered into this project with no *a priori* assumptions or limitations on which online platforms, interactions, or media types I would prioritize. As other have theorized, the "fields" of qualitative study are no longer solely linked to physically bounded communities. Clark

(2007) advocates for a "mobile sociology," taking the position that association, "no longer revolved around groups in fixed space, but around individuals theoretically set free from contextualizing anchor points (Paech 2009)." I do not, however, take the position that individuals are completely detached from offline anchor points. Rather, I couch my project in the argument that online anchor points that contextualize social meaning and interaction are equally, if not more important for African American young adults in college as those found offline.

Offline and online interactions are bound together in an alternating and dynamic relationship, with each avenue of interactions providing context to the other. In some instances, the salience of online interaction is elevated above the offline; in others they are equal, and other occasions still the relationship is reversed. Likewise, some have challenged the notion of implicit merit in face-to-face interactions (Crichton and Kinash 2002; Slater 2002), positing that ICT mediated exchanges can, "equal, transcend, and fracture this authority in intriguing ways" (Paech 2009:6).

Overview of Major Theories and Bodies of Scholarship Grounding this Project

This dissertation engages three primary bodies of literature. First, education scholarship on black student experiences at PWIs, the development and impact of metastereotypes, and the role of counterspaces in black student retention, emotional well-being, and overall academic success. This research provides the contextual support necessary to ascertain how identity formation unfolds for black college students.

Within the academic setting, I incorporate sociological scholarship on racial identity formation and the toll of bias and discrimination on African Americans in the

U.S. more generally. I also discuss the history of race relations for black people in an effort to further establish the context necessary to properly situate my findings.

Moreover, I extend the theoretical contributions of W.E.B. Du Bois, who is only recently gaining recognition as one of the most important figures in American sociology. Du Bois, a prolific scholar and advocate for African American civil rights, developed the concept of the Veil and Double Consciousness to describe the tensions and dual-identities black people were required to negotiate in order to survive the oppressive institutions of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. He asserted that to be black in America was to be of two competing minds, souls, and identities. He wrote:

> "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (Du Bois 1903:2)

Today, these competing senses of self are still alive in the black community. How these identities are negotiated in the presence of an increasingly connected social world is a determination that lies at the heart of this dissertation. In the chapters ahead I lay the groundwork for extending his theoretical contributions, providing empirical support for my updated conceptions of the Virtual Veil and Digital Double Consciousness. I demonstrate the usefulness of the ideas through my articulation of the Triple A Framework for interpreting and categorizing identity formation in online interactions.

Lastly, while communications and Internet scholars have addressed digital inequality, they have yet to adequately interrogate the role of race, racism, and racial identity in their studies. Nevertheless, those works unpack important nuances of online interactions, and in doing so provide the final components to a more complete examination of racial identity formation in contemporary American society.

Organization of the Dissertation

In the next chapter I delve further into the offline context in which the lives of my black students take place. In Chapter II, "Managing the Culture Shock: Black Identity in a PWI and the Impact of Online Interactions," I address the influence of offline life on online life, and how those experiences lead black Millenials into online action and behavior. The primary mover of online activity, in the academic context, is the academic calendar and the content and variation in student offline campus life. In addition to those factors are students' individual experiences, class backgrounds, sexual orientations, abilities, and gender identities.

Through this chapter I describe the sites and processes for offline identity formation identified in previous scholarship. I confirm those findings with my own data, primarily through an analysis of the interview transcripts. I then move into an illustration of how black Millenials supplement and moderate offline processes with online interactions. I also provide data showing my respondents' perception of campus racial climate at MU as hostile and awash in colorblind ideology and white privilege. The manifestations of that climate are visible to them in both the curriculum, staffing, faculty demographics, the composition of the larger student body, as well as in the individual

experience of both overt bias and daily microaggressions on and around the campus community.

Black Millenials make use of many strategies for managing that climate; prominent among them is the exercise of personal agency is constructing online counterspaces that provide necessary reprieve from those conditions. They, In doing so, purposefully seek to increase their ability to persist at MU by creating a network of associations from whom they gather the necessary emotional, psychological, and cultural support to succeed.

Black students have consistently been shown to have a distinct set of disadvantages placed upon them at each stage in the education pipeline. All of my 47 interviewees report having personal encounters with bias and discrimination in their school experiences, going back to as early as kindergarten and continuing for each of them in college. Most report, In fact, increases in both occurrences and the awareness of bias as they move through their academic careers.

Chapter III, "New Media Ecologies: The Properties of Digital Environments and the Affects on Identity," focuses on what participants find online, the opportunities that are available once they are driven there through various offline social, economic, and cultural pressures, and how they leverage online resources that are unique to online environments. In explaining the novel parameters of online experiences, I detail how the built environments of online spaces affect, enable, and/or hinder identity formation and expression.

In Chapter III, through a close examination of online data, I have identified and conceptually defined several properties of social networking site interactions and spaces

that impact identity formation in a variety of ways. These properties include: Distance & Reach, Confusion, Anonymity, Asynchronicity, and Media Multiplexity. Each of these properties have distinct affects on the nature of online interaction, and subsequently, online identity formation. Importantly, these properties are manifested and implemented differently by online site, adding complexity to online identity formation processes of black Millennials.

Theorists and empirical researchers alike have tackled the ramifications of the emergence of new media on various aspects of social life. Ito et al. (2012) have extended that scholarship to address the nuances of new media and online interactions, examining their impact on the lives of connected youth. My research takes their conclusions steps further by coupling my analysis of online action with offline information, triangulating multiple data sets to provide a clear picture of the meaning making processes of black Millennials engaged on online activity.

From that position, I build on their "Genres of Participation" framework, which establishes the variation in intensity of new media use, by coupling it with my conceptual contribution, "Hierarchy of Online Activity." I have identified the specific online actions that map onto the "Genres of Participation," illustrating not only the intensity of online use, but also how that intensity is manifested in specific online action. Ito et al. focused on age and generational identity as the primary concentration in their studies examining youth new media behavior. I continue my extension of their ethnographic research - broadening its reach by examining race as a driving force in online activity for African American young adults - establishing the more critical importance of "friendship and interest driven" online actions to the overall well-being of black Millennials in racially

homogenous and hostile environments. I argue that online space is racialized space – uncovering and explaining a focus on race and racial identity as a new category of " friendship and interest-driven" online behavior for black students

Chapter IV, "Constructing The (Digital) Self: Creating Black Counter Narratives And Images & Building Digital Black Communities," brings the main thrust of this dissertation full circle - demonstrating how online interactions reverberate back and interact with offline social life and identity formation for black Millennials. I unpack the nuances of online racial identify formation for black students, explicating the construction and development of multiple, situational, and complex racial identities. I analyze how online interactions and identity formation processes affect the offline lives of black students.

In the pursuit of those goals, I illustrate the construction of the digital self through the development of online counter-narratives and the construction of counter-images and counterspaces. These actions comprise primary strategies deployed by African American young adults to challenge deficit notions of blackness. In doing so, I explicate the moderating affects of online interactions on identity formation, and establish the set of novel processes for identity formation unique to online environments. In bringing the focus of the project full circle, I highlight the significance of constructing a "digital" self as a vital input to the formation of the self more broadly, which aids black college students in securing the necessary support to persist in higher education.

Chapter V, "Discussion and Conclusion," includes a discussion of the major findings of this dissertation. I provide additional context necessary to properly situate this research within the larger body of identity scholarship, as well as within the discipline of

sociology more generally. I restate the theoretical perspective with which I contextualize the findings of this project by elaborating on the ways in which my work extends the scope and contemporary utility of the contributions of W.E.B Du Bois. Specifically I reformulate his conceptions of the Veil and Double Consciousness by accounting for modern forms of new media communications. After demonstrating how social media and online interactions impact black racial identity formation I build on Du Bois primarily with my development of the concepts "Digital Double Consciousness" and the "Virtual Veil." I leave these theoretical conversations with my thoughts on the importance of Du Bois' work in future scholarly endeavors on identity formation, particularly with regard to understanding the role of new media in those processes.

Lastly, I elaborate on my conceptual innovation, the Triple – A (Armor/Anxious/Affirmation) framework for understanding and categorizing the online identity formation. Due to the comprehensiveness of the data collection and analysis of my dissertation, I propose that this framework may be of significant use for ascertaining the nuances of identity formation online along multiple intersecting identities beyond the focus on race and age. As such, gender and sexualities scholars, as well as those interested primarily with class and ability may make use of applying this framework to their populations of interest.

CHAPTER II

MANAGING THE CULTURE SHOCK: EXPERIENCING BLACK IDENTITY IN A PWI AND THE ROLE OF ONLINE INTERACTIONS

"Um…if I go to a place, especially around here, and I'm the only black person in there I get really worried about my safety. Just because of it...a lot of people who haven't met or talked to black people, and they already have this assumption that I'm evil or I'm bad, or I'm going to do something. I've just become very mindful. Like if I go to the store near campus, I am very mindful of where my hands are, I make sure everyone can see I'm not stealing anything, everything goes straight into the cart and straight onto the conveyor belt. I get very…I focus on myself a lot more, like every action that I make, and it makes me feel very uncomfortable, but it's cheaper... So…" – Angela

People go about their days in a material world – bathed in the various non-material cultures of the times – complete with all the trappings of daily social life that come with being part of large and complex communities. My study of online interactions and identity formation, considering this reality, is grounded in the offline experiences of Black Millennials attending a predominantly White institution of higher education. Online interaction, however, is colored by offline life. Importantly, and a point missed by many, is that this relationship is a multidirectional. For Millennial college students in particular – those whose lives are organized largely by the academic calendar, and whose age cohort most active online, offline experience is shaped and colored by online life as well. For African American students, the dynamic between on- and offline has become an increasingly important component in the effort to persist in predominantly white college spaces. The offline climate of Midwestern University (MU) and its' respective host cities, creates internal tensions for black students in and outside of the classroom - even when preforming menial tasks like shopping at local grocery stores near campus, as illustrated above.

In this chapter I analyze, clarify and discuses the impact of online interaction on the emotional, psychological, academic well-being of black students attending MU. I begin by reviewing the existing literature on both the established sites and processes for identity formation. I then move into data addressing how black student perceive and manage the offline campus climate at MU, experiences that I find then trigger specific online action and behavior. The core of this chapter addresses how the participants view the campus racial climate and engage in the campus community, how they perceive their experiences there, their management of metastereotypes and microaggressions, and the degree to which they leverage online resources to negotiate those experiences using Triple A processes.

Included in this chapter is an introduction to how black students construct digital counterspaces - online locations where African American students challenge deficit notions of blackness, and gain emotional, cultural, and academic support - in response to hostile campus racial climates. To accomplish this I provide a litany of examples, drawn primarily from in-depth interview data, which captures the emergent importance of online interactions for the formation of internally consistent and complex racial identities. I conclude with a summary of my findings before moving into the following chapter, which provides a more focused analysis of the online domain, its' properties, and how they uniquely impact racial identity formation.

Sites for Identity Formation and Management

To begin investigating how online interactions affect racial identity formation for African American young adults in college, it is necessary to recognize the various sites and processes identified in prior literature. Social media interactions, as I will show, supplement non-ICT identity formation processes, at times moderating their

implementation and effects while also providing new processes unique to online domains. The set of offline sites for identity formation illustrated in prior scholarship includes the home, work, the leisure sphere, civil society, and school.

The home presents a complex site for identity formation, as it allows the opportunity for both public and private development and expressions of self. It is a site where individuals are able to reveal their "true" selves in privacy and away from the "gaze of others" (Somerville 1997). It has also been argued, conversely, that the home also becomes a "front-stage" in which individuals are able to present to themselves and to others (Dhingra 2007; Goffman 1959).

The leisure sphere and civil society are also important and often over looked sites for identity formation. These sites serve as bridges between public and private, providing activities chosen rather than imposed which operate under less strict rules and "domain codes" than other institutions such as work and school. Domain codes, according to Dhingra (2007:124), refer to "an agreed-upon way of processing information and behaving among individuals that is judged 'proper' within a given context, regardless of whether the individual personally prefers it (Fiske and Taylor 1984; Friedland and Alford 1991; Swidler 2001)." The less stringent domain codes in these arenas allow for more autonomy in the construction of boundaries around racial identity. Civil society, on the other hand, includes sets of "institutions and organizations, rather than individuals" that harness collective efforts to accomplish goals that are prohibitively difficult for a solo action (Dhingra 2007:204). Examples of civil society include churches, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and social clubs.

Another major site for identity formation is the workplace. There is, however, relatively little research that explains how people of color experience, construct, and manage their identities within the workplace (Prasad and Mills 1997). What has been done, Dhingra (2007:129) noted, found that African Americans consider work environments "insensitive to their difference, which makes them uncomfortable day to day and nervous about their long-term mobility (Cose 1999; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Gilbert and Ones 1998; Soni 2ooo)." These emotional responses to workplace pressures are not unique to employment settings; they are replicated in university settings as well, as black students strive to attain greater social mobility through educational attainment.

Educational institutions also play an integral role as a major socializing institution and key site for identity formation. School curriculums, via omission of minority culture, at times promote a white patriarchal and heteronormative view of "American" identity (Solórzano et al. 2000). Scholars have noted that from their initial entrance into academic institutions, black students are, "faced with issues of racism and discrimination on a day-to-day basis (Rodgers and Summers 2008:178). Moreover, Torres and Charles (2004:130) found that black students lamented the, "everyday frustrations of being in a place designed to honor white history, white knowledge, and white cultural practices at the expense of the black experiences (Feagin et al.)." Tracking and standardized testing also funnel students of color into different educational and career paths, which in turn impacts the available set of identity options for individuals and groups as they enter other domains such as work and civil society.

Researchers have remarked on the role agents of socialization and socializing institutions play in various types of identity formation. In examining the impact on

gender identity, Cerulo (1997) noted how scholars have often scrutinized individuals and institutions, the family (e.g. Caldera et al 1989), the schools (e.g. Best 1983), and popular culture & media (Eilberg- Schwartz &Doniger 1995). Examination of how these institutions and individuals affect black identity formation specifically, however, is less prevalent. Each of these agents provides inputs into the identity formation process for individuals along various identity intersections (Cerulo 1997).

Similarly, and most important for this project, is the emergence of online interactions and communities as sites for racial identity formation. Cerulo (1997:397) argued that ICTs have "changed the backdrop against which identity is constructed; they have reframed the generalized others and the "generalized elsewheres" (Meyrowitz 1989) from which the self takes its cues." Other scholars suggest that computer-generated communities provide a "pseudo-gemeinschaft" experience (Beniger 1987). Continuing, Cerulo and others articulates the point that ICTs create a, "sense of 'we-ness,' demonstrating the concrete effect of techno-links and charting emergent cultures of references that can unify once disparate social actors (Cerulo et al 1992; Cerulo & Ruane 1997; Dayan 1992; Liebes 1990; Purcell 1997; Steuer 1992; Tichi 1991)." Taken together, these studies point to the importance of recognizing online interactions and spaces as meaningful inputs into and locations for identity formation.

Online sites function as centralizing locations for migrating people to construct their cultural and racial selves (Lee 2012). In such sites national and ethnic community is built for displaced peoples, which fosters a sense of common culture, history and group solidarity. In another instance, Ignacio (2005), studying of Filipino cultural communities

online, observed that the Internet functions a site for community formation around racial and ethnic identity for Filipino immigrants and non-migrants alike.

Emphasizing the significances of the meaningful and intentional association with co-ethnics, Tuan (1998:57) concluded that community ultimately resides within a "sense of community and associations" rather than any particular ethnic cultural practice. Activities such as bowling, fishing, or baseball were as important to the Asian American ethnic identity of her respondents as any culturally specific activity because interaction with other in-group members was the qualifying trait that made the congregation relevant.

In the online domain more specifically, which has had far less empirical study than offline sites, there are many activities that allow in-group members to engage one another. Massively popular online cooperative and competitive game playing (e.g. Xbox live, Twitch, PlayStation Network), multi-user video chats (e.g. Skype, Oovoo, Face time), and social networking sites (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), I argue, create conditions where community formation occurs for historically disposed populations. I argue, similarly, that is not the actual online activity that promotes racial identity formation and a sense of community, but the intentional association with other in-group members within online social spaces.

There are few sites where black Millenials, and the African American community more generally, can openly express feeling of marginalization, sadness at the loss of ethnic heritage due to slavery and institutional racism, and frustration with present day issues with discrimination and prejudice. For isolated people of color, this lack of cultural support is even more prominent. The Internet and online interactions provides a means

not only for black Millennials to seek out valuable cultural information, but also a way to engage in the type of identity-work that allow for the construction of positive black identities. The ability to locate and reengage with cultural history, rituals, and symbolically important cultural capital via online interactions has received little scholarly attention.

I spoke with Khloe, a female undergraduate student with a love for science and an interest in graduate education, about her pursuit of community in online spaces. Khloe has a medium brown complexion, long and loosely curled dark brown hair. She self-identifies as both African American and Mixed Race – a combination of Black, Italian, Puerto Rican, and Native American. Khloe describes her use of online interactions as a means of establishing lasting community attachments and positive identity affirmations. In navigating between racial categories as a mixed race individual, Khloe leverages the extended reach of online communications to address the lack of access to her cultural and ethnic heritages, and to see the diversity of visual representation present in mixed race communities. Khloe frequents an online group geared toward the multi-racial female experience. In doing so she affirms aspects of her racial identity by interacting with online content and people who share common experiences with multiraciality. She replied to my question with the following response:

Khloe: "There's this one page that I like and follow, it's called Mixed Chicks. And…it exhibits people who are made of multiple ethnicities and how they come out [present physically]. And that's a great time…like, I'm obviously 'liking' all the baby pictures. And…that's a great place where you can express…you can be that exact same makeup [as someone else] and look different. I like when I can talk about that stuff."

Raised in a single-father household, separated from and unaware of her mother's family, Khloe experienced inner conflict and struggles with developing an authentic

racial self. She gradually became aware of the various components of her racial ancestry, collecting information on each respective aspect of her lineage in the years leading up to college. One connection in particular is indicative of the capacity for online interactions to facilitate racial identity formation. Khloe explained how she met her grandmother online and subsequently found out about her diverse racial ancestry:

Khloe: "…In college, I get a Facebook message from my grandma, which shocked me. She's like, 'I found you I found you!!!' After that a bunch of people friend requesting me from my mom's side of the family, and my mom contacted me… I asked my grandma to explain a lot of questions. She's says that my grandpa was Italian. So that's how I found out what I am."

Black students often engage in online activities in order to compensate for being socially and/or cultural isolated in those instances where they find both connections to other black people, or positive black identity options, lacking. In response to that isolation, black students utilize online interactions and digital counterspaces to develop a sense of community.

For those who are not isolated, online interactions provide a means with which to coordinate and engage with the larger black community and to provide support for other African American peers who are isolated. In line with this premise, Wellman (2004:3) stated, "Technologies themselves neither make nor break communities. Rather, they create possibilities, opportunities, challenges, and constraints for what people and organizations can – and cannot – do." Online interactions and spaces, in that way, are reconstructing the traditional boundaries that previously compartmentalized sites for identity formation.

The impact of race online may not be obvious due to the seemingly disembodied and geographically untethered nature of online communications; people, however, still

account for content of those communications. As the editors of Race in Cyberspace (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000) noted, "race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matter offline, and we can't help but bring in our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on."

Identity Formation Processes

Within the many sites for identity formation are multiple processes through which people of color form their senses of self. Each process serves as an input to the complex and fluid arrangement that comprises ones set of identities. Among them are familial influences (socioeconomic background & cultural history) and physical appearance (the most cited process), followed by social network composition, and language & discourse.

Familial influence and community demographics

The primary agents of socialization early in life have typically been one's immediate family, close relatives, and the childhood friendships within one's local community. Because individual senses of self, both racially and otherwise, often originate in those first connections with significant others, the role of familial influence, socio-economic background, and cultural history play key roles in the identity formation process. Scholars have extensively documented how the experiences one has during childhood impact racial and ethnic identity later in life (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Dhingra 2007). Tuan (1998:76) found that "parents establish precedents for food preparation, language(s) spoken, customs observed, and the importance placed on co-ethnic friendships." Moreover, parents have influence over where to raise their children, which is significant as the population in which one is raised and has direct contact with impacts the range and availability of observable racial identity options. The degree of

exposure to marginalized populations has been shown to affect susceptibility to negative racial stereotypes (Lee et al. 2004). In this way, the demographic compositions of an area, and whether one has majority or minority standing in that area, influences how racial discourse and behavior unfold in daily life.

Further, the types of racial coping strategies enacted by people of color may also be impacted by their experiences growing up in less diverse areas. Tuan (1998:77) stated in reference to this dynamic:

> "The demographics of their community and outlying areas largely influence whether children experience much or little prejudice and discrimination, have opportunities to explore their cultural heritage outside the family, and are encouraged either to be proud of their heritage or to shun it. Through interactions with friends and strangers outside the home, young people develop a sense of themselves separate from how their families see them within the home. In the realms of the classroom and schoolyard, the neighborhood, and community, they learn what meanings their race and ethnicity hold for the larger society by watching how others respond to these aspects of their identity."

The family, socioeconomic status (SES), and cultural background dynamics contribute to a series of what I call "pressures and releases" that either constrain or make accessible various identity options for individuals to consider and/or adopt. Put differently, the perceived elasticity of racial identity – what is an is not acceptable as a black person, what blackness represents, and how to be black – is impacted by the local environments and offline interactions present in the home, with family, and in the local communities in which people reside. These pressures and releases are evident in the lives of black Millennials. The experiences they have prior to entering the college environment at MU shape the formation and presentation of their racial selves across all arenas of social life.

A junior political science major at MU, committed to developing a career in

government, Julius spoke frankly about the pressure to conform to a specific representation of black identity from his family. I asked him if his family had ever spoken to him about race and racism, and if they had ever coached him on how to behave or present himself as a young black man. He stated:

Julius: "Yes. I was saying this in class the other day in response to Michael Brown in Ferguson. I was explaining, you know, mostly in the African American community, or the black community, you are taught, especially as a black man, how to deal with the police in a positive way. And…I didn't really notice it; I thought it was normal for every parent to show their children, to teach their children how to deal with cops. However, it's not. And…but in my family I was taught, "Julius, if you're pulled over, keep your hands on the steering wheel, make no sudden movements, don't blink too hard, don't say nothing too strong, when you reach for your wallet to get your license and registration, you reach slowly. You explain to the officer each and every one of your movements, expect for him to put his hand on his gun, because he's scared of you, because you're black or African American. You know, we get talked that before we get talked the birds and the bees (laughs)…"

This conversation illustrates how Julius' family attempted to prepare him for what they saw as an inevitable social reality of his blackness. They were framing future interactions for him in hopes that he would be able to negotiate those negative encounters without harm. This type of coaching strategy, unique to communities of color, is a pressure on racial identity formation for black youth. The attempt to instill a pre-established cultural script into black youth that sets the parameters of interactions with police and other authority figures, commonly called "the talk," clearly shows an effort to constrain behavior that black parents worry may get their children injured or killed. As a result, young men like Julius internalize those scripts, adjusting their public behavior accordingly, thus limiting the free expression of identity as they move through life and the various institutions that shape lived experiences for African American young adults.

This script is also present for Black women, though the gendered nature of these interactions is apparent. Alexis, a Junior Women's and Gender Studies major and aspiring social work graduate student, verbalized a similar discussion with her parents, who highlighted the unique struggles she would face as both black and female.

> Alexis: "I've always been proud of who I was. I've always had that attitude. My parents always raised me to be a proud African American woman. They raised me African American, not really differentiating between black and African American. But they always were like, 'be proud to be who you are, be proud to be a woman, you don't have to do anything a particular way because you're a woman.' My parents were always 'you do what you gotta do, but you are going to face some type of backlash at some point in your life because you are who you are."

It is clear that past experiences with family and community significantly impact identity formation. That assertion is confirmed in my own data, as evidence in the passages above. Extending out from those home neighborhoods and family-centric experiences are the social ties that make up student's extended network of associations, close friends, acquaintances, and other relations. A primary driver of racialization in those interactions is the physical presentation of the individual - how one's collection of phenotypic traits fit the stereotypes of physically observable racial identity.

Appearance

To understand racial identity formation requires a discussion on the sociocultural significance we assign to bodily difference. What are, genetically speaking, minor variations in traits like complexion, hair texture, and eye color are defined as important through a lifelong process of socialization. We have determined that those minor variations is physical features indicate meaningful difference between what we socially construct to be races. The power dynamics in those determinations permeate the

historical record, as people of color have largely been left out of any real process of self-determination, or larger scale discourses on what should constitutes racial categories.

In the literature on racial identity formation, those phenotypic differences are consistently presented as the major component of how people racially identify and are identified by others (Harris 1994). . Importantly, the consequences of those definitions have lasting impacts on the lived experiences of people of color. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002:56) in their study of biracial identity in America, note that appearance strongly influences racial identity developments, mate selection, friend selection, and a multitude of life chances.

That physical input to the process of racialization is so pervasive, in fact, that even individuals blind since birth adopt an overwhelmingly appearance-driven schema of racial categorization. Obasogie (2010:586) found that through an iterative process spanning multiple social institutions and practices, that even people who are blind from birth report having phenotypically based assumptions about existing racial categories. Blind people not only understand the visual representations of race, they make choices and are impacted by those frames of understanding just like their sighted counterparts. With those findings, he asserts that while many processes inform the racial identity formation and categorization of people of color, appearance is the most significant.

Regarding how appearance is managed in online interactions, Nakamura (2008) traces the trend in modern Internet culture that relies on visual images to mediate racial identity formation. She noted that though there are many complex methods with which people establish and parse out racial identity, the selection of avatars as social and symbolic artifacts is common. Similarly, Daniels (2012:5) writes that, “the key insight for

race and Internet studies is that rather than offering an escape route out of notions of race tied to embodiment, the visual culture of the Internet complicates race and racism in new ways that are still closely tied to a politics of representation…" Finally, Kendall (2000:260) argued that racial signifiers and symbolism continue online, stating that:

"The bodies of others may remain hidden and inaccessible, but this if anything gives references to such bodies even more social importance...Studying relations of dominance and difference on-line where appearance cues are hidden can yield further insights into the working of the social processes by which identity understandings are created, maintained and/or changed."

These scholars argue that appearance remains a significant factor in racial identity formation, even in the incorporeal quality of online interactions. What scholars do not directly address is the purposefully manipulation of physical presentation in online interactions. They do allude to the selection of avatars in a more limited sense, but it goes much beyond that. In interpersonal communications between black Millennials, the selection of avatars is largely absent, with the exception of gamers who are required to create in-game characters with which they navigate online worlds like MMORPGs (e.g. World of Warcraft). The vast majority of my respondents used actual photos of themselves as primary profile and account pictures.

The use of avatars to obfuscate identity is a generally outdated practice tied largely to a wariness of online interactions more common in previous generations. Today's youth have a drastically different relationship to online social life, with far less fear of presenting identifiable information, such as actual pictures, locations, workplaces, and schools, to the world of online others. My respondents do, however, meticulously manicure their visual representation online in different ways. Rather than substituting photographs of themselves with avatars, black Millennials are highly selective of photos,

being hyper-aware of clothing choices, body position, the perceived fit of their images with negative racial stereotypes, and they are wary of type of activity they present online (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol). The exact manifestations of these choices fluctuate by online site, and are strategically used to present variants of their set of selves and identities across their collection of social media accounts.

Russel provides an interesting contradiction common of my respondents. My interview data indicates a tension between the free expression of racial identity, which for most includes a strong sense of pride in racial and ethnic heritage, and what is actually done in online contexts to manage racial presentation. What this amounts to is the struggle to balance a dual identity structure where an authentic expression of self must be weighed against the specter of racial stereotyping. With a staunch sense of pride in his black racial identity, Russel exclaims, in one breathe, his opposition to cover or hide aspects of his racial self.

Q: Has there ever been an occasion where you either played up or played down your racial identity online?

Russel: Nope. Not at all! I'm going to say I'm black, and if you don't hear me say it you gone see it from my photo as my profile pic. Mmm Hmm.

Moments later, when asked if he adjusts the presentation of his racial identity online, in another breathe, he articulates a deep seeded anxiety that compels him to amend his online presentation.

Russel: Like I purposefully try not to have pictures of myself in a bandana. Like, if I were to post a photo in a bandana, you never know what's going to happen. They might be like, This gangbanger right here' or if something…like if I got hit by a car or something…you never know what the media is going to try and do. Like they might look up my Facebook and try to see what kind of photos I have. They see me in a bandana, they will be like, he was a potential thug, especially if the color is red or blue. You never know so I try not to get myself trapped in a situation where I can be viewed as a potential

threat or potential criminal. Or even a potential gangster, because I even had some people in reality come up to me and be like, 'are you in a gang?'"

Q: Are those decisions not to present your self in a certain way to avoid stereotypes a conscious choice?

Russel: I think it's definitely conscious. Because if it was unconscious, believe me, there would be those photos of me in a bandana. I've done it before, just not on Facebook. I think definitely they're conscious because I already know what it's like being a black man growing up in American society. So I don't want to further any stereotypes, even though most of the people who are on my Facebook account know who I am and what I represent. They know I'm not a violent guy. But overall I don't want an image of myself and it may be taken the wrong way.

Others take the opposite action of racial performance rather than covering or concealing to avoid stereotyping. While opposing strategies, each shares a common goal of managing the consumption of racial self by some other or others. Using image software to adjust components of physical appearance in photos, for example, Angela purposefully darkens her skin tone in online photos of as a means of affirming the beauty of dark complexions. In doing so she casts off the negative stigma associated with her dark skin, and projects a sense of pride in black identity into her social media interactions.

This attempt to reshape physical appearance is an exercise of agency in the online presentation of her racial self. Angela remarked on this topic:

Angela: "(long pause)…when I was younger, because my brother and my mom is about your complexion, and I'm a lot darker, I constantly felt ashamed of being as dark as I was. And then I always wished I was either white or Asian."

Q: Has there ever been an instance where you either played up or played down your racial identity online? You mentioned having white avatars before…

Angela: "I definitely play up. When it comes to Instagram photos, I will go to a filter that makes me darker…and…this is the thing…it really started last semester when we did the light skin v dark skin skit. Cuz I used to consider myself dark skin, and then when I was told I was in the middle, I realized that certain lighting makes me look lighter, and certain lighting makes me look darker, and now I lean to the one that makes me look darker."

Q: Is that conscious, are you doing that on purpose?

Angela: “I do that on purpose. I took a picture today and I [laughs boisterously] was like I'm looking too light.”

Q: tell me about the motivation or the process of why you're doing that. What is it doing for you to do that?

Angela: “It just makes me feel more confident, and it makes me feel prettier in that picture than doing it lighter…I don’t know. It’s very recent that I just started doing that. I don’t know if it's the lighting in my room that washes me out…and I use darker foundation, cuz when I did go…I was like I want to try out makeup, other than eyeliner. So I purposely got foundation that makes me look a little bit darker, and I’ll just move it to where my shirt starts.”

Prior scholarship is clear in its prioritization of appearance in shaping racial identity. Black Millennials also engage in this process, though they manifest it through a variety of ways unique to online interactions. The compulsion to manipulate appearance, whether it be on or offline, interacts with the other major identity formation processes. How my respondents felt about appearance, and the deeper meanings they hold about what it means to be black in the U.S., are also impacted by composition of their social networks.

Social networks

One’s immediate family and relatives take up the most significant roles in socializing youth as they begin negotiating their senses of a racial self, and the phenotypic traits one has provide input into those processes. In addition to those factors are the individuals and connections that make up one’s wider collection of associations. The totality of network ties maintained by each individual open up the constellation of inputs into identity formation, which were once relegated to only those primacy connections found in the family and the constraints of local neighborhoods. Scholars have sought to determine if and how network connections affect the development of identity, in addition to providing an understanding of how resources flow through

network ties. Core network ties provide a broad form of social support, which includes emotional aid, companionship, and relationships that impact one's racial identity development and overall mental health (Hampton et al. 2011). Tuan's (1998:110) findings that meaningful co-ethnic social networks promoted communal participation illustrate how networks shape identity. She noted that in the past those ties served as anchors for individuals to their ethnic communities. Moreover, those ties also ensured the observance of ethnic rituals and cultural practices. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002:58), stated the following in reference to the impact of social networks on racial identity formation:

"What occurs within these networks and the type of interactions that individuals have in those setting affect their choices of racial identity. We conceptualize this as *push and pull factors* where individuals, located within particular types of social networks, may feel pulled toward one racial identity option because of positive experiences with one group or may feel pushed away from another racial identity because of negative experiences."

Regarding the impact of online interactions on network size, Hampton (2011) reports that rather than having a negative effect, some ICT use was associated with larger more diverse core networks. In fact, those who have mobile phones and use the Internet for instant messaging and photo sharing, have core discussion network sizes that are, on average, 34% larger than those who do not use those ICTs. While some warned that the use of ICTs and the development of online relationships and identities attrite local network ties (Putnam 2007), this warning has proven groundless as scholars (Hampton et al. 2011; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Hampton and Gupta 2008) find that rather than replacing existing network ties, ICTs provide the chance to maintain distant ties as well as promote opportunities for new and supplemental local interactions (Hampton 2011 et al.). These findings are consistent with the work of Ito et

al. (2012) who found that youth relationships derived from interest-driven new media practices sometimes develop into lasting friendships and result in "friendship-driven" activities. Within networks, individuals are privy to a multitude of discourses, the language of which also shapes the perception and salience of racial identity.

Language and discourse

Working within family and local connections, and wider social network ties, are the ways in which people communicate identity inputs to each other. Explicit in the identity formation process are the methods, contents, and means of interpersonal and intergroup communication. Many scholars have examined language and discourse as key processes of identity formation (Cerulo 1997; Bell and Hartmann 2007; Dhingra 2007; Obasogie 2012; Wong 2000; Hughey 2008). Cerulo (1997) asserts that identity is continually renegotiated through linguistics exchanges and social performances. Additionally, Bell and Hartmann (2007:907) found that much of the discourse around diversity rests on a white normative perspective. They stated:

> "This perspective starts from the dominance white worldviews, and sees the culture, experiences, and indeed lives, of people of color only as they relate to or interact with the white world. White normativity is not simply an attitude held by whites in which white people are the center of the universe. Rather, white normativity is a reality of the racial structure of the United States in which whites occupy an unquestioned and unexamined place of esteem, power, and privilege."

This white normativity frames discussion around race, racism, and racial identity, which in turn places restrictions on what can be said regarding race and when it is appropriate to do so (Anderson 1999). These language and discourse processes are visible in both Julius' and Alexis' discussion with family about appropriate roles and behaviors in social life due their racial identity. Limitations on the free expression of racial discourse – restrictions set by the dominant cultural scripts put in place in racialized

social systems – hold sway over the identity options and expressions available to students of color.

This review has presented a synopsis of the scholarship on offline identity formation sites and processes, providing supporting and confirmatory data from my own project. As full-time college students, the majority of whom do not live with parents during the academic year, work full-time, or reside in hometown communities, those sites have less impact in organizing the day-to-day identity formation processes of my respondents. While they are significant, they are relatively less important sites for identity formation, as school now serves as the primary offline residence for my respondents. In the following section I elaborate on how the college environment shapes identity formation, including a discussion of the student perception of campus climate at MU. I then move into an account of how my respondents experience microaggressions and metastereotypes at MU, with data illustrating both the emotional toll and student responses to those conditions. I continue with an explanation of various coping strategies for managing that added stress, which leads to a examination and discussion of how online spaces are leveraged as a resources for managing the campus climate. I conclude with a summary of findings prior to moving into chapter three of this dissertation.

The Problem of Hostile Campus Racial Climates

Scholars have long explored the unique experiences black students face in university settings. In that scholarship, systemic and interpersonal barriers to progress through the education pipeline are well documented. Whether it is the residential segregation and subsequent education funding inequality, the propensity for teachers to assign disproportionately harsh punishments to black children, or the implicit bias held

by faculty and staff who then unnecessarily track black students away from advanced courses and college preparatory resources. Once in college, issues like these do not simply fade away. Black students are exposed to many problematic behaviors and institutionalized inequalities, which combine and contribute to the experience of hostile campus racial climates in college. This climate, in turn, has serious and lasting affects on student persistence, emotional and psychological well-being, and overall academic success (Solórzano et al. 2000).

Historically, attempts by African Americans to integrate into academic institutions have been met with overt hostility. While the most egregious forms of racism and discrimination are less prevalent today, black students still face bias through hostile campus climates, racial microaggressions, and the experience of metastereotypes. Pierce et al. (1978:66) defined microaggressions as, "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders." They went on to note that the "cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions." Moreover, Davis (1989:1576) defined racial microaggressions as "stunning automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute verification of black inferiority." Microaggressions, in sum, are processes that contribute to the interpersonal reproduction of racial stratification. They do so by subtly reinforcing deficit notions of blackness that reduce the heterogeneity of black culture and identity into non-complex and homogenizing negative stereotypes.

There is an explicit connection between racial stereotypes, racial microaggressions, campus racial climate, and academic performance. Solórzano et al.

(2000:68) found that racial microaggressions occurred both on- and off-campus for black students attending a predominantly white institution. Importantly, they noted that the campus racial climate facilitated subtle racism within academic spaces and overt racism within social spaces on campus as well. They found that as a result of exposure to racial microaggressions and a hostile campus climate, black students struggled with feeling of "self-doubt and frustration as well as isolation." In addition, several of their participants noted that racial microaggressions affected their academic performance by pushing them to, "drop a class, change their major and even leaving the university."

Sources of Black Student Emotional Labor and The Causes of Hostile Campus Racial Climate

The structure of academia advantages white students over students of color throughout the education pipeline. These discrepancies filter out historically marginalized groups at each level of academia. The result is a predominantly white set of institutions of higher education ill equipped for supporting the personal and scholarly achievement of students of color.

For my respondents, the variation in individual personality, hometowns, experiences of diversity, class standing, extracurricular involvement, and other factors are wide ranging. While many experienced exposure to white populations in childhood, the scale of whiteness, and the overt lack of black and brown bodies and cultures at MU, was striking. This culture shock was magnified for those who had little exposure to racial others prior to their entrance into MU. Despite their initial level of relative racial comfort with out-group members, and their variation in personal histories, the homogenizing affect of racialization brought on by matriculation into MU is stark. Black students at MU have remarkably similar sets of encounters with various forms of bias and discrimination

on and around campus. Those conditions led them to overwhelmingly characterize the campus racial climate at MU as generally hostile and uninviting.

Through our conversations they explained what they view as primary causes for the emergence of a hostile campus racial climate at Midwestern University, and higher education more generally. These causes include the lack of prior exposure white students have to racial others, administrative neglect and faculty negligence, and cultural isolation resulting from an unacceptably small black student populations, and inadequate curricular representation.

In illustration of these factors, the following data unpacks black student perception of the campus climate at MU. My conversation with Teddy, an outstanding student, is revealingly typical with regard to how the mostly white space of MU constrains the free expression of racial identity. Academically accomplished, Teddy is also committed student leader with an impeccable record of civic and student government participation. Teddy has a light brown complexion, medium brown hair locked in dreads with the tips dyed a rusty reddish light brown color. In typical college student clothing - jeans and a t-shirt - he wears his hair pulled back, securing the locs tightly with a headband to keep them from falling into his face. With a brilliant and infectious smile, Teddy sat in front of me, confident and conveying a deep interest in the conversation at hand, as we began our discussion. Casting an inviting energy - whimsically twirling a pen between his fingers - he pondered and thoughtfully responded to my question when I asked him how the demographic composition of MU affects his experiences there.

Teddy: I feel like being an African American individual does affect all of my experiences in the formal educational process. So, with all of the different things, and being that I am more active on campus, if something happens it's just kinda like, "How do you think and how do you feel?" [Mimicking others asking him this question]. What if I just want to not

feel anything for a second? What if I don't want to answer your questions? What if I don't want to help you organize a town hall or something like that? So that is one thing, especially with everything going on right now. But…it's interesting, cuz I like it but I hate it at the same time….But at the same time, like the fact that there are only so many of us, it's kinda just like, 'Well, you guys hold all of the views of black people in your 7 or 8 percent. How do you guys feel? What do you think we need to do?' It's just like we feel the same…we feel. It's stressful."

In the passage Teddy explains the daily requirement placed on black students to educate their white counterparts on black issues, identity and culture. Exasperated, he gives a glimpse into the daily stresses resulting from his white peers lack of exposure and knowledge of other cultures and identities. This type of emotional labors placed undue pressure on black students to mitigate structural inequalities that result in both small black students populations and the type of segregation that leads to the narrow conceptions of black identity held by white students.

I went on to ask Teddy about how those demographics and resulting experiences impact how he expressed himself on campus. In his reply Teddy explains the burden of representation felt by black students at MU, and the emotional exhaustion that results form those expectations. He replied:

Teddy: I feel like there are kinda like…I think that it kinda comes back to the fact that…the stereotypes and things like that. There's 90% white people, and I'm not going to interact with all 90% of those people on a day to day. So the way that I have to carry myself, the way that I have to look, the way that I have to interact with anyone that's new it just like…you gotta be the best of the best. You have to make sure you're always carrying yourself at your best. You're always 110%. So, the way that I do walk around campus…just like, walking around…is kinda just like you always have to be that 110%. I do feel like I have to carry myself a certain way around campus, or even if I'm just interacting with someone for the first time, I have to carry myself that way. After I've interacted with them a bit I do feel like it does get better, and I can relax and be me. For lack of a better word, I can just relax and be Teddy, not have to worry about…I can say how I really feel in that instance.

Teddy goes on to describe how those experiences and the resulting self-checks on his behavior filter into classroom interactions with both students and faculty.

Teddy: So…there are 80 students admitted into the nursing program. Two of us are black in this next cohort….It's like even if I have a good grade in the class, it's like 'Oh, we didn't expect you have a good grade.' And I feel like it's the same thing for a lot of different people….all of the student's have had some little microaggressions or someone said something. One girl said 'colored people' in the class. And she was like one of only two students in the class. And I was [referring to his inner monologue], 'Is the professor going to say something. Do I have to say something? I don't want to jump on this girl because she may just be ignorant, but at the same time you just called us colored people.' When you're alone it's like, I just don't want to say anything, I don't want to be that person, I don't want to be overreacting or hypersensitive about an issue. But even more so when there's more of us in the class, it's kinda like, 'do you feel the same way about it. Well if you feel the same way maybe I'm not overreacting. Maybe It's not just me.' But there's not always three or four of us in the class, which is sucky."

The unwillingness and/or inability of faculty to address the improper use of racial terminology, again, placed undue burden on Teddy, who then went through an involved process of questioning and assessing his emotional response. It is typical for black students in these situations to question whether or not their reaction is appropriate. As Teddy details, being isolated and having no one in the room who can validate your emotions from a place of personal experience is a significant source of emotional labor – this, in turn, detracts from the lesson at hand in the classroom and hinders academic performance.

In those moments of isolation and distress, initiated by the lack of faculty support and outdate racial etiquette used by white student peers, several coping strategies are used to compensate. In order to manage the hostile campus racial climate black Millenials often engage in self-censorship – an action common among my study participants. With engagement in the language and discourse processes of identity formation, black students in predominantly white spaces are hyper aware of their verbal articulations regarding racial issues. Despite needing to outwardly process their emotional labor through

interpersonal communication, black students, in the offline setting, are compelled to either suppress those feelings or face sanctions for verbalizing them.

My conversation with Sarah, a charming and charismatic female theater major, highlights the struggles of self-censorship. Hair in a natural style, light complexion and about 5'6'' tall, Sarah speaks in an interesting variety of shifting vocal tones, dramatic pauses, and complimentary gestures. Invested in the local arts scene of the area, she exudes the stereotypic flair and charm one would expect from a theater major while we talk. I asked her if she thinks the racial composition of MU affected her expression of self, stated the following:

Sarah: "Yeah. Sometimes I felt like…I had to go to specific places to be…to say certain things. …for instance, on the bus, if you're having a conversation. I'm sitting with my black friend, we're talking about black culture…and I say…I'm talking about racism, what somebody said, why she said it, and am I wrong for feeling like that was racist. And my black friend is shushing me…cuz the bus is full of white people. And I tell her 'I don't care!' Because this is a public place, and if they have anything to say to me, they are very welcome to do so. I had to be defensive!"

In this passage Sarah articulates a language process in which her discussion of race and racism she is policed by a black student peer. Though she ultimately rejects that restriction, she nevertheless is required to negotiate the encounter with her peer, and in doing so consider the ramifications of the interactions both for herself in this predominantly white space, and for her relationship to her friend, one of the few other black students associations she has at MU.

In order to maintain her agency in speaking plainly about race, Sarah risks damaging an important peer relationship that helps her persist at MU. She went on to tell me about a bias incident that would have caused her to leave the university. She was falsely accused of taking the belongings of her dorm mates, three white female students.

During the argument, all three dorm-mates collectively bullied her with false accusations, and when an RA arrived, fabricated a story painting Sarah as angry, aggressive, and unapologetic when they confronted her. The three white dorm mates, together, attempted to use that false narrative to have Sarah removed from the residence. She explained to me that she was prepared to drop out of the university, but for the support system developed and maintained throughout her college career. I then asked about the larger problem of racism at MU. She replied the following:

Q: Do you think that racism or discrimination is an issue at Midwest University?

Sarah: "Yes! Because if racism is or discrimination puts me out of my dorm room, and I am…and I literally have emotional breakdowns two years afterwards, because I'm still hurting from it. I don't feel like I was retritbuted (sic) from that…then…and I was left to deal with that on my own…"

Others respondents, prior to any incidents, limit the use of specific racial identity labels in an effort to limit negative encounters with white peers. There is a clear propensity to strategically select how one articulates black identity to others based on the racial composition of the audience, which at MU is 90% white. While Charles presents and self identifies as Black, he describes himself as African American in the presence of white people at MU. He uses this linguistic maneuver, despite using the term black with family and close friends, so as to not "offend anyone." He explains,

Charles: "I would say the school I went to…are you familiar with the east side of the state…well, we grew up… it was predominantly black, with a few other races mixed in…and then we moved … in that district, which at that time, it was majority white. And I would say in that setting is when African American came into play. And I think that was because, where I was….it was black teachers black students…I guess it was socially acceptable to say black, where nobody would feel offended. But I guess when you get into a predominantly white environment, they kind of want to be politically correct, so they use the term African American."

Linguistic cues, racial labeling, vernacular, and conversation about race and racial identity are inputs into the formation of racial identity for black Millenials. Online interactions mitigate some of those restrictions of the above mentioned processes by providing African American students the opportunity to construct counterspaces where they can verbalize, build, manage and present their racial identities less encumbered by the pressures and tensions of offline social life. Dhingra (2007:146) found that everyday conversation requires strategic decisions for minority group members so as to not violate, or appear "too ethnic," for the domain code of a given location. In addition, his respondents engaged in "identity-talk," which refers to the statements people make that psychologically affirm identity commitments. Following that discourse, Dhingra's (2007:161) respondents then engaged in boundary-work, "the physical behaviors that indicate an observable, not simply (or even necessarily) articulated, difference between groups," in order to affirm those commitments.

Another strategy I have identified in my data for managing hostile campus racial climates is the breaking of traditional offline barriers between identity formation sites - those based on physical limitations and the geographic distance within and between offline locations - by creating and using online counterspaces, sometimes while still in class, to vent and seek community support and validation.

Black students perceive the core curriculum of MU as an object that reinforces a negative campus climate, and a source of microaggressive behavior by faculty and staff. In illustration of this, I asked Yarra, a Nigerian-American social work graduate student, about her experiences at MU, if she ever felt pressure to perform or adjust her behavior while in the classroom.

Yarra: Um….(long pause)….Mostly, no. It would usually be like…it would depend on a professor.

Unprompted, with clear exasperation in her voice as she recalled the moment, she abruptly added the following comment, as I was about to move on.

Yarra: So, the first one that comes to mind was this economics professor I had. Who had this thing, pretty much from the beginning of the year, where he was talking about capitalism, where he would say like, 'That's what separates us. If we didn't have capitalism, we might as well be back in Africa wearing loin clothes. [Frustrated] Yeah, so that was one shit."

My respondents do not miss the western bias and lack of cultural representation in the materials of study. Because of the underrepresentation of black thought and culture in core classes at MU, some students seek alternate means of filling those gaps. Kevin, a male junior studying hospitality management, could not find adequate representation of black identity in the core curriculum of his classes. Kevin spoke about his use of electives to fill out that gap, highlighting the added time constraints of doing so.

Kevin: "…well, I took…I think I took African American studies last year…and then I wanted to take some more but I just haven't had the time, because I actually would like to learn more on my own…you know, research. Because I really don't know…I don't know where to start, that's why I wanted to take the class, and like build up a foundation of what I really want to look into."

The experiences of black student at PWIs are shaped, to a high degree, by the racial demographics of the institution. My respondents perceive the disproportionately white demographic composition of MU as a major factor that increases the frequency of microaggressions in their day-to-day lives. Managing those microaggressions places a heavy burden on Black students at MU, which often manifests in the development of overtly negative metastereotypes.

Metastereotypes and the Affects on Minority Student Success

Scholars have shown that black students are aware of "metastereotypes" and that this knowledge creates racial tension on campus, feelings of anxiety, and increased levels of stress. A metastereotype is the perception black people have of the racial attitudes of white people toward African Americans (Signalman and Touch 1997). According to Torres and Charles (2004:133), black students' academic outcomes are shaped, in part, by their perceptions of white stereotypes of black people. They argued that metastereotypes are a manifestation of double-consciousness in predominantly white universities where black students are exposed to stereotypes of black inferiority. In such situations, black students exert considerable mental energy both combatting negative stereotypes, and simultaneously rejecting the internalization of them (Massey et al. 2003).

Through an examination of focus group data, Torres and Charles found that the metastereotypes held by their black student respondents - the belief that their white peers had a uniformly negative view of African American identity - was in fact consistent with how their white student respondents reported their perceptions of their African American peers. This study further noted that African American students sought out safe black spaces in order to find reprieve from what they termed a "constantly hostile climate." They went on to state that the majority of their black student respondents saw having such a space as being crucial to their success at the university. In essence, black students viewed safe black spaces on campus as a place where they no longer had to manage stereotypes and perform identity-work in reaction to bias, racism and discrimination.

These results are replicated in my data as well. My respondents feel as though their white counterparts have a generally negative and stereotypical view of black identity

and culture. Indeed, the vast majority of my respondents report having had negative encounters with white students at various stages of their careers in education. As a result, they have internalized a behavioral strategy whereby they censor and cover their actions in an attempt to manage potentially negative perceptions of themselves and black identity as more generally. Feeling the weight of the entire race - having to perform in order to counter any negative perceptions of blackness white students and faculty may have - my respondents struggle to balance an authentic presentation of self, the metastereotypes they hold, and their daily interactions on and around campus. These acrobatics are intensified as they also fight to manage course loads, work, and social lives with the hostile campus climate, while maintaining an exemplary academic performance.

I asked Russel, for example, if he felt pressure to manage his emotions, physical presence and appearance, or attitude while at school. He responded with a detailed account of how he adjusts his behavior on campus in order to manage the perception of black identity:

Russel: Definitely. If I'm not smiling…people think something is wrong. If…you know…use my passion, people think I'm crazy or angry. I wouldn't say crazy…but more so angry. But it's like I constantly have to be aware of my behavior, because I don't know how people are going to react to it. I can do something as small as speaking to a bunch of young ladies and people are like, 'You know that's not very professional.' Like, why? I'm just having a conversation. It's like I have to constantly be on the outlook for certain responses based on certain actions. And it's like, people may say that line, 'I'm not trying to pull the race card,' but if I was white, would this actually happen. I wonder if white people do actually have to think about their attitude or their reaction to certain things, compared to me."

Russel, in those instances, attempts to balance a dual identity, where on the one hand his preferred dispositions and methods of communication are stifled for want of tempering the read of his actions as volatile, dangerous, and sexually aggressive – each of these stereotypes an old and damaging trope of black male identity with roots stretching

back into the18th and 19th centuries. He goes on to question how those behaviors would be viewed if enacted by a white person. This type of racial projection fits neatly into the metastereotypes and Double Consciousness frameworks for understanding the formation of black identity.

Following up, I went on to ask Russel how he felt managing those perceptions affected his emotional well-being. He replied:

Russel: "It can have a state of paranoia on some individuals. Constantly gotta be aware, constantly looking at the way you dress, the way you act, the way you speak…and the way you portray yourself in general. Cuz you'll never know how somebody will take it, especially being at a predominantly white institution. It's like…I hate to say this, but it's like the odds are against you. Sometimes people don't understand you for who you truly are, and the value that you carry."

Another student, when I asked how she managed negative interactions, remarked on the toll of engaging in those racial performance:

Tiarra: Yeah… in class I know me and another black guy had a conversation, where we hold back in class, because if we get going it's going to get emotional…and people here are easily offended…get scared, and we're animated, so…I know he and I hold back a lot. Had a cultural competency class, which is super annoying…because cultural competency is not just black and white, but that's all it talked about. And I just sat in the back of the class…I didn't contribute, nothing. It was like, 'I'm done with this.'

The experience of hostile campus climate goes beyond microaggressions and the development of negative racial metastereotypes. The majority of my respondents also experience direct exposure to racism and discrimination while on campus at MU. They were exposed to a range of racially aggressive and insensitive behavior, including racial jokes and mockery, blatant stereotyping, tokenism, and fetishishizing (particularly for black women).

In illustration of the overt discrimination black student at MU faced, my conversation with James stands out. A first-generation student from inner city Detroit, he

a short and stoutly built young man. A first-year student, James is timid and stands with the slightly bowed shoulders of a thoughtful and shy young person. He has a medium brown complexion and smiles frequently – radiating a sincerity that is noteworthy – and wears a long dark-blue puffy winter jacket, tattered and faded black sweat pants, and a thick wooly royal blue winter hat. Speaking in a Midwest Detroit accent, his vernacular peppered with an abundance of yes and no sirs demonstrating his politeness, he talked me through the rapid succession of incidents he experienced on campus just a few weeks prior to our conversation.

James: "One time, I was…it was the first week of class here…and this is my first semester … and…these boys was playing with the Frisbee…so I was just admiring them walking past. And then the Frisbee all of a sudden…like I'm right here, and my mans like right here…the Frisbee just came towards my way…then the guy was like, 'he must got an eye on you.' [James giving me his inner monologue] - I bet he do trying to hit me with that Frisbee. And then another time, I was walking in front, it was like 10-11 at night. And I was walking in front of these…it was this white girl, Caucasian. And…all I heard was the word nigger…(laughs nervously)…when I tell you, I sped up so fast! I just walked ridiculously fast. And the third time, I was sitting down on the bench. It was like 12 o'clock in the morning. Gathering my thoughts…and…this police car came by. I guess it was doing to the midnight patrol. So it came out and shined a bright light. Cuz I guess when they saw me, they immediately did a u-turn and kept shining the light at me to see what I was doing, like I was going to steal a bench of something like that. I don't' know, but they just kept shining the light on me. And they would not leave until I left.

Due to the consistent exposure to microaggressions within the black student community at MU, even those few who have not had direct exposure to bias assumed it occurs but without their knowledge. This alludes to the pervasiveness of metastereotypes on predominantly white campuses. The initial development of Double Consciousness (Du Bois 1903) occurs in early childhood. For those who grew up in predominantly black areas, there is often massive culture shock upon entering a PWI and experiencing the types of interactions illustrated above.

Offline Encounters Triggering Online Action and the Emotional Toll of Attending A PWI

The totality of those experiences has an indelible emotional impact on black students in higher education. Mia Tuan (1998:89) called these effects the "hidden injuries" of racial marginalization. She remarks on the incremental impact those experiences have in the dismantling of positive conceptions of self, leaving in its wake feeling of self-resentment, anger, fear, and shame. Through the interview process, I identified several key "injuries" experienced by my respondents, which collectively demonstrate the emotional toll of attending a PWI. Those injuries include: severe emotional discomfort in the form of sadness, depression, fear, shame, paranoia, and anger, as well as persistent physical and mental fatigue.

I spoke to Edwin, a male sophomore with a dark-brown complexion. A snappily dressed young man, Edwin is highly involved in campus life – always wearing clean and neatly pressed business casual attire. I asked him if he felt any pressure to adjust his presentations of self at school. In expressing the fear resulting from daily life at MU, and the larger social currents and racial tensions in the U.S., he stated the following:

Edwin: "Oh yes! Well, being in a college that is predominantly white, those negative connotations of who black people are, who black men are! – Given what the propaganda, the media, we know this! – Just the focus on the expectations. Besides the expectations, it's already a preconceived notion of who I am before I even get there, you understand. So when I walk in a room, people unconsciously they're thinking things and the way they behave. For instance, I was walking one day. I was at the store [near campus], I was walking, just…before I know it I heard a click and a click…people started locking their doors. And I'm like, man, seriously! And when the Trayvon Martin stuff was coming down, everything like that…I really feared that I would be a casualty of police brutality. That became a fear of mine. And I had self-expectations of how I should behave, and how I should dress, to dilute attention upon, upon myself. And the one thing I don't do at all, and this might be offensive to you, I do not wear hoodies, and I limit my wear of sweatpants in public."

Edwin illustrates his enactment of multiple boundary- and identity-work processes resulting from the campus racial climate and the fear of police brutality. He adjusts his physical presentation by rejecting hoodies and sweatpants, typical undergraduate attire, in order to manage negative perceptions of blackness tied to the "thug" narrative that permeates mass media representations of black male identity. Because of his exemplary stature among his peers, it is not uncommon to see his face on university promotional material and billboards around the campus community. Despite his standing at MU as a respected student leader, like his lesser known peers, he also grapples with the struggles of balancing an authentic self with the deficit notions of black identity that saturate campus life and mainstream American culture. This is yet another example of the homogenizing affect of racialization MU has on black students. For Edwin - a widely charismatic and advanced student leader fully invested in campus life - to James, a first-generation, timid and highly introverted freshman, the experience of student life is equally driven by their shared identity as African American young men, despite the stark variation in their individual personalities and backgrounds.

While significant on its own, fear is not the only emotional response experienced by black students at MU. As noted above, sadness and depression are also common reactions. Gayle, an international student from the Congo, describes an incident where his white friends overtly stereotyped black communities, leaving him vulnerable and distraught, with little local community support.

Gayle: "I might remember another instance where geographically I would be like isolated because of where I had just moved to in the U.S…we were living in an apartment complex. When some of my friends would…because I didn't have reliable transportation…sometimes they would pick me up from home to go to [soccer] practice. Then one time they actually decided not to get me home because they were afraid they would get shot in my neighborhood...Yeah…And I was really devastated by that, so I told

them, ok you can just drop me off somewhere then I know somebody there who will take a car and drop me off at home."

Gayle was forced to process this interaction, the negative stereotyping of black communities as dangerous ghettos filled with violent criminals, in addition to managing the practical concern of finding a way to get home after having been left miles away from his neighborhood by his friends.

Often, fear, sadness and depression go hand in hand with feelings of shame regarding aspects of black identity. This is an internalized oppression that inflicts lasting psychological damage on black Millennials, and illustrates the complexity of identity formation and management for black students in white spaces. At times, the attacks on identity come from within, the result of a lifetime of exposure to socializing agents and institutions that consistently devalue black culture, community and identity. A type of paranoia sometimes settles into the psyche of my respondents, in direct response to the microaggressions and metastereotypes present MU.

Russel very poignantly explained how he feels self-conscious about his academic performance in the classroom, and also how he internalized the colorism of racial marginalization. The subsequent struggle to overcome those negative feelings and embrace a more positive conception of black identity tied to dark skin tones consumed another large portion of his emotional energy.

Russel: "Unfortunately being in a predominantly white institution, especially when I'm the only black man in class…[Sighs deeply]…I tell you…I don't want to look stupid in front of anyone…and if I get an answer wrong, you never know what kind of things people are thinking. Like, 'Is he supposed to be in here?' Dang! It feels like I'm representing my entire population. Even though that may not necessarily be the case, just because I know the circumstances of what my people have been going through on a consistent basis, and knowing that a lot of people do have prejudice thoughts about black individuals in particular. Still, it's like I don't know who's judging me, I don't know…I just don't want to fit the stereotype.

Russel went on to explain the evolution of his racial identity, from high school through his college years. Through the peer connections he was able to make and maintain, in part using social media, he more fully situated himself in a positive conception of black identity. He explained that evolution in the following statement:

Russel: You know…I remember there was a time when I was really self-conscious about being black and…when I looked at myself in the mirror, I did see dark skin…and I wasn't proud of it. I was thinking to myself, how come I couldn't be a milk chocolate complexion…or caramel…you know, something light. You know what I'm saying. And there were times even when I was outside, I was hoping that I wasn't in the sun too long because I didn't want to get darker. And….it was just…it's so crazy how even young children have an internal hatred because of their skin color …you know…there's a huge problem with that. That we have bleaching products, and it's like, that's not necessary. Whatever skin you're born in, you should be proud of it, because it makes who you are. So I eventually, in high school, learned to accept who I am, accept my skin color, and it's a part of my character, a part of my identity."

Feeling shame or embarrassment often results from feeling responsible for the actions of other black people. The toll of representations exacerbates the fear of poor academic performance. My respondents felt a great sense of responsibility, to themselves and their families, to become academically accomplished. Students of varying demographic groups can feel pressure to perform as a means of both upward social mobility, and more personal desire to impress loved ones. Black students in particular, though, carry that weight with the added burden of representation.

From the unfair responsibility of representing all black people feelings of anger and frustration often emerge. That anger is often coupled with the desire to "prove the stereotypes wrong," and to exceed expectations in order to disrupt the persistence negative racial stereotypes. For Teddy this desire is clear. In a particularly informative exchange, he explained the emotional fatigue those experiences generate when I asked him what it means to be African American in the U.S. today. He responded:

Teddy: Threatened! (laughs nervously)….Just because of the time that we are in today, literally right now. So…I do kinda feel like being black is threatening, or people are worried or intimidated, or they think less of black people. But…again at the same time, I never been the stupid person or anything…I've never even identified myself as a lesser person. So…all of the different things and all of my avenues in the things I do, I feel like I'm kinda like, an exception. Or maybe not so much an exception, but I'm just like, I'm showing people that I'm not the same as what you think a black person is…I personally believe black is great! I love being black, and everything…most of the things that come with it. But…I do know other people from the outside looking in don't necessarily feel the same way."

He went on to state:

Teddy: The way that society makes it seem that black people are, that's the way that people think. And being an individual who doesn't necessarily fit those ideas, it's just like anything I do I have to like prove that I'm not that. So even in school, when my grades aren't the best. I'm just like, 'Oh shit, somebody is going to look at me and say, 'That stupid black kid' or something like that. Or…even if I don't…if I show up late to work, like I'm always worried about, 'what are my white coworkers doing,' if they show up late they may have one or two instances where it's ok, but like just being different…and it may now necessarily be the case, but it's just always in the back of my head…. So it is pressure. It is a lot. And I'm always thinking about it."

I then asked:

Q: What affect do you think that has on your emotional well-being?

Teddy: Oh Jesus, I'm stressed. I know that there are times when I'm just like, 'Ok. Breathe. It's ok. It's probably not even that.' But you're worried about it, so it does become overwhelming at points. But, I feel like the fact that I have had to deal with it so long, I've kinda like, realized…I know when it's getting bad or when I need to sit down and talk to someone about it, or when I need to do something to just completely de-stress and let everything go, and start fresh. It is exhausting, but sadly it's life. Like you have to deal with it, and you just know how to handle it.

The majority of study participants report racism and bias being major issues at MU. The remaining, while not directly citing MUs policies or administration as the culprit, feel it is normal for students of color to experience daily microaggressions at any PWI. They take the position that it is problematic when any institution has a population that is 90% white, particularly when the surrounding area is much more diverse. In that

way my respondents view those conditions as larger systemic problems with racism and discrimination at all universities that are deeply segregated and non-diverse.

Like so many others, Teddy, Edwin, James, Tiarra, and Russel walk the narrow line between carefree college student, managing the struggles to maintain good grades and enjoying their youth, and the knowledge of the dangers present for young black people in U.S. society. They articulates a deep and foreboding fear of becoming the next Trayvon Martin as they innocently walk home from class, while also baring the pressures expected of every other student to do well on exams, make families proud, and secure some sense of stability for their economic futures. They all experience daily microaggressions leading to significant added emotional labor, which in turn generates overtly negative metastereotypes and the internalized tension of managing a Double Consciousness.

The accumulation of emotional labor with each negative psychological response to the campus racial climate decreases the likelihood of black student persistent and academic success. As Tuan (19997:90) noted, a "running tab is kept on these cumulative 'acts of ignorance,' and increasingly the person spends more mental and emotional energy to short-circuit future incidents." Those "hidden injuries" often become visible actions, as student seek out, create, and implement strategies for managing those circumstances - emotional energy manifested in myriad coping strategies to protect positive conceptions of black identity and culture.

Coping Strategies for Managing Metastereotypes and Microaggressions

While the negative results of attending a PWI with a hostile campus climate are explicit, both in my data and in prior scholarship, Black students demonstrate a resilience

and creativity in addressing them that is noteworthy. My respondents created and implemented a variety of offline coping strategies for managing hostile campus climates, daily microaggressions, and other forms of systemic and interpersonal bias while in school. Their strategies included: the practices of venting, self-coaching, disassociation, retreating, neglecting, humor, self-censorship, and establishing and maintaining tightly knit networks of black student peers. Last, and most important to this project, the strategic use of online interactions and the development of online counterspaces.

While the implementation of these method are not mutually exclusive, with multiple strategies often enacted simultaneously – some also evolving into a distinctly online form, each has unique qualities worth noting.

Self-censorship was the primary stereotype management strategy employed by my respondents. It was common for them to self-censor by adjusting or truncating their expression of ideas, stances, and dispositions in an effort to avoid conflict and racial tension on campus. Similarly, some respondent chose to adjust their physical presentation by rejecting certain styles of dress solely on the basis of avoiding negative stereotypes.

The practices of self-coaching, venting, neglecting and humor are strategies primarily meant to assist in emotion processing. Self-coaching is the process of scripting and practicing responses in anticipation of future negative racial encounters. Students often run through a variety of rejoinders to possible scenarios so as to avoid being caught completely off-guard in both overtly discriminatory and microaggressive interactions. Black students build this strategy on the foundation laid by coaching they received as adolescents. It is common for black youth, particularly black boys, to receive "the talk" from their parents as they grow up. Parents, in a variety of forms, convey the cultural

capital they see as necessary for their children to successfully navigate racially hostile environments, which often includes discussion of the disproportionate exposure to the criminal justice system and police brutality. Continuing that dialogue as an inner monologue, student's script and rehearse their responses to difficult interactions, also projecting the range of rebuttals they may receive in return.

Venting is an important process where black Millennials seek comfort, recognition, and empathy by reading their internal frustrations to a select other or others. While seemingly self-explanatory due to the common and widespread use of this technique for processing various types of emotional energy, it holds a particular significance for connected black students in predominantly white spaces. Venting now occurs through more complex and dynamic mediums as social media allows for the breaking down of barriers that once prohibited the free expression of venting behavior in some locations. Venting, once a solely offline process now may occur in class and in real time, in the presence of the perpetrators of the problematic behavior. For example, *digital venting* can now occur while still in the presence of faculty and student peers who are completely oblivious to the process unfolding in the online domain. Venting, now combined with its' online corollary, *digital venting*, increase the efficacy of this coping strategy for managing hostile campus climates.

Neglect and humor are often conducted in tandem. Neglect is a strategy whereby respondents act like the bias is insignificant – accepting the reality of racial bias and adopting the "Brushing it off" mentality as a means of avoiding heavy emotional labor. Using negative encounters as a source of humor and joking with their peers is also a means of reducing the significance of racial bias down to make it more manageable.

Humor has the ancillary affect of helping to create group solidarity, with black students bonding through the exercise of comical storytelling of shared experience.

Retreating and disassociation are methods of creating distance, one socially and the other physically. When retreating, students completely remove themselves from the space in which the negative encounter(s) occur. A student might, for example, drop a class in order to avoid altercations with faculty who have problematic behavior. On the other hand, when dissociating, students will create social distance from negative interactions by symbolically withdrawing from aspects of the black community – removing black network ties and replacing them with racial others in hopes of detaching themselves from the stigma, negative connotations, and/or shame the may feel from closely identifying with black racial identity.

Providing the foundation for most coping strategies is the development of a strong network, on and off campus, with other black peers. Having close ties to others who are able to empathize and provide cultural and emotional support, from a position of personal experience, becomes integral to the social, psychological, and academic pursuits of black students. The development of strong community ties takes two primary forms. The first are offline ties – those connections tethered to- and limited by the geographic and time constraints of physical interactions. Second, and most pertinent to this project are online ties – those that often originate from local social worlds, but also include connections to the online black diaspora unrestrained by the limitations of time, space, medium, or distance.

The Strengthening of Black Student Ties

The demographic compositions of educational institutions affect the connection and maintenance of ties between African American students. My respondents report the strengthening of ties to other black people/students in reaction to the lack of representation at MU. This, in turn, affects the salience of on and offline community engagement in black identity formation processes.

Cultural isolation for black students creates conditions where the social, emotional, psychological, and materials support they are able to field from their peer/friendship network at school becomes integral to their emotional well being, persistence and overall academic success. Previous scholars have theorized and empirically studied the importance of various forms of mass media for network expansion and management, in addition to its impact on access to information on ethnic culture and ancestry. Jiminez (2005) argued that mass media has "elasticized" the link between cultural experience and geographic proximity to that culture. The crux of that assertion being that mass media allows culture to flow in such a way that it allows the development of ethnic identity without direct contact, or even ancestral ties.

Similarly, Roth (2012) examined the role of "cultural remittances" in the transnational diffusion of racial schema. Taken a step further, the impact of those remittances, largely diffused through phone calls and in-person communication, are widened via pervasive new media communications. Those online interactions becoming increasingly significant for geographically isolated students of color on racially homogenous campuses. Students use social media as a means of community formation around black identity and culture in the attempt to mitigate the impact of

underrepresentation on the MU campus. Tony, for example explained the impact the demographic composition of MU had on his peer network, stating:

Tony: There was a kind of a shift in the race of my friends between like, freshmen after that…yeah. Pretty much my group of friends…like the race changed to all black…more black not all black. So that was…I wouldn't say refreshing, but having come here my freshman year, and to me where I cam from was kind of diverse, so coming here I'm like, OK there's a lot of white students, who apparently have never interacted with a black person before in their life. It was a shock for me. It was probably a shock for them, but me too! And then, after that, sophomore year…just more friends with more minorities.

He went on to note how he met and befriended other black students

Tony: I met…one of my best friends…I met her the end of my freshmen year. It was through other friends, because they all lived in Ashland [a student residence hall]. I knew like one or two people in that group. Then I became friends with her, so it was like me and her, and someone else who became a best friend…and we actually lived together junior year. They had a lot more black friends than I had, so I met all the rest of them. So that was nice.

With a snowball sampling like process, Tony grew his network of black student peers through those initial connection his first year at MU. A common strategy, black students bring friends into the core group, in which they provide one another with the necessary support and know-how to successfully navigate the particularities of student life for people of color at MU. This act of solidarity is then repeated as successive cohorts of incoming black students are integrated into the larger black student community. After the introductions, black students are quickly acculturated into black student life at MU, which includes a crash course in safe places to congregate, professors to avoid, places to eat, and organizations to join.

Teddy, in illustrating the camaraderie he felt when interacting with his black student peers, made the following statement:

Teddy: So, thinking about different things where all of the black students will interact together, or they come together and put on an event. It just makes me feel comfortable to see me and my people doing something productive or just having fun. So like going to a

probate or an event that's put on by a black org. it makes me feel good to be a part of it and to be there.

While connections to black peers are exceedingly important, they are not always accessible or easy to manage and maintain. Many students find it difficult to meet and keep black friends on campus. This problem extends to the lack of black faculty and staff as potential mentors. Charles, a career focuses junior with ambitions of upward mobility at his a full-time job, remarked on these difficulties when I asked him how the demographic composition of MU students and staff affected his experiences there:

Charles: I don't know if it necessarily on how I perceive myself…but I do find it…it's a little bit harder to find people that you can identify with. And I think that's been my biggest thing with being here. Is that I've yet to have a black professor. As a matter of fact I think I've only seen one black professor. I think that's my biggest thing, you don't really have those people who are like you. That you can identify with. Student wise, or even faculty wise."

My findings are in line with various social compensation theories (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Mckenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), which posit that computer-mediated communications serve a beneficial role for isolated individuals with high levels of social anxiety and low self-esteem. According to Ranney and troop-Gordon (2012), "greater levels of Facebook use predict greater integration in the university community and stronger bonds with on-campus peers (Ellison et al. 2007)." These findings are supported in the self-reported importance of online interactions of my respondents. These studies, however, while referencing the social utility of ICT interactions, do not explicitly examine the racial component of such technologies, or how they might function differently for black students on white campuses.

The inability for many black students to find and maintain strong connections to other black students occurs for a multitude of reason. Some are introverted, finding the

task of meeting and maintaining new friendships a deeply taxing and untenable pursuit, especially when considering the existing physical and emotional toll of academic performance while navigating the campus climate. Others work extensive hours in addition to full course loads. Still Others are commuter students who face a distinct set of challenges with engaging in the campus community from afar, particularly when difficult Midwest winter weather prohibits easy travel during the bulk of the school year.

These conditions, collectively, increase the necessity of online interactions as a domain for black students situating themselves within an established African American community at school. Moreover, it increases the primacy of the corresponding set of processes for identity formation through which online connections are created and negotiated.

Students "get in" to a multitude of online black spaces through several avenues. Some institutionalized methods are in place, such as "follow-trains" in which incoming first-year students are encouraged to friend/follow/add their peers on social media using a key hashtags (e.g. #MU2017). A respondent described the follow-train process during our conversation:

Precious: "I came here my freshman year, they had like a group…like…twitter line for MU. I'm a sophomore, so it was like #MU2017. So I followed the train and people retweeted it…you're supposed to follow everybody that retweeted it. So then I became friends with actually my best friend now, James, on the follow train. So that would probably be a good example."

While helpful as it was for Precious, this method only reaches those students who participate in student orientation activities, and is not explicitly focused on connecting students of similar racial backgrounds to one another. Students often seek out connection to black peers and culture online independent of any institutionalized process, in many

cases creating their own space online for identity formation. Some connect with the one or two other students of color in their classes, others join student organizations and clubs, and other still engage in completely online interactions – developing lasting friendships with people they've never met in person.

Scholars have written extensively of the network expanding affects of Internet use (Subrah-Manyam et al., 2008; Ranney and Troop-Gordon 2012). For example, Wellman (2005), when analyzing the impact of Internet access on network size for and community engagement in a Canadian neighborhood, found that those online knew three times as many neighbors as those who were not online. Additionally, the "wired" residents were reported to talk to more than twice as many neighbors, and were invited to neighbor's homes twice as often. He concluded that the Internet allowed those who were online the opportunity to identify neighbors with whom hey shared common interests.

Online Strategies for Managing Hostile Campus Climate

With the increased interaction available online, in addition to moderating offline options, comes a set of unique Internet-based coping strategies for managing hostile campus climates. Yarra, as detailed above, had incidents both in an out of class as an undergraduate and graduate student at MU. In a previous example she described a professor making the comment, "That's what separates us. If we didn't have capitalism, we might as well be back in African wearing loin clothes." during an Economics course. Later in our conversation about how she managed those types of incidents, she expanded on that interaction by illustrating the ensuing exchange following his comment.

Q: what was your response to that?

Yarra: "I literally was like, 'Excuse me sir! One, I'm Nigerian and you just fucked up.' And that's when everyone was like 'Ohhhh!' I was like, you're going to take that back. I

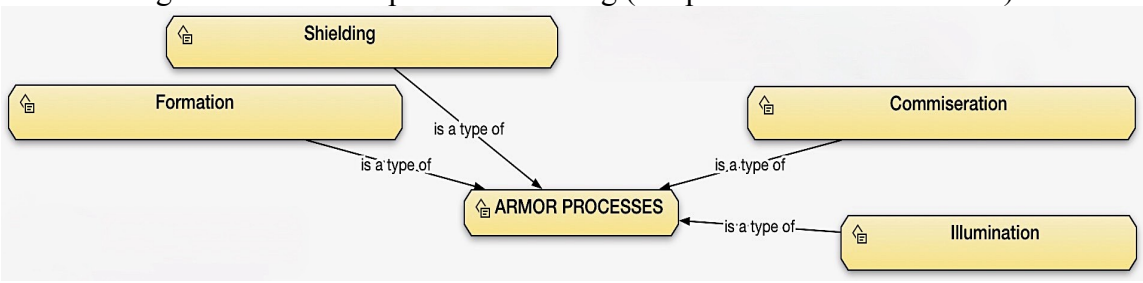
was like, you're a professor, you can't say shit like that! You're coloring everyone's minds. He was like, 'Oh, I didn't.' So we didn't really like each other after that."

Yarra, working two part time jobs, was not able to drop the class in order to retreat from the situation as no other classes fit her schedule. I asked her how she managed that class going forward, considering her inability to drop it. She answered:

Yarra: "It was what it was…I mean, I tweeted…I took pictures of anything he did that pissed me off and put them on social media... and I made sure I put them in the reviews at the end of the year."

By chronicling the in-class interactions, both posting and venting about them online to her confidants, She engaged in a digital venting coping strategy, which is an example of, the Triple A – Armoring process. By posting online Yarra initiated a complex array of Armoring sub-processes which served as a means of both processing the emotional labor of the situation, and a method of safeguarding against potential offline bias from her instructor had she continued a more direct interaction with him. Triple A-Armor sub-processes Shielding, Formation, Commiseration, and Illumination are all simultaneously at work in the act of tweeting out those incidents and digitally chronicling the events of the class.

Figure 11. Yarra Triple A – Armoring (Subprocess Activation Chart)



Triple A – Armor (Shielding) is a protective process in which black Millenials use online interactions to escape or manage offline bias, and to restrict access, once online, to themselves and/or their digital content from hostile or potentially hostile encounters. A defense mechanism not typically available to historically marginalized populations in offline environments, this process provides autonomy in the creation of digital counterspaces. Through *Shielding*, Yarra was able to establish an online counterspace where she felt comfortable openly expressing her disdain for a faculty member who has authority over academic future. By posting the content to that space she presented a vulnerability to her associates who then could come to her aid – A *Formation* subprocess.

Triple A – Armor (Formation) - the moniker inspired by the popular Beyoncé song of the same name - is a process in which marginalized people rally in support of one another in online locations, collectively confronting the source(s) of hostility through online action (e.g. reading, dragging, flaming). Often in tandem with *Formation,* black Millenials engage in Triple A – Armor (Commiseration) actions. This is an Armoring subprocess with which one's network of associations express empathy and shared experiences of marginalization, within online space, in order to provide the necessary support to cope with the oppressive experiences. This process, often involving the acts of tagging, sharing, or hashtagging specific online network ties to alert them of the incident. This, in turn, serves to create space for the mutual expression emotional support and camaraderie.

The ensuing comfort and solidarity Yarra gained from the post helped her process and disburse the negative emotional energy resulting from the incident. Finally, by posting the interactions, and relevant media captured from the class, Yarra enacted a

Triple A – Armor (Illumination) subprocess. This action is a means of casting light on the persistence of both interpersonal and systemic bias and discrimination. Illumination often involved the sharing of content that displays bias, racism, discrimination, or other types of oppression as a means of highlighting the current state of racial progress in the United States. Akin to articulating the components of metastereotypes, Triple A – Armor (Illumination) serves as a means of defining the boundaries imposed on oppressed identities by the dominant group, to which social justice action and advocacy can be aimed. The occurrence of microaggressive behavior experience by Yarra, from an institutional representative at MU, provided the content of the Illumination process. Her actions in initiating the illumination subprocesses served to dispel popular conceptions of faculty as erudite hyper-liberal professionals whose intellectual acumen takes them beyond oppressive behavior. Moreover, her posts add to a larger online discourse among her peers on campus climate, colorblind ideology, and racial stereotyping.

Describing the use of a similar set of Armoring processes, Teddy explains his use of online interactions to manage offline pressure.

Teddy: "I do have friends that aren't necessarily here, in the MU areas, that I may communicate with online or via social media. So I may just like rant about something on Facebook to Twitter, and then like my friends back home who understand and who are always there, they may comment or send me a message. Or call something or me like that. There are instances where I have some like 7-page long Facebook status, or I just tweeted like 17 straight tweets, about some instance or event. And then just like…the things come in. so people see it and if they understand they will like text me or some type of response."

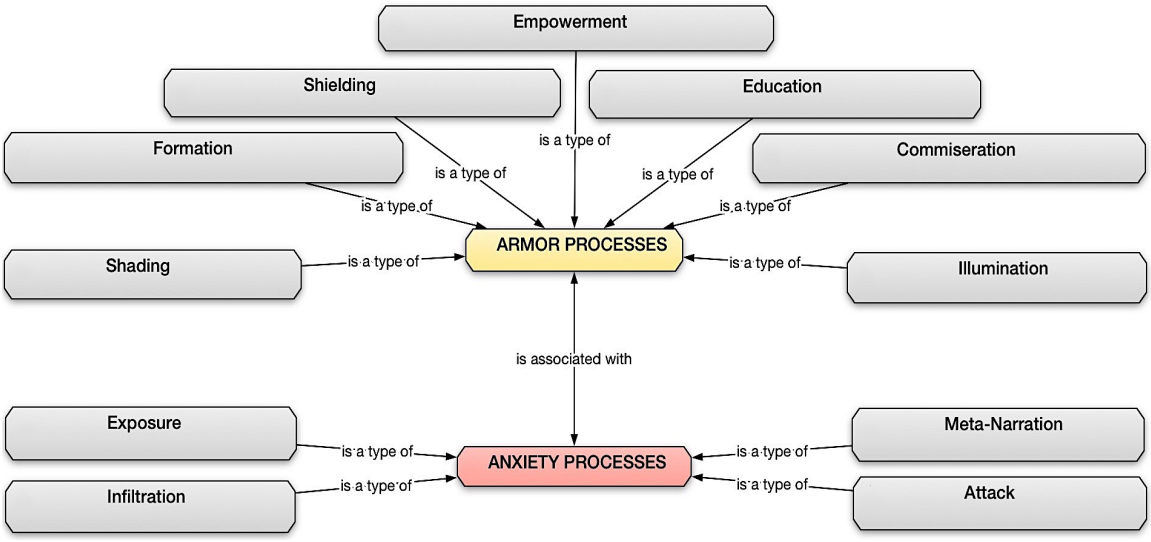
He went on to note how those actions affect his emotional well-being and feelings of legitimacy with his reactions and responses:

Teddy: "I feel like being able to communicate with those people and not just have my own experiences or my backgrounds and beliefs kinda like equips me with a comfortability (sic) to talk about it with other people. Because in my groups, it's not just

all black or white people. There are people from different backgrounds as well, there's a wide wealth and knowledge of experiences and fact and things I can carry on into a conversation with someone else. So being able to have those groups does make me more comfortable at least to talk about different things. Because I feel the knowledge I have is legitimate. The facts are legitimate. The experiences that I can bring up are not just mine but someone else's. So it makes me more comfortable and able to effectively carry on that stuff, so it definitely helps having those two."

The collection of Armoring processes has become necessary tools with which Yarra was able to successfully complete the course and proceed to graduation. Like Yarra and Teddy, many others leverage online strategies for managing hostile campus climates. Those Armoring strategies, however, are more complex than one might surmise when considering them on their own. While online resources provide a meaningful set of coping strategies, they also open black students up to a significant source of anxiety. The interplay between these positive and negative affects of online interactions as a mechanisms for racial identity formation highlight the tensions between the Armor and Anxiety pillars of the Triple - A framework.

Figure 12. Triple A Framework – Armor/Anxiety Pillars (No subprocess activation)



While these positive affects outweigh the negative consequences of online social life for my respondents, particularly when coupled with Triple A-Affirmation processes, a more complete analysis of online identity formation must fully consider the adverse experiences of online domain.

Each pillar of the Triple A Framework is intricately linked to create a series of nested identity formation processes that are paramount in the negotiation of racial identity for black students. Above I explained the layering of Armoring subprocesses elicited by Yarra. Instances like that, while in the moment are uniformly beneficial for black student retention, provide the components of one of the more subtle Triple A-Anxiety inducing experiences online interaction, what I term "Nostalgic Racism." The armoring posts (e.g. Formation, Commiseration) that lead to in-group solidarity and online social cohesions among black students, leaves a lasting record of damaging encounters that black students periodically relive in their online lives. Built into the structure of social media environments are features that reintroduce and reintegrate past online actions into present day activity (e.g. Facebook memories, Instagram time-hopping, Snap stories). In addition to these structural features of SNSs, are the present day interactions with past posts by followers and friends.

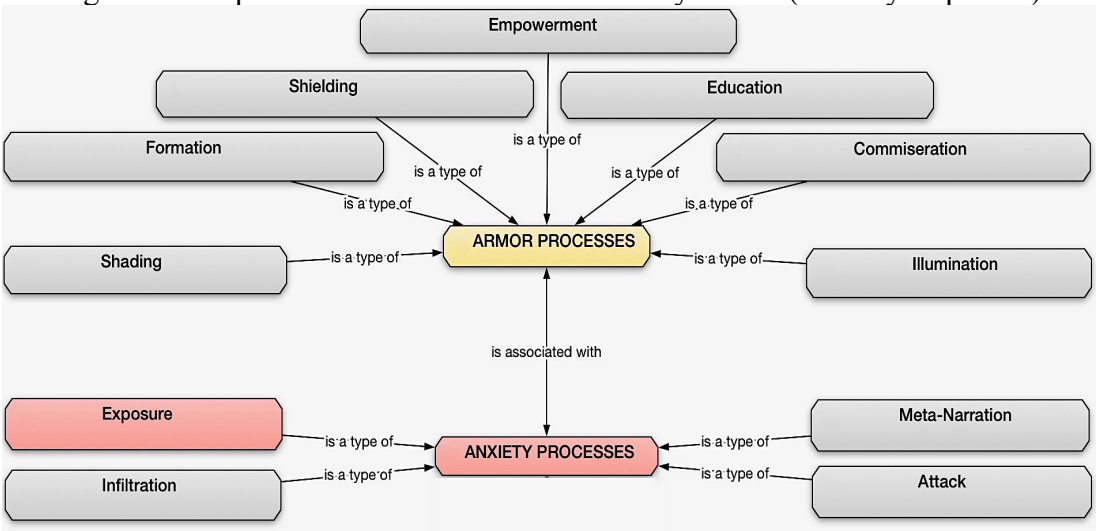
One's networks of associations online are typically able to scrub backward in a person's timelines and newsfeeds. It is not uncommon for members of one's social network to do so, and then to interact with past racial moments. Each of these features renews the experience of bias and discrimination in the online lives of my respondents, inducing "Nostalgic Racism"

Other Triple A-Anxiety processes are manifested in a variety of ways. When asked what the differences are between on and offline discrimination, Addison articulates how a core feature of online interaction – anonymity and the absence of face-to-face discussion - contributes to stress and emotional labor in online discourse.

Addison: "I think its more verbally aggressive online. I think its way more verbally aggressive, because there's nobody in your face. It's more intimidating…like you're not going to say half the things you say to a person's face that you do online. Whereas, I think, offline people still hold their stereotype or prejudices…but they hold them more silently. Or, they might voice them but try to form it in a way that you can't really like…you know what I mean…you cant really tell that they're being racist…I mean you can tell, because you know what their ideas are when they say certain things, but at the same time, if you were to react you would look like the person who's overreacting

Online interactions, due to the access black students have to a wide array of others, the propensity for exposure to racial animus is heightened despite the Armoring and Affirmative aspects of social media interaction.

Figure 13. Triple A Framework – Armor/Anxiety Pillars (Anxiety Exposure)



Distance & Reach and Anonymity are some of properties of social media interactions and online spaces that enable both Armoring and Anxiety in online space. In chapter three of this dissertation, I list and explain the parameters and structural features of online space,

detailing the evolution of scholarship addressing the Internet, ICTs, and new media communications. I discuss the importance of each individual's New Media Hub – one's primary collection of preferred social media sites - in which the vast majority of Triple A processes are enacted. Next, I explain the impact of those sites for the strategic building and breaking of boundaries around sites for identity formation – challenging traditional domain analysis for racial identity formation. To conclude, I illustrate how the structure of online space affects identity formation, expanding on the work of Ito et al. – building on their framework for categorizing new media behavior – by including racial identity formation as a new form of interest-driven online behavior. Before moving into that discussion, however, the following section will provide a summary of the arguments and primary findings of this chapter

Summary of Findings

With this chapter I have revisited the established sites for identity formation– Home, Work, Leisure Sphere and Civil Society, and School – and their corresponding processes - appearance, family background and SES, community demographics, social network composition, and language and discourse. Expanding on that body of scholarship, I detailed the role of the education setting as the primary offline site for identity formation for black students – explaining how the academic calendar, and student life more generally, are the major organizing factors in the lives of my respondents.

In childhood and high school years, online social networks reflect the demographic composition of the local neighborhood and school system in which students reside. Due to persistent residential segregation, for my respondents it is often not until college and

early adulthood when there is a significant adjustment of personal online network ties to include significant numbers of racial others.

As students integrate into campus life, they often present contradictory presentations of their racial identity. Most assert a uniformity of racial identity expression and performance across multiple domains, including the education setting. However, my analysis of the data reveals the purposeful and strategic performance and suppression of various components of their racial selves. This is done to leverage domain specific resources and cultural capital. That manipulation is frequently a defense mechanism used to offset the deleterious affects of rampant racial microaggressions, metastereotypes and other forms of bias within and around the campus communities.

One manifestation of that strategic action is the shuffling of identity labels. Black, African American, American with no hyphen, and other identity labels, are used strategically to navigate interactions with racial others. This variability illustrates the fluid set of verbal identity expressions, a form of identity-talk, which students initiate for specific outcomes. That fluidity denotes a compartmentalization of racial identity and the internal negotiation between various cultural scripts/domain codes, and controlling images.

In some cases, the student's hometown network is replaced with a new set of primary associations as they move through their undergraduate careers. While the older connections remain, they are often shifted to completely online contacts who are then activated in the instances where additional support is necessary. For black college students in particular, the identity formation site Education, and process Social Network composition, are highly interlinked. Often, their in-person network of friends and

associations is derived from the pool of undergraduate peers. In a PWI, the pool of potential connections is by definition mostly white. However, black students leverage online resources, coupled with offline campus programming, in order to establish and maintain a diverse friendship network and the requisite resources and know-how to advance through their respective programs of study. Rather than weakening local ties, as has been proposed in a multitude of scholarly texts and articles (McPherson et al. 2006, Olds and Schwartz 2009; Signman 2009), black students develop stronger on- and offline connections with black peers as a result of significant ICT and new media engagement.

Seeking knowledge and connections that reinforce black racial identity becomes intensified in the collegiate environment, as exposure to new ideas and experiences provokes a more salient cultural, societal, and political awareness of self. Social media, then, serves as a location assistant with which black students sift through and filter a deluge of hashtags, snaps, yaks, and other social media interactions as means of identifying black spaces on campus, creating new friendships, and locating/creating online counterspaces. This form of digital literacy is a skill set developed out of the long-standing familiarity with new media, and the necessity of innovation, as black student balance social and economic pressures for academic success with the lack of resources, cultural capital, and institutionalized support networks generally available to their white peers.

While not explicitly focused on race, researchers have studied the positive impacts of online communications in the adjustment to campus life for first-year students. According to Ranney and Troop-Gordon (2012), a multitude of studies have established a positive correlation between computer-mediated communications and “psychological

adjustment, self-esteem, closeness with friends, and enhanced well-being (Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006; Morgan & Cotten, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002a; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008)." Others (Shaw and Gant 2002), found that student communications with online peers, for extended periods, "predicts decreased loneliness and symptoms of depression, enhanced feelings of social support and self-esteem' for undergraduate students."

My findings qualitatively confirm the experience of these beneficial affects, with consideration of and emphasis on the unique experiences and needs of black students in a PWI. Black Millennials navigate campus social currents, connecting online and giving each other space to vent and process emotions, as well as to provide warning flags regarding where and with whom they should avoid interacting on campus. Put differently, they leveraged online interactions, through Triple A Processes, to erect symbolic safeguards and support networks for their black student peers. Online spaces provide an avenue through which black students actively shape their presentations and internalized concepts of a racial self.

The importance of "safe" space on and around a campus community for student success has been well established in both sociological and education scholarship. Students often coalesce around small, not institutionally supported black spaces in order to have a sense of community. At MU, this space is comprised of a series of tables in a particular corner of the Student Center. Mirroring the segregation observed in high school cafeterias, this space is one of a few where Black students at MU congregate in order to converse, check-in, and build in-group solidarity between classes and events. This space, however, is located in a public area and does not provide the necessary components for a

strong and vibrant counterspace, which includes a level or autonomy and privacy from the gaze of racial others.

I demonstrated the evolution of "safe space" into a more intersectional, autonomous, and mobile online counterspace for black students to seek reprieve from what they perceive as a hostile campus racial climate. Online counterspace emerge organically through online social media interactions, a process I will detail in the following chapter. Once established, they provide an arena for the legitimation of positive conceptions of self, and emotional responses to offline bias and discrimination. I have also shown how students break traditional barriers separating domains for identity formation by engaging in online interactions on campus, during class, and as a means of reaching back to hometown communities and friendships for support.

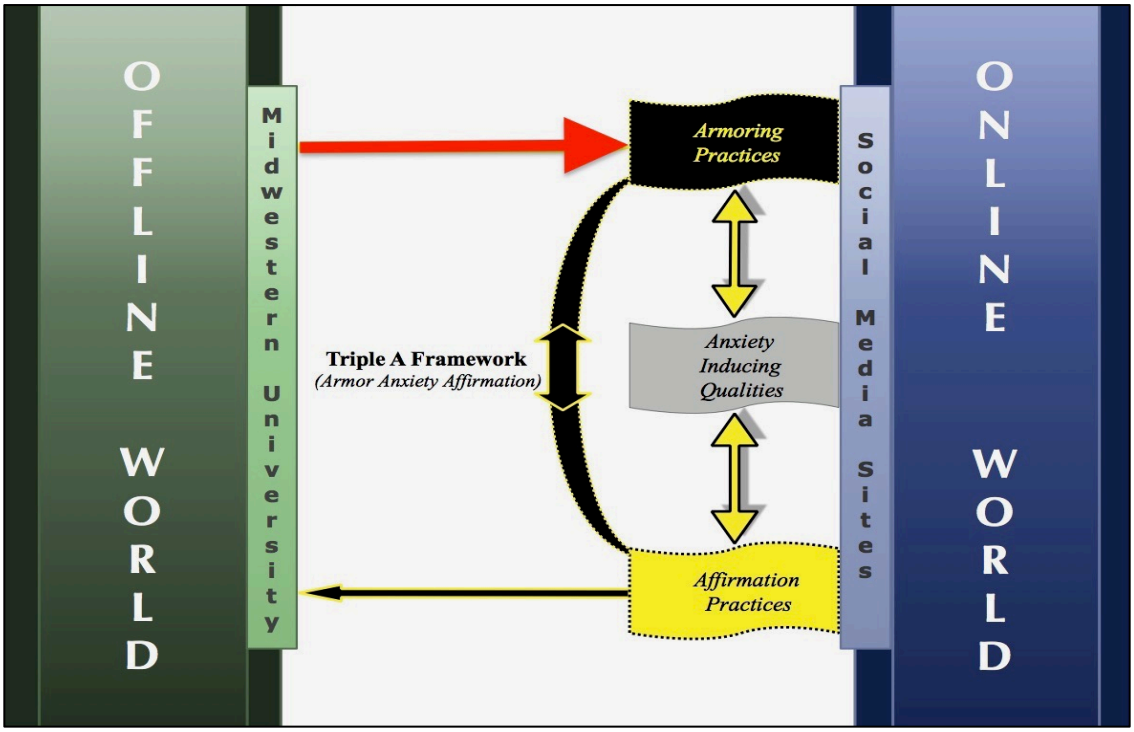
Without exception, every interviewee articulated personals experiences with bias and discrimination at various stages of their academic careers. Yet, despite the clear-cut nature of those encounters, it was common for them to second-guess their emotional responses, often feeling as though they may have overreacted. This emotional labor continues through the time between the incident and when they are finally able to share the moment with someone in their counterspaces. Once done, the added stress is alleviated as their peers validate their reaction to the encounters, as well as rally in support initiating a series of uplifting posts, tweets, direct messages, and other online encouragement.

In other cases, that support takes the form of connecting the victim with some offline or online resources to help them process the trauma. Yet another response is the mobilization of offline social action in the form of campus protests, town halls, or other

forms of student initiated activism. My respondents leveraged online resources and interactions to reach beyond the walls of academia, breaking barriers between traditional identity formation domains. In doing so, they are able to virtually "go home" in times of need. Online interactions allow them to maintain and expand their network of peers, both friends at home and new connections at school – providing them with the requisite sense of cultural community and support the need to succeed. Black students are highly aware of the unique quality of the online domain to assist them in pursuing and achieving the various goals and aspiration that brought them to MU in the first place.

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to establish how the setting of MU affects identity formation for black students. In doing so, I highlighted how those conditions, in addition to impacting offline student life, provoke the engagement in online interaction by my respondents.

Figure 14. Triple A Flowchart (Offline Life Provoking Online Action)



In the next chapter, I take aim specifically at the online domain. Chapter three integrates the examination of offline identity formation processes illustrated in this chapter into a larger and more complex framework that incorporates new media and digital interactions. Shifting focus away from the Education setting, chapter three highlights the unique properties of online interactions, the built environments of online spaces, and how the various types of social network sites and forms of online interaction enable online identity formation.

CHAPTER III

NEW MEDIA ECOLOGIES: THE PROPERTIES OF DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS AND THE AFFECTS ON IDENTITY FORMATION

"I think my online life shows more of my internal integrities. It's much easier for me to type something than it is for me to say something. Usually, when I first meet somebody, I'm very reserved, I don't have a lot to say. It isn't until we've hung out for a long time that I actually open up…online there is no barrier there. So I can pretty much say whatever I want to on there. I mean I would never say anything rude or disrespectful to somebody, but on my own personal blogs, I'll say exactly what I'm thinking." -Holly

The education setting has a significant impact on the experiences and identity formation processes of black students. With their lives shaped significantly by campus life and the academic calendar, black Millennials make use of many strategies to shed the constraints placed on the expression of their identities in offline locations. Reaching past the restrictions of geographic distance and time, my respondents participate in more malleable online spaces and interactions through the use of mobile ICTs and other Internet connections.

Shifting focus away from the education setting, in this chapter I explore and explain the unique properties I have identified in online interactions and the built environments of online spaces, and how various types of social network sites facilitate online identity formation. For Holly, in the opening excerpt, online space and interactions provide the necessary conditions to negotiate interpersonal and intergroup communications, absent the constraining affects of face-to-face conversations.

Social anxiety, introversion, busy schedules, and other location specific offline material and cultural idiosyncrasies impact the expression of the various identities. It is tempting to think that online environments, in contrast, completely remove social

pressures to negotiate identity performance and presentation. I find, however, that like offline locations, the various aspects of online built environments, and the cultural norms that permeate them, uniquely impact identity formation. Rather than an inert void – one free from socio-cultural pressures where identity is shaped entirely by the whims of individual users –the online domain is a fluid collection of communal, public, private, and quasi-personal spaces, each providing different sets of pressures and releases on identity formation for black Millennials.

In the attempt to delineate the impacts of those pressures and releases, scholars have argued that to understand identity formation and performance, several dynamics must be considered. Dhingra (2007:7) wrote that, "the influence of a cultural space on people's behaviors, and how that influence in turn impacts their commitment to multiple, at times contrasting, interests," are factors that prohibit individuals from presenting any identity they please. He went on to argue that the effects of particular domains for identity formation have not received the necessary scholarly attention.

Understanding social and community/cultural space is necessary for understanding identity formation. With this in mind, it is important to turn a scholarly eye toward the online social, community, and cultural spaces that are integral to the integration of young adults into their peer networks. This, in turn, necessitates a direct examination of the parameters and features of online space, and how they differ from offline locations. This insight expands the sociological understanding of how racial socialization and identity formations occur for African American young adults.

It is vital not to reduce the motivations of the subjects, when analyzing the impact of digital environments, down to a type of technological determinism. To do so would

stipulate that the structure and constraints of online space dictate the type quality and quantity of participant interactions. Rather, I find that users operating in digital space work reflexively within and around those built environments, co-opting certain features and properties of the space and reconfiguring others to suite their own needs and desires.

Subjects are not passive actors whose actions are fully determined by the parameters of a given site of online interaction. Moreover, an avoidance of technological determinism, and an inclusion of qualitative methods for new media research, allows researchers to "expose how people build culture from the bottom up" (Howard 2002). This perspective provides the necessary starting point to begin discussion and analysis of digital environments in identity formation. The following sections will provide some needed context prior to moving into the full analysis.

Digital Divides and Inequalities

The first digital divide: the haves and have-nots

As computer technology and Internet access began spreading into American households, social scientists sought to unpack the ways in which access to and use of the Internet, as well as the hardware used in its implementation, were distributed among the general population. Research on inequalities of access to the Internet began early in the 1990's when this new technology was used by a very small and homogenous segment of the population. As such, much of the initial research referencing the computer and Internet use was executed in terms of a binary relationship between users and non-users. The analysis of this binary association is the distinctive characteristics of what has routinely been called the "First Digital Divide." Taken as a whole, research on the first

digital divide was gear primarily toward addressing the haves and have-nots of the digital landscape.

The second digital divide: stratification within the user group

Second digital divide research is distinguished from the first by the analysis of stratification within the internet user group, as researchers sought to examine the nuances of internet behavior and how it contributes to social inequality. As Eszter Hargittai stated (2009), "Sociologists of technology propose that not only a technological artifact, as such, but also patterns of usage should be considered when studying the social implications of technologies." As the research on the second digital divide progressed in that way, the development of user typologies began to evolve in the work of researchers (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; Hargittai, 2003; 2005; 2008; 2010; Robinson et al. 2003; Zillien and Hargittai 2009).

Those scholars asserted that a users socioeconomic position, and other class indicators, influenced both access to the Internet and also what is done while online. Specifically, individuals from more affluent and/or educated backgrounds are more likely to engage in online behaviors that serve to reinforce and perpetuate their social position. Activities such as health information seeking, online asset management, and online shopping allow one to maximize available purchasing and investment power. These "capital-enhancing behaviors," along with the ability to exploit the cultural capital/signaling components of Internet activity, contribute to the ability of advantaged groups to reinforce and maintain their social standing. In contrast, individuals from less affluent and/or educated groups tend to use the Internet for engagement in social-networking sites, online video viewing, and instant messaging rather than for capital-

enhancing activities. As mobile Internet access, and the increased availability and computer power of smartphones, had not yet been widely accessible to the American public, even those more complex studies did not capture the breadth and depth of today's online environment.

From digital divides to digital inequalities

More recent scholarship has made note of the rapid diffusion and use of Internet capable mobile devices. Rainie and Wellman (2012) describe this new era as the "mobile revolution." The group-level order of adoption is currently different for mobile ICTs than it is for wired access and use. Individual-level use of wireless technology to share information, communicate with network ties, conduct work on mobile devices, transmit social remittances, and even market skills to employers all represent changes from the first and second digital divide.

Presently, there are emergent trends in the proportions of minority group access and use of the ICTs. People of color still less likely to have access to home Internet connections and hardware than their white counterparts. NTIA (2002:21) showed that the rates of Internet use are greater for non-Hispanic whites (approximately 60%) than for non-Hispanic blacks (40%) and persons of Hispanic origin (32%) – a pattern that holds when controlling for differences in income and education. However, more recent scholarship shows that while 33% of non-Hispanic white adults access the Internet with their cell phones, African Americans (46%) and English-speaking Latinxs (51%) outpace their use significantly (PEW 2014).

African Americans have historically been disadvantaged as persisting digital divides effectively limited their access to the Internet and its related technologies. As

Wellman and Rainie (2012) remark, however, the triple revolution of expanded Internet access, the popularity and use of social networking sites, and mobile Internet activity have decreased issues of access for all demographic groups in the United States. As such, online interactions and communities open up opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities to explore a set of identity options previously unavailable to them (Lee 2012).

Moreover, as younger age cohorts disproportionately engage in online activity via wireless access points, generational succession and technological development has created conditions in which wireless connectivity and cloud-based computing dominate the digital landscape. Millenials routinely go online via smart phones, laptops, net-books, and tablet computers with approximately 80% of 18 to 24 year olds connecting to the web via a mobile connection on a daily basis (Pew 2010).

The emphasis on online interactions has been given little attention thus far in sociological literature referencing race and ethnicity. This may be due in part to the relatively recent advances in mobile computing power and availability of cost effective and fast mobile connections, as well as the subsequent lack of available data. As such, few studies address the unique properties of online environment and how they impact racial identity formation in the "digital age"(Daniels 2012).

As wireless Internet access continues to penetrate the U.S. market, younger age cohorts disproportionately engage in online activity via wireless access points. Generational succession and technological innovation will likely create conditions in which wireless connectivity and cloud-based computing dominate the communications landscape in the years to come as well, potentially increasing any impact online interactions have on identity formation. Given these conditions, it becomes important to

fully understand how the novel aspects of the online domain operate, and how young adults work within and coopt those features to interact with their network of peers and associations.

With that literature in mind, and shifting focus away from the offline education setting, in the sections to come I explain how more current scholarship on New Media has begun addressing youth engagement in online interactions. Following that summary, I illustrate the unique properties of online environments, explaining what they are and how they function, through the analysis of both interview and digital data fielded from my respondents.

Expansions to the Scholarship

As early as 2001scholars began theorizing about the "fate of ethnicity in an age of virtual space" (Hughey 2008:534). They questioned whether or not raciality still required bodies, or if the existence of online social spaces with their own unique digital "rituals, customs, traditions, and hierarchies," are sufficient for the development of authentic online racial identities. Early on in the creation of virtual spaces, most relationships were strictly one-to-one text-based interactions. During that time, most studies addressing the affects of the Internet on identity formation were analyses of anonymous user environments such as MUDS (multi-user dungeons), chat rooms, and forums (Grasmuck et al. 2009). Since the 1990s, however, ICT-mediated interactions have evolved from almost entirely text-based to multi-media formations that integrate text in more complex media ecologies of interactions (Ito et al. 2012). Currently, researchers have begun focusing on self-presentation in less anonymous online settings (Lee 2012; Grasmuck et al. 2009

In light of the evolution of the Internet, new media, and ICTs, scholars have sought to develop a framework with which to categorize the new media behaviors of today's youth. Ito et al. (2012:15) describe new media participation as falling into two primary classifications: friendship-driven and interest-driven. These designations are meant to identify "Genres of Participation" that adhere to various types of youth culture, social network structure, and modes of learning. More specifically, they argue that these distinct genres are meant to capture the, "dominant and mainstream practices of youth as they go about their day-to-day negotiations with their friends and peers." Friendship-driven practices refer those activities that develop out of "local social worlds." Interest-driven practices, on the other hand, are centered on "specialized activities, interests, and niche and marginalized identities." Interest-driven practices are described by the youth in their studies as the, "domain of the geeks, freaks, musicians, artists, and dorks-the kids are who identified as smart, different, or creative, who generally exist at the margins of teen social words."

Included as part of this framework are distinct levels of engagement in the respective genres of participation. These levels include "Hanging Out," "Messing Around" and "Geeking Out." These designations are relational terms that describe the intensity with which youth engage in new media practices. Messing around can be understood as an intermediary stage between Hanging Out and Geeking Out, with Geeking Out denoting an "intense commitment or engagement with new media or technology, often one particular media property, genre, or type of technology." However, the authors do not suggest that the process by which youth move through these stages is always linear. Rather, they found youth often move back and forth through these levels.

Importantly, Ito et al. (2012:18) note that participation in friendship-driven new media practices not only replicate existing practices of hanging out and communicating offline, but also open up opportunities for identity development via networked publics. Though this conceptual framework for categorizing youth new media practices is intended to describe how larger media ecologies influence learning outcomes, it can be usefully extended to illustrate the interplay between new media practices and racial identity formation for black students. Moreover, what the authors assert are digital extensions of youth connections developed in local social worlds, in the form of "friendship driven" online behavior, carries heightened significance for black Millennials. Friendships, both on and offline are critical sources of support as black students navigate the harsh terrain of hostile campus racial climates and beyond. Absent those connections, many of which are sustained through social media communications, the life chances for black Millennials would, in their own perspective, would be substantially reduced.

Using this framework, then, African American college students are engaging in both friendship and interest driven online social activities anchored by a shared interest in black identity and culture. One manifestation of this action is participating in both physical and digital black counterspaces launched from predominantly white campuses. In this sense, framing ICT-mediated interactions as part of a larger new media ecology, with which my respondents manage, negotiate, and present racial identities, allows for a deeper understanding of how black Millenials employ online interactions, and to what end.

Daniels (2012:4) asserted that while scholars have made strides in theorizing how the Internet and ICTs affect identity (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1997; Castells 1997), they have done poorly in explicitly addressing race/ethnicity and the implications for racial identity formation, with the exception of Castells' *The Power of Identity*. She goes on to argue that a growing body of literature "points to the fact that people seek out racial identity and community online. People use the internet to both form and reaffirm individual racial identity and seek out communities based on race and racial understanding of the world (Byrne 2008a, 2008b; Everett, 2004, 2008; Nakamura and Chow-White 2011)." According to Hughey (2008:532), electronic media "reorganizes sites of social interaction." This reorganization, based on Meyrowitz's (1985) findings, takes place through the media saturation of everyday life, which in turn, "alter the meaning of central social coordinates such as time, space, representations, entertainment, the self, and "others."

Currently, the presence of increasingly cheap and powerful internet capable mobile devices, push notification systems, and dedicated mobile applications effectively create an "always on" and available online domain and correlating set of identities options - identities that users can seamlessly move in and out of due to the level of autonomy associated with mobile ICTs. Unlike other sites and processes for identity formation, the online domain is more malleable for individual users than offline domains. Not only are the specific content exchanged and the audience(s) to which it is aimed highly pliable, but so to is the domain itself. It can be accessed at all times from all other domains, a fact which challenges the compartmentalization of domains and identity formation processes in traditional offline focused analyses. The online domain can also

be ignored and/or withdrawn from at the users discretion.

It should be noted, however, that study participants do not view withdrawal as a viable option. They fear missing out on full integration in peer networks, in addition to the loss of academic and financial connections and resources as a result. To compensate, users can anonymously consume and create online content, making themselves known or active in online communities at will. Black Millennials mange that tension by initiating Triple A processes in order to control the exposure to others in online spaces, as well as process emotional labor resulting from on- and offline encounters.

Beyond Bricks and Mortar: How the Built Environment of Social Media Spaces Shape Online Interactions

Howard (2002) noted the concern with researchers imputing "community culture from formal structures of networks and hierarchies." He argued that, "The problem lies in an analytical frame that equates the particular structure of an organizational field site with broader social phenomena." I avoid this problem - the assumption of community culture in the online domain - through the triangulation of both interview and digital data. By coupling online observations with the explanation of their significance by study participants, I provide a more robust and direct account of how the properties and structures of online environments impact identity formation for my respondents. The following section details each unique component of online environments, how my respondents leverage them for particular outcomes, how those properties free or constrain individual agency, and how my respondents perceive their importance in their day-to-day lives.

Structure And Properties Of Online Environments And Interactions

Through my data analysis I have identified and conceptually defined the primary properties of social media interaction, each of which provides Internet intensified abilities and/or alters or extends the experience of offline communicative action. These capacities originate from the built environments and features of social networking sites. It is possible that these properties are components of the online domain more generally, but as this dissertation focuses solely on social media interactions, I do not make that determination. Future scholarship using online data would benefit from testing the universality of these properties beyond social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook.

. The properties I have identified in my data include: Distance & Reach, Confusion, Anonymity, Asynchronicity, Integration, Permanence, and Media Multiplexity. Each feature alters, to greater or lesser degrees, the ability to consume, negotiate, and present various aspects of the self to select online audiences. Importantly, all of the properties are combinable, making for an extraordinarily powerful set of communications abilities and experiences. As Belk (2013:477) noted, "The digital world opens a host of new means for self-extension, using many new consumption objects to reach a vastly broader audience." These properties enable Triple A Identity formation processes. Without them, the ability to negotiate online interactions as a means of racial identity formation would be significantly less effective.

Distance & reach

Distance & Reach have a high degree of co-occurrence, so it assists in their presentation to couple them as a single, though multi-functional property of social media

interactions and spaces. Reach adjusts the capacity for individuals to interact with both geographically distant others and larger numbers of people, while Distance serves to create space between oneself and others. While this property has been addressed in previous scholarship, it is often reduced to only the connection with people who are physically far away. More than that, I find that this property in social media interactions also reduces the *social* proximity to others. That is to say, Reach & Distance opens up space for people less adept at face-to-face communication, those with social anxiety, those negotiating complex power dynamics, and those generally seeking to avoid dramatic encounters to manage communications even with contacts they know offline. This property moderates identity expression in traditionally in-person communications, in some cases by relieving the inhibitions of person-to-person dialogue.

Online social relationships do not replace face-to-face interactions or traditional modes of communication. Rather, developments in ICTs supplement "traditional" communication mediums and practices (Rainie and Wellman 2012). This conclusion is replicated and extended in my own data as black students at MU make use of the Distance and Reach property of online domains to enhance and manage their connections with offline associations.

In illustration of Reach & Distance, during the interview process I spoke with Tommy, a male sophomore with a light brown complexion. He wore a short and rounded afro, face cropped by silver-accented wayfarer style black-rimmed eye glasses. Tall and svelte, yet broad shouldered, he spoke with a deep and welcoming tone. He sat stolid and at ease in his chair as we begin our conversation. Tommy explained his involvement in online advocacy for women's rights and LGBTQ issues. He actively shares and promotes

content that constructs a counter narrative to the dominant cultural scripts attached to those identities. A survivor of sexual assault, he is a fierce ally and advocate against sexual violence and trans/homophobia.

Tommy struggles with deep emotional trauma and depression resulting from his past experiences. Using online interactions as a means of coping, he frequently writes about his offline friends and peers on Facebook as a method of communicating to them the impact they have on his life – his confidence in doing so bolstered by the absence of the pressures and immediacy of face-to-face conversation. He told me the following story when I asked if he saw a meaningful distinction between his on and offline life:

Tommy: "Yes…My online life gives me a little bit more of a comfort. Um…throughout my life I've had issues with depression. And…it took a long time for me personally to kind of address it. but…in there a couple of people I went to and talked to about it [in person], but in particular, this year, there's a lot of friends of mine kind of having the same problems. I felt more comfortable making a statement on Facebook about…[Tommy telling me what he wrote on FB] 'I went through this and I know a lot of you people don't know this, but just keep in mind that, even though I might not have said something to you, you made me smile this one day because you said this, and you helped me make it to the next level. Keep that in mind when you're talking to anyone else.' And I think in that sense, social media gives me the comfort of, I might not be right there in front of someone, being vulnerable, so they have to completely take me as I am… So I think those are the two distinctions that, even as individual, I do have a capacity to talk and make statements that will do that, and I have! But, on social media, it's a little bit easier, and it does get me a little bit more security for who I am as a person, to open up a little bit more."

The following excerpt is the actual text from Tommy's Facebook post described above:

August 29, 2014 ·
"I truly do not say this enough in life. I am honestly beyond thankful for the people I have in my life. Few of them know this but I have suffered from severe depression and devalued myself to a point life never seemed to have light. But every day I came home, even with a fake smile someone offered enough of themselves to make it real. And as horrifying as it is for me to type this out in the most melodramatic way, I just wanted to verbally express how valuable friendship can be. How important it is to offer up the tinniest amount of acknowledgement and concern when you make eye contact with another human being. How important it is to express moments of gracefulness. So to everyone who may come across this and read to this point, thank you."

As illustrated in the passage above, Tommy uses the features of social media environments in order to more easily communicate his experiences of depression to his peers, and to let them know the positive impact they have had on him. In doing so, he also provides them with support as well. The status update Tommy wrote about his depression subsequently received 75 "likes" from his peers. In that online exchange, Tommy used the online properties Distance, Reach, and Asynchronicity to negotiate his interactions.

It has been argued that online interactions provide a disinhibiting effect for those involved (Ridlyey 2012; Suler 2004). Prior scholarship explains that the lack of "gaze-meeting" in face-to-face interactions, coupled with the anonymity and invisibility of the online domain, "seems to free us up to self-disclose, but also sometimes 'flame' others" (Belk 2013:484). Both functions, contacting distant associates and managing the "gaze" of others presented in my data.

Expanding, Tommy spoke of the buffering effect the Distance & Reach property provided. I asked him if discrimination were an issue in his online communications. In his response, he notes that having distance between himself and the perpetrator of online discrimination gives him a sense of comfort.

Q: Generally speaking, would you say that racism or discrimination is an issue in online communications?

Tommy: Yes. I think it kind of comes back to one of the reason why I feel so comfortable with doing things through social media. It is…it kind of gives you that barrier…and it's different than kind of addressing someone and saying things blatant, rather than kind of making hints to it in a social media outlet.

In his commentary, Tommy's description of social media as providing a "barrier" is indicative of the Triple - Armoring processes provided by online interactions. Others

noted the ability to connect from afar as an important feature of online interaction. Residing in a racially homogenous area, and attending a predominantly white institution, creates feelings of isolation, paranoia, general unease and self-consciousness among black Millennials. Also, leveraging the Distance & Reach property of online interactions, Tony told me about his efforts to remain in touch with his friends and family back home using various social network sites:

Tony: So I mean, even just like my close friends. Because they don't live near MU. Um…most of them are out of state…so there's communicating with them through Twitter Facebook, and a little of Tumblr. My best friend, one of my best friends, she's on Tumblr – I communicate with her there. And then Twitter…people that I don't actually know in real life, that are black, there as well.

Echoing the same sentiments – the need to remain in touch with geographically distance peers – Tiarra describes the social isolation of life at MU, and the impact of connecting with her peers through social media to alleviate that isolation. Outspoken and fiercely proud of her heritage and identity as a black woman, she had a difficult time at MU and in the surrounding community. Commenting on the usefulness of social media, enabled by the Distance & Reach property, she stated:

Tiarra: It's really my connection to the outside world, because I'm so…like in a cocoon here. Like I live by myself…like I really only interact with people…I have one or two friends, but in class and at work. So outside…it's the only way I can connect with my family outside of talking on the phone. So, seeing pictures…seeing what they're up to…so that's why it's a big part

At one point, Tiarra attempted to "take a break" from Facebook because she thought it was consuming too much of her life. Millenials often perceive themselves as stigmatized by older age cohorts for their "always on" lifestyle. Hoping to shed the negative connotations associated with that stigma, she deactivated her account for three

weeks. Tiarra quickly found herself in an increasingly difficult situation without the connections made possible by the Distance & Reach property of online interactions

Tiarra: …When I was doing that three-week hiatus…I was like, I'm in a cocoon even more! Like what am I trying to prove here by not being on Facebook? Like I have shut myself off, and I'm already shut off in the world. So, give me back my Facebook so you can see faces, at least, you know, talk to family.

Distance & Reach combine to allow for the manipulation of physical and symbolic space, as well as intensifying user ability to connect with larger, more diverse, and geographically dispersed collections of others. This is fundamentally different from email communications that could also be said to have a Reach and Distancing effect. Unlike emails, messages like Tommy's do not have to be targeted to a select user or users. His commentary can be placed on his page and subsequently slipped into the news feeds of his peers to discover it as they engage in their own social media activity. In addition to this difference, the social location of the message also matters - the medium becoming part of the message, as others have argued (McLuhan 1967). Tommy's post in a quasi-public display, unlike emails, was meant to both engage specific others, and to declare/perform aspects of self to a wider population of online associates simultaneously.

Confusion

The Confusion property of online spaces can create a lack of clarity in interactions with regard to internal motivations, meaning, tone, and/or context when engaging others online or posting content. This creates a "thinned context" due to a lack of traditional non-verbal cues such as body language, audible pitch and tone, and other gestures that indicate the nuances of intended meaning. Importantly, the Confusion property inspires an array of strategies to infuse online content and interactions with the necessary context to relay subtleties of meaning. These strategies include action such as the incorporation of

elaborate series of emoji and punctuation to convey the nuances necessary to have more complex interactions. Meaning is also imported into online content prior to the creation of the content actually begins. The selection of the site(s) to which one posts or shared information adjusts the intended perception of that content dramatically. Additionally, black Millenials combine various media into their posts, such as meme photos and gifs, to illustrate deeper intent. Yarra, for example, described the Confusion property of online domains when I asked her if she ever feels the need to adjust what she says when online.

Yarra: "You can't get anybody else's cues when you're online. You don't know how they're taking it as they're reading it. When you're in person its way easier to be like…to see they're shifting in their chair, this is going to go one way or another. You can't do that online."

Yarra explained how that thinned context leads to lost meaning. Julius, on the other hand, described how he manages the loss of context through deliberate online action. He noted his carefulness when posting in the attempt to avoid misunderstandings stemming from the Confusion property. When asked if he saw a meaningful distinction between his on and offline life, he responded:

Julius: I do. There is a huge meaningful difference. When you're online, it's very difficult for people to understand your tone. So they think you're speaking in a different way. Sometimes they can take it as an attack, and they don't even realize that you're actually agreeing with them. And you just have a different way of coming to that agreement, that conclusion. And that is missed online. And I think a lot of the online interactions, the bad online interactions, are a result of that. Even with me personally, sometimes I think people are attacking me when they're not. They're actually speaking in a good tone; they are just trying to explain where they are coming from. But just the word they use, or if you use all caps, that's evil (laughs boisterously)."

In explaining what he sees as a problematic aspect of online interaction, Julius highlights how Confusion runs rampant in online discourse. In his final remark, he noted an important strategy for alleviating that issue, the use of punctuation and capitalization to underscore intent. He went on to explain his perspective in more detail when I asked

him if the composition of his audience (i.e. the demographics of his friend list) affected his want to carefully craft his online posts.

Julius: Absolutely! I don't want to give people the wrong impression when it comes to political views. Being a person that wants to go into politics, that's very important. For people who don't care nothing about politics, then you would just post whatever. For someone like me, it's very important that you not give people the wrong impression. Like I said, online, those impressions become facts."

Julius does more than address the problem of Confusion, he alludes to the increased importance of that property for students of color, many of whom already have to manage the stereotypes of "angry black person" in their interactions with racial others. In hopes of positioning himself for a career in politics, Julius is hyper aware of the perception of his posts, while simultaneously feeling pressure to engage in politically charged topics due to his career aspirations.

Anonymity

Anonymity is the most widely understood and acknowledged component of online domains in research on new media. The implications of the ability to restrict access to identifiable information has been a lasting topic of discussion since the inception of the first chat rooms and messaging boards of the 1990s. The ability to be anonymous, the choice to be anonymous, and the level of difficulty of anonymity, however, must be treated differently. The vast majority of my respondents report not only a disinterest in anonymous online interaction, but also an overt disdain for doing so. They detail how the ability to be anonymous online is the cause of a great deal of the anxiety-inducing qualities of online interaction, in part, because anonymity is easier on social media platforms.

Confusion in online interactions intensifies the particularities offline experience of interacting with strangers. When offline, master statuses are used to make snap judgments about the individuals with whom one encounters. Online anonymity, without the necessary context to immediately ascertain the background, intent and/or trustworthiness of an other, contributes to the racialization of online experience. Black students do not perceive themselves as having the luxury of being unaware of those in their immediate surrounds, both off- and online. People of color must be more aware of the level of access to their digital presence, and the composition of their online company, in order to avoid potentially hostile racial others. Holly, for example, told me the story of how an anonymous stranger attacked her online after she posted her first profile picture to Facebook. I asked her to describe the encounter in detail. She replied:

Holly: It was after I had opened my Facebook account that I started posting pictures. Everybody was putting pictures on those things. I was pretty much the only person for a long time that was not allowed to put pictures on my Facebook. I begged and pleaded and my mom was finally like, 'Ok. You can put four pictures.' So I put some pictures up, and at the time my account was not private. So people could come in and message on it, or they could send me a personal message about it… and I got a message, I don't even know who this guy was. Who had said, 'You dirty nigger. You don't belong on this site.' And…I mean I just read over that message over and over again. This was one of the first times when I was actually identified by somebody else as being black and it was in such a negative way."

This interaction provoked Holly to take greater care in her exercise of Triple – A Armoring practices. While she does not close off the entirety of her online life through the use of privacy settings, Holly does selectively choose which sites she allows to remain open to the public – the most open being her Tumblr account in which she does not include identifying information, while simultaneously being the site where she shares her most personal content.

I also spoke to Rosalyn, a black and white biracial student taking only online courses at MU. She was raised in a predominantly white area, solely with the white side of her family. She never met her African American relatives, including her father, until her adult years. I asked how anonymity affects her online interactions. In her response she echoed the same sentiments as Holly:

Rosalyn: I think nowadays people are…most people are conscious about not wanting to be seen as racist. Or even overly sensitive about talking about racial things. If you can be anonymous maybe they can express…like if they have a stereotype I think they would be more likely to say it anonymously."

Encounters like this are common for black Millenials whose social media accounts are often open to the public. Due to that potential exposure to hostile others, Triple A – Armoring processes are increasingly important in maintaining integration in online networks, while safeguarding against deeply traumatic online experiences.

Asynchronicity

The asynchronous nature of social media interactions facilitates a variety of identity-work strategies for black students in online environments. This property of extends the "pause and wait" aspects of more traditional forms of online communication such as email, as previously noted, by opening up the content to a wider and less specified audience. It also relieves the tension and anxieties of immediate responses expected in offline interactions, in addition to increasing the interaction limits with regard to how many people one can communicate with by spreading encounters across ones waking hours more evenly. It also alleviates some of the embedded power dynamics that tinge interpersonal interactions across various identity intersections such as class, sexuality, gender, and race. My respondents note the strategic use of time to both temper an immediate emotional response - Asynchronicity providing a type of "cool down"

period that allows them to both reestablish their composure after a significant encounter - also allowing them to rally resources in the face of difficult situations.

Respondents note the value of added time to research and substantiate rebuttals to offensive online remarks. Other use that temporal leeway to process internal responses and choose a course of action that is most well suited to maintaining their personal health and psychological well-being. Hampton et al. (2011), too, remarked on the social significance of asynchronicity as a property of online interactions. They asserted that the availability of those interactions, unbounded by temporal constraints, "affords frequent, short, asynchronous exchanges that are ambient, or otherwise integrated into everyday life. Contrary to concerns that new media lack social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984), the pervasive and persistent nature of some new media may allow for more information to be shared over time than through traditional encounters." Without exception, every study participant used the Asynchronicity of social media interactions to negotiate and revise their stock of responses to prejudice, bias, overt discrimination, and other meaningful encounters. In doing so, they create a more complex set of coping strategies that serve to alleviate the deleterious affects of those encounters.

James, for example, explained just such an instance – one where he was presented with an unexpected interaction where the other person began telling him about their thoughts of self-harm. This story came, unprompted, when I asked James if there was anything he felt he could do better online compared to offline. He replied:

James: Yes. Online communication I'm able to think about what I'm about to say better. Cuz offline, when somebody say something, they expect you to say something right back. An immediate follow up that sometimes hurts people, especially me. I learned a lot about that from past experiences. So with online, when somebody say something I can actually

think. Especially if its something drastic...like one time, please forgive me…this person was saying stuff about how they want to do something to himself [James gestures indicating some type of self-harm]…I'm like…well…I had to think for a minute. Because if somebody was to tell me that in reality, I'm like…I woulda been struggling. Like 'calm down calm down, life aint that bad [said stutteringly]!' Online I can actually think about what I want to say to actually help them out - To encourage them to make it through another day, or even months or years."

By leveraging the extended "pause and wait" aspect of social media interactions, an integral part of which is the expectation of time delays longer than in offline encounters, allowed James to overcome his initial shock in order to more calmly provide comfort and support for the individual with whom he was communicating.

Integration

Integration denotes the high degree to which social media interactions are structured to be embedded into daily life . All of my interviewees report the entrance into, and actions within, social network sites as being seamlessly woven into the fabric of their daily lives. The "mobile revolution" facilitated the Integration property of social networking site interaction, which has since become embedded in the cultural milieu of the millennial generation. Beyond the cultural factors that spur continuous connection and use, social media has permeated numerous aspects of social life more broadly. From tweets filling the lower quarter banners of news broadcasts, to Facebook icons littered across billboards, to the integration of social media in campus life by administrators and faculty alike - Millenials today are fully invested in the pervasive use of social media.

Additionally, the ubiquity of mobile ICTs and social media interactions, breeds a stigma for those young adults who do not want to be as involved in online social life. Millennials must balance their individual level of commitment to online life with the

social expectations to participate. For black Millenials in particular, the presence of online resources as necessary to persist in PWIs adds to that burden of participation.

Alexis, for example, provides a completely typical account of how Integrated and pervasive social media communications are in the lives of my respondents. I asked her to walk me through a typical day of her online activity. In response, she conveyed an account of her daily online life so common it could be easily applied to the majority of my study participants while maintaining its accuracy. She stated:

Alexis: On a busy day…Ok…I'm going to look at my phone [Alexis takes her phone out of her pocket]…I would Facebook, it's the first thing I do. Um…now if I have extra time between leaving my room and getting to the bus, I'll get on vine. No! When I first wake up it's probably Facebook, then get ready for the day, and then between me getting done and dressed, probably get on vine for a bit. And then I get on Pandora because I listen to music all day… Then I get to work, and…I'm online all the time – So I'm either looking up stuff, then I get on Facebook again, look up stuff for people's problems I'm solving on the phone. Then that's the time I'll get on Jezebel.com or AlterNet.com and read. Then I go to class, and sometimes in class I'll probably get on Instagram and Facebook [laughs heartily]. And it becomes such a reaction; you just sit down and just be like, 'well let me get on my phone.' Then between class I'll get on – sit down and get back on my phone – probably get on Facebook again. I get on Facebook all day! And then…get on the computer and do homework where I have to look up stuff online. Then I'm probably on Facebook and Instagram, I don't have Twitter anymore…Vine…for the most part that's about it."

I then asked Alexis to clarify the role of notifications in that process, whether or not they provoked her to check her social media more often. She replied:

Alexis: I got to check it! [Laughs boisterously]…Yeah. I gotta clear. I feel like it's kinda my life. I feel like I gotta clear these, its getting to be a lot.

Q: When you can't, if you see you have a lot but you can't check it, does that give you any type of anxiety?

Alexis: Anxious [giggles]. It's bad, David! It's bad! Yeah, I'll get over it after a few minutes, but I do feel anxious. I don't know. Curiosity. Nosey. I just feel the need to clear that or check it. I need to respond back to this person

Q: Is it gratifying when you have a lot of notifications on your phone?

Alexis: Yeah…Well, I guess it depends on what the notifications are, if it's a lot of emails, maybe not. But if it's a lot of texts, yeah.

This exchange highlights both the high degree of integration online interactions have in the lives of my respondents. More subtly, Alexis articulates of the deeper psychological processes at work that motivate the acceptance of that level of connectedness. She stated a clear compulsion to get through her notifications, which are often triggered by being tagged in content by another person, or having another person reply to a comment/post she made herself. Additionally, messaging applications (e.g. WhatsApp, Messenger, KiK) also provide independent notifications initiated by Alexis' peer contacts, and others. Negotiating that volume of individual and intergroup interaction highlights the Integration aspect of online social life, as well as the Distance, Reach, and Asynchronicity properties that allows one to physically maintain that level of engagement.

Permanence

Social media activities often create a record of events and interactions that persist indefinitely, with users building and adding to that supply of digital moments as the move through daily online social life. That searchable record is then available to be re-read, reposted, copied, and shared at any given moment, and in many cases, automatically as a function of a social network sites core features (e.g. Facebook memories). Because of the Permanence property of social networking site interactions, the encounters and content in those spaces often have lasting impacts, both positive and negative, on the lives of those engaged in social media activity. My concept of Nostalgic Racism– instances where traumatic moments are revived as past content is sifted into present day newsfeeds and timelines - is enabled by the Permanence and Asynchronicity properties of social media

environments. Some have described them as “memory markers” or “objects of extended-self,” that function to create bridges between current and former manifestations of the self (Belk 1991). Importantly, those experiences of Nostalgic racism, after reintroduction, can also be deleted, in some instances providing a cathartic experience after the revival of past trauma.

In contrast to the negative affects of Nostalgic racism, Permanence combined with Asynchronicity can also revive bygone moments of joy and accomplishment, allowing for positive identity affirmations. Use of these properties strategically by black Millenials demonstrates a unique exercise of personal agency in online domains. Rosalyn revisited a moment of joy and accomplishment that deepened her attachment to distant friends by reposting an old photo and tagging those individuals pictured. Also at work in this example are the properties Distance and Reach, which play vital roles in maintaining her connections to those geographically distant friends.

Figure 15. Rosalyn Facebook –Asynchronicity

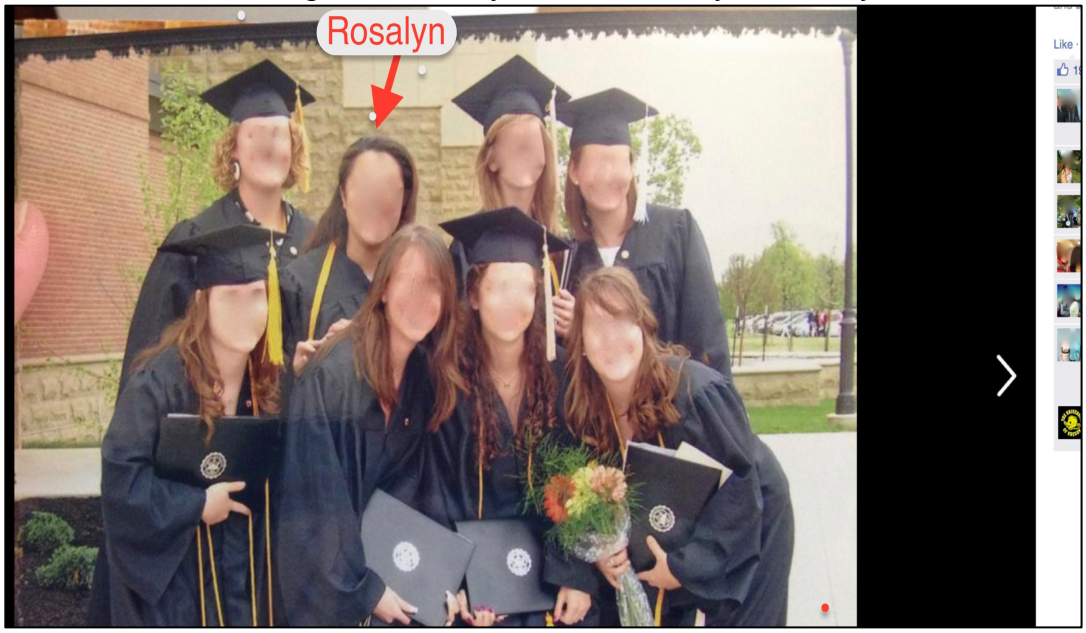
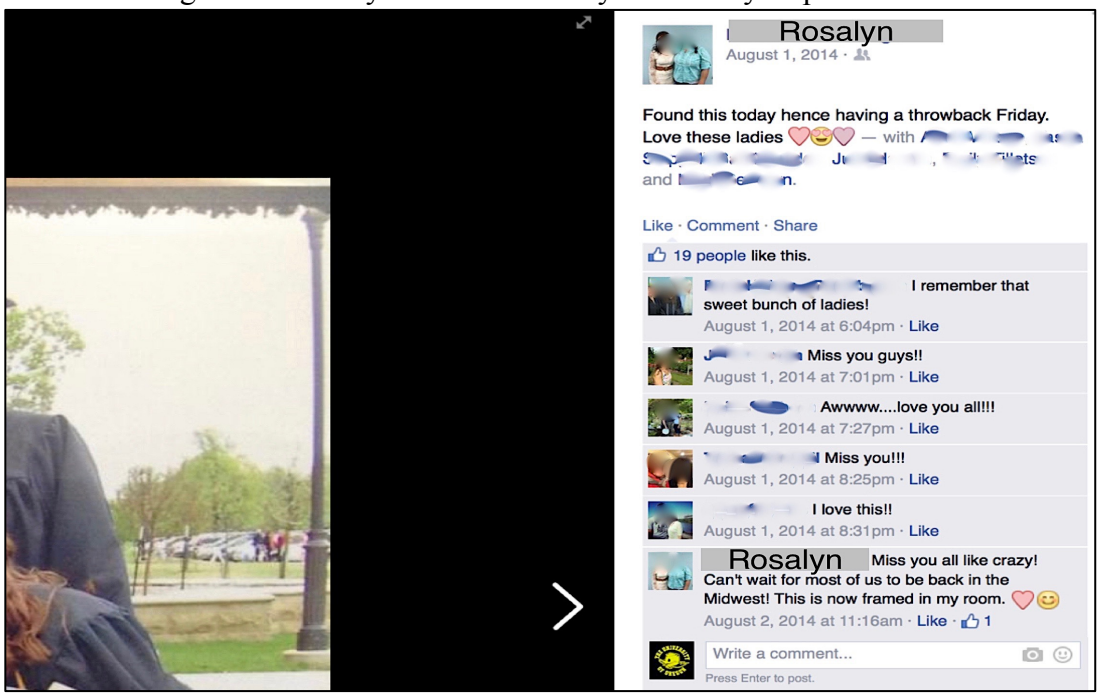


Figure 16. Rosalyn Facebook – Asynchronicity Caption & Thread



By tagging her friends, Rosalyn broke down the traditional domain barrier of time and distance. These online identity performances and friendship commitments illustrate Triple A – Affirmation processes in action.

Media multiplexity

Media Multiplexity is the ability to create, share, and interact with a variety of media types based on the built environments of online space. Enabled through the combinability of all properties of social media interactions, on Tumblr for example, a user can manipulate and interact with nearly all media formats, including pictures, gifs, memes, audio files, videos, and plain text. On Instagram, conversely, the range of media one can manipulate is restricted to photos and short (1 minute) videos. YouTube, in turn, does not allow the upload of still images or copyrighted audio or visual content - no such restrictions apply to sites like Tumblr or WorldStarHipHop.

Media Multiplexity renews a scholarly conversation on the "dematerialization" of possessions. This has been a point of interest for those theorizing the impact of disembodiment and non-material cultures of online space (Belk 2013). Some might argue that people lose connection to possession when objects shift to digital formats. The move from Vinyl, to cassette, to CDs, to digital downloads of music highlights that shift from materiality to immateriality of possessions well.

For generations, people have developed lasting and meaningful bonds to the possession they physically hold, use, and to which they subsequently ascribe significance. The love of books, clothes, music and film collections, photographs, and other objects is a common experience for people of varying backgrounds. Millenials mourn the loss of digital things like other age cohorts do so with material things. A crashed hard drive, a software glitch causing mass deletion of music downloads, a stolen phone full of contacts and digital photographs - each loss of non-material possession creates anxiety and a sense of deep personal injury for African American young adults. Beyond the monetary value of the hardware, however, they are uniformly more concerned with the digital possessions those technologies contained.

In many cases, in fact, digital objects and interactions are more meaningful to black Millenials than some of their material possessions. The collection of non-material possessions can contain greater and more complex collections of meaning and attachment, as study participants endow their digital objects with significance. Belk (2013:479) theorized that the ability to publish a playlist held more consequence than "opening the windows and cranking up the stereo." Indeed, my respondents spoke explicitly about the value of their online possessions and preferred types of interactions in

similar terms. Russel articulated his love for electronic music, and the inability to share that passion with his close network of offline associations.

Russel: "I think subconsciously I understood that the type of music you listen to builds your own identity…and I'm a big fan of that, so the kind of community I lived in, a lot of people didn't listen to the style of music that I like. I like electronic music. And eventually I broke it down. Like, I like Electronic music, but what type of electronic music…so I like Dubstep, electronic trap music…Man! I just be going crazy [an enthusiastic smile spreads across his face]…but nobody…I didn't really have a lot of friends that listened to that, so I had to seek it for myself. So I would go onto Pandora anytime I could.

He went on to explain in more detail:

Russel: "A lot of my family members would be like, 'Oh, you listen to that white music.' You know what I'm saying? That stuff. They even say that today. But overall…I try not to get so worked up at it, because I will admit, the majority of electronic musicians, they do happen to be white. But there are some who are black, and they're well known for the kind of music they make, even though it falls under the electronic category. Not only that, I even researched electronic music and how it was actually first developed…people like Afrika Bambaataa…and other black artists, and overall…it was pretty much started by black people, if you're looking at it from that context. Even Dubstep…. Dubstep comes from reggae music that originates from Jamaica, and the islands of the Caribbean. So looking at how Dubstep evolved over time… So I'm not too quick anymore to be like, yeah, I like white music. I don't even label it white music, because if you look at its roots it comes from black people. White people are the main artists now, but if it wasn't for black people this music probably would have never existed. I take pride in the kind of music I like. Even though the sounds may be a little crazy, this is what I like. This is just embracing who I am and what I like to listen to."

As illustrated above, the Media Multiplexity of online interactions allowed Russel to both develop an attachment to online music via popular streaming sites like Pandora. He cultivated specific musical tastes, in addition to refining a deeper understanding of the origins of electronic music through web searches. In doing so, he created a relationship to his online music collection, and the action of sharing music with like-minded, though geographically distant, genre enthusiasts. The Media Multiplexity of online environments, couple with Reach & Distance, intensified his pride in black identity and culture.

Each social network site allows for engagement with specific arrangements of actions and media types. Study participants, include in their array of identities labels things such as YouTuber, Facebooker, Instagrammer, and Snapchatter. They also articulate possessive relationships with their social media accounts and the stored content and digital belongings within them. They often describe the accounts as "my Facebook," "my Twitter," and "my Instagram." Their attachment to various aspects of those sites becomes apparent through an analysis of the interview and digital data.

My study participants were remarkably consistent with which sites they used over the 16-month collection period, as well as with the types of online actions and content they engaged. My findings contrast sharply with popular conceptions that Millenials are adrift in a sea of new media, ebbing and flowing with the tide as each new site and mobile application shifts the current. I find that instead of moving toward every trend in the digital arena, Millenials integrate new content into their collection of preferred sites only if they are deemed worthy. The serious acquisition of a new platform is rare; rarer still is the replacement of an existing preferred site by another. New social media platforms are rapidly created; few however, stand the test of time and become integrated into the respective social media hub of individual users.

The data presented above underscore how the unique properties of social media interactions and spaces affect the ways in which my respondents navigate digital environments. Distance & Reach, Confusion, Anonymity, Asynchronicity, Integration, Permanence, and Media Multiplexity each shape the use of online space as a means of identity formation.

Like offline locals, online space is a built environment, one in which the architects shape the *intended* range of possible interactions through their design efforts. One cannot, at their whim, adjust the structure of Twitter or Tumblr as they wish. Black Millennials, however, do work within those boundaries, pushing the limits of what is available, and reorganizing the cultural significance of a particular online action within a given site. While the intended purpose of the built environment of online spaces may not have been to enable identity formation processes that serve to combat deficit notions of blackness, they have nevertheless been co-opted by African American young adults explicitly for that purpose.

Multi-Site Integration and Cross-posting

Black Millenials spin webs of meaning when engaging in online interactions. A key component in enacting those complex meaning making processes is the cross-posting of content to multiple social network sites. I find that cross-posted content often conveys meanings specific to the site on which it is presented, despite the content itself being unchanged. I call this process "Digital Code-Switching." This process mirrors the offline behavior of adjusting tone, timbre, intonation, vernacular, language, clothing, and demeanor based on context and setting, so as to avoid stereotyping and other types of racial hostility. Digital Code-Switching is a means of adjusting interactions based on the site of the communication. This is a strategic use of varying social network sites by respondents to maintain dual or multi-identity structures in interactions with specific audiences.

Alexis illustrates the balancing of multiple identity presentations. I asked her if she ever felt pressure to adjust how she identifies or acts based on her race. She explains,

after an initial hesitation, how the context and setting of various locations causes her to adjust presentation of self. She stated:

Alexis: I don't…feel any…well, I guess…You know how you have your front stage and your backstage. I have that. I don't necessarily feel…I guess I feel the need to act professional in my day. Because I go to work everyday and I work in IT, which I'm one of two black woman that work in the immediate department that I'm in. So I guess I do feel a particular type of way not to present myself any certain type of way. But I still act, I still am who I am…I'm more conscious; I'll put it like that.

She went on to elaborate on the cause of that consciousness, whether it was the professional setting or something else.

Alexis: I guess it's a mix of both. I guess it would be because of my racial identity as well. I ask a lot of questions about the people I work with, where they're from. We're always down there together. Then you start realizing that people have never been around, and didn't even go to high school with…or maybe went to high school with maybe one black person and never had them in a class. And so I feel like I…I don't know…I can feel the switch. I don't feel like I consciously do it. I just do it.

This form of offline code-switching is a common experience for black people, and other marginalized groups. Being hyper-aware of their presentation to racial others is a manifestation of Double Consciousness as illustrated by Du Bois. The "switch" Alexis speaks of is the automatic, and often subconscious, strategy for dampening the affect of negative racial stereotypes, which include the tropes of the "angry black person" – one who is hyper violent, dramatic, and/or sexually aggressive. Black students are responsible for balancing that offline pressure to present a non-threatening persona that avoids reinforcing deficit notions of blackness, while also presenting an authentic racial self.

The necessity of maintaining multiple identities for black students is compounded by hostile campus climates, microaggressions, and metastereotypes present in their day-to-day lives. Moreover, those negative encounters do not remain offline; they seep into the online social life, causing them to engage in Digital Code Switching behavior as a

means of managing potentially hostile others across their range of on- and offline interactions.

Black student are forced to negotiate the expression of Double Consciousness, and the array of all their identities, within online interactions as well. Many of the online connections black students maintain are born out of their local offline worlds, which in the case of my respondents includes the student body at MU – a 90% white campus population. Because of the need to interact with and maintain personal and working relationships with student peers, staff, faculty, friends, and dorm mates, many of whom are non-black and have had little direct exposure to the African American community, they initiate the process of Digital Code-Switching. This act assists in the full expression of emotional experiences they accumulate, while tactfully managing their diverse network of associations. Additionally, as is the case with young age cohorts more generally, they also manage close connections with family elders, parents, and siblings online, which then adds an additional heft to the emotional labor of filtering their online presentations of self.

Teddy articulated the strategic use of sites for that purpose when I asked him if he behaved differently, or posted different types of content, to various sites for any reason.

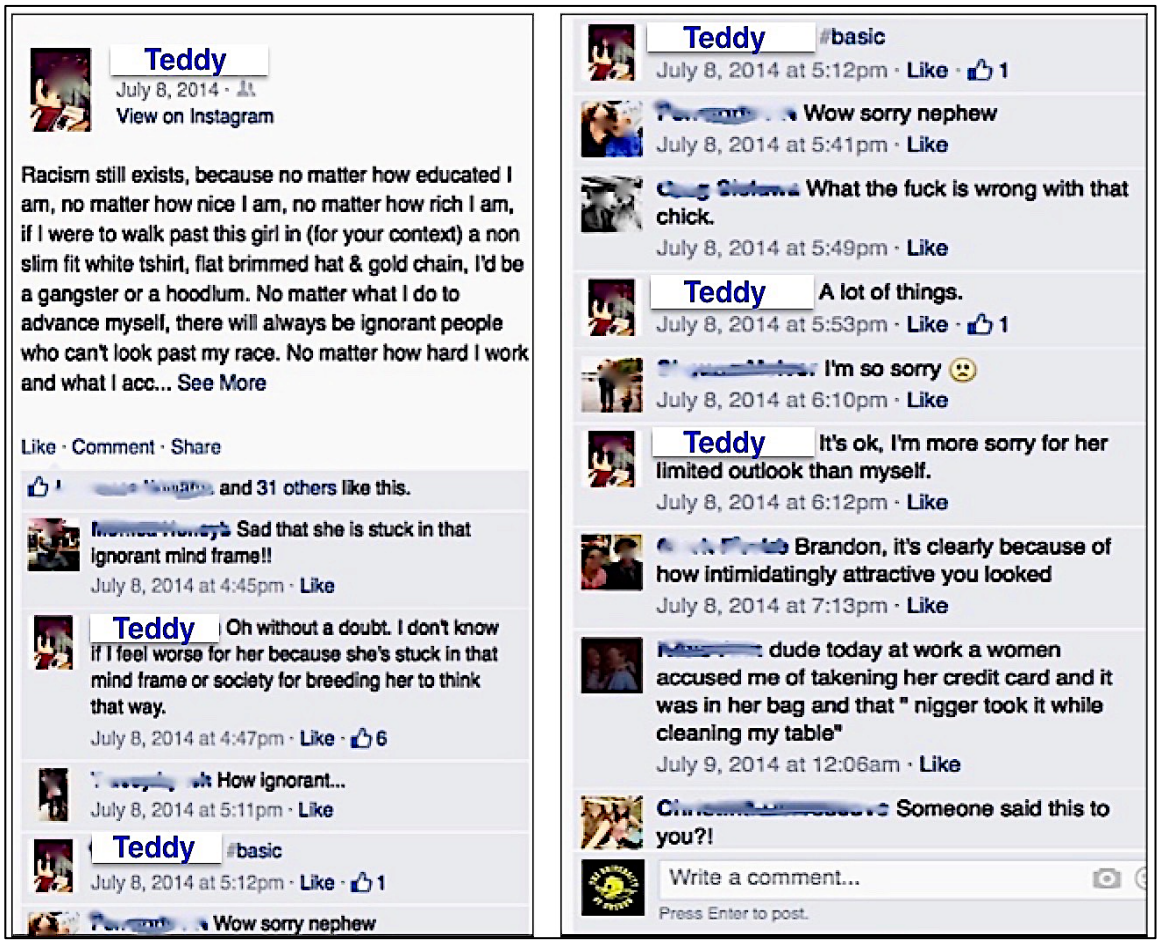
Teddy: Yeah. And I think that on different sites it may just be the different people that are there. So kinda like, on Tumblr, which is just the blog, there's not so much necessarily like all of my family or even like friends that I went to high school with, or people that I'm in college with. So, I guess things are a lot more anonymous on Tumblr or something like that, than they are on Twitter. Whereas Twitter is a lot more of my friends from high school and further back. And maybe so more a lot people that I've met now. Facebook is just like, everyone that I know, my family my friends, people that I met years ago that I still keep in contact with. So I guess if you were thinking of it as like a hierarchy, like I'm a lot more conscious of things I'm saying or what I'm posting on Facebook than I would be on Tumblr where I know that people aren't so much necessarily…maybe the fact that…and this may come back to the anonymity of it, people may not think necessarily that it's me if I say something on there. It may just be, I'm spreading the word on what

this is."

The breadth of my data allows me to connect this interview excerpt to an actual online occurrence. This instance highlights Teddy's enactment of Triple A processes in response to a microaggression he experienced online. In a Facebook conversation with peer, Teddy received the following reply. Note that Teddy redacted the individual's photo and name himself, prior to capturing the image and cross-posting it to Instagram. Also note, the comment received multiple "likes," indicating agreement from individuals following the conversation. In the image, an online encounter in which Teddy was engaged takes on a tone of racial bias when a commenter admits that they negatively stereotype black men as dangerous. To clarify the timeline of events and online locations, the original offensive comment originated on Facebook. Teddy screenshotted and cross-posted the comment, with redaction, to Instagram. Teddy then shared that Instagram post back to Facebook, where the comment thread shown below ensued. Through the caption Teddy authored and attached to the post, and within the comments tied to it, unfolds a series of Triple A processes at work in Teddy's negotiation of racial identity.

Figure 17. Teddy's Edited Facebook Comment – Cross-Posted To Instagram

Figure 18. Teddy's Edited Facebook Comment – Cross-Posted To Instagram - Comment Thread

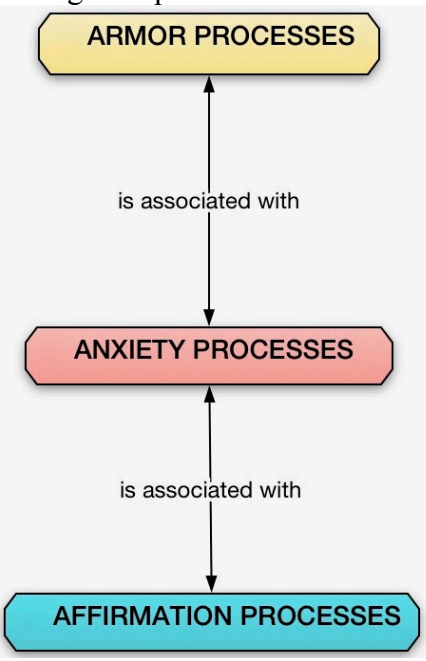


This complex series of posting, redactions, cross-posting, and re-posting is exemplary of the intricacies of online identity formation and management through Digital Code-Switching and Triple A Processes. To fully unpack this instance of online identity formation, I will illustrate the activation of each component of the Triple A Framework occurring in this single series of online actions.

Teddy manipulates online resources to seek emotional support while also redacting identifying information so as to maintain the offline connection to the person with the problematic comment (Triple A – Armoring). The comment itself, and subsequent "likers" who affirmed the sentiment through their indirect interaction in the conversation,

contribute to the anxiety of online interaction (Triple A – Anxiety). That emotional labor is then counterbalanced by the support Teddy received in the attached comment thread from his network (the Triple A – Affirmation).

Figure 19. Teddy's Cross-Posting – Triple A Activation Chart (Major Pillars Activated)



Previously, Teddy described in detail his hyper-awareness of what he posts on Facebook as a result of the expansiveness of contacts he maintains there. This provides insight into the depth of trauma he experienced as a result of the interaction shown above.

Initiating this entire series of identity formation actions, first, was the increased opportunity for contact with racially hostile others and/or microaggressive online content and behavior (Triple A – Anxiety Exposure). Second, and more directly inciting the series of Armor and Affirmation processes, was the actual negative comment posted by a peer, which is an example Triple A – Anxiety (Attack). *Exposure* is an anxiety-inducing quality of online interactions that creates pre-contact wariness of the online domain by black Millennials. This wariness is bred out of the knowledge black Millennials hold that

their presence in online environment potentially opens them up to racial hostility. Triple A – Anxiety (Attacks) are actual encounters that cause trauma to historically marginalized people in online environment. *Attacks* can be both subtle microaggressions and overt racism in the users online life. They can come in multiple media formats (hostile memes, gifs, status updates, hashtags, direct tags), or from individual people or groups. The result of *Attacks* includes feelings of shame, inadequacy, fear, threat, aggression and/or increased wariness.

Teddy exercised agency in combatting deficit notions of blackness, purposefully demonstrating that despite his stature among his peers, his remarkable campus leadership, and impeccable academic performance, he too is exposed to negative stereotyping based solely on his appearance. He broke the boundaries between sites in order to find safe space to process this encounter. Teddy engages in Digital Code Switching by cross-posting the encounter, which is an act of Triple A – Armor (Shielding). *Shielding*, as explained in Chapter II with Yarra's online activity, is a protective process in which black Millenials use online interactions to escape or manage bias, in this case originating from the online domain, to safeguard themselves and/or their digital content from hostile or potentially hostile encounters.

Teddy sheds light on the persistence of these types of occurrences, and then explains their problematic nature through personal experience in the caption (Triple A - Armor Illumination & Education). Triple A – Armor (Illumination) is an action meant to cast light on the persistence of both interpersonal and systemic bias and discrimination. *Illumination* often involves the sharing of content that displays bias, racism, discrimination, or other types of oppression as a means of highlighting the current state of

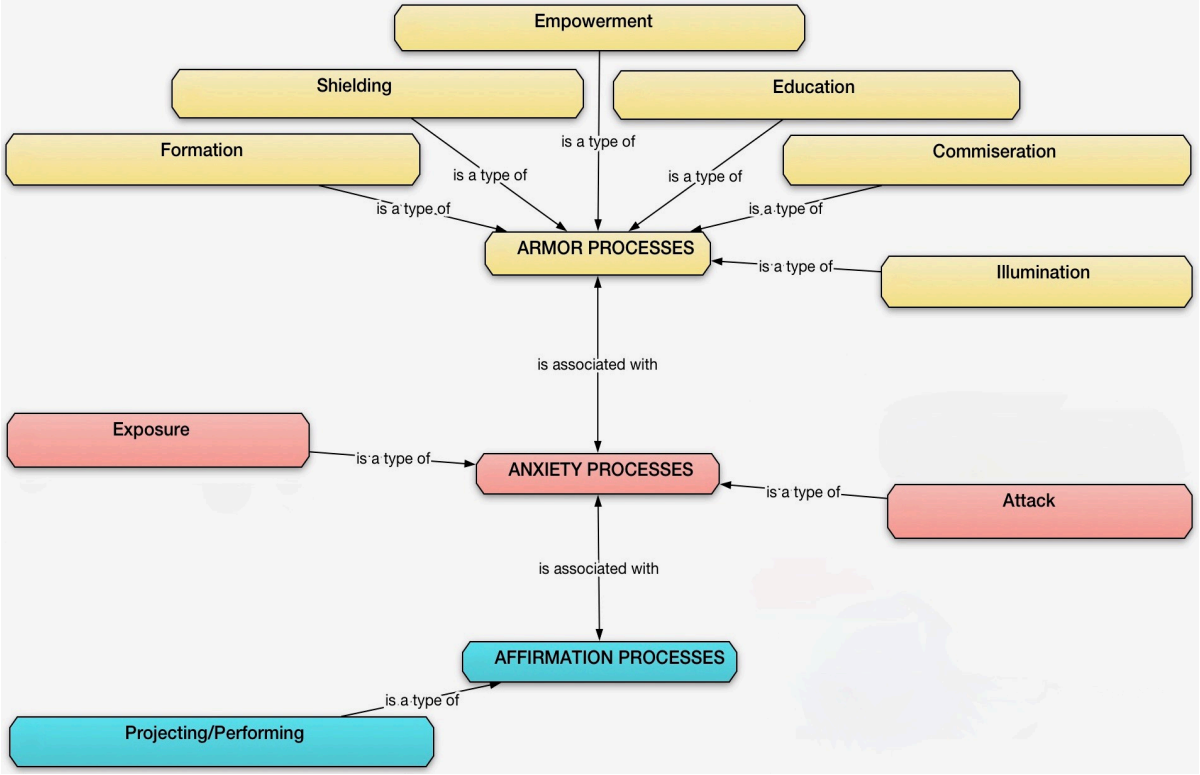
racial progress in the United States.

Triple A – Armor (Education) is a subprocess whereby black Millenials, as a means of combating deficit notions of blackness, utilize their personal knowledge and the resources made accessible by the properties of online interaction, to educate misguided and/or ill informed people expressing problematic online behavior. Simultaneously, Teddy's caption on the cross-post is an act of Triple A – Affirmation (Performance) – a process in which he presents an aspect of his black identity, specifically the weight and emotional toll of anti-black racism - to an online audience.

Continuing, in the comments Teddy gains necessary emotional support through Triple A – Armor (Formation, Commiseration, and Empowerment). As described in Chapter II, Triple A – Armor (Formation) is a process in which marginalized people rally in support of one another in online locations, collectively confronting the source(s) of hostility through online action (e.g. reading, dragging, flaming). Also previously noted, the Armor subprocess *Formation* is often enacted in tandem with Triple A – Armor (Commiseration). *Commiseration* is an Armoring subprocess with which one's network of associations express empathy and shared experiences of marginalization, within online space, in order to provide the necessary support to cope with the oppressive experiences. That action then serves to create space for the mutual expression emotional support and camaraderie. Triple A – Armor (Empowerment), like *Formation* and *Commiseration*, assists in counterbalancing the negative aspects of online interaction. *Empowerment* is a process in which black Millennials post content in efforts to evoke pride in black racial identity and uplift themselves and others. *Empowerment,* coupled with *Formation* and *Education,* creates a potent set of identity formation processes that seriously challenge

deficit notions of blackness.

Figure 20. Teddy's Cross-Posting – Triple A Chart (Subprocesses Activated)



In explaining the rationale for engaging in those digital acrobatics – posting, cross-posting, redacting, and reposting – Teddy made the following statement during our conversation preceding the collection of his online content:

Teddy: I may just like rant about something on Facebook to Twitter, and then like my friends back home who understand and who are always there, they may comment or send me a message. Or call me or something like that. There are instances where I have some like 7-page Facebook status, or I just tweeted like 17 straight tweets, about some instance or event. And then just like…the things come in. so people see it and if they understand they will like text me or some type of response."

Because black students engage in Digital Code Switching, and Triple A Processes, which vary by site and interaction type, it is important to understand how each of their preferred social network sites (SNS) function in racial identity formation.

Notably, there is consensus among my respondents as to the utility and benefits of the most popular social networking sites. In addressing the perceived utility of the dominant social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), I explain their main function, the types of interactions preferred one each site, how those interactions are used, and why other interactions or site features are avoided. In the following section, I continue to detail how my respondents break and create symbolic boundaries around black racial identity through the strategic use of online space and interactions.

The New Media Hub and Strategic Site Use: Building and Breaking Symbolic Barriers

The integration of the Hub – one's preferred collection of social media sites - in daily life should not be understated in its impact on the development of racial identity for black Millennials. As noted in Chapter I, the vast majority of study participants use the same primary social network sites on a daily basis. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter overwhelmingly dominate the Hubs of my respondents. This trend correlates strongly with nationally representative surveys illustrating the prominence of these sites among the wider population.

Figure 21. PEW Social Media Trend Data 1

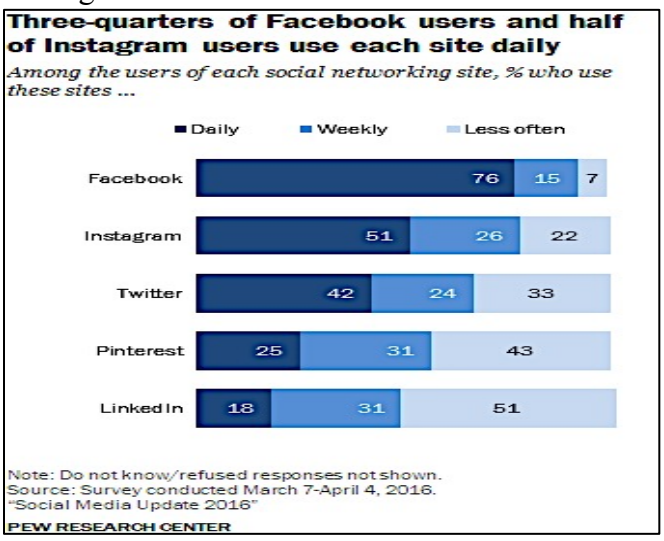


Table 3 PEW Social Media Trend Data

Substantial 'reciprocity' across major social media platforms

% of users of each social media site who use another social media site

	Use Twitter	Use Instagram	Use Pinterest	Use LinkedIn	Use Facebook
% of Twitter users who ...	–	65%	48%	54%	93%
% of Instagram users who ...	49	–	54	48	95
% of Pinterest users who ...	38	57	–	41	92
% of LinkedIn users who ...	45	53	43	–	89
% of Facebook users who ...	29	39	36	33	–

Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.
"Social Media Update 2016"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

As previously noted, users develop an attachment to specific sites and types of interactions. Because of this, each respondent's Hub is hierarchically organized, with one or two sites dominating their online hours; the others taking an ancillary role. Yarra summed up the purpose of the Hub succinctly when I asked her if there were specific reasons why she preferred the sites she used over others. She stated:

Yarra: "My Facebook is a lot broader, and that's probably just cuz…I made it a point not to care…like if I know you or you're a friend of a friend, and you're harmless, I'll accept you on Facebook. That doesn't matter; I don't really update it like that. You know what I mean. Like people will tag me on stuff, but I still have my setting so that I can approve something. So I don't really care about who follows me on Facebook. Meanwhile…and Twitter is actually pretty open, but Instagram and Snapchat, you have to follow me, and I have to accept you following to get into that. Same with Tumblr."

The variation of significance by social networking site, and by interaction within them, has yet to be adequately examined. Understanding those differences, however, provides important insight into the meaning-making processes of connected young adults. The following sections will remedy that shortcoming by unpacking the utility of each major site for black Millenials.

Facebook

Facebook is the most ubiquitous of all social network sites. With the majority of American Internet users actively participating, Facebook is by far the most open with regard to the diversity of others my respondents connect to on that site. Respondents use Facebook for social, economic and academic networking, for the maintenance of familial ties, the maintenance of "online-only" associations, as well as preserving past relationships (e.g. high school friends).

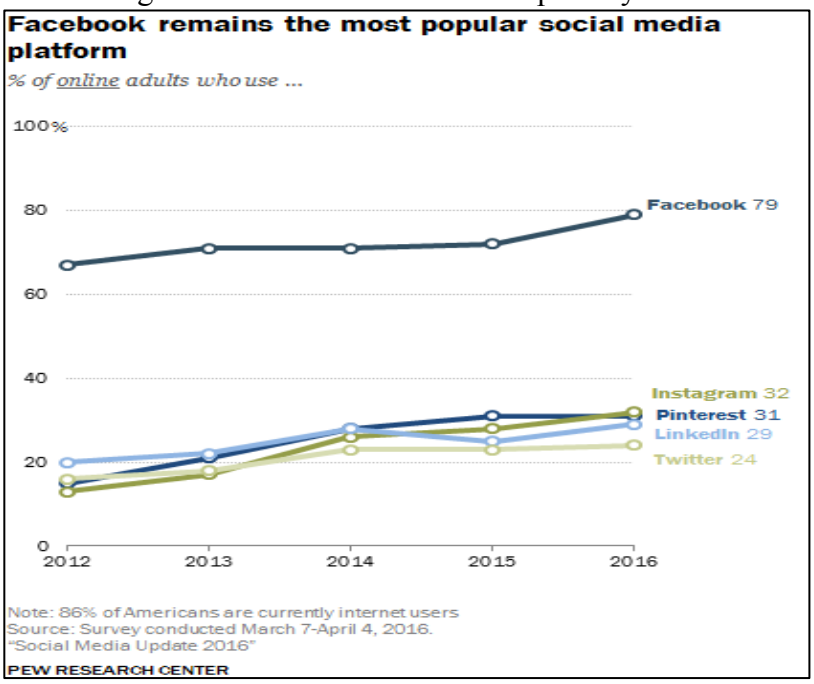
Because of the breadth of connection, Facebook is also the most highly curated of all sites. In sum, Facebook is a multi-purpose site on which my participants fully integrate the range of contacts from all avenues of their on- and offline lives. While Facebook allows for Media Multiplexity in interactions, it is more structured than other multi-media sites like Tumblr. Users are not allowed to reorganize the built environment of Facebook, which, in turn, somewhat limits the free expression of racial identity. Nevertheless, Facebook remains a core component in the online lives and identity formation processes of my respondents.

Along with unpacking the perception and utility of each site, I endeavored to determine what motivated the initial attractions to each SNS by my interviewees. During my talk with Julius, I asked him what drew him to Facebook in the first place. He remarked:

Julius: Number one, more of my friends were on there, everybody was talking about it…it's way better than MySpace. I always thought it was better than MySpace. I'm not good at…I'm not a very artistic person. And with MySpace you had to create a profile…That's a lot of work to me (chuckles warmly). That was something I was not interested in at all! And so with Facebook you didn't have to design your profile, it was just there."

This exchange highlights both the access to peers, and the structured environment of Facebook, as primary reasons for his daily engagement with the site. These reasons are typical of the responses I received. The combination of site popularity across all demographic categories, the ease of use, and its' wide spread integration into American social life allows Facebook to maintain its dominance over the social media landscape, as illustrated by the Pew (2016) chart below.

Figure 22. PEW Social Media Popularity Data



Twitter

Twitter generally functions as a more depersonalized space - one in which black Millennials cast aside the politically correct and tactful veneer that permeates many Facebook interactions. Inclusive of a wide range of others, Twitter is a more acerbic and politically charged environment. Participants exercise less self-restraint when engaging in Twitter based interactions, often in fact, using that space as a place to debate the issues of

the day and vent/process the emotional tolls of their personal offline encounters. Even the humorous aspects of Twitter engagement takes a sharper turn, as #BlackTwitter, and other digital boundary objects, are used to tie disparate members of the virtual African American community together in the unabashed celebration and expression of black identity and culture. That energy is often in direct confrontation with pervasive white supremacy and color-blind ideologies.

Table 4 PEW Twitter Trend Data

24% of online adults (21% of all Americans) use Twitter

% of online adults who use Twitter

All online adults	24%
Men	24
Women	25
18-29	36
30-49	23
50-64	21
65+	10
High school degree or less	20
Some college	25
College+	29
Less than $30K/year	23
$30K-$49,999	18
$50K-$74,999	28
$75,000+	30
Urban	26
Suburban	24
Rural	24

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.
Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.
"Social Media Update 2016"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

While less popular than Facebook, with 36% of 18-29 years olds using the site, Twitter is gaining traction, particularly among black Millenials. Tommy, for example, noted his attraction to Twitter, and how he uses it to navigate political currents and debates, as well as the anxiety inducing quality of interactions on that site due to the

politically charged environment. He recalled an encounter he had on Twitter when I asked if he had experience any bias or discrimination online:

Tommy: Two of my friends were talking about something…and this guy, just out of nowhere, comes in and says a comment, I can't remember specifics, but I remember it went from their innocent conversation - to his [friend 1] comment that did relate to her [friend 2] race, to both of them being attacked by him [the stranger], to me getting in because I do kinda have this protective sense. And…just turning into something really nasty that I don't think anyone expected…I know at one point, he threatened to kill me, and like I said something back to him. …It…[exasperated]…it got out of hand. But it was definitely one of those moments where…it was kind of weird because he didn't follow any of us, and it was kind of one of those, "Should our tweets be put on private" just so we don't have to deal with this. Things like that. but we never put our tweets on private."

Tommy went on to detail how others involved themselves in the altercation by retweeting and favoriting the attackers tweets, which further emboldened the antagonist to escalate his assaults. After going to bed, Tommy awoke the next morning to a slew of similar reactions to his tweets. I asked him what affect the favoriting and retweeting had on him upon waking. He stated:

Tommy: "Um…it's kind of…I guess this is part of my political side…it's kind of having like it's own personal poll, and seeing how other people respond to it. So, definitely when you see more people kind of favorite it and retweet the thing that led you to say what you said, you kind of get a sense of why do people find that to be ok. And I think that's definitely one of the biggest things that kind of hits home when it comes to favoriting and retweeting on Twitter...is that moment. At first, I did not like Twitter. One of my friends convinced me into it, and then I kind of fell in love with it because it gave me an outlet. Being the only child, never really had anyone to talk to…I always had things, so occasionally I would feel more comfortable, sadly, kind of just posting this on my own form. Like this is what I'm thinking, this is my stream of consciousness…and then if I wanted to come back and debrief myself, I can readily come back and reread what I said. So that's kind of how my social media progressed."

Here Tommy parses out the why and how of bias and overt discrimination online. Seeing the validation his attacker received provided him insight into why that person would continue on such a racially motivated tirade, culminating in direct threats of violence. Twitter's particular social ambiance, more open to strident political and

personal attacks in the eyes of my respondents, is illustrated in Tommy's example. Likewise, he articulated the positive aspects of quick tweets as stream of consciousness writing – content that he can then revisit to take stock of his internal processes at a later time.

Instagram

Instagram is primarily used to interact with close associations, both those originating offline and those based solely or mostly online. Photo sharing, the primary means of Instagram interaction, takes on a more personal tone with respondents engaging in self-portraiture as Triple A – Affirmation processes. Photo sharing provides support and feedback to and from study participants, in addition to the following of various celebrity and meme pages for entertainment purposes. Gayle, for example, often uses Instagram to affirm his identities as both, black, biracial, an African international student, and a cisgendered male.

The two images below capture a transition from adolescence to young adulthood for Gayle and his friends. Having maintained their connection over time, using the properties of online interactions as a means to do so, Gayle intimates various aspects of his selves through the use of Instagram photos and the associated hashtags he assigns to them. The first image is an illustration of the importance of in-group solidarity along multiple axes, including adolescent male and Congolese identity. Additionally, the #swag hashtag is a colloquialism meant to capture an interest in, and successful execution of, a particular type of dress and demeanor - the "cool" of the millennial generation.

The second of Gayle's photos captures he and his friends as young men. It acts as a sort of online chronicle of their journey from the Congo to the U.S., and their

maintenance of friendship bonds across the years. Gayle continues his identity affirmations, bringing them into present day, hashtagging the current photo with #squad #family #blackboys #congoleseboysrule. The male identity affirmation, coupled with the focus on both black identity broadly, and Congolese identity specifically, highlight the opportunity present in online interactions to present intersectionally situated presentation of self.

Figure 23. Gayle – Instagram Post – Identity Affirmation 1

Figure 24. Gayle – Instagram Post – Identity Affirmation 2

Posting selfies is a form of identity affirmation - Digital self-portraiture as a means of visual journaling where moments, feelings, ideas, and emotions are captured. Moreover, group selfies are a form of friendship building and performance. The public illustration of friendship bonds is a digital identity commitment signaled both through the posted content and through the process of tagging and hashtagging. This act provides a public accountability that affirms Gayle's stake in the friendship, concretely expressed when displayed for the consumption of others, who in turn support and further affirm the bond with comments, likes, and shares. Significant bonds between people are given concrete expression through these Triple A – Affirmation processes.

Self-expressive online behavior also has a particularly important function for study participants because they are often physically distant from their peers during the academic year at MU. By creating a record of their connections - creating digital possessions - it provides them with access to those "stored feelings" of belonging and community in the moments when they experience isolation and discontent. Black Millennials often share old posts – via apps and services like TimeHopp and Facebook Memories – as a way to relive the good times when they did not feel culturally and emotionally displaced as a result of pursuing their education. In this way, selfies – a seemingly self indulgent and egotistical act – carries far more social significance for black youth than is outwardly apparent. Coupled with select hashtags, self-portraiture is a meaningful act of online identity formation.

Hashtags, which scholars argue serve as boundary objects (Herrera 2017), act as lynchpins with which individuals organize and erect borders around various identities.

The more personalized nature of Instagram content allows for this immediately satisfying and personal important form of identity affirmation and expression for my respondents.

Domain-Centric Analyses

In current identity formation scholarship, researchers often centralize their analyses to specific offline domains. Dhingra (2007:156) makes a strong argument for domain-centric analyses, arguing that they illuminate the tensions within those offline spaces, and contextualize the salience of "domain cultures" for people of color in identity formation processes. He asserts that domain-based approaches "uncover the power of local expectations" and give a "clearer explanation for people's actions."

While a valuable and institutive set of contributions to the understanding of identity formation for people of color, the emergence of online space, with its' unique properties, rapid diffusion, and saturation in the daily lives of young adults, adjusts the significance of domains codes and cultural scripts for black Millennials. Rather than refuting that work, I extend it by arguing a reformulation of the roles of domain codes and cultural scripts in identity formation for African American young adults. As Reskin (2012) noted, full understanding of racial disparities across multiple domains requires a recognition and analysis of their reciprocity and coalescence as integrated systems. Similarly, to fully grasp the totality of identity formation for today's youth, requires an understanding of the ways in which they purposefully build and break traditional boundaries between offline domains with online interactions, in addition to creating new online domains that reach tenebrously across all avenues social life.

Young adults are no longer bounded to particular offline locals. Black students frequently break the barriers of the MU campus and surrounding communities, using

online interactions to engage with people and groups to which they have no immediate physical contact. They strategically select audiences to which certain content is presented, in an effort to erect boundaries around nested communities within larger online social networks.

Tiarra, who is linked to close associates and family, in addition to coworkers and other professional contacts on Facebook, sorts her contacts into various lists, which then allow her to choose which audience(s) can view specific content. The adjustment of viewership is an effort to solidify the boundaries of an online counterspace within the Facebook environment. This action fences off specific online content, allowing Tiarra to balance Facebook as an open site where connections to the widest group of others is expected and perceived necessary, while also extracting the desired set of responses from her selected network of associations. This is another example of Triple A – Armor (Shielding), whereby privacy settings provide cover from potential outsiders when respondents seek the benefits of online counterspaces.

Figure 25. Tiarra – Facebook Meme Photo – Audience restricted 1

Figure 26. Tiarra – Facebook Meme Photo – Audience restricted 2

Scholars have written extensively about the Goffmanian front vs. backstage presentations of self. Similarly, I find that black students negotiate various presentations of self offline, while using online interactions to further fracture those presentations, distributing the components of self across multiple social networking sites – thus provides a more complex series of identity performances meant to engineer desired interaction outcomes. It has been reported that most young adults use their phones as a means of intensifying the engagement with in-person and online contacts (Pew 2014). 45% of Millennials use their phones to photograph gatherings; 41% use their phone to share something from an online source with people they are physically with (e.g. SNS, group txt, email); 38% gather information of interest to the group with their phones during gathering; and 31% use their phones to connect with friends of group members who are not physically present. 78% of young adults cite at least one "group-contributing" reason for smartphone usage in the presence of peers. In sum, a total of 89% of 18-29 years olds reported using their phones in their most recent gathering.

Having access to these "group-contributing" activities, via online interactions, adjusts the scope of local domain scripts and cultural codes. By both providing access to a larger set of others, as well as the ability to bring in more in geographically dispersed

friendship connections into offline gathering, young adults adjust the inputs into those cultural scripts by expanding their sphere of influences and influencers.

With this integration of online social media interactions, black college students strategically and consciously manipulate the features of social networking sites in efforts to build and break symbolic boundaries between on- and offline sites for identity formation. For example, I asked Yarra if she felt that online interactions allow her to expresses herself in ways she cannot express herself offline. She responded:

Yarra: "Yes, because you have more mediums online. I can be talking to somebody and reference any amount of songs, if I'm online. Any images that come to mind…I save images in my phone so that I can put them in…I'm really good about that. I have a wonderful image stash…Ok, I always call them gifs…I have a lot of images like that that I will save to put into online things…which I really love about Tumblr. It's so much better on a post once you have that image. It just really hits home. Because everybody knows THAT facial expression! You know? They know That shrug [imitating a popular meme photo."

Figure 27. Tumblr Meme Photo – #KanyeShrug

Acknowledging the nuances of online interactions, however, Yarra went on to discuss how the demographic composition of an online space influences her level of

engagement and feelings of safety. I asked her to elaborate on how she participates in online conversations, particularly when the issue of race is present. She remarked:

Yarra: That's going to depend…online…if it's a group of people of color, I might participate more so than if it's a mixed group or predominantly white. Because…there's more opportunity for it to go left, in my experience…so…I'm really not going to do it unless something really pulls me and I'm like, I have to address this. This like…I can't let you go on saying this forever. That's pretty much the only time I'll get into the brawl. As far as like serous talks a race, if it's just about like us as a people, I have a lot of that on Twitter, the 'Us a people' things. Like the whole Black Twitter, I love it. That's wonderful.

Online interactions, and the properties of online spaces, facilitate the creation of distinctive domain codes and cultural scripts. Part of those codes is illustrated in the consensus on which sites serve what purpose. That consensus emerges, in part, through a form of socialization among black students – a process in which they observe black student peers engaging in Triple A processes online, taking up those behaviors as a sort of non-dominant cultural capital (Carter 2003) handed down to successive cohorts by more seasoned students and peers. Black Millennials are careful when engaging in online interactions, as illustrated by Yarra's comments above, paying particular attention to the audience(s) and sites to which their input is available. That decision about where and to whom she will share her open commentary, illustrated the capacity for online interactions to serve as sites of identity-work for black students.

Hierarchy of New Media Activities and "Genres Of Participation"

In response to the lack of representation within both traditional media and new media outlets, black Millenials engage in Interest-Driven online behaviors meant to promote and solidify positive aspects of black identity and culture. They impose themselves on the dominant narratives of black identity, forcing a shift in larger discourses about black culture. In doing so, they insert their perspectives as new inputs to

the collection of meanings socially assigned to blackness. In following section I demonstrate the salience and meaning of specific online actions in those efforts, paying attention to how they map onto the "Genres of Participation" framework for understanding youth new media behavior.

Interest driven practices are those centering on "specialized activities, interest, and niche and marginalized identities," and include an array of behaviors meant to accomplish a variety of tasks. These initiatives include seeking information on black culture and history, gathering support and feedback from in-group community members, synthesizing and then disseminating that information through social media in efforts to shape the perceptions of blackness. Study participants engage in online behavior that takes advantage of the properties of online space and interactions. In doing so they define the parameters of black identity through an exercise of individual agency, manifested through a hierarchical arrangement of online actions.

Many scholars have sought to provide nuance to the analysis of online interaction by creating various schemas for categorizing user behavior, both by demographics and intensity of use. For example, Hargittai and Hsieh (2010) established that online activity and intensity of use is not randomly distributed among the user groups. Rather, analysis shows that gender, for example, is a predictor of social network site activity, with women being more active and intense Internet users than men.

As previously noted, Ito et al (2012) developed a system for categorizing the intensity with which youth engage in online interactions. Those "Genres of participation" include the categories, "Hanging Out," "Messing Around," and "Geeking Out" (HOMAGO). Adding to that expansive ethnographic research, I have identified specific

online actions that map onto those genres, thus providing a more robust understanding of intensity of use, and how young adults hierarchically arrange specific online actions that align with those categories. Additionally, through the coupling of interview and digital data, I unpack the process by which my respondents steep those specific actions with social significance and meaning within their larger collection of identity formation processes.

Study participants selected a small assortment of topics and interests, on which they post with remarkable consistency across their preferred social networking sites. The chosen topics and interest are representative of vital components to their set of internalized identities and dispositions. The consistency with which they engage with content centered on that set of interests and identities only varies with regard to level of the directness with which they express themselves by site. This variation in digital boundary-work is visible in the acts of Liking, Posting, Sharing, and Tagging – the four primary social media actions. HOMAGO, as indicated above, are relational terms that describe the intensity of youth engagement with new media. Ito et al. (2012) argued an increasing intensity of new media use as youth move from Hanging Out" to "Messing around" to "Geeking Out."

I find that Liking online content correlates to "Hanging Out," encompassing the most casual form of online interaction. Perhaps counter intuitively, Posting content falls as an intermediary action that generally serves as a "Messing Around" form of online participation. One might assume that the act of creating content to post online would hold the highest significance for my respondents – I find otherwise. Importantly, Posting is the most flexible of all online actions in terms of its importance and intensity with which it is

deployed. At times Posting content may take on a "Geeking Out" intensity and significance, though it more often drops down to "Hanging Out," with content serving a substantial identity formation function reserved instead for the action of Sharing content online.

I observed that my respondents consistently reserve the majority of the shared content (e.g. videos, articles, photos, memes, gifs, etc.) for those topics of great personal and social importance to them. It was rare for study participants to share content that was not directly related to a significant aspect of their selves, and the social inequalities and pressures to attach and adhere to those identities.

Moreover, the act of tagging people – an action that initiates direct contact and notification of the desired content to a select other(s), also falls into the "Geeking Out" genre. Tagging both provokes responses through direct contact, and also carries the expectation of a reply, in one form or another, from the person(s) tagged. It serves the secondary function of placing the tagged content onto the newsfeeds and timelines of the desired other(s), which integrates it into the view of a wider audience by Reaching "Friends of Friends." This act effectively multiplies the availability of that content far beyond ones immediate network of online associations.

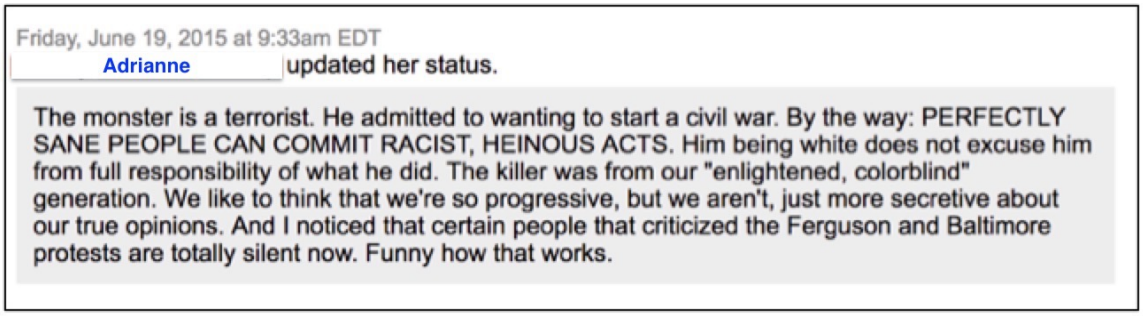
While there are exceptions, with respondents intermittently sharing and tagging content solely for entertainment, the vast majority of shared content is a reflection of internally held dispositions and ideologies regarding specific topics and identities of interest. The following subsections will provide examples of Liking, Posting, Sharing, and Tagging as manifestations of Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out.

Liking to Hang Out

Black Millenials use "Likes" as passive online interactions meant to "signal boost" some forms of online content. That is to say, Liking as a means of enhancing the impact and reach of online content, which then creates a larger collective voice (e.g. Trending). This act is also perceived as adding credibility to content. African American young adults also use *Likes* as Triple A – Affirmation Processes to provide support for content that affirms black identity, culture, and experiences. *Liking*, then, takes on a more nuanced significance in social media interactions, though it is a less intense form of identity-work than other online acts. Liking allows respondents to express deeply help convictions, as well as casual agreements, while also sidestepping any potential backlash from others – effectively using that act as a more subtle Triple A – Armor process.

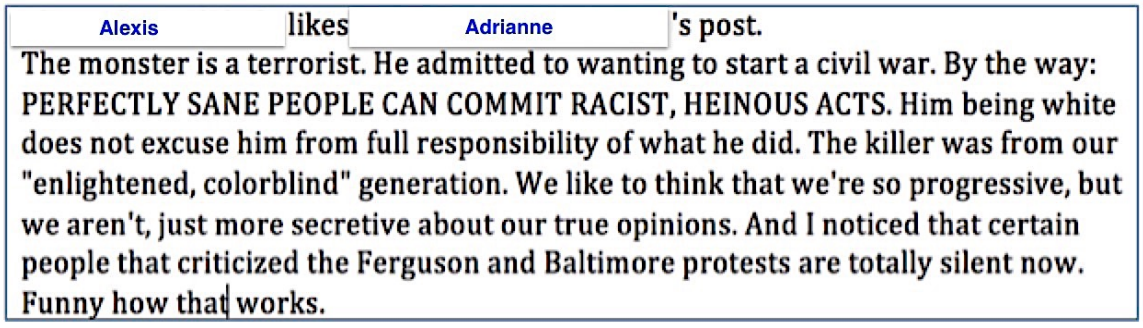
In illustration of Liking as a form of Hanging out, Alexis interacted with the Facebook post of another study participant with whom she happens to be friends. Adrianne is a senior Psychology major who is highly vocal and critical of the colorblind ideology in mainstream American racial discourse. She posts often about her disdain for what she views as inadequate institutional responses to instances of police brutality, namely the killing of Mike Brown and Freddie Grey. Adrianne was also critical of the media during the ensuing protest coverage in traditional news outlets. She wrote the following status update on Facebook addressing the Charleston Church shooting, expressing disgust and resentment for the treatment and framing of Dylan Roof by both the local police and national media.

Figure 28. Adrianne's FB Status Update – Charleston



Alexis, as a Facebook friend of Adrianne, saw this post and reacted to that status update. I was able to follow the stream of interactions between various study participants who provided complete access to their social media accounts. Doing so provided multiple examples of "Liking" as Triple A- Affirmation with a lesser intensity of interaction. In this case, Alexis signal boosted and affirmed the sentiments of Adrianne's post. This exchange is an example of engagement in an "Interest-driven" online activity centered on black identity.

Figure 29. Alexis – Like of Adrianne's FB Status Update – Charleston



I retrieved Alexis' Like history from her Facebook Activity Log. Through this exchange, we see that she provides passive support for Adrianne by liking the commentary on Dylan Roof , an action that in turn displayed her "Like", and Adrianne's original post, in the newsfeeds of her own Facebook friends. This act effectively boosts

the range and accessibility of Adrianne's post beyond her immediate online sphere of influence and into Alexis' network of online connections.

In trying to understand the motivations for Liking, I asked Amal if the availability of that form of online interactions affected how she chose to interact with others. Detailing the purpose and significance of Liking as an online action, she explained that the more passive, and often habitual, action of liking content one feels a connection toward. Amal stated:

Amal: "Like 'liking' statuses… I think that's more so passive, I feel like…. I'm pretty sure there's research out there…its like our fingers are just so used to tapping on the screen when we use our phones. So I feel like it's very passive when I like pictures and statuses. Sometimes I might not read through the whole status, ill read the first part and end up liking it. I'll just click the like button."

By promoting a post, rather than creating an original post with similar content, my respondents perceive their actions as adding strength to the opinion by increasing its visibility. Liking, in these instances, is an expression of Triple A – Armor (Shading). When *Shading*, individuals convey personally held positions beliefs, or dispositions without attaching themselves directly to the sentiment by crafting an original post. This provides a means of heightening the overall affect of a post, an opportunity to express an opinion while avoiding the direct backlash or confrontation, and indirectly disseminating the information into the newsfeeds of one's collection of online contacts. All of these outcomes go beyond what is possible in offline settings, where it is more difficult to promote a perspective while avoiding direct interaction with others.

Messing Around and Geeking Out Combined: Posting as "Geeking Around"

Posting content takes several forms, most common of which is directly creating a version of the status update (i.e. tweeting, blogging, commenting). With the range of

posting types also comes flexibility with regard to significance and meaning of their enactment. Importantly, in contrast to Liking, Posting allows the use of Media Multiplexity. Respondent post a multitude of content types, from text and photos, to gifs and memes. In my data, however, commenting on digital content authored by someone else is by far the most commonly implemented form of posting, with drafting direct posts as secondary.

Direct posts, while less frequent than commenting, carry more social significance for black Millenials. With direct posting, uploading photos is the most heavily implemented online action. This is largely due to the popularity of Instagram as a major site in which my participants engage one another. According to Ryan (2008:118), online communication complicate boundaries between "oral and written, the public and private." They go on to note that it has become imperative for users to "manage their online reputation" through image management, which "entails not only the calculated projection of symbolic markers of identity, but also an imagining of the audiences that may view this display." This imperative to manage one's visual persona can, in part, be attributed to the *Permanence* property of social media. Though there are some applications that purge videos and photos after a specific amount of time or number of view (e.g. Snapchat), most online content remains as a digital artifact unless users manually delete them and/or close their accounts. Often, those digital records remain perpetually online despite user attempts to remove the content.

To unpack the motivations for engaging in direct posting, I asked the students what provoked that specific online action. I spoke with Annette, a student-athlete in her Junior year at MU. In response, she details how she exercises agency in direct posts.

When doing so she finds value in offering an opposing view, in providing support for a similar disposition, or in educating others on the realities of racial tension and progress in the U.S. Annette state in explaining how and why she directly comments online:

Annette: It depends. Sometimes I like to read the comments. Sometimes I feel like my comment might help this situation, or add a different insight to it. That happened after Mike Brown…A lot of people, especially from back home…white people from back home…were really big on that. And I found myself answering a lot of them, which was kinda weird. Because it wouldn't have happened out here. If it was somebody from out here, I probably wouldn't have. But just knowing back home they have more exposure to different cultures and lifestyles and stuff, I feel like it's a lot easier to have that conversation with them online."

In this quotation, and throughout our conversation, Annette remarked on the significance of commenting and engaging in difficult online discussions. She noted that the Distance & Reach property of those online interactions eased the tension and anxiety present in similar face-to-face conversation. Engaging in racial discourses allows one to use linguistic turns and other identity commitments to shape a senses of self. Importantly, online interactions, like those described by Annette, increase exposure to racial others in ways previously unavailable (Hampton et al. 2011).

I opened this chapter with a quotation from Holly who commented on how writing her thoughts online allowed greater expression of her "internal integrities." I went on to ask Holly how it would affect her if she were not able to write out her thoughts and engage people online through blog posts and other direct comments. She, similarly to Annette, replied by stating the following:

Holly: I have had a couple days where Tumblr was down or my internet was not working…and I'm just like [Deep sigh]…I have to find something else to do. I feel like I always have to have my hands busy. Like if there is something on my mind, I need to be doing something with my hands, and if I can't write about it, then I'm going to have to find something else to do. And it…part of the reason I rescued my dog from the humane society was because of that. Because I have pent up depression… and I don't know how else to outlet it…and…so when I can't get on those blog websites, I'll take my dog for a

walk, or we'll go out and play for hours and hours. I mean, I just have to do something that clears my mind."

Posting original content plays an important role in the management of multiple components of self. For Holly, managing depression by writing her Tumblr blog has become an integral part of her daily life. Absent those communications, as she indicated, the loss of agency in exercising those particular identity formation processes would be damaging to her psychological well-being.

Sharing and Tagging as Geeking Out

It is common for black Millenials to borrow the legitimacy of online content crafted by other people, groups and organizations that have higher visibility, and those who are more established and heavily credentialed, (e.g. Marc Lamont Hill, Crunk Feminist Collective, Shaun King, BuzzFeed, PEW, NYTimes, Etc). By sharing content created by others, they perform and display various aspects of self in order to display identity commitments and affirmations, such as efforts to reduce the burden of pervasive Eurocentric beauty standards, to address the impact of police brutality and mass incarceration of communities of color, or to dispel the specter of colorism that pervades black imagery. Tagging people in that shared content attaches them to the post, symbolically anchoring the taggee to the content. Tagging functions as a form of signaling, attention getting, or attention seeking – it is a more aggressive means of provoking online interaction, and flagging content for others as a means of identity performance and information sending.

Black Millenials relay their personal opinions, dispositions, and the components of a complex set of intersecting identities through the sharing and tagging of online content. On the surface it would seems like those who choose not to post much original

content, in favor of shared materials, have less of a voice or are less engaged in online identity formation. I find, however, that the articles and other shared content act as a second voice for my respondents – and amplified version of their own internal dispositions. Shared content serves as a digital bullhorn with which black students vocalize opinions. In illustration of this, Alexis articulates how her online life contributes to her social activism. She uses shared content to display and perform her commitments to various forms of social justice – activities that the busyness of her offline often prohibit. I asked Alexis if her on and offline life were separate in any significant way. In responding she highlighted the value of shared content:

Alexis: I do definitely see a difference in my online versus my offline. I feel like…I hate saying this about myself…sometimes I feel like such a, what do they call it, a "hacktivist." Is that what it's called. I'm always sharing stuff about different things going on – race wise, gender wise – different things that I support, but I feel like sometimes offline, and it may just be because of my schedule right now, I just feel like I don't have enough time to go to different events and as many activist events as I like going to. Where you actually talk to people and tell them what you want. I don't feel like I have time to space out time in my schedule."

The ability to collect and share multimedia content creates a digital collage of cognitive and identity formation processes. Indeed, the lion's share of shared content for my study participants centers on what they view as their vital identity traits. For Alexis, a social justice advocate and Women's and Gender Studies major, her shared content primarily addresses those interests and provides an outlet for the performance of those aspects of self.

This trend is present with all study participants, across all primary social network sites, regardless of their intensity of social media use. London, For example, was the least active online of all respondents, only using Facebook, and only posting to the site a few times per month. However, on the occasions she did post, the content consistently

addressed race and gender identity, specifically natural hair and police brutality. Additionally, she posted content on her identity as an aspiring anthropology graduate student. These three aspects of her identity are exemplified in the following content pulled from her Facebook page.

Figure 30. London – Facebook Shared Content

Likewise, Holly's shared items are dominated by three types of content – Those related to her race and gender, her deep commitment to veganism, and those related to her immediate family, specifically her fiancé and their dog, whom they view as their child. The following example highlights the complex actions with which Holly uses the available online actions to engage in identity formation.

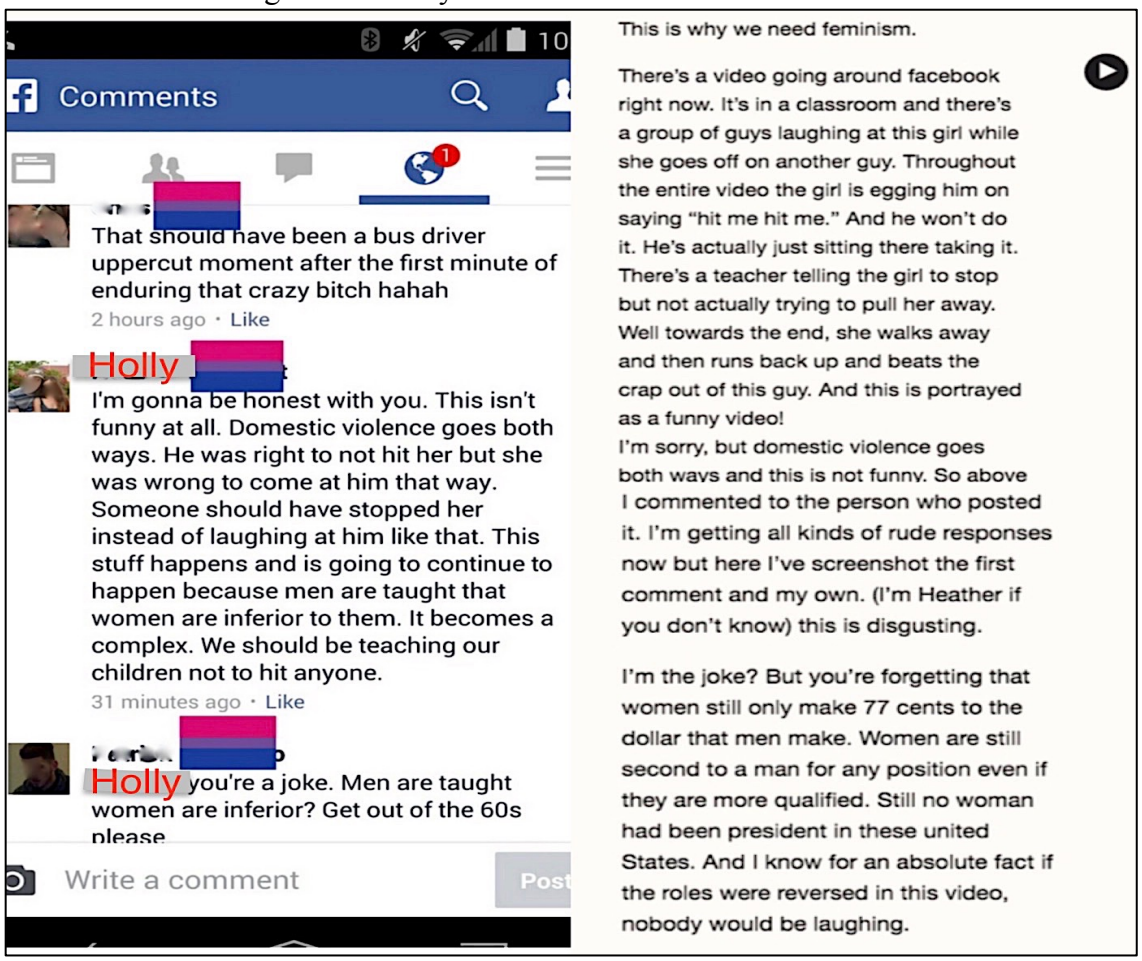
She engaged in an exchange on Facebook regarding a viral video showing a fight between a male and a female high school student. Holly observed a Facebook Friend joking that the male student should have punched the female student in the face during the fight, ending his comment calling the female student the word "bitch" - a term historically used to demean, oppress, and generally dehumanize women of all backgrounds. This is an example of Triple A – Anxiety processes in action.

In the video, the male student is seated and engaged in a heated argument with a female student who is standing. The two argue viciously, during which time the boys filming the event are heard laughing raucously in the background. After a few minutes of the boy refusing the girls repeated dares for him to hit her, she storms off, calling him a "bitch" as she does. He returns the insult, at which point the girl ran back and began to strike the boy about the head and face - the boys filming the incident still laughing in the background. The clip ends shortly after the physical altercation begins. What incited the altercation was not included in the clip.

Holly proceeded to Post in the comment thread in order to address her concerns with her "friend" making light of the assault on the boy, and his advocating the boy punch the female student in the face. Holly takes advantage of the Distance and Reach properties of online interactions – confronting the person without close physically

proximity (Triple A – Armor Shielding). Holly, after her comment, received a series of aggressive, dismissive, and misogynistic responses, from both the original poster and others jumping into the thread (Triple A – Anxiety Attacks).

Figure 31. Holly – Facebook Shared Content to Tumblr



Being a woman I can back that in every position I worked, my male equivalent consistently made more and advanced quicker than I did. I work my ass off. Even in menial positions where I had more qualifications(a degree and several certifications), I had to work harder to get to the same position that a man did and I still made less money.

In order to process the encounters, like Teddy, she screenshotted the altercation, redacted the identities of her Facebook "friends," and cross-posted it to Tumblr, where she wrote a response and critique of the interaction for her Tumblr audience. As noted above, Holly uses her blog to process emotional trauma and to arrange, interpret, and present aspects of her identities. In all, she leveraged an assortment of online properties - Distance & Reach, Asynchronicity, Media Multiplexity, Integration, and Permanence - to both engage in and process the interaction. In doing so, she affirmed her identities and dispositions as a woman, feminist, critic of patriarchy, and advocate for non-violence and women's rights, through the actions Posting and Sharing.

This Tumblr post, and the ensuing debate attached to it, was subsequently reblogged twenty-three times by Holly's followers. Online environments provide a set of processes for identity creation, management, and performance. Each identity formation process online can be implemented through the exercise of various mechanisms that include Liking, Posting, Sharing, and Tagging, and the range of Triple A Processes.

Ito et al. (2012) when discussing the "Genre of Participation," stress that movement through them is not necessarily linear. Individual users can and do move back and forth between Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out. Bringing a similar caveat to mapping specific online actions onto the Genres of Participation framework, it is important to note that due to the properties of social media interactions and spaces, the implementation of these actions are not mutually exclusive. With the ability to cross-post, restrict access, redact information, and initiate the range of Triple A processes, black Millenials are able to make use of multiple interaction types, with an array of media content, across several social networking site platforms simultaneously.

With the complexity of online activity illustrated in the examples above, holly, exercised a multifaceted series of Posting, Commenting, and Sharing in efforts to negotiate the race, class, and gender dynamics involved in that online interaction. Gayle, likewise, manages the intersections of gender, race, nationality, and his status as a student through the Sharing of an article written about his life on Facebook.

Figure 32. Gayle – Facebook Shared Content

With the article and within the comments, Gayle performs his race, gender, nationality, and student identity for his peers. In expressing pride in the article on his

journey from the Congo to the U.S., through the academic pipeline and into MU, he uses the caption and comment thread to distribute positive affirmations of his self, through social media, to his network of online friends and family.

As a working class student, diligently pursuing a degree in computer information systems, Gayle measures his self-worth by his accumulation of knowledge, tenacity, and his ability to capitalize on his ambitions despite structural barrier to his success. By attaching the Lincoln quotation to his caption, he also reifies an identity commitment to fortitude and power as demonstrations of masculinity.

In the comment thread, one of his peers articulate a deep pride in their shared African heritage, stating, "They don't know how we Africans Roll!!!!!! You are a trailblazer and you showed everybody." As you can see, the post received a flurry of positive responses, each comment adding to the accumulation of Triple A – Armoring and Affirmation processes

These interactions, and those like them, are vital for black student persistence in PWIs, their management of the emotional labors born of out the racial climate and tensions that pervade offline life more generally, and their strategic use of online spaces to counter and revise deficit notions of blackness. The collection of actions - Liking, Posting, Sharing, and Tagging - function together in online spaces to facilitate those outcomes through the enactment of Triple A Processes.

Summary of Findings

This chapter has illustrated the particularities of online domains and interactions, paying attention to how the built environments of social media sites, and the actions available on them, impact identity formation for African American young adults.

The impact of digital environments on identity is wide-ranging. They expand the "toolkit' of racial concepts (Morning 2009) and identity options available to black Millenials. Social media environments open up larger and more diverse communities to which individual can make connection, increasing access to various types of cultural capital and resources. Online domains provide greater autonomy in shaping the parameters of black identity in the United States – cultural scripts that have historically been drafted by dominant mass media narratives that situate black identity in homogenous and disproportionately derogatory terms.

Importantly, the online domains, and the sets of actions and interactions available there, are not merely shadows of offline processes - poor mimics that fit neatly into existing conceptions of racial identity formation practices. Rather, new and emergent online domains are novel sites for identity formation, with particular cultural scripts, norms, and rituals, linked together with increasingly pervasive and "always on" mobile ICTs. As notes by Hughey (2008:25), "Virtual communities are not reducible to systems of social relations, but have logics of their own in the governance of "authentic" identities"

Moreover, I found that my respondents do not just develop deeper and more expansive relationships to other people in online interactions. The impact of digital environments on identity extends further, creating the capacity for individuals to develop relationship to types of interactions as well, labeling themselves "YouTubers," or "Instagrammers," and also linguistically claiming ownership of their online content and accounts.

That language creates symbolic ties to particular sets of online interaction types. In the Bourdieuian sense, this is an exercise in cultural capital signaling, indicating a

preferred style of life, digital taste, and personally held disposition. These are verbal flourishes, when put into context and checked across multiple data sets, highlight the significance of online domains and their unique properties in identity formation. In the eyes of black Millenials, the sites and interactions, then, become a sort of property, like a car, home, or couch, onto which individuals projects aspects of their selves in order to furnish the corners of their digital lives.

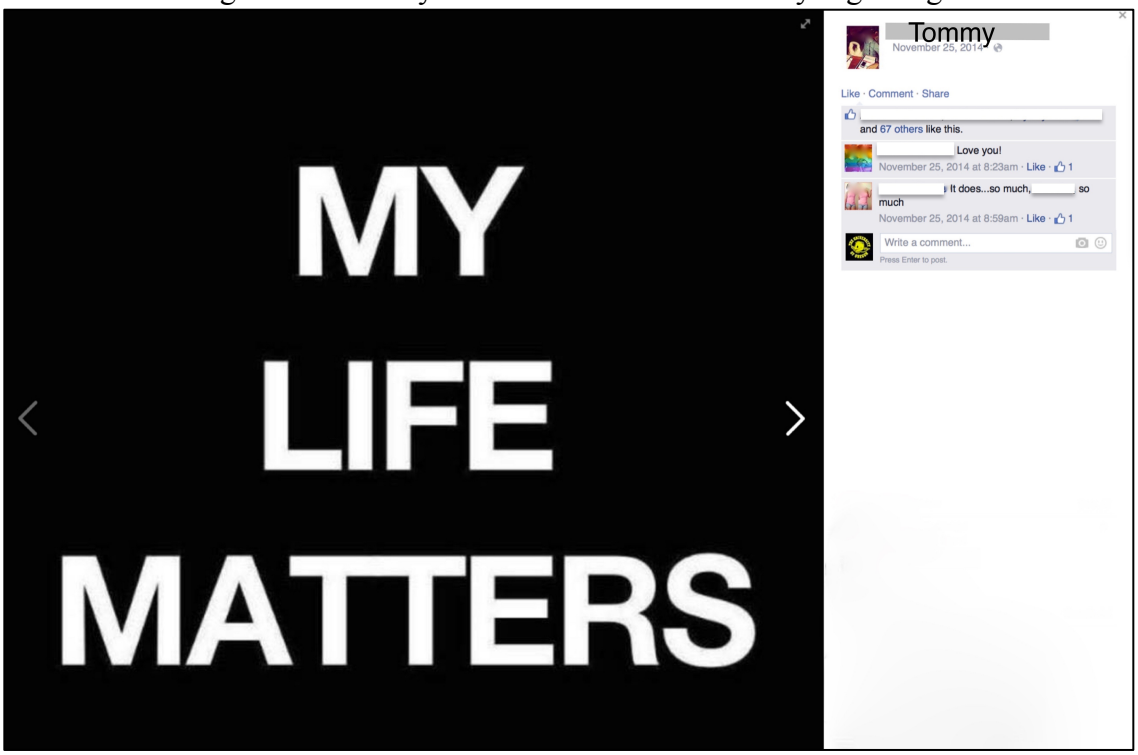
African Americans still lag in a variety socioeconomic factors and life chances. Black Millenials, however, have accumulated a great deal of online skill as they've grown up with new media. While the gap has narrowed, studies report African American young adults consistently outpace their white counterparts in mobile technology and social media use (Hargittai 2008, 2010; Pew 2010). While the black community has been historically dispossessed of more dominant forms of cultural capital, with online interactions and social media, black youth have become exceedingly proficient with the stock of non-dominant cultural capital valued in the online communities of color in which black Millenials reside. They use that knowledge to seamlessly navigate within and between multiple social networking sites and other online communications as a means of identity and community formation. Identity is being continually (re)negotiated through communicative exchanges and social performance, subverting the white normativity said to dominate identity formation in more traditional communications (Bell and Hartmann 2007). With the properties of online interaction, through Triple A Processes, black youth are subverting that white normativity and actively shaping digital spaces that celebrate black racial identity.

With consideration of the sweeping impact of online spaces and interactions in racial identity formation for black students, it becomes important to more fully unpack how African American young adults go about creating their digital selves in those online spaces. The following chapter, thus, will complete the main thrust of this dissertation by examining how African American students build digital personas across their range of social networking accounts. In doing so, I explicate how they counter deficit narratives of black identity, how they construct positive images of blackness, and how the use new media to create black communities by building online counterspaces.

CHAPTER IV

CONSTRUCTING THE (DIGITAL) SELF: CREATING BLACK COUNTER NARRATIVES AND IMAGES & BUILDING DIGITAL BLACK COMMUNITIES

Figure 33. Tommy – Facebook – Racial Identity Signaling



The propensity to view online communities and interactions as illusory, inauthentic and cheap imitations of "real world" interactions is a common trope in the description of online social life. African American young adults, however, and Millenials more generally, do not share that perspective. For black Millennials, online communities and interactions are as real as the collection of experiences in their offline lives.

It has been proposed that the Internet would create a utopian environment, free from the negative issues and consequences that attach to black identity in offline life. The views that online spaces would be those in which disembodiment dispelled the lasting

specter and consequences of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, mass incarceration, and police brutality permeated early conversations about the role of the Internet in contemporary American social life. The democratizing and egalitarian dream of online space held my many early Internet optimists, however, has not held up.

In the sociology of race and ethnicity, theorists have long set their minds to explaining the myriad ways in which social life, institutions, and the exercise of individual agency are all set within the context of deeply embedded and racialized social systems that shape all aspects of social life (Bonilla-Silva 1996). It is from this vantage I begin to elucidate the construction of the (digital) self for black Millennials.

I have established the offline context of campus life at MU, and the corresponding offline identity formation processes paramount in the lives of my study participants (Chapter II). I have given an account of the unique properties of online environments - unpacking their affects on identity formation, and provided examples of those properties in action (Chapter III). This chapter narrows the focus of this project to its most precise point of emphasis, specifically analyzing the creation of the (digital) self for black students, through the construction of online counter narratives, counter-images, and the development of digital black communities and counterspaces.

In the pages ahead, I illustrate the strategies study participants use in those endeavors, grounding the analysis with both interview and digital data. I demonstrate how black students deploy Triple - A processes online to challenge deficit notions of blackness by knitting together counter-images, within counterspaces – in doing so forming complex counter-narratives. Those narratives, subsequently, push positive black identity affirmations into the ether of modern American conceptions of blackness.

To begin, I will explain how online space is racialized space. Following from there, I detail the manner in which African American young adults combat a range of bias and discrimination online, while also using that space to form digital communities, the benefits of which reverberate back into their offline lives as students at MU.

Online Space as Racialized Space

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva asserted that race, particularly in contemporary American society, is a significant organizing force in the macro-level institutions, and the individual level interactions, between people, groups, and social structures. In his racialized social systems framework, he argued that race and racism affect overall life chances and experiences of people of color in both significant and observable ways. He argued that while race intersects with class and gender, forming the *triumvirate* of the sociological study of stratification and inequality, it also stands alone and has independent affects on social life - positioning groups in varying subordinate and superordinate strata with differing and/or competing interests. (Omi and Winant 1986; Robinson 1983; van Dijk 1987). In short, Bonilla-Silva (2003:477) wrote, "A racialization framework accounts for the ways in which racial/ethnic stereotypes emerge, are transformed, and disappear." This is partly a function of the persistent legacy of institutionalized discrimination founded in white supremacy, as well as the contemporary manifestations of those conditions in the form of structural discrimination and colorblind racism.

In sum, within racialized social systems economic, political, social, and psychological rewards are allocated, unequally, to various groups along socially constructed racial categories. Racial ideology develops and guides the actions of racial actors in society as they take on various racial projects. Those social constructs become

real in their consequences as individuals operate according to these cultural scripts and domain codes that perpetuate the deleterious affects of white privilege, couched in a subversive colorblind ideology. Racial contestation, following this, becomes a key feature in racialized social systems as different groups vie for resources and the implementation of varying objectives and interests (Bonilla-Silva 1996:473).

Like all aspects of social life, the online lives of my respondents occur within digital spaces that are embedded in the larger racialized systems that guide and constrain social life more generally. People do not shed their biases, ideologies, and assumptions about themselves, others, groups, or communities to which they are physically bounded when they enter into online spaces. Perhaps an obvious point, though one that bares stating, is that people interacting online are in fact mostly engaging with other people, a point internet pessimists sometimes fail to acknowledge as they decry the breakdown of sociality in the age of the internet (Putnam 2007; Hampton 2011).

With this in mind, I demonstrate how the racialization of social life traverses physical boundaries and penetrates online discourses and interactions.. Importantly, the features of online space, specifically the increased levels of autonomy in shaping perceptions of black identity, shifts the dynamic within those spaces into a different configuration, allowing black Millenials to exercise greater levels of individual agency in creating new boundaries around blackness.

While some digital inequality scholars have written of the influences of socioeconomic status, age, and to a lesser degree, race on online behavior, there remains a dearth of scholarship explicitly addressing the intersection of race and age in the literature. Eszter Hargittai (2008; 2010) demonstrated that Internet users from varying

social locations tend to exhibit differing online behaviors and activities congruent with their socioeconomic status. Zillien and Hargittai (2009) found that individuals who are from more affluent and/or highly educated background are more likely to engage in what they term "capital-enhancing" online behavior. Internet access has been shown to impact income-earning opportunities outside of employment, such as through online management of investments or access to additional social and cultural capital (DiMaggio and Bonkowski 2008). Although they note the additional finding of stratification within the Internet users category, Zillien and Hargittai's results support the assertion that privileged groups are more likely to benefit economically from online activity than their less advantaged counterparts.

Ito et al. (2012), take that scholarship further, moving beyond that second wave digital inequality research, in efforts to understand how class and generational location impact online behaviors of todays' youth. Building on those works, I unpack the processes by which black students construct various aspects of their online persona, namely black racial identity. Social media sites are now spaces in which black college students engage in "Interest-Driven" online behaviors motivated by their experiences of race relations, tensions, and bias in their daily lives. Additionally, I illustrate how my respondents leverage online interactions to actively form and manage connections to digital black communities.

The Difference Between On- and Offline Oppression

Due to the properties of online interactions (Distance & Reach, Confusion, Anonymity, Asynchronicity, Integration, Permanence, and Media Multiplexity), black students perceive substantive differences in both the expression and experience of bias

and discrimination between on and offline encounters.

The impact of that difference begins with the view of problematic online behavior by my respondents. In explaining that distinction, they verbally drop the significance of racism in online contexts to the affective level of an offline microaggression. I asked James, for example, if he saw a meaningful difference between on and offline discrimination or racism. He replied:

James: "Me personally, online it probably won't effect as much. Because you don't know the person, and my…like is said, online we really don't know people, and what they do to you is kinda meaningless. Like if somebody was to cuss me out online, I probably wouldn't really care, and you just cuss me out for no reason. I probably wouldn't pay attention. But in real life, it has more…it hurt…it would penetrate me more."

This minimization is an identity-work mechanism that psychologically reduces the negative impact of problematic online interactions. The more dramatic effects of exposure to overtly hostile racial others online are lessened through that linguistic boundary-work. However, like the impact of offline microaggressions, the regular exposure to online bias and discrimination does have a cumulative affect on black students that remains significant.

The presence of what is viewed as microaggressive behavior in online spaces, coupled with the exposure to offline microaggressions on the MU campus, compounds the accumulated negative impact of those experiences. While this anxiety inducing quality of online space and interactions persist, Triple A – Armoring and Affirmation processes counteract their tolls and enable the construction of more nuanced and positive aspects of self.

In addition to blatant expressions of online racism (e.g. overt racial slurs, mockery, threats of violence) presented in my data, black students are also exposed to more subtle

aspects of online bias – a feature of online domains I've identified and call "Algorithmic Microaggressions."

The coding of social network sites often integrate advertiser content into the built environment of a user accounts. This can be observed in side panels ads on Facebook, paid posts in Instagram and Snapchat photo streams, and sponsored tweets throughout user twitters feeds. These ads, like those observable in traditional mass media outlets, convey narratives that perpetuate not only non-complex stereotypes of black identity, but also overtly heteronormative sets of visual cues, complete with expressions of ability privilege, ageism, colorism, and Eurocentric beauty standards.

In addition to the traditional sites established for identity formation (e.g. family, school, work) mass media narratives and controlling images (Collins 1991) play a role in establishing the parameters of the metastereotypes held by black Millennials. Those images and narratives combine to form inputs into the collection of identity options for African Americans in the U.S. Not only do media narratives affect identity formation and perception of black racial identity, they also contribute to the view held by black students that online interactions are one of a few effective ways in which they can reclaim an authentic, internally consistent, and positive sense of racial self

James and Angela, for example, enjoy anime and gaming culture. James in particular has an interest in classic Sega Genesis characters like Sonic the Hedgehog. He explains his affinity for those interests, and how internalizing and expressing them violates the boundaries around the hyper-masculine and sexually aggressive black male stereotypes that dominate mainstream media representations. He uses online space and interactions to cultivate those interests, while avoiding the stigma associated with

engaging in what he thinks will be perceived as juvenile behavior. I asked James if he felt like being online allows him to express his racial identity in ways he couldn't do offline. He replied:

James: "Yeah…the way…cuz like I said, online is more varieties of people. Like I told you, I'm a big Sonic fan. And…[hesitates]…I cannot tell nobody [offline]…I really keep that very confidential. Because…the people [intimating what others say] 'Ugh, you still a boy, you a kid!' Especially with girls…that's the last thing I tell them. And with online I meet so many other people who like him, and I found out that it's people 30 or 40 that are [intimating what others say] 'Aw! Man! I love Sonic! Super Smash Bros.' I'm able to relate to them…and then I can easy start a conversation more with them. And I found a couple people actually on campus that's actually like that, and one of them was my mentor. He mentored me in computer science. And he likes Sonic and Mario and all that stuff. So…so far as online, that I can express myself more online than offline.

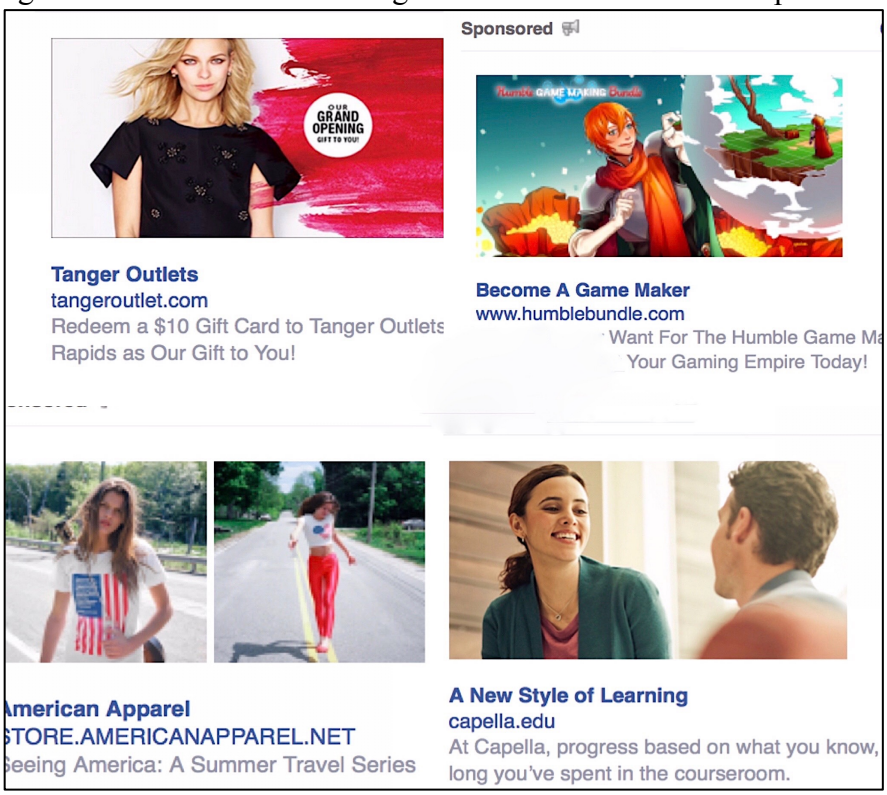
Despite those interests in anime and gaming culture, the algorithm that assigns advertiser based content to user accounts fails to reflect diversity in lived experiences of the account holders. In the event that gaming based advertisement appears on the account of students like James and Angela, it too remains a white visual representation. These components of online space prohibit study participants from seeing themselves in the interests they have internalized without their direct efforts to construct that imagery themselves.

On the occasions when Facebook ads, for example, include imagery of people, they overwhelmingly display representations of white, young, able bodied, and heteronormative identity. The following advertisements were drawn from the Facebook data I collected and are representative of the content that appeared on the pages and timelines of my respondents.

These trends hold even when the displays contain fictional video game, cartoon, or anime characterizations, as is the case with the top-right image above. While the full

affect of this underrepresentation in advertisement, within online interactions, is not yet fully understood, it is nevertheless another aspect of the racialization of online domains.

Figure 34. Facebook Ads Collage – Level 1 Access for Multiple Users



Those types of imagery permeate the online locals of black Millenials due to site-based algorithms. The forced presence of those images is exemplary of how the underrepresentation of black identity is embedded into the built environments of many online social media sites. These Algorithmic Microaggressions shape, in part, the experience of online space by black Millennials – representing another Triple A - Anxiety inducing quality of online interactions. Despite this reality, online interactions and spaces continue to be an avenue through which black Millennials have the ability to counteract those images and narratives by constructing black counterspaces within social network sites.

The assertion that online space is racialized is not entirely absent in previous scholarship. Others (Daniels 2012), have examined the affect of race on the selection of social network sites (Watkins 2009:80), noting racialized language was used to mark the distinction between Facebook and Myspace - with Myspace described as "uneducated, trashy, ghetto, crowded, and [filled with] predators." At its inception, Facebook was confined in its availability to only those college students attending predominantly white elite universities. Watkins went on to note that Facebook was described by study participants as 'selective, clean, educated, and trustworthy." Moreover, Boyd (2012) noted what she described as white flight from Myspace to Facebook, explaining that phenomenon as driven by the perception of Myspace a place for the uneducated and unemployed, a dramatic shift in perception as MySpace's dominance over the social media landscape waned in the mid 2000s, concurrent with the ascendency of Facebook.

Study participants assume an exposure to multiple forms of online racism and bias when entering online spaces that are not heavily Triple A - Armored. With that assumption in hand, black students, in response, create a series of coping strategies tailored specifically to the racialized nature of online interactions, which aim to ameliorate the added emotional labor associated with the anxiety of participation in online interactions.

Trolls Under The Digital Bridge: Anti-Black Racism In Digital Environments and Strategies for Managing Online Oppression

There were many novel coping strategies deployed by black Millenials to manage online bias. In the section ahead I discuss several key online strategies implemented when Triple A - Anxiety processes necessitate their use. The vast majority of study participants enacted the following strategies, which I have identified and conceptualized, as they

emerged from my data: *Digital Venting, Covering, Digital Neglecting, Digital Confronting,* and *Retreating*. The section ahead will illustrate the parameters of these coping strategies, complete with illustration of both their digital manifestations, and the respondent's perspective on their utility via interview excerpts.

Digital Venting is enacted through online avenues, by communicating emotional trauma to selected audiences, as a means of processing problematic encounters with either people or multimedia content – the venting strategy has both on and offline variants. *Covering* is the act of adjusting a behavior or trait so as to obfuscate one's racial identity, views, thoughts or dispositions, without restricting access to one's content. This act has the benefit of minimizing negative online encounters without managing additional accounts, lists, or intricate privacy settings – those other activities being forms of boundary-work study participants find overly laborious and time-consuming.

Gayle, for example, combines both *Covering* and *Digital Venting* when negotiating online interactions – a specific combination made possible by the properties of online domains and his particular background. Gayle, being multi-lingual, will strategically select the language in which he vents about an incident in order to hide the content of his posts in plain sight. The selection of language is a covering strategy where he changes his linguistic presentation of self as a means of mitigating a potential conflict online, while also using the online space to vent his frustrations. Unprompted, he told me that being multilingual was a factor in his online communications. I asked him how many languages he speaks after he made that statement. He replied:

Gayle: "Hmm. fluent...I speak three, and two more dialects not so fluent…"

He went on to state:

Gayle: "I would say something like…I knew a certain person would not be able to understand what I'm saying. So I post it in English or I rarely post in French… In that way I try to like relay messages to the two groups and use both languages. Sometimes I target a message I know they won't understand, but it's just something I want to vent. So other people that understand English know how I'm feeling but not the person who I am targeting the message to."

Gayle, in those instances, harnesses his linguistic ability, coupled with the Reach, Distance, and Asynchronicity properties of online space to reduce the burden of the anxiety inducing quality of his online interactions.

When engaging in digital discourses, my respondents make snap judgments regarding both the potential time commitment and the likely efficacy of directly engaging someone expressing problematic behavior in online formats. Rather than committing time and emotional energy to those interactions, study participants often enacted a *Digital Neglect* coping strategy, through which they adopt the offline "brushing it off" mentality in online space. Again, this psychological tactic reduces the significance of online bias and discrimination down to the affective level of an offline microaggression.

In illustration of this process, I asked Julius if there are examples of any personal experience with discrimination in online interactions that stand out in his mind. He explained his use of the Digital Neglect strategy after being racially stereotyped in a political conversation about Obamacare that took place in the comment section of an online news article. As previously noted, Julius, an aspiring politician, is politically active and views participation in online political discourse as integral to his development in the field. In describing the altercation he stated:

Julius: "All the time. One time in particular, we got on to talk about…this was back when Obamacare was being passed. I got online to voice and opinion on a news article. Not for it or against it, but just saying that a lot of Americans are without health insurance. Blah blah blah…You know we all have to pay for this, maybe we should do something. Then the guy in response just laid out all the stereotypes…I mean didn't know me from Adam

and Eve. But just said, 'You're black! You're from this city! This is how you think!' …and I'm reading the sentences like, who is he talking about!?! He responded with all of the stereotypes, called me all kind of monkeys and names…you know…told me I should take Obama and go back to Kenya…"

I then asked Julius what his response was to the aggressor. He replied, explaining a *Digital Neglect* coping strategy:

Julius: "I didn't respond. I don't respond to stupidity. And…You know…Out of all the…we haven't had that many presidents, but here it is the only African American president we do have, you want to ask for his birth certificate. It's blatant racism! (laughs boisterously). Of all the President's, here it is, you have President Obama who was born in Hawaii. You have John McCain who wasn't born on American soil, no one asked for his birth certificate to ensure…but yet you ask for Obama's, because his father is from a different land than ours."

In dismissing the tirade as an act of "stupidity," Julius creates cleavages within the interactions onto which he can grasp in order to provide rationalizations for such overtly discriminatory rhetoric. Study participants, wanting to maintain a sense of optimism with regard to racial progress in the U.S., often explore the range of logical reasons why racial others would be so callous. Julius, In doing so, engages in this coping strategy in order to create a sense of safety and well-being in an overtly hostile racial climate.

Scholars have sought to describe this socializing process, one where individuals adopt the appropriate forms of expression and emotional governance. Hochschild (1983) referred the "feeling rules" as governing emotional self-expression. These rules, specifically in online interactions, are constantly being scripted, rehearsed, and enacted by black Millenials as they accumulate life-hours of online experience. The autonomy of online life contributes to the ability of black students to manipulate emotional energy through the strategic use of various online sites and coping strategies.

While some implement the *Digital Neglect* strategy for managing bias incidents, others more directly address the sources of racial hostility in their online interactions through a *Digital Confronting* coping strategy. Two methods of *Digital Confrontation* emerge from my data. First, respondents directly address the larger systemic issues at the core of their specific bias incidents, rather than focusing on the individual who is perpetuating the problem.

Russel, for example, after having been racially stereotyped on multiple occasions, both on and offline (Triple A – Anxiety) took it upon himself, with the assistance of his close friends, to directly address the ramifications and persistence of racial stereotyping in the wake of the Michael Brown/Ferguson incidents. He chose to post a photo of himself holding a sign reading, "I am not a criminal!" to counter the stereotype that black men are aggressive, dangerous, and predisposed to hyper-criminality.

Figure 35. Russel – Confrontation Strategy - Facebook Anti-Stereotyping Post

The caption attached to the photo articulates cross-cultural support as Russel's friend, a Guatemalan student at MU, shared the photo. The associated comment thread furthers the counter-narrative, creating a complex series of Triple A – Armoring and Affirmations, embedded within a single post, the impact of which reaches far beyond the geographic constraints and physical limitations that would have otherwise stunted the impact of this racial performance.

Figure 36. Russel – Confrontation Strategy Facebook Anti-Stereotype Post Comment Thread

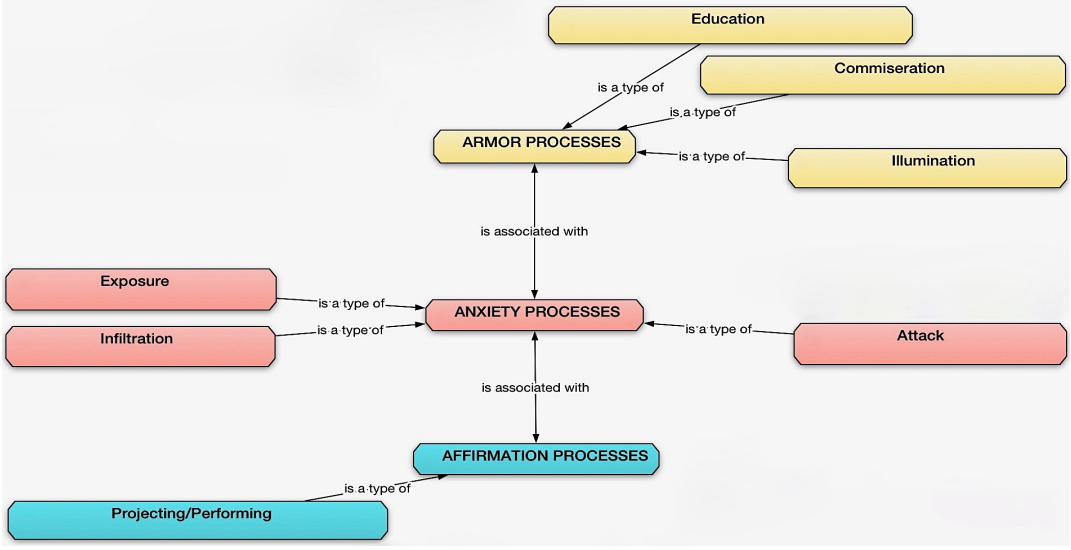
Poignant and direct, this post and the accompanying series of comments are in direct response to reported bias incidents occurring in Russel's Facebook timelines after Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. My respondents reported numerous instances where Triple A – Anxiety (Infiltration) processes occurred in the days following the events in Ferguson. *Infiltration* is an anxiety inducing process in which people one thinks of as either allies or neutral with regard to forms of bias and oppression are allowed past one's online Armor (Shielding) boundaries.

Those *Infiltrators*, once on the inside, express problematic online behavior. In instance like this, peers one once thought of as safe and supportive might, for example, perpetuated victim-blaming culture by questioning the character of Michael Brown or Trayvon Martin – effectively accusing them as being responsible for their own deaths after their stories go viral. This act, for black Millennials, is psychologically damaging as it corrupts the black counterspace in which they were seeking support to process their emotional energy. They view people who infiltrate as supporting the misrepresentation of black victims that permeates larger national discourses regarding instances of police brutality.

Russel's post not only deconstructs negative depictions of black male stereotypes, but it also attaches to that demonstration a series of online resources in the ensuing comments. This post enacts a variety of Triple A processes, including Triple A – Armoring *Illumination, Commiseration,* and *Education as well as Triple* A – Affirmation *Performance*. Like Teddy's cross-posting example in Chapter III, Russel counters deficit notions of blackness through his online action.

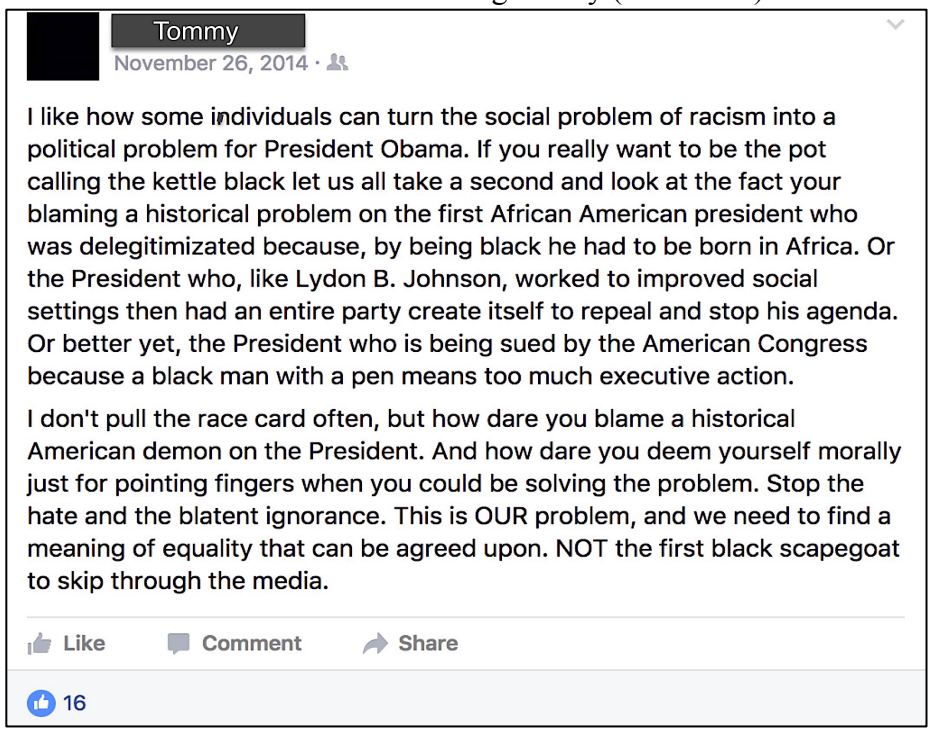
To summarize Russel's demonstration of Triple A Processes: Triple A – Armor (Illumination) is an action meant to cast light on the persistence of both interpersonal and systemic bias and discrimination. Simultaneously, Russel is engaged in Triple A – Affirmation (Performance), a process in which he presents an aspect of his black identity. Specifically with his rebuke of negative racial stereotypes of black men, Russel emphasizes the heterogeneity of black identity to an online audience. *Education* is a subprocess whereby black Millenials, as a means of combating deficit notions of blackness, utilize their personal knowledge and the resources made accessible by the properties of online interaction to educate misguided and/or ill informed people expressing problematic online behavior. This process is illustrated in both the sign Russel holds, the caption on the post, and the shared resources in the comments. These resources aim both at those wanting to participate in larger social justice movements, as well as informing potential white allies of resources to restore or take on a new role in dismantling systemic racism. Lastly, the commenters express empathy and shared experiences of marginalization, an act of Triple A – Armor (Commiseration).

Figure 37. Russel's Performance – Triple A Chart (Subprocesses Activated)



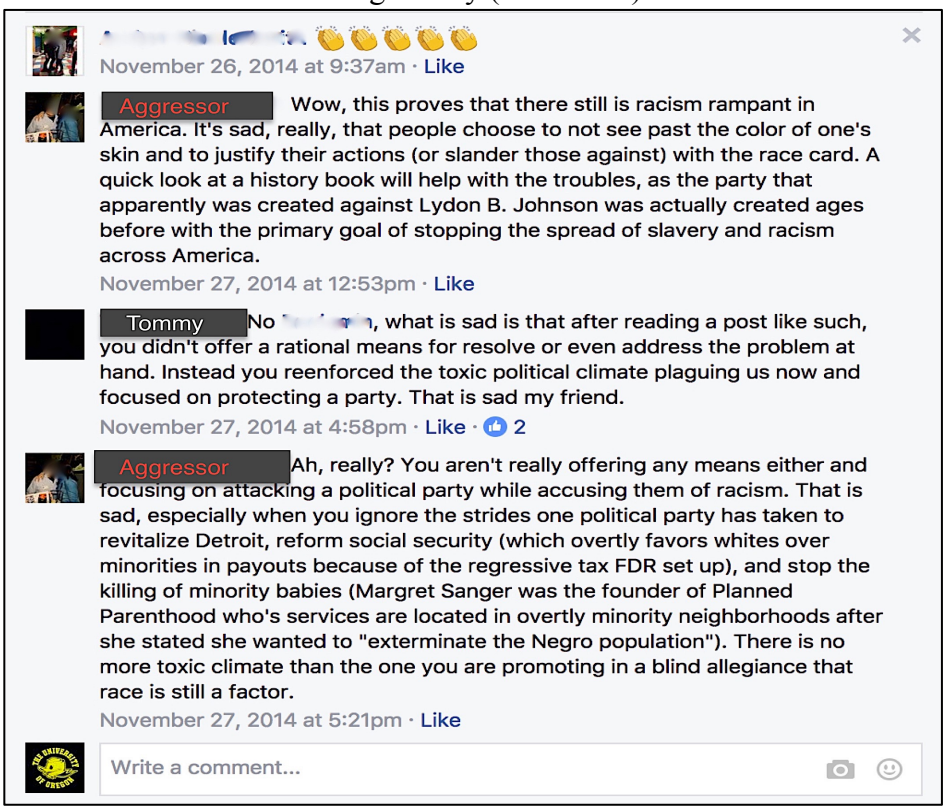
With the other variant of *Digital Confrontation*, black Millenials engage in a direct interpersonal Conflict with online aggressors. In the example below, Tommy, in response to the attempts to delegitimize Barack Obama's presidency, posts an indirect social critique status update. This initial post is an attempt at the indirect digital confrontation strategy used by Russel example above.

Figure 38. Tommy – Interpersonal Confrontation Strategy– Indirect Confrontation Post on President Obama's Legitimacy (birtherism)



In the comments, however, the more direct Confrontation strategy is enacted when a white peer argues that Tommy is the one perpetuating racial bias through his post. In the ensuing conversation, the aggressor argues a variation of the "reverse racism" argument against Tommy, pointing to his critiques of racially biased political discourse as a sign of Tommy's own racially divisiveness rhetoric.

Figure 39. Tommy – Interpersonal Confrontation Strategy– Indirect Confrontation Post on President Obama's Legitimacy (birtherism) – Comment Thread



I contextualize these online interactions with the offline interview data of my respondents. Highlighting the significance of these types of exchanges, Tommy explains how the ability to be online affected his expression of racial identity. In his reply, he alludes to the importance of *Digital Confrontation* as an online coping strategy for managing hostile racial encounters. Additionally, he indicates Digital Confrontation as a Triple A – Affirmation processes through which he can deconstruct deficit notions of blackness. He stated:

Tommy: "I definitely felt…there were times where I would make strong statements to my racial identity. I know one of the big things on Facebook was when president Obama got elected. I definitely made strong stances to…'I am an African American male, this is an African American president, and the way he's being treated I feel is not fair.' Or, 'he gives me hope for the future, because I used to be talked about as, 'You could be the first African American president' just kind playing off of that. When a lot of issues started sparking nationally, internationally, around race. I felt more comfortable saying these

types of things of I'm black, and kind of just really making those strong statements. So I think social media definitely helped. …I feel…with online, it was a lot easier to make those strong statement, rather than offline you can make those statement in groups, but they can be overlooked or passed on... But when you tweet them, and people ware just kind of scrolling through, and all of a sudden they see this, and they have this, "Oh! Okay! Favorite" or reply, "What do you mean?" stuff like that, it kind of forces them to focus in a little but more.

Tommy explains how the properties of online interactions allow a more free expression of aspects of his racial self. In doing so, he consciously seeks to contribute to online discourses by directly countering deficit notions of blackness through both is uploads, comments, and interactions with online content (e.g. liking, sharing, favoriting).

Digital Venting, Covering, Digital Neglect and *Digital Confrontation* are regularly utilized strategies for coping with bias in online setting. Each of these responses to some online stimulus includes, to one degree or another, the active management of encounters with an other or others. The final coping strategy that I observed does not share that common trait. Unlike the identity-work and impression management of the previous strategies, *Retreating* is the act of removing one's self from an online local so as to avoid the emotional labor of managing difficult encounters or problematic content.

While often implemented for coping with online oppression, black students rarely use Retreating on their primary social networking site accounts. As noted previously, black students do not view withdrawal from key online spaces (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Instagram) as viable options. They view withdrawal from those sites as stripping them of vital emotional, cultural, and academic support and cultural capital. Being fully integrated in their peer networks, in their view, necessitates being involved in their primary sites to at least some degree. This pattern holds even for those who rarely post or interact with online content. Having the account and being witness to the goings

on of online social life attaches even the least active users, if only indirectly, to valuable information and opportunity in online spaces.

Angela, one of my least active respondents, articulated the value of being engaged in social media spaces during our conversation. I asked her if her perception of self would be different if she were not able to go online. She replied

Angela: "I think I would still have a very negative view of being black, just because most of the media has that. So…that's…being on the Internet is where I get that validation that black is beautiful and that black isn't all negative. Just like there's negative and positive to all races."

While black Millenials view involvement in primary online spaces and interactions as necessary, retreating is an often cited and frequently used coping strategy for ancillary online sites – particularly those that are App-centric. The intersections of race, sexuality and gender with regard to Retreating is notable, with black women and gay black men in my study reporting a disproportionately high use of retreating with regard to app-centric anonymous social media sites (e.g. YikYak), specifically those geared toward romantic/sexual encounters (e.g. Tinder). Alexis, for example, indicated her disdain for dating apps due to the negative interactions she experienced on the sites from male users. I asked her if there were any sites, apps, or online interactions she avoided for any reason. She replied:

Alexis: "Certain dating apps, or meeting people apps. You try to avoid because there it's even more…Creep city. So you basically just try to avoid those things."

Q: Have you had a bad experience with them?

Alexis: "Oh Yeah! Just two days ago. Getting messaged like, 'My life would be fulfilled if I hooked up with a black girl' Or the references about black people and food, so like 'Hey chocolate queen!' You know something like with food. Oh yeah, I've had so many!"

Similarly, Tony, who identifies a gay, shared his experience with sexually inappropriate encounters with racial others in those anonymized and App-Centric online spaces. He described an incident where he was sexually objectified by a white male user, which caused him a series of adverse emotional reactions. I asked if people he interacted with online ever made assumptions about him based on his racial background. He replied:

Tony: Well, I did have someone make a fried chicken reference. It was just like a comment…just…we don't have to go into details…but it was just about fried chicken.

Later in our conversation Tony revisited that comment when I asked him if he was willing to share any details on the encounter. He went on to elaborate:

Tony: "…the chicken wing thing. That one…Ugh! Yeah…just wanted me to…yeah…like a chicken wing [insinuating the aggressor perform fellatio on him like eating a chicken wing]…So…stuff like that. Like, Alright, great!?! [exasperation fill Tony's voice]…That makes life hard (laughs nervously)…Let's see…so there's that, and another where I would say…like we're being fetishized for our race. And then there's the opposite end where that's all that they see, and they want nothing to do with it. Like there's a lot of just profiles…gay and straight…just like, 'In to this. No blacks,' that kind of thing. And then I saw one that was… Like there's no way you can say this is not racist. One thing…it was…instead of it saying no black people…it was…'No fried chicken [blacks], no rice [for Asians], and no beans [Latinos].' So stuff like that…yeah…

Q: When you run into those disclaimers, what does that do you to you emotionally?

Tony: Um…(nervous laughter)…Ooh…I feel like [Tony speaking very low]…I've started too…[hesitates]…I don't want to say…hate white people…but it's just…more I guess cautious with those interactions. Because now I never know…why someone is talking. If they're interested in me."

Tony and Alexis, after those encounters, limited their exposure by reducing the intensity of interaction on those applications, or deleting them altogether. In choosing to retreat from those platforms, my respondents exercise agency and autonomy less available in their offline lives when difficult situations arise, particularly at school on a predominantly white campus.

These strategies are born out of necessity, as the racialized nature of offline life permeates online discourses and interactions. Contrary to earlier predictions that the Internet would provide a utopian vista - one free from the oppressive degradations attached to embodiment found in the offline world – online space is as racialized as any other domain. The perpetuation of anti-black racism is clear in the online lives of black Millenials.

The following section will elaborate on the specific responses to the bias my respondents experience in their online interactions. I demonstrate how black students challenge deficit notions of blackness through the deliberate and strategic use of online spaces and interactions to construct counter narratives and to create counter images of black identity. In doing so I explain how various sites and media types function in those acts, paying particularly attention to how Triple A – Armor and Affirmation processes are enacted in those endeavors.

Challenging Deficit Notions of Blackness

Over the past decade scholars have begun seeking to understand the nuances of online life for people of color. Some argue, as do I, that the racialized nature of offline social life spills over into online interactions. Gatson and Zweerink (2004:185) state that, "…it is any number of enculturated and habituated bodies that come into particular places on the Internet, we should not be surprised to find people bringing place and identity with them as they simultaneously find themselves in a new space in which they are creating a new place and perhaps new identities." It is the creation of new places and new identities that is the core of the following section. Research indicates that people strive to manage the presentation of authentic selves, while also adhering to dominant and generally

accepted trends – the balance between "belonging and distinctiveness" (Smith and Stewart 2012). These tensions manifest, among other ways, in the visual presentation of avatars in online worlds (Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, and Wadley 2009).

I find, similarly, that black students strive to create idealized versions of black identity in their online spaces and interactions. This pursuit is inspired by their desire to provide direct and overt counter images and narrative that aggressively delegitimize negative presentations of blackness in traditional media. In creating those images and narratives, study participants tacitly acknowledge the power dynamics at play within mass media representations of people of color.

Historically, African Americans have been shut out of the mainstream media apparatus responsible for coverage of both black identity, and issues related to the black community. Understanding this lack of autonomy in those traditional media outlets, black Millenials take to online spaces with the intent to aggressively alter the undesirable roles to which black identity and culture has been relegated.

The vast majority of study participants perceive a uniformly negative metastereotype with regard to mass media representations of black identity. All interviewees view the portrayal of black identity and culture as overwhelmingly negative, with 97% of study participants directly citing the media (e.g. movies, newspapers, magazines, television) as the source of those negative perceptions. The only exception was Amal who, rather than the media, cited "colonialism and imperialism" as the root causes of the generally negative perceptions of blackness in mainstream American discourse.

When I sought detail on exactly how black people, culture, and identity were

portrayed, respondents gave remarkably similar responses despite the variation in their personal background, class standing, or areas of study. Teddy, for example, responded with the following comment when I asked him what types of characteristics are involved in the negative portrayals of black identity.

Teddy: "Anything that you want to necessarily think is negative. So, guns and violence, and angry and mean and loud! They're unintelligent; anything you could possibly say about a person to make you not want to interact with that person can be synonymous with black when it comes to the media…to be honest. I don't really watch TV now…watching TV, if there's like no black person in the show, it's just kinda like, 'OK. Well, what are you saying to the little kids just like me that don't see anyone like them on the TV?' What are you saying to the kids who only see white people, or when they see the news or when they see something else, the black person is an idiot or they can't speak right. Or they're working as a janitor, or they're doing something for someone. So…I can't…watch TV. I mean I try to but…just…it's annoying, it pisses me off sometimes.

Teddy went on to describe how exposure to those negative images and narrative made him feel. He stated:

Teddy: "Oh Jesus…I'm stressed. I know that there are times when I'm just like, 'Ok. Breathe. It's ok.' It's probably not even that. But you're worried about it. So it does become overwhelming at points. But, I feel like the fact that I have had to deal with it so long, I've kinda like realized…I know when it's getting bad or when I need to sit down and talk to someone about it, or when I need to do something to just completely de-stress and let everything go, and start fresh. It is exhausting, but sadly it's life. Like you have to deal with it, and you just know how to handle it."

In the face of that reality, black Millennials to take action in counteracting those negative portrayals. The efforts to adjust deficit notions of blackness, and to affirm positive senses of racial selves, fall into two primary categories – creating counter narratives and constructing counter images.

The struggle to change the large scale perception of blackness, and in doing so form, manage, and perform one's racial identity, is a type of information age "racial contestation" (Bonilla-Silva 1996:473). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva wrote of the "strife that exists in a racialized social formation," arguing that racial contestation is, "the struggle of

racial groups for the systemic changes regarding their position at one or more levels." The purposeful attempt to reformulate the perception of blackness is such a struggle, one that is illustrated in the digital content of black students at MU.

This racial contestation takes digital form and cross multiple sites, engaging a range of media types, each serving a variety of purposes. They purposefully and strategically bolster or suppress components of their racial selves to leverage site-specific resources and cultural capital. This action is taken as a defense mechanism to offset the deleterious affects of racial microaggressions and institutionalized discrimination within their workplaces, neighborhoods, and campus communities. In effect, these actions serve as resistance strategies that destabilize oppressive power structures and highlight micro sociological identity formation processes.

Language contributes to how people parse out space for and around particular identities. Linguistic turns and vocabulary choices indicate various components of the self. My respondents feel limited in their free expression of those language cues as a result of the racially homogenous offline environment at MU. Black student often seek out space to articulate frustration, vent, joke, and have frank conversation about the realities of black experience at PWIs. In doing so, they engage in conversation and debate on the parameters of black culture and identity. This "barbershop/salon talk" has been a staple of the black community for generations, a point highlighted in prior identity scholarship (Daniels 2012).

The physical spaces for those conversations, however, are less available to black students on university campuses. Online interactions lift the physical constraints of the campus community, opening up online domains for racial identity formation. Through

the use of the features of social network sites, they reinvigorate those in-group conversations with both black student peers and the wider digital black diaspora.

Black Millenials, in creating counter images and narratives, are attempting to construct the ideal black archetype. They articulated the components of that ideal when I asked what they felt were missing from public representations of black culture and identity. The responses to that question were dominated by two main images/narratives: (1) The missing portrayal of black excellence – academically, creatively, and with regard to the African American influence on popular culture. (2) The steadfastness of the black family, dual parent and single parent homes alike, as bedrocks of the black community through which black youth are provided the components for a strong moral foundations.

The vast majority of interviewees expressed one or both of these ideal types of black identity as overtly absent from mass media and public representation. In acknowledgement of this absence, Russel explains the underrepresentation of black academic excellence. I asked him what was missing from public presentations of black identity and culture. He answered with the following statement:

Russel: In regards to like…how we're represented in certain things…I'll say…definitely how there are a lot of black people in college. In particular black men, because people don't get that the criminal justice system is a racist institution itself…speaking about discrimination, I think that's discrimination to the max…I think a lot of the time they're just looking for people of color to put in the jail…

Similarly, Precious responded to the same question with her own articulations of the absence of discourse on black excellence in a public representations, stating:

Precious: Um…I would say like…more like the intelligent intellectual side. Like all the art and music we create, and like the different strides we've made with technology. And other things like certain inventors that other people don't know about. It like, with the traffic light, or with helping make some of the first computers."

On the other hand, in highlighting the steadfastness of the black family as a component of the ideal black archetype – a feature also missing from mass media presentations - Edwin remarked:

Edwin: "Definitely the love. Community. And when I say community, I'm not talking about a neighborhood. I'm talking about family structure. So that definitely left out for sure. Community. And I will say…Community and intellectual honesty."

Annette, too, mentions the positive aspects of the black family as being left out of public presentation of blackness. She stated:

Annette: "The unity that we have as far as families. I mean…I grew up in a two-parent family, those do exist – African American wise. Not everyone is raised without a father and stuff like that."

Encapsulating the entirety of perspectives among my interviewees, Yarra fervently explains the crux of this issue. In the conceptualization of the ideal black archetype, black Millenials articulate a centralizing narrative that provides the foundation of what they perceive as an authentic and universally true statement of what constitutes black identity. The principle that informs their assertion of the missing portrayal of black excellence, and the steadfastness of black families, as components of the ideal black archetype is that black people are not a monolithic conglomeration - one bound together simply by a shared collection of physical features and narrow cultural tastes and dispositions. Yarra, to this point, stated bluntly:

Yarra: "We can be 3-dimensional people, dammit! We are 3-dimensional people! I can do whatever the hell I want, and it doesn't mean one thing or the other to Blackness. Just like the whole thing about how…if there are 3000 different Black Americans, there are 3000 different ways to be black!"

Going further, I sought to address the toll of those homogenous portrayals of blackness had on black students. I asked Tommy if the negative stereotypes and expectations of black identity had any emotional impact on him. In response he

articulates the urge to combat those stereotypes, doing so through a meticulous management of his online presence and persona. He explained:

Tommy: "I'm also the type of person who doesn't do well to being confined to a certain standard…. I was always expected, because I'm a tall African American male, to be really good at basketball. But I never tried out and I never gave it the time of day. With those kind of social constructs, that kind of expect me to do a certain thing or say things in certain way, I do think that's a great reason why I look back at what I'm typing before I send it. One thing that always bothers me is when I have a grammatical or spelling error in a tweet…. I edit friend's papers, and I'm very focused on English and making sure that what I say is concise…. So when I make that mistake I feel personally upset for that. But I also know there is the connotation that an African American may make this mistake a lot easier, than another ethnicity. And I think…just thinking about it now…that also feeds into the thought of, "why did I make that mistake, now I need to go back and change it."

Tommy is not alone in his compulsion to manicure his online presentation of self. The my participants generally felt compelled to express an overtly positive representation of self in the conscious effort to subvert negative portrayals of black culture and identity. Charles, for example, explained his selection process when uploading a photo to his social media accounts. I asked if he found himself purposefully managing is physical presentation online; whether or not he withheld content he wanted to post specifically to avoid racial stereotypes. He describes anxiety at the potential of being stereotyped by prospective employers viewing his social media accounts should he post content that is interpreted as unprofessional. He stated:

Charles: "Oh yeah! I am very aware of what I put on media. But I wouldn't say that's necessarily because of images, but because I don't want anybody stereotyping me… I don't put stuff up just for the sheer point that I'm going to be on the job force. And I don't want anything on my social media pages…you kinda get into that age where it's like…people are checking. So that's more so where I'm at. And I think that's a lot of my friends also…. they're kind of at that phase, where if an employer were to see your page there would be nothing on there that you would be embarrassed about."

While that fear of stereotyping based on the content of their pages is present, black Millenials manage that anxiety through Triple A – Armoring processes, which balance free self-expression with those underlying social pressures.

With my conversation with Alexis, it becomes clear the process by which black Millenials address the constraints placed upon them by mass media representations and interpersonal exchanges. She explained her use of social media interaction to combat deficit notions of blackness – to reshape the perception of black identity through confrontation and other online coping strategies, facilitated by the properties of social media spaces. I asked what her emotional response to navigating difficult online interactions, she stated:

Alexis: "Yeah. It's like I can be as blunt and as direct, and maybe as hurtful as I want to be. And even though you can still look at my profile, it still feels like there's an anonymity, it still feels like that. Sort of, but it feels like you can post and be as…I guess it depends on the moment and what the person says…I might either take it as an aggressive teaching moment, like I'm actually going to try and teach you, why would you even think that. Or I'll teach it like, if somebody says something bold – like calling me a nigger or something like that – then I'm going to go in! Because people feel like they can say anything and nothing will ever catch up with them, you know. And I feel like because people spend so much time online, I might as well teach that person, One, you can't…don't think this is a safe space for you to just say that, because it's not. I feel like I would do that in person as well, but I feel like I'm too ready, like I'm soo ready to do it online!"

With this perspective in mind, I find that black students go about the task of creating those counter narratives that challenge deficit notions of blackness. They create those counter narratives by digitally signaling various aspects of their racial selves. In doing so, they demarcate the boundaries around black racial identity – each image, status update, and tweet forming the fences around more complex and heterogeneous conceptions of blackness. These digital signals, through Triple A Processes, establish the self and reframe existing social relations by adjusting the content of black identity and

culture visible to both geographically dispersed in-group members, and the collection of racial others online.

Creating Counter Narratives

Countering is a creative, distributive, and/or supportive action. My respondents produce online content and share content created by others, but they also like/favorite/heart online content in more passive forms of interaction. Each of these actions increases the visibility of the counter script the content promotes. Interestingly, my respondents often counteract deficit notions of identities they do not personally hold (e.g. a female respondent posting content depicting men breaking masculine gender norms, or a black male respondents posting affirming content of natural female hairstyles).

The features of online interactions, importantly, allow for a more inclusive and intersectional effort to break negative stereotypes that pigeonhole blackness into only a few noncomplex manifestations. In my data, black women counter for black men, black cisgendered people counter for black transgender people, and black Americans counter for black African immigrants and international students. The layering of those efforts along multiple intersections provides a more potent tool for the Armoring and Affirmative aspects of Triple – A processes.

The construction of counter narratives unfolds in two primary ways. First, black students will engage in Triple A- Armoring subprocesses Education and Illumination processes, to demonstrate the persistence of racial inequality both on and offline, by authoring original written content. Second, respondents will upload a bevy of multimedia content in order to accomplish the same task without directly drafting a post themselves,

or they may attach a short caption to sourced content. In using executing these processes, they challenge negative portrayals of blackness by providing a digital input to both the their personal network of associations, and to the larger national discourses referencing black identity.

Holly, for example, posted this Facebook status update *illuminating* the persistent microaggression she experiences with regard to her hair. Having long loosely curled hair, she is constantly asked whether or not her hair is real, a common experience for my female respondents regardless if they have a hair weave or not.

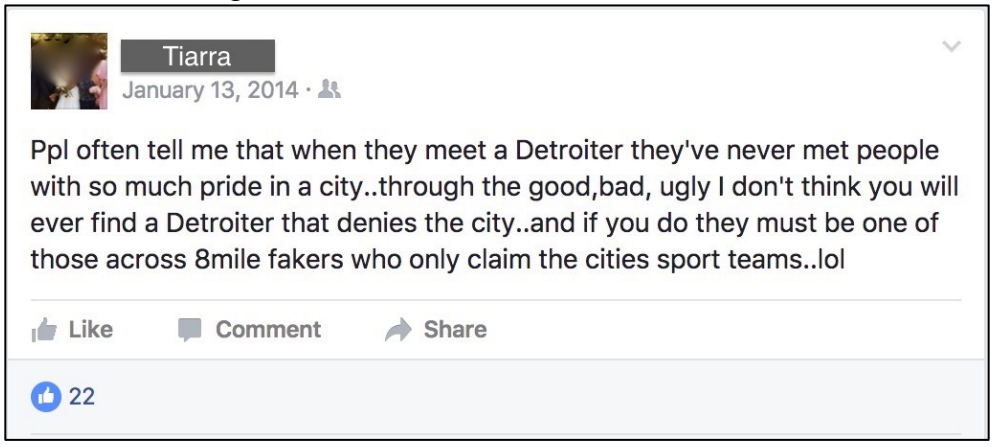
Figure 40. Holly – Facebook Status Update – Hair Related Microaggression

This post serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it illuminates the incessant questioning black women receive about their bodily presentation, specifically tied to their hairstyle. On the other hand, it is a subtle proclamation that 1) people should not feel entitled to information about one's bodily presentation – in this case in particular questioning that is reductive of black and gender identity 2) not all black women wear hair weaves, and 3) not all black people have tightly curled or course hair textures. All at once, this simple post enacts the Triple – A Armoring Illumination process, and the Triple A - Armoring Education process. This update also provides Holly the emotional

release necessary to manage those types of offline encounters – with additional positive affirmations coming from her network of associated in the form of "likes."

Similarly, Tiarra counters dominant narratives of black identity tied to her hometown of Detroit, MI. In the Midwest, Detroit is often ridiculed for it's depressed economy and difficult financial circumstances – a situation heighted by the financial crisis of 2008, and tied intricately with the racial politics of space and place. A predominantly black city, Detroit is often a target for class-based and racialized criticism from Michiganders, and other Midwesterners, who reside on the West side of the state and beyond. Tiarra rebukes those criticisms of her hometown, and the internalized identities of black, female, and working-class that intersect with her native Detroiter identity, by posting the Facebook status update below.

Figure 41. Tiarra – Facebook – Detroit Native



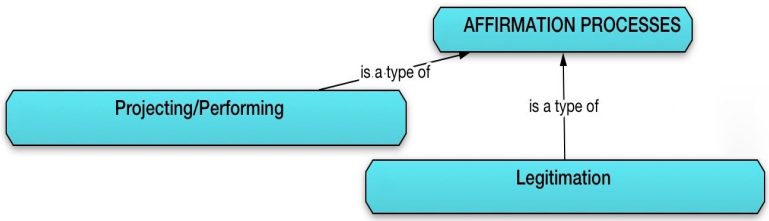
Tiara, pushing back at the surprise others have that she is proud of her Detroit roots, articulates a combination of boundary-work processes in this post. Claiming ownership of her Detroit native identity, in light of dramatic gentrification of the outlying area and surrounding communities, she creates symbolic distance from non-black,

suburban residents who do not live in the "real" Detroit. Labeling critics as "across 8mile fakers" serves to delegitimize their perspective by casting them as outsiders to authentic Detroit culture – a culture inextricably linked to black identity for people like Tiara.

Others, combine the two methods of counter narrative construction, posting multimedia content, with originally authored captions that convey pride in black culture and identity, while also highlighting the heterogeneity of blackness absent from mass media narratives. This effort combines text and visuals to break stereotypical presentations of blackness tied to embodiment, by attaching the respondent's thoughts to multimedia content. Black Millennials, in this way, exploit the aspects of online spaces and interactions to provide a dramatically more positive and nuances depiction of their racial selves.

Gayle, in a Facebook post, creates a subtle yet meaningful refutation of negative tropes of black male identity. In his photo, and the accompanying caption, is a public expression of a Triple A – Affirmation subprocesses Legitimation and Performance in action.

Figure 42. Gayle - Triple A – Affirmation Subprocess Activation Chart



Triple A – Affirmation (Legitimation) is a process in which one uses the social media platform as a forum to express and legitimize internal feelings or perspectives tied to marginalized identities. This act of *Legitimation* is then displayed for online consumption, which is the act of Triple – Affirmation (Projection/Performance). In a

post, Gayle and his peers present in both standard American professional attire, countering the "thug" narrative present in mass media controlling imagery, in a Facebook performance of racial identity. In this exercise of individual agency, they use online space as a means of legitimating the diversity of presentation within black cultures. Additionally, Gayle's peers present in Congolese formal dress, highlighting the complexity of black identity by performing both the American and Congolese aspects of their racial selves within a single photograph. Coupled with the caption, which subtly addresses the systematic barriers to success he and his peers face as black male students of color, they actively engage in identity-work meant to provide a more accurate and internally consistent representation of their racial identities.

Figure 43. Gayle – Facebook Counter Narrative Caption + Image

These self-affirmations, through counter-narratives, make up one of two primary methods by which black students challenges and rewrite deficit conceptions of black identity.

Constructing Positive Images of Blackness

The other aspect is the act of creating counter imagery that serves to cast black identity in a more positive and representative light – one that shows the breadth of black experiences, culture, and identity through visual mediums. Constructing counter images is an identity-work process through which individuals erect media rich, positive online visual representations dominated by black bodies and culture. These images are starkly contextualized with a purposeful and strategic absence of whiteness.

Combating the narrow visual representations present across various sectors of society, black Millenials actively craft online spaces comprised almost entirely of affirming black imagery. Respondents engage in Triple A - Affirmations (Legitimation) and Triple A - Affirmation (Iconography) by uploading and sharing content that illustrates the variations of embodiments and interests within black identity. Triple A – Affirmation (Iconography) is a process in which black Millenials post and share content that depicts aspects of an ideal black racial self, through the visual presentation of iconic black figures, and/or other striking images of black identity and culture – those images illustrate black excellence, in various forms, and the steadfastness of black families, both avenues representing the components of the ideal black archetype.

Like counter narratives, creating counter images takes two primary paths: 1) Posting affirming images of self, and (2) posting a variety of content displaying affirming imagery of blackness more generally. With regard to self-portraiture, selfies are often characterized in mainstream discourses as self-aggrandizing acts that demonstrate the

self-centeredness of the millennial generation. I find, however, that the selfie culture of black Millenials, when analyzed in context and with considerations of the lack of positive representation of black identity in mass media, is a far more complex and important identity formation processes.

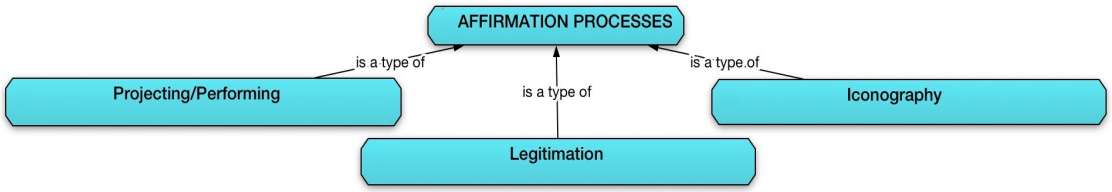
Scholars (Belk 2013:484) have begun to argue that self-portraiture indicates a greater degree of self-reflection (Schwarz 2010; Cohen 2005; Dean 2010), as people upload, "more digital bits of the extended self to represent us, sometimes with multiple daily updates." The students in my study exhibit an internal interest in self-presentation that equates to an interest-driven online behavior centered on the presentation of black racial identity. Autonomy in self-expression is vital to developing an affirming and healthy set of internal identities for historically marginalized groups. With consideration of offline domains, where external pressures can force black young adults into predetermined paths of self expression, my respondents lay claim to the digital platform as a means of identity performance - spaces in which a unique interest in self expression is both an underlying axiom of youth identity and a vital component to creating counter imagery. In effect, with the act of uploading selfies, black Millenials are projecting an ideal version of self – continuing the process of actively constructing the ideal black archetype.

In illustration of this process, Teddy for example, uses a selfie to project multiple aspects of self, including but to limited to, his black racial identity. In doing so he promotes a far more complex and multifaceted black identity – one that intersects with his feminist, student, and social justice advocate identities. From his online data, I gathered a selfie with Patricia Hill Collins during her visit to the MU campus.

Figure 44. Teddy– Facebook Selfie W/P. Collins + Comment Thread

Through the caption, and the ensuing comment thread, Teddy engages in Triple A – Affirmation (Legitimation) of various aspects of self, displayed as a Triple A – Affirmation (Performance), while including Triple A – Affirmation (Iconography) through the depiction of his shared space with a nationally renowned black feminist scholar. Collectively, this post is an illustration of the ideal black archetype as involving black academic excellence, grounded with intersectional perspectives on social justice.

Figure 45. Teddy - Triple A – Affirmation Subprocess Activation Chart

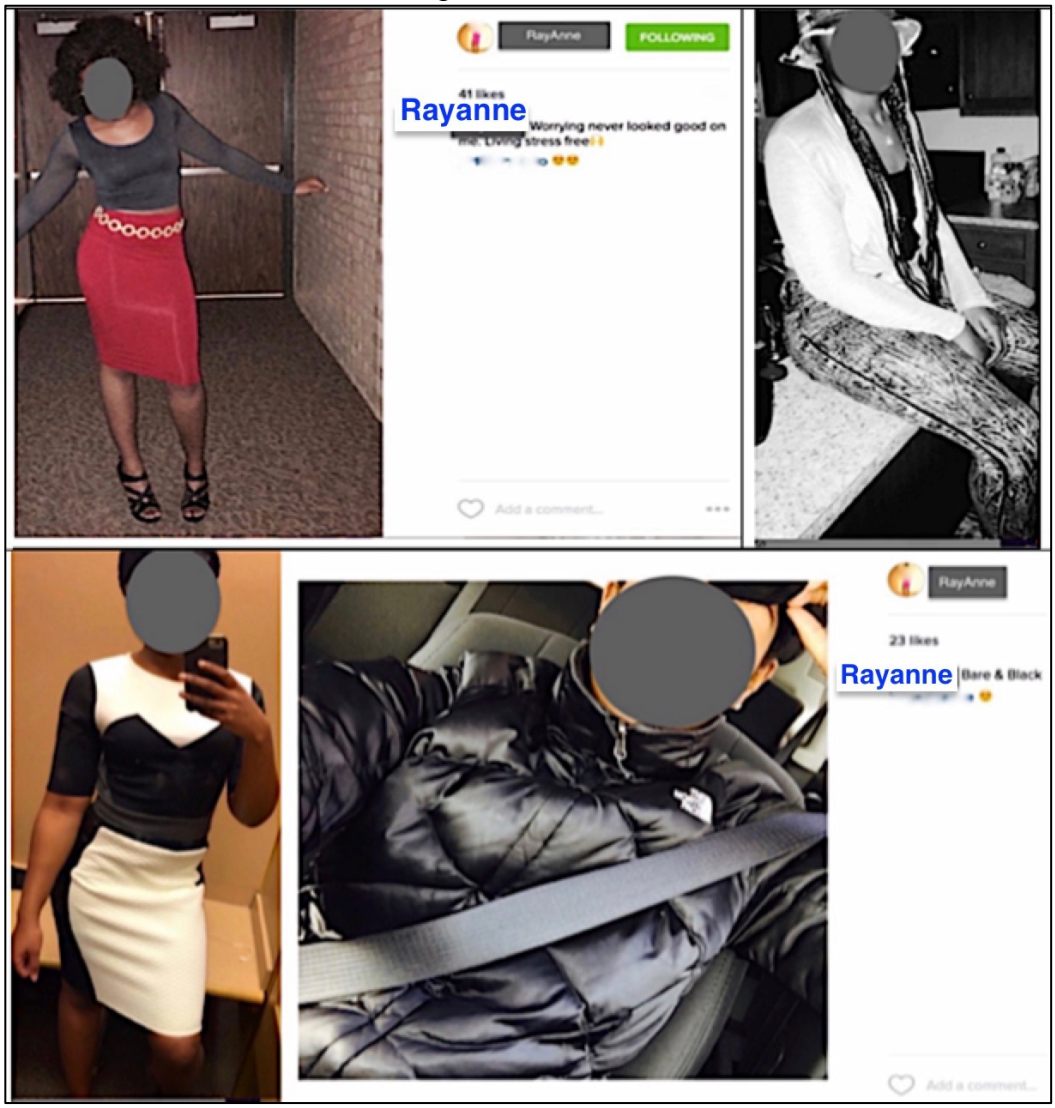


In further illustration of the salience of constructing counter-images in black racial identity formation, I also spoke with Rayanne. She is a senior Business and International Finance major. About 5'5'' tall with a medium brown complexion, she sat stoic, but expressive, wearing a black winter cap, waist length puffy winter jacket and stylish rings and earring complimenting her outfit. With a reedy yet confident voice, she explained what it is about visual media driven sites, like Tumblr, that she finds valuable.

Rayanne: "Um…the pictures. I feel like with Tumblr, it's more authentic pictures and messages. You know, so I like…um…I like to visualize my future life a lot. So when I'm on Tumblr and I see things, or I see things that relate to me, it gives me a chance to kinda build my own story through pictures. That's why I like Tumblr."

Her ability to use the media Multiplexity of Tumblr to create visualizations of her future life, complete with what she describes as "more authentic" visual representations of black identity, Rayanne actively constructs a digital counterspace in which she finds the necessary support to succeed both academically and emotionally. Rayanne's image content vacillates between affirming self-portraiture (Triple A – Affirmation (Legitimation), and the more general types of counter-imagery demonstrating types of black excellence (Triple A – Affirmation (Iconography). Her Instagram page, for example, is dominated by selfies captioned with positive affirmations, in performance of her senses of style, gender and black racial identity (Triple A – Affirmation (performance/Projection).

Figure 46. Rayanne – Instagram Collage
Photo Caption 1: "Worrying never looked good on me, living stress free
Photo Caption 2: "Bare & Black



These images represent various identity commitments that stabilize a positive sense of racial self in a hostile campus racial climate, and within larger racialized social systems that perpetuate deficit notions, narrative, and images of blackness. Her Tumblr account, on the other hand, is awash in black iconography that demonstrates the variety of complexions, occupations, styles and creativity as illustrations of black excellence within the black community.

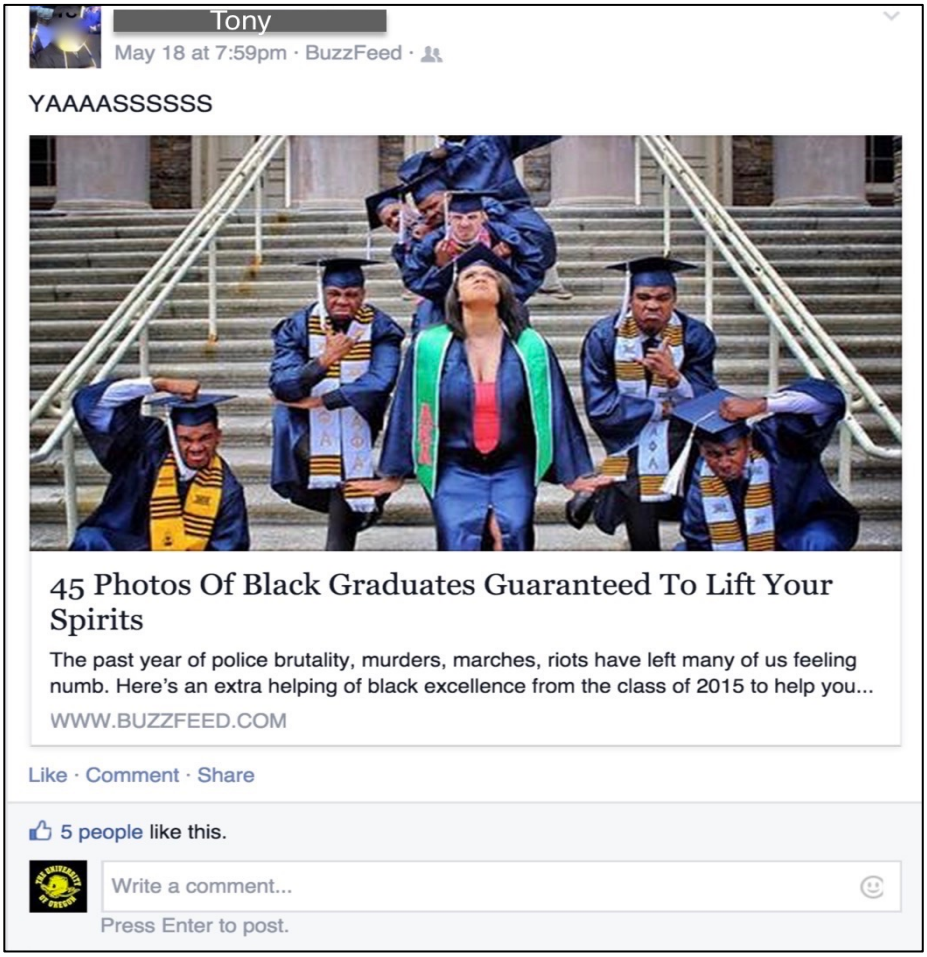
Figure 47. Rayanne – Collection of Individual Tumblr Posts

Rayanne, like Teddy and other study participants, manage, shape, and performs blackness through the exercise of individual agency and autonomy of self-representation made available through online interactions.

Further illustrations of Triple A – Affirmation Legitimation and Iconography processes, in the construction of counter images, permeate the visual data of my respondents. Tony combats metastereotypes of black inadequacy in higher education with the following post which links to a collection of black college graduates - highlighting the ideal black archetype in black academic excellence. Enthusiastically, Tony captions the

post with the simple, yet impactful colloquialism “YAAAASSSSSS.” A staple within the black millennial vernacular, “Yas” is a colloquialism meant to uplift and affirm. Made popular by black artists like Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj, among others, this short yet loaded phrase conveys deep adulation and support for the content to which it is attached.

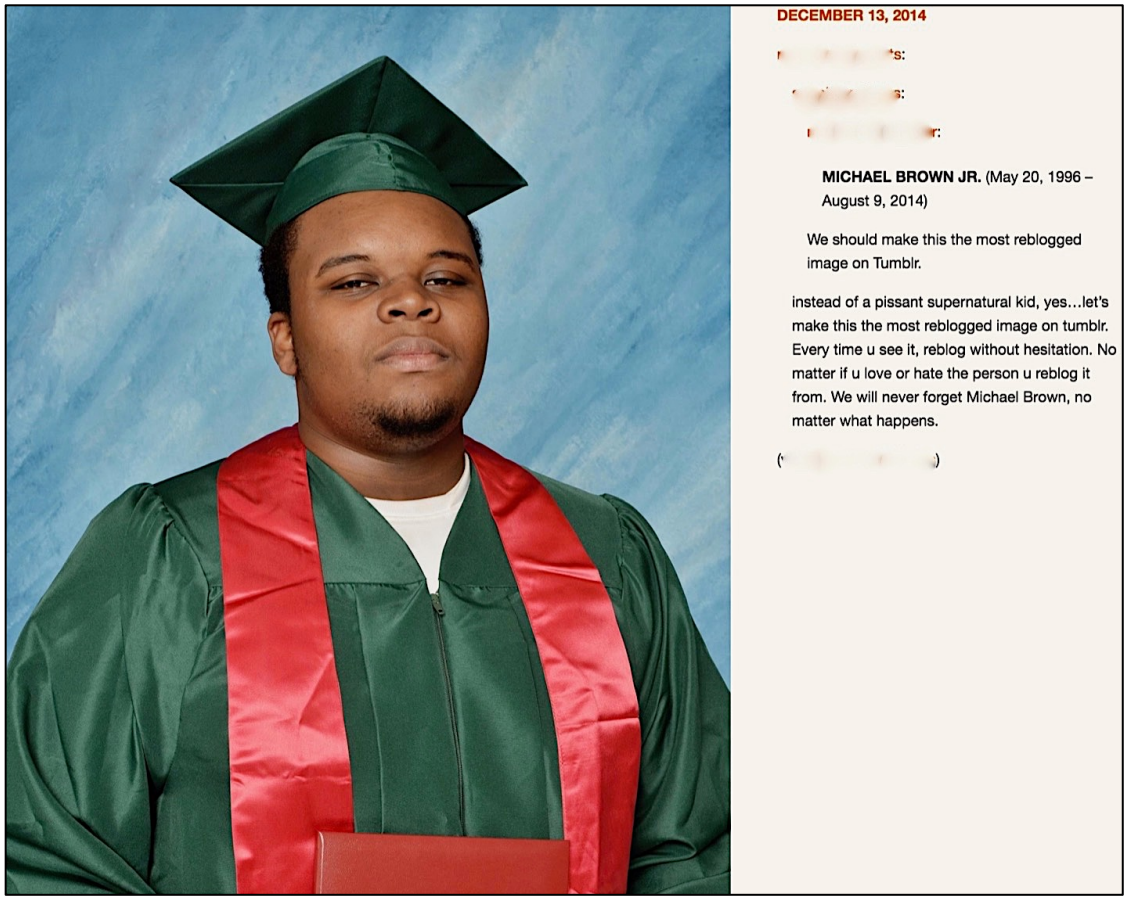
Figure 48. Tony – Facebook Share – Black Graduates Affirmation



Also in presentation of black academic excellence, Holly combats the smearing of black victims of violence in mass media narratives by sharing the graduation photo of Michael Brown. After his death, the fears of respondents like Russel, who expressed trepidation about wearing bandannas and hoodies in social media photos, was

substantiated as images of Michael Brown cast in unflattering light cascaded across traditional media sites. In opposition, Holly implored her following to reblog Michael Browns graduation photo in order to pay respect and support to yet anther young black unarmed person killed by police.

Figure 49. Holly – Tumblr post – Michael Brown Tribute

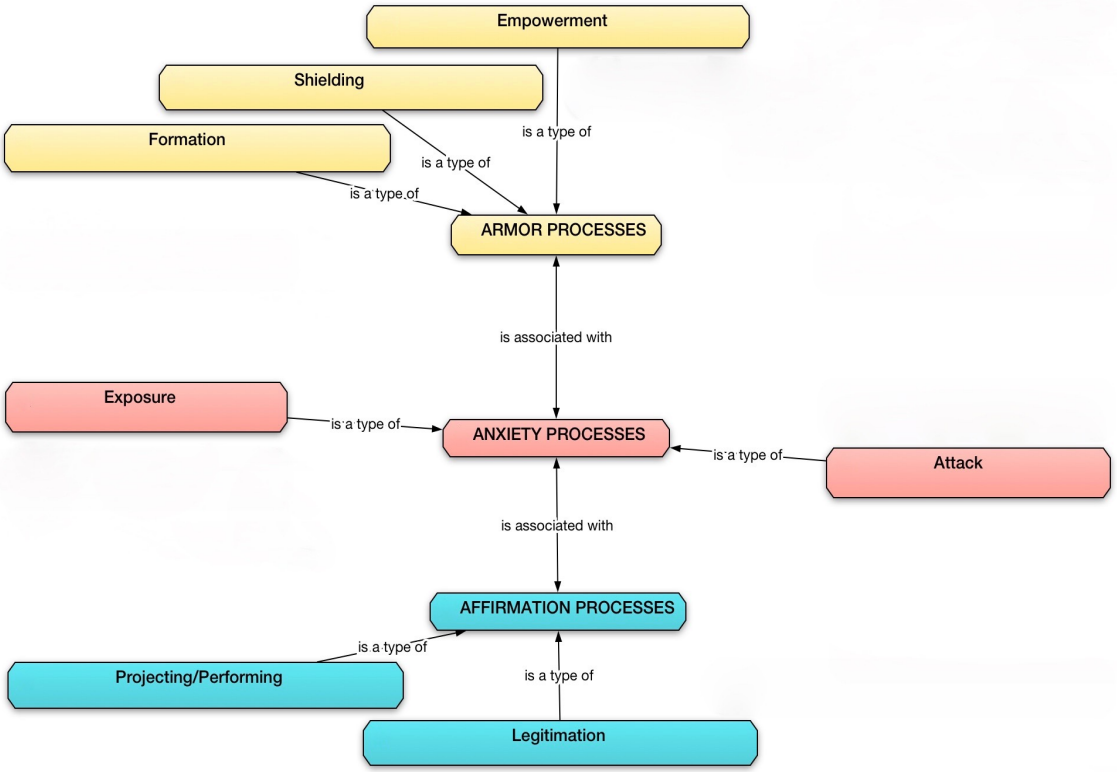


Summarizing the impact and significance of creating counter narratives and images in online spaces, Holly explained another instance where the autonomy in self expression provided her with a high degree of affirmation, contentment and legitimacy. I asked if there was a specific aspect of her online life that made those instances more impactful. She replied:

Holly: “Through Tumblr, I have seen that. A lot of the times, if you get a message, you can post it onto your wall, and then your followers can reblog it if they want to. And so, with one instance I did reblog it. I posted a picture of myself…I had perfect curls…I was really proud of it, so I posted a picture – it was just of my face and somebody had commented saying, ‘Why are you trying to look black’ or something along those lines…and I said, ‘Well, because I am!’ and then I posted it on my wall, and somebody else reblogged it and added a comment, and it said, ‘And you’re a beautiful black woman!’ So, I mean, it could have gone either way, but because they’re my followers, a lot of them know me at least on some level, and they’re going to side with me over anybody else. So in this instance, I had a lot of people reblogging it and adding their own comment to it. and I'm like, ‘I’m winning this fight!”

In this quotation Holly also narrates another aspect of online countering that my respondents view as an indispensible aspect of online interactions in racial identity formation – the development of online communities and counterspaces. In this example, Holly engages all major pillars of the Triple A Framework.

Figure 50. Holly - Triple A Framework (full) Subprocess Activation Chart



She goes to Tumblr as a means of Triple A -Armor (Shielding) in order to find reprieve from the hostilities in her offline locations. While there, she engages in Triple A – Affirmation (Projection/Performance & Legitimation) by posting her selfie with perfect curls, affirming a positive aspect of racial self tied to bodily presentation of hair. Because of the Anxiety-inducing qualities of online spaces, she experiences Triple A – Anxiety (Exposures & Attack), evidenced by an aggressor challenging the authenticity of her black identity. In response to those conditions, she and her followers activate Triple A – Armor (Formation & Empowerment) processes to restore the beneficial aspects of the online domain.

Collectively, these counter narratives and images speak to an ideal black identity, one in which members of the black community are able to see themselves in the depictions without the burden to conform to narrow, monolithic, and/or negative stereotypes of black identity. Each construction of counter-imagery and narrative illustrates the aspects of the ideal black archetype, which was articulated in both the interview and digital content of my respondents.

The composition of black Millenials online profiles contributes to their construction of counter narratives and imagery that fulfills their conceptions of what is missing from larger societal discourses on black identity, namely black excellence and the strength of the black family. These constructions, in turn, sit in direct contrast to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of blackness black Millenials view as saturating public consciousness about black culture.

They create that symbolic space in which their dispositions and personality traits have room to breath within the newly defined parameters of blackness. These efforts

collectively assuage the burden of combatting negative stereotypes by providing protected digital counterspaces where they find reprieve from exposure to hostile imagery, narratives, and bias elsewhere. In perfecting their architecture, constantly creating the space for counter narratives and imagery, black students readjusts the dominant cultural script to include more accurate representations of blackness. In addition, they build lasting relationship and communities that maintain and disseminate those advantages to the wider body of black Millenials through the creation of digital black communities and counterspaces.

Creating Black Communities – Building Black Counterspaces

Constructing digital black counterspace serves multiple functions. Prior scholarship has asserted that the development of an aggregate self in online spaces assists both content creator and others who observe or invest themselves in the production (Belk 2013). Manghani (2009) wrote with regard to this process, that such exchanges constitute "tender technologies of the self." Belk (2013:485) elaborated on Manghani's work, arguing that it "expanded Foucault's (1998) idea that we can cultivate the self partly 'with the help of others." The larger black community online, in this regard, further establishes the development of positive and internally consistent online expressions of the racial self.

The actions displayed above, where black students create counter narratives and imagery in the form of entirely black Tumblr pages, for example, exemplify the enacting of Triple A processes that assist both the respondent and their wider online network of associations. Because social media sites provoke interactive encounters, the page becomes grounds for open communication where black peers are able to invest

themselves in the counterspace production of my respondents, through both direct and indirect interactions with the media (e.g. liking, reblogging, commenting, sharing). In doing so, the larger network of individuals add their voice to a conglomerate of interactions within the digital black communities, thus producing an echo chamber that reverberates with positive black identity inputs available to the larger black diaspora.

Online black communities, then, function as digital black counterspaces. Counterspaces are locations that provide an arena for students to challenge deficit notions of people of color (Solórzano et al. 2000:70; Cruz 2013). According to Torres and Charles (2004), students of color in predominantly white institutions leverage such spaces for the acquisition of educational, emotional, and cultural support. I find that this process now goes beyond the physical locations that once constrained the presence of counterspaces. Black Millenials are now creating digital black counterspaces in which their constructions of the ideal black archetype, via counter narratives and images, are housed.

Though absent a focus on racial identity, the online domain has been found to be an important space for other marginalized groups. Boero and Pascoe (2012:34) argued, in their examination of the construction of bodies in online communities, that these arenas allow participants to explore identities in safe anonymous settings. Specifically, through observation and analysis of a Pro-anorexia online community postings, they contend that, "the internet has facilitated the coming together of once isolated and marginalized individuals with others like them in a place that offers the safety of physical distant and anonymity." They go on to state that because of the importance of community building online, "such spaces should not be viewed as 'virtual communities,' but rather real

communities based on real human interaction convening in virtual space (Campbell, 2004; Rheingold, 1993; Riley et al., 2009)." Building these digital spaces, and the role they ultimately play in the lives of black Millenials, is the focus of the following section of this chapter.

Aspects of Online Community Formation

There are several notable aspects of online black community formation present in my data. The construction of digital black communities takes place through three key methods: information seeking, information receiving, and information sending. Information seeking online behaviors are interactions initiated by the user in pursuit of communal support, affirmation or affection. Black students use social media as a means of locating information about racial identity that is less available offline due to a number of factors (e.g. geographic isolation, familial cultural capital is unavailable or underdeveloped, ambiguity of racial origins due to legacy of slavery and Jim crow, underrepresentation in college curriculum). Information receiving online behavior are interactions initiated by others that affirm a sense of community for the user. Information sending behaviors, lastly, are online actions initiated by the user. When engaging in sending behavior, black students promote community development through the conveyance of information or sentiment by tagging, sharing, or posting content to a specific individual or group in the attempt to build or strengthen a community connection. This coincides with my previous findings in Chapter III, that sharing online content denotes a higher level of engagement in the topic material it addresses.

Collectively, these three online actions produce a coherent online community, with specific cultural codes, norms, mores, and rules of engagement that vary by social

media site. Through these three actions, my respondents develop meaningful and lasting connections to black counterspaces and online associates. The actions are often spurred by offline factors, including but not limited to campus climate, lack of representation in curriculum, homesickness, and demographic isolation in predominantly white spaces.

Dominating the timelines and newsfeed of my respondents during data collection were, in addition the examples of countering above, what I call "lightening rod moments" in race consciousness. These moments are those when the national discussion of race and racial progress (or lack thereof) are heightened after some significant racial moment. The majority of such events, for black students, are the rash of viral videos depicting instances of police brutality. Each occurrence of an unarmed black person harmed by police reverberates through the entire constellation of my respondent's social media accounts. Online discourses then emerge around those lightening rods moments.

These pieces of viral media serve as "boundary objects" with which my respondents navigate the deluge of online content – using them to locate personally important content centered on their interest in black culture and identity. I argue that Inefficient boundary objects fail to gain traction and fade away into the mass of online content. Efficient boundary objects, conversely, gain traction, trend, and then become viral (e.g. #BlackTwitter, #SayHerName, #Formation #TamirRice #Ferguson #BlackLivesMatter), and around which digital black communities are able to coalesce. Others have found similar centralizing forces adhering to hashtags, which served as boundary objects with which individuals express and negotiate the parameters of sexual identity in online communities (Herrera 2017). In these instances, hashtags and other media, function as lynch pins holding together emergent, spontaneous and organic online

communities - anchoring online counterspaces within my respondents accounts to the wider population of individuals engaged in online racial discourses.

As these racial moments begin, an initial message is posted, tweeted, or shared, which then creates momentum as others coalesce around it. This in turn creates the space necessary to formulate the digital counterspace. This is complicated by the fact that online counterspaces are sometimes open to the public. Black students balance the want to make their space available for other people of color with the need to activate Triple A – Armoring processes by limiting those who may find and/or enter into the community. This openness necessitates a set of strong digital sanctions and authenticity determinations to manage the counterspace population. Inability to meet these standards often initiates a group response from community members in the form of Triple A Armoring (Formation), sometimes colloquially referred to as "reading," "flaming" or "dragging."

It has been noted that what binds co-ethnics together is not merely enacting cultural specific rituals and activities. Scholars note (Tuan 1998; Dhingra 2007) that place does not necessarily dictate community attachment. Rather, the content of the activity, regardless of place, is what is meaningful. This has implications for the development of black online communities in that despite being physically dispersed, the intentional congregation in online space, using digital boundary objects as centralizing forces, creates the conditions necessary to establish and partake in the benefits of digital black communities.

The purposeful interaction in online space as facilitating community formation has been observed for other people of color as well. Lee (2012:20), in her study of the

formation of digital communities for Korean Immigrants in the US, noted that "online communities of migrating people present a centralizing field for their cultural identity…the creation of online communities can offer a cultural center around which a national or ethnic place can be imagined." Within these imagined communities my respondents form lasting and meaningful connections that in many cases carry on indefinitely, regardless of the degree to which those connections have offline roots. This point is not without quantitative empirical support as well, as prior scholarship has established the propensity of Internet connected individuals to form new social ties that remain online (Hampton 2011).

While there are novel online connections in the lives of black students, like others have indicated (Rainie and Wellman 2012, Ito Et al. 2010), online associations still typically emerge from and supplement offline networks. However, the presence of online-only ties necessitates creation of a means by which black Millenials ascertain the authenticity and legitimacy of those relationships. Due the Triple A - Anxiety inducing quality of online interactions, my respondents determine the quality of online connection through exchanges of "non-dominant cultural capital" (Carter 2003) associated with black culture and identity. These exchanges, in addition to providing checks on the authenticity of online connections, also function as a means of building in-group online solidarity.

These acts foster trust and camaraderie among those engaged in that form of information exchange. The benefits of those connections, in turn, helps facilitate successful outcomes both personally and academically through the sharing novel information and supports for emotional well being and academic success.

Black cultural capital comes in many forms, each indicating a level of authenticity and belonging to the digital black community. Tony, for example, shares content in his Facebook page to assist his peers in navigating predominantly white academic institutions. He took it upon himself to share a "how-to" guide for black students to survival during life at a PWI.

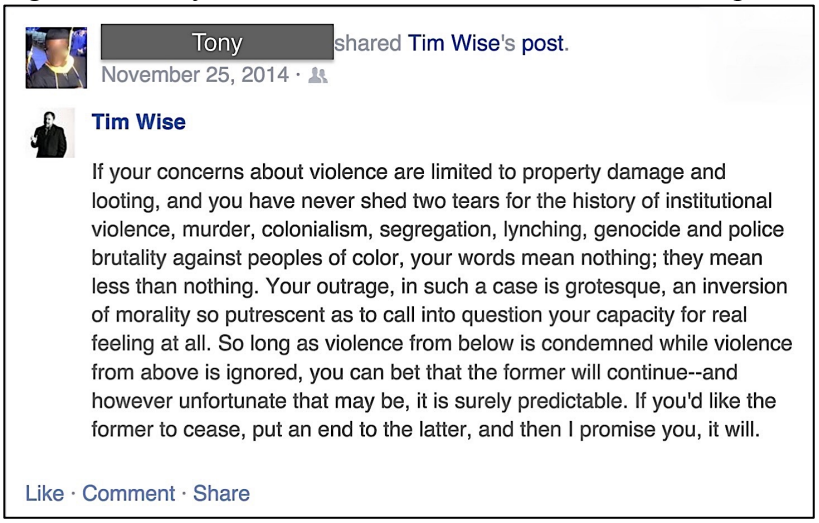
Figure 51. Tony – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital 1

This post is an attempt to spread the necessary information for persistence in potentially hostile campus racial climates. Hoping to save his peers from difficult interactions, Tony posts that content to his Facebook page. He also shares content to warn his peers of the dangers of the college party scene, as well as enacting a Triple A – Armor (Shading) process via a shared comment authored by Tim Wise. Shading is a process in which black Millenials convey personally held positions, beliefs, or dispositions without attaching themselves directly to the sentiment by authoring the content, or by directly

addressing the intended target of the post. In the first type, shading provides an outlet for personal expression, in a sense borrowing the legitimacy of the author of the content, in order to deflect some or all the potential backlash while still conveying the underlying message in the post. The shared and shaded post by Tim Wise references the focus on property over people in the wake of the Ferguson and Baltimore protests.

Figure 52. Tony – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital 2

Figure 53. Tony – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital 3

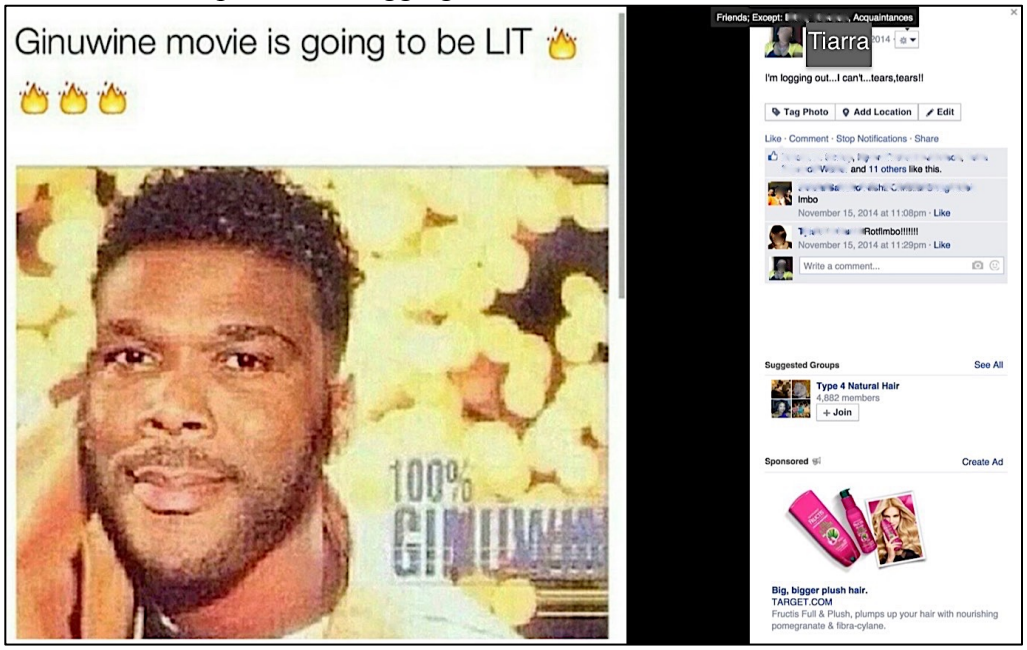


Other participants in digital black counterspaces earn legitimacy by sharing culturally specific content about their offline black communities. Tiarra posts to selects lists of Facebook friends, those belonging to her digital black counterspace community, about housing bias in Detroit. By doing so, she demonstrates her investment in the black community, providing a means of authenticity confirmation, and also disseminating pertinent information about her hometown through her network.

Figure 54. Tiarra – Facebook - Non-dominant Cultural Capital – Detroit Housing Bias

Tiarra, further engaging in non-dominant cultural capital exchanges. She also posted humorous content, for example, a meme mocking the then recently released VH1 Aaliyah documentary, which was not well received by many segments of the black community. By sharing a joke meme mockingly showing Tyler Perry playing 90s R&B artist Ginuwine, Tiarra builds connections to other in-group members through her demonstration of this charming and funny use of black cultural capital.

Figure 55. Tiarra – Facebook Non-dominant Cultural Capital
Caption "I'm tagging out…I can't…Tears. Tears!!"

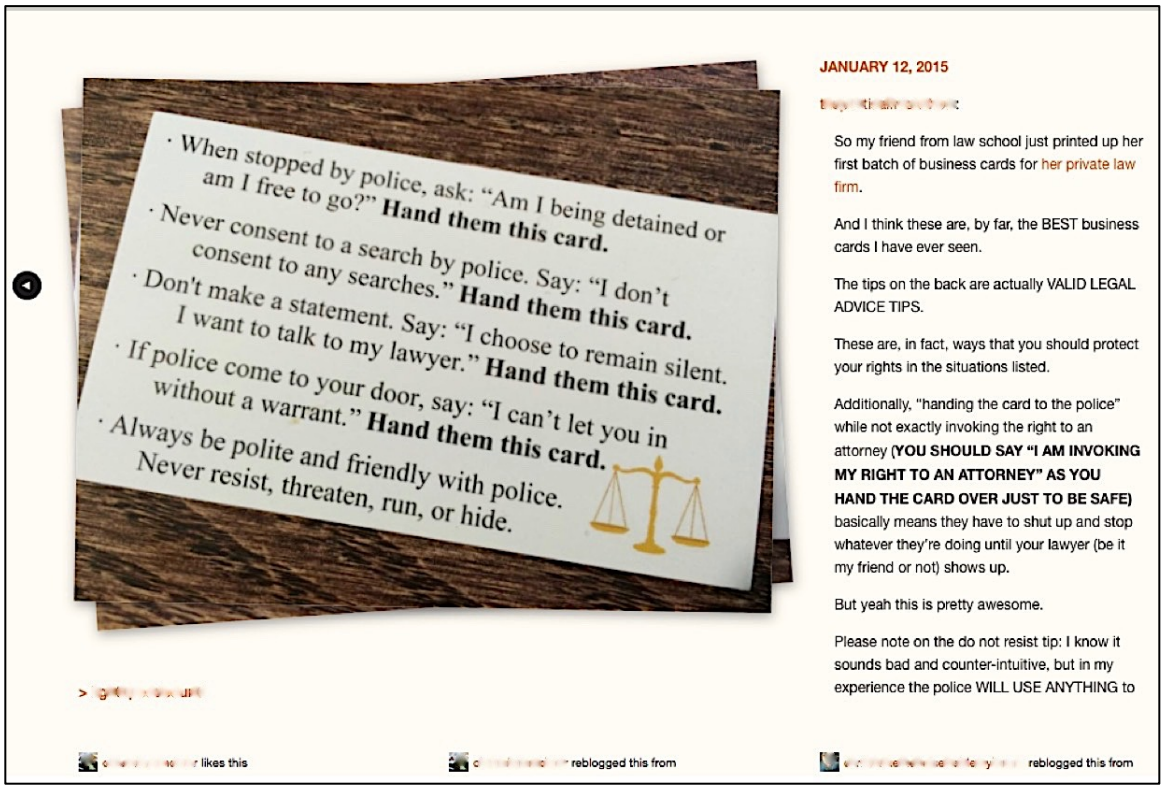


Holly, similarly, shares both humorous black cultural capital posts, and what she views as vital information for peers who encounter police. On the one hand, she reblogs a Disney meme featuring lyrics from the then hit Beyoncé song "Drunk in Love."

Figure 56. Holly – Tumblr – Non-dominant Cultural Capital - Drunk in Love Meme

On the other, she reblogs these instructions for managing police interactions.

Figure 57. Holly – Tumblr – Non-*dominant Cultural Capital* – Police Encounter Instructions



These identity signals demonstrate understanding and familiarity with black culture. This in turn indicates to community members an authentic black identity. More importantly, these actions demonstrate a vested interest in contributing to, and the building of, the digital black community.

The importance of non-dominant cultural capital has been central to the scholarly contributes of other researchers as well. Carter (2003:138) wrote of the importance of non-dominant cultural capital in community formation, stating:

"One of the most apparent instrumental purposes of non-dominant cultural capital is to navigate the terrain of ethnic authenticity. Racial and ethnic groups create cultural boundaries to demarcate both intergroup and intragroup differences. That is, groups create internal cultural boundaries to separate the "real" ("authentic") from the "not real" ("inauthentic") co-ethnic, and individuals construct self-conscious ways in which they use "natural" and specified characteristics to signify group affiliation (Tuan 1999). As groups socially construct what is authentic, their members use myriad in-group cultural codes and signals. Hence, authenticity work requires signifiers (Peterson 1997), and these signifiers often embody non-dominant cultural capital"

Negotiating an authentic identity is paramount to racial identity formation and community construction. Displays of cultural important in-group knowledge are a means of validating one's blackness within the disembodied and dispersed online community.

Offline studies of racial identity and authenticity-work highlight similar processes in action. Vasquez (2010) noted that individuals do authenticity work to indicate cultural allegiance in order to compensate for having skin tones that fall outside of established racial domain codes. Within the online black communities of my respondents, trustworthiness and authenticity within the space is more heavily dependent on the content of their interactions rather than the physical cues that signal racial affiliation. Similar to those racially ambiguous participants in Vasquez's work, black Millenials exchange non-dominant cultural capital as a means of signaling cultural allegiance.

Lightening rod moments are often occasions when an authentic black racial identity is challenged. Agreement over the issue of police brutality, and the efficacy of #BlackLivesMatter collectives, are sometimes seen as a litmus tests for black authenticity. This process illustrates the digital variant of the "uncle tom" phenomenon, whereby some black people are seen to have internalized white supremacist ideals to such a degree that they effectively viewed as no longer authentic members of the black community. This process occurs in new media spaces as tests of black legitimacy pervade

the most intense socio-political online interactions and prescient racial issues (e.g. police brutality, mass incarceration, respectability politics).

Black Millenials consciously share content in efforts to build online black communities and counterspaces. Study participants reported sharing content with specific friends in mind, hoping to trigger a Triple A - Affirmative or Armoring processes for their close associates – the intended result being to uplift their friends who share similar experiences with hostile campus climates, anxiety inducing online interactions, and the frustrations accompanying those instances. As previously noted, the act of sharing content is hierarchically more important to the online black identity formation process than other online actions (e.g. liking, posting). In doing so, black students erect boundaries around their own automatous version of black identity, within the black counterspaces, which are reinforced as the targets of their actions respond and reply by sharing, liking, and commenting on their content.

In illustration of the significant of black counterspaces and communities in the lives of black Millenials, my conversation with Yarra captures the dominant sentiment of my respondents. She explained the significance of black counterspaces and communities when I asked what she does to pursue her interests in black culture and history. She stated:

Yarra: "Um…I spend a lot of time online engaging with different people. My Tumblr, 90% of my Tumblr…I actually only know one person who is one my Tumblr in real life, like in person. Everybody else is just another black person that we somehow found each other on Tumblr, through a reblog, through a post. We've built some kind of…you know how there's communities in Tumblr. We generally all follow the same people, and we have a community of African and African Americans. So dialogue with other people, talk to my family members – my cousin is probably one of the most knowledgeable people on our family history from my generation. She's done a lot of research into our background, like our family crest and all that."

I then asked Yarra whether going online affected how she expressed herself racially. She replied:

Yarra: "One, I love it! I'm proud of it. Two, I know that I have certain friends that I'll think about…like, 'This person is so gonna comment on this!' For instance, one day, I was scrolling on Tumblr and someone like put up a quote where they were like…'Oh you think you're doing me, you're doing yourself – Nigerian mom. 100% done with the stress'…and I was like Zimmi is going to talk about this! Like, ok… she is going to be commenting on this. And that's exactly what happened. Zimmi was the first one to comment on it (Yarra laughs boisterously). So you know it's going to be a nice inside joke for certain friends."

In this illustration, Yarra explains how she purposefully shares content, the significance of which tied to the Nigerian-American experience she and several of her close African and African American student peers share. That content reduces feeling of isolation for both Yarra and her friend Zimmi, as well as adding to an already vibrant online black Tumblr community, in which Yarra is a daily active participant.

It has been established in several works (Turkle 2011; Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe 2008), the degrees to which youth and young adults interact with the content of each other's social media profiles. 86% of Millenials post to friends pages, with 83% commenting on friend's photos. Belk (2013) notes that these are "phatic messages that translate as 'Hi, I am still your friend and I care about you." These messages are baked into the everyday social milieu of black millennial culture. Moreover, they are indispensible connectors that tie together members of a largely dispersed community of black college students.

The Role of Digital Black Communities

These connections and affirmations are common among my respondents, each contributing to the development of a robust digital counterspace. An example of such a counterspace is observable in the online life of Alexis. She noted how participation in an

anti-racism online Facebook group provided her with an important outlet and place to receive counsel during moments of distress. I asked what that online space did for her. She replied:

Alexis: "That's a place where if I see something completely ridiculous online, or if I need some 'Hey somebody posted this on my page or whatever, I just don't know how to handle that, or how to respond.' I know that's a safe space for me to go if I need some feedback. Some fun feedback that may be silly, or some really serious feedback. Just a safe space if I have issues with that…. I feel close to people I know are wanting to do and have the same goal as me I feel like a part of something. I feel like I'm doing big things or making a change. Or even if it difficult to make a global change, but maybe just making a change to myself and my way of thinking. It's a huge thing."

This quotation is evidence of the de-compartmentalization of identity formation domains, and the construction of black counterspaces and communities. Manipulating the features of online spaces, and leveraging various online interactions, incorporates digital counterspace and online black communities into a matrix of strategies and skills that are invaluable to black student emotional, psychological, and academic well being. The motivations for participation, however, extend beyond the utility of those spaces for persistence in higher education, or their personal psychological and emotional growth.

My respondents report feeling social pressure to be engage in online black communities, indicating the degree to which the intersections of black racial identity, and youth culture more generally, collide to produce powerful socializing processes to stimulate individual online action. In speaking with Reece, a first year female student with a hearing disability, I gained insight into that pressures my respondents faced to be involved online. Reece sat, small in stature and presence, with a shy demeanor and exuding a wide-eyed optimism as we spoke. She had recently joined a group on campus whose focus was in addressing campus sexual assault, in addition to racial issues for

students of color. I asked what she felt she got out of involvement in that group. She replied.

Reece: "It's more…I think… it's a safe space to express my somewhat political opinions. And also because my mom was a victim of domestic violence. And I never…we didn't go after it…we didn't go to therapy. We don't talk about unless it comes up in an argument, and I think I still have resentments, maybe some anger, about that. I definitely have some anger towards my step dad. But I think its more a safe space…because I'm not the only one who has experienced something like that, so hearing other people's stories and being able to say something…because I can't talk about it with my mom,"

I went on to ask Reece if any of her involvement in that group took place online. She explained:

Reece: "Not so much where I communicate, but like they post links about stories they hear…events that are happening on campus you might be interested in, so I go on there sometimes… I think it keeps me up to date."

I followed up by asking if she was a member of any online communities geared solely toward black culture or experiences. She illustrates in her reply a sense of guilt for not being invested in online interest-driven behavior solely focused on black identity. She stated:

Reece: "I don't think I am. It kinda makes me feel guilty saying that. Like I think that some people would think that I should be…I don't know why I don't want to be involved in that. It's not like I have anything against it…I just feel guilty saying that I don't"

This social pressure to be involved correlates to the perception of authenticity within black circles. Being absent from the online spaces and conversations roiling the black community in light of the rise of #BlackLivesMatter, and the increased online occurrences of viral videos of police brutality, creates tensions and inertia that draws black students into online discourses referencing those issues. Withdrawal or absence from those online communities and conversations leaves black Millenials feeling isolated. This is particularly relevant as Hampton et al. (2011:7) demonstrate the one's

core discussion networks provide a "broad forms of social support, including emotional aid and companionship during times of crisis (Wellman & Wortley 1990)." Removed from that support leaves black Millenials with a sense of normlessness. The context of the campus climate at MU intensifies the social pressure to get linked into black counterspaces and communities.

That need to participate as a consistent theme present throughout my interview data, this reality is perhaps highlighted best in statement made by Precious. I asked her if her life would be significantly different were she not able to go online; if the way she thinks and feels about race would be changed. She remarked:

Precious: "Yeah. I think I would feel more ashamed, or uncomfortable, even though my family definitely played a part in me not feeling that way. I think with like Twitter and like Tumblr and other things, when you have other black people constantly encouraging you and like giving you tips on…beauty tips…I know for like women, like the beauty magazines and different things are focused on like, you know hair type that's not your hair type, and makeup that you obviously can't wear because it's not your skin tone. But like online, you have all these YouTubers, and people like helping you navigate with like different fashion stuff…and so, if I didn't have that or access to that, I'd feel more uncomfortable and feel like, you know, I have to straighten my hair or I have to…do this…with those like communities, I think you're more comfortable living within your skin, because you know other people are just like you. Or are experiencing the same thing as you are."

The importance of online black counterspaces and communities cannot be understated in the lives of black Millenials. They take a great deal of pride and support from involvement in those spaces and interactions. The function of having a defined and accessible black community online, and the counterspaces in which they reside that allow open dialogue and affirming exchanges of information, resonate back into the offline world.

The creation of counter narratives and imagery, within black counterspaces, filled by digital black community members, provides a substantial resource that has multiple

positive impacts on the lives of black students, specifically those attending predominantly white institutions. First, online spaces and interactions provide avenues through which they can exercise agency and autonomy in shaping the parameters of black racial identity. In doing so they are able to create cultural scripts in which they see their unique perspectives represented in a truer and more consistent depiction of blackness; one in which the complexity and heterogeneity of black identity is more closely captured. This is particularly resonant for those who are marginalized within the margins (Dhingra 2007), shedding light on the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability that create layers of advantage and disadvantage even within the black population.

Second, the emotional, psychological, cultural, and academic support flowing within and through those interactions helps create the offline conditions necessary for black students to successfully navigate the hostile campus climate at MU. My respondents are able to seek, send and receive information and resources that allow a speedier acculturation into and navigation of campus social life.

Others have written of the utility of the Internet for connection members of the African American community during times of distress. Daniels (2012:06), notes how "the web became a vital tool for connecting African-Americans following Hurricane Katrina (Brock, 2008)." She goes on to argue that the Internet promotes, "intimate and discursive interactions, similar to the way black barbershops and salons allow private spaces for identity discourses." It is not a new assertion that online interactions and communities contribute to racial identity formation. My findings do, however, narrow the focus to the experiences of black young adults in college, demonstrating the significance of online social life on their personal and academic success, and overall psychological well-being.

By bringing the focus of this dissertation to that more specific point of analysis, it becomes clear that through technological advancement and generational succession, that the sociological understanding of how black youth construction the (digital) self, through the use of online interactions, is paramount to understand the black experience of American social life in the "information age."

Summary of Findings

In this chapter I explained the racialization of online space, complete with discussion of the presence of what I term Algorithmic Microaggressions as aspects of the built environment of online sites. In response to those conditions, I delineated the most prevalent coping strategies of managing online forms of racial oppression, which included: Digital Venting, Covering, Digital Neglect, Digital Confronting, and Digital Retreating.

Online interactions have clear and demonstrable impacts on the lived experiences of students of color. The triangulation of multiple data sets allowed me to highlight the subtle and intimate ways in which online space is racialized. In reaction to this, my respondents engage in "countering" activities meant to reshape the perception of the content of the black identity and culture. I then unpacked the means by which black student draft those online counter narratives and construct counter images in efforts to the challenge deficit notions of blackness they view as pervasive in mass media representations.

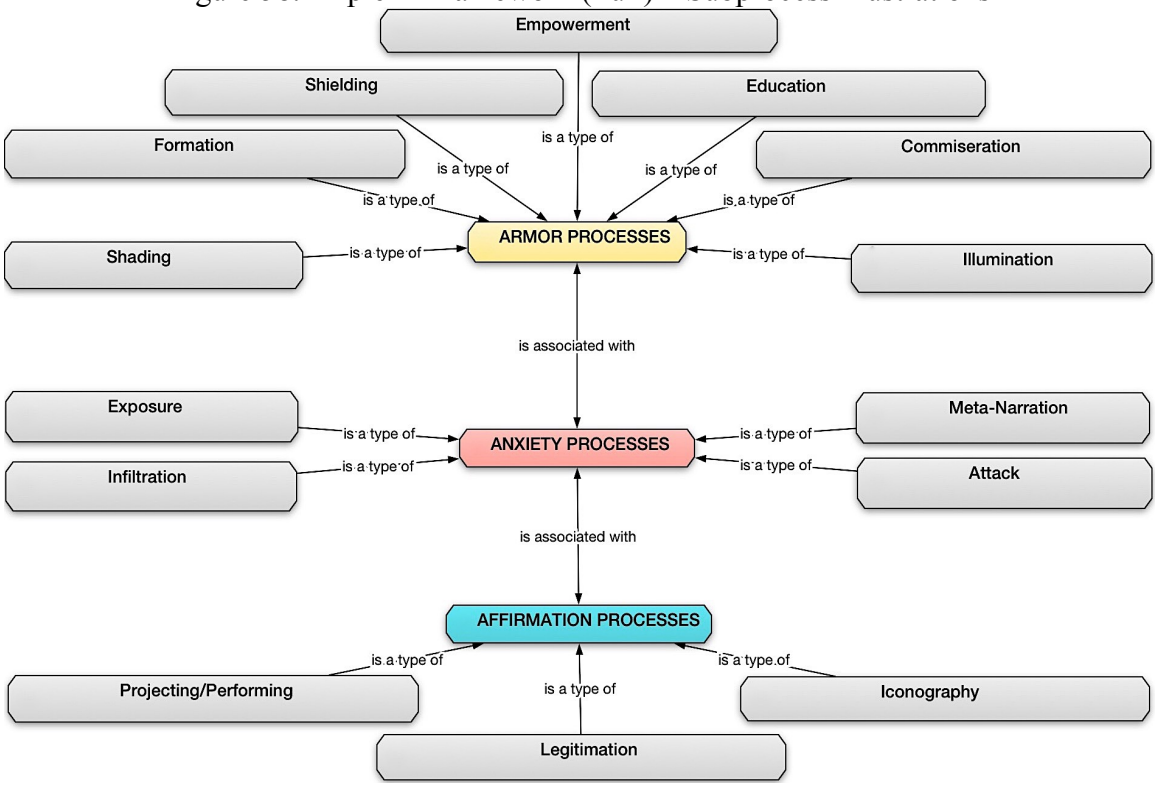
I found a noteworthy absence of white faces and bodies in the social media feeds of my respondents. They have effectively constructed explicitly black counterspaces, in which positive identity affirmation is constantly emergent, dynamic, and, importantly,

under their control. This autonomy provides an avenue through which black students, living and being educated in a white dominated physical location, create digital counterspaces.

These counterspaces are comprised of an array of multi-media resources directly opposing deficit notions of blackness. These counterspaces are real lived environments in which participants leverage the media-multiplicity of the Web 2.0 to create dynamic and evolving peer-driven digital networks. In this way, black Millenials are engaging in what Ito et al (2010) identified as interest-driven social media behavior, a new variant of which I have discovered that is centered on black culture and identity. Black Millenials visit these untethered locations constantly, using them as conduits through which meaningful components of their multiple identities are formed and performed, and with which they interact with a larger digital community racial in-group members. The construction of those rich and complex, overwhelmingly pro-black, digital counterspaces are revolutionary acts for my respondents, as they find a level of autonomy in self-representation historically withheld from minority populations due the lasting effects of institutionalized slavery.

Through a presentation of both interview and multimedia data, I also revealed how black students build digital networks and associations that both marshal resources across the online domain, and provide support that filters outward into their offline lives. Those endeavors are illustrated with the use of the Triple A Framework of understanding and categorizing online identity formation. Each major pillar and subprocess of that framework unpacks the intricacies of internet enabled identity formation.

Figure 58. Triple A Framework (Full) – Subprocess illustrations



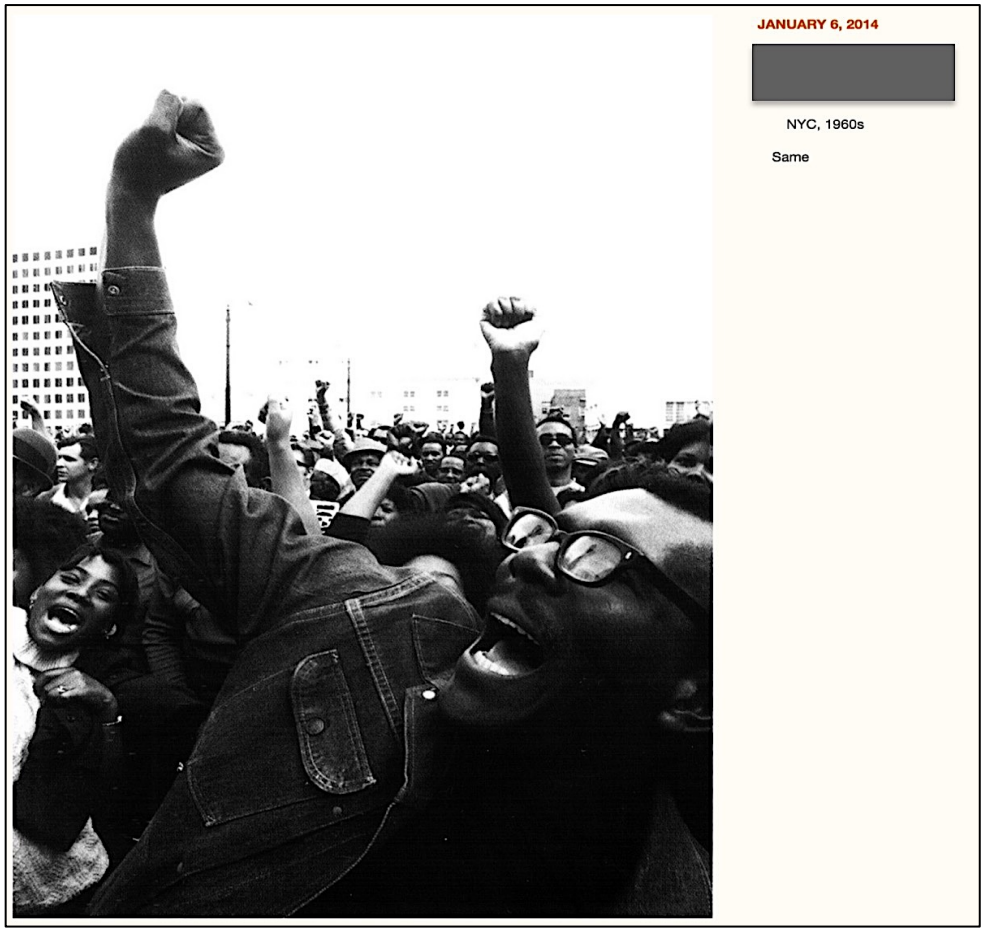
While others have unpacked the core components of racial identity for African and African American in the U.S. (Waters 1999) I focus instead on another facet of black identity. The goal of this chapter, in addition to laying out the means by which black students counter damaging narratives and imagery, and create black counterspaces and communities, has been to highlight the complexity of black identity. Rather than reducing it to several core components of blackness, my data reveals a dramatically complex and varied series of black identity subgenres that repudiate the monolithic representations found in mass media content.

The primary factor that binds this beautifully complex group of black students at the core of this project together, regardless of the array of personal background and

identities they hold, is the homogenizing experience of racialization grounded in their offline lives and MU. Their connection, then, is solidified by their common desire to rebuff deficit notions of blackness that attach and adhere to their lived experiences regardless of the variation in their personal histories. They favor, instead, a view that any variation in black life as one of a multitude of acceptable subcultures within the black community, with no inherent negative quality or disposition attached to any of them.

The courage of these young people in rejecting and shattering the lenses that have cast them in such poor light since the inception of this American Union is remarkable. Many are seeking to be revolutionary. All are in it together.

Figure 59. Holly – Tumblr
Caption: "Same

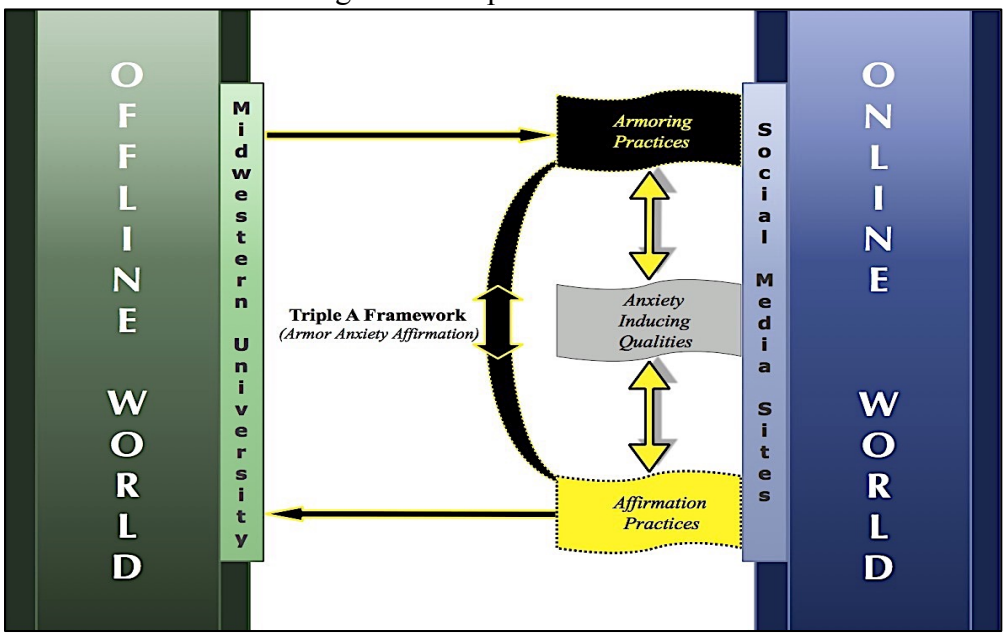


CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

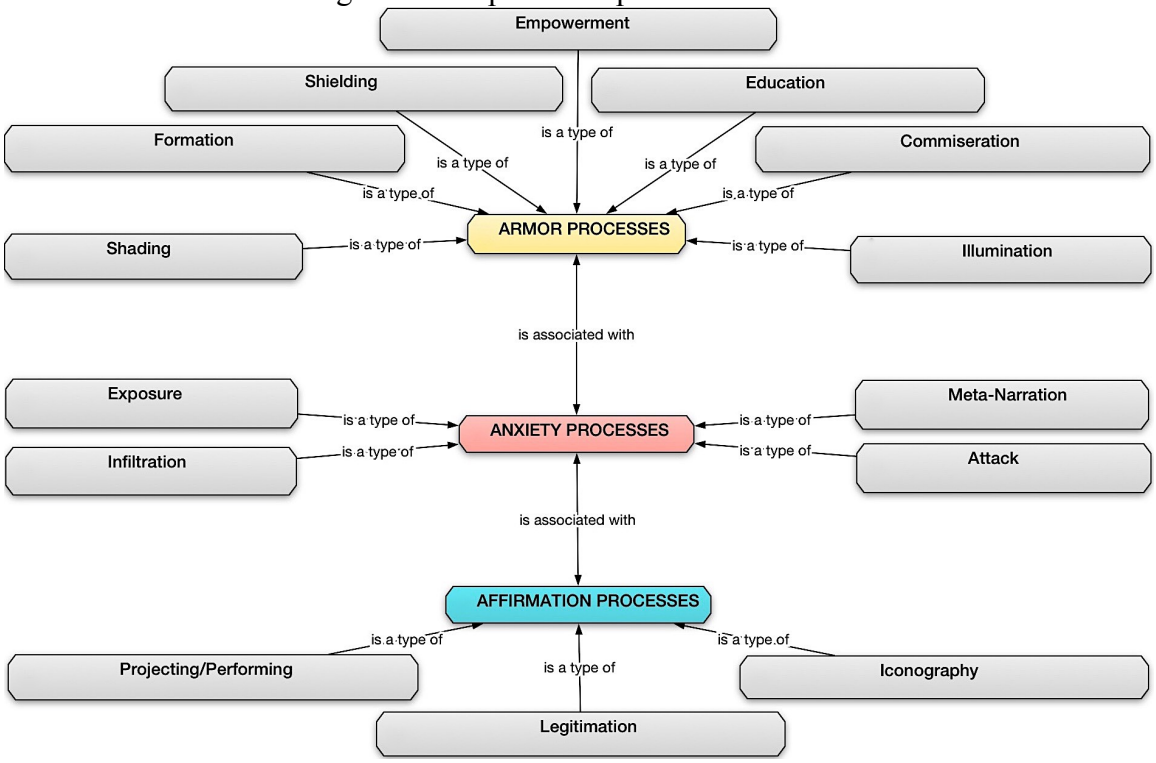
In this dissertation I explored the role of online interactions and digital spaces in racial identity formation for African American young adults in college. I sought to determine if online interactions, set within racialized digital environments, played a significant role in how black students form, manage, and present aspects of their racial selves. In doing so, I aimed to ascertain if those processes had offline motivations and origins, as study participants live their lives in the predominantly white academic spaces of Midwestern University. Beyond that, I aimed to understand if the online behaviors and activities of black students in PWIs filters back into offline social life, and if so, how that action might affect their persistence in higher education. Providing the through line that connects each chapter was the application of the Triple A framework for categorizing and understanding online identity formation.

Figure 60. Triple A Flowchart



In each chapter, I demonstrated how black Millennials articulated the parameters, utility, and use of the three major pillars of the Triple A framework – Armor, Anxiety, and Affirmation. With multiple examples, I elaborated with the more fine-grained analysis provided by the various subprocesses branching off of the major pillars.

Figure 61. Triple A Subprocess Flowchart



Through the full application of the Triple A Framework, I explained how online identity formation unfolds for African American young adults. I also highlighted its potential utility for developing an intersectional understanding of online identity formation for other marginalized identity groups.

The range and analytic power of the Triple A Framework is made possible by the breadth and depth of data with which I created it. This analysis was driven by a triangulation of multiple data sets – survey and in-depth interview data combined to

provide a robust contextualization of the digital content fielded for this project. In that effort I implemented novel data collection strategies and methods I developed specifically for the examination of identity formation in online environments. The combination of digital qualitative data collection strategies in this dissertation cannot be found in prior scholarship addressing either identity formation or the study of new media communications

Findings

In chapter two I revisited the existing identity formation scholarship as I set the context for this dissertation. I argued that the college setting of MU, and the content academic calendar, were primary organizing forces in the lives of my respondents. The research questions at the core of this chapter were about how offline contexts motivate and shape online action in the development of racial identity. These initial questions concerned the perception of campus climate by my respondents, and how they view their experiences in that environment. Following, I sought to ascertain the content of their metastereotypes, and the quality their experiences at MU with overt bias and subtle microaggressions. The product of those inquires was the discovery that black students at MU had a uniformly negative perception of both the campus climate, and a consistently negative set of metastereotypes of black identity. Additionally, all had regular and damaging exposure to both structural and interpersonal bias and discrimination, which presented in both subtle and overt forms.

This chapter highlighted the fluidity of racial identity through both the strategic use of various identity labels, as well as with the specific use of online interactions and spaces to navigate the hostile campus climate at MU. I further explained how those

conditions increased study participants personal awareness of their social, political, and cultural selves. With that increased awareness black students leverage online information and interactions as a means of marshaling offline resources to aid in their academic careers at MU. In that process I emphasized how respondents develop stronger on- and offline bonds to their black student peers, a process facilitated by their exercise of digital skill and literacy in online spaces. Those endeavors included using social media to locate other students of color with whom they found systems of support, in addition to connecting to institutionalized programs and resources geared toward assisting students.

I contextualize these findings with the education literature on academic counterspaces and their impact on student psychological well-being and overall academic successes. Solórzano et al. (2000:68) explored the connections between racial stereotypes, racial microaggressions, campus racial climate, and academic performance. Through their analysis of focus group data with black students at a predominantly white university, they found that racial microaggressions occurred both on- and off-campus. Importantly, they noted that the campus racial climate facilitated subtle racism within academic spaces and overt racism within social spaces around campus. Further, they found that as a result of exposure to racial microaggressions and a hostile campus climate, black students struggled with feeling of "self-doubt and frustration as well as isolation." In addition, several of their participants noted that racial microaggressions affected their academic performance by pushing them to, "drop a class, change their major and even leaving the university." I confirm their results with my data, finding the continued salience of academic counterspaces for black student success, the effects of which, for my respondents, are facilitated and intensified by online interactions.

With online interactions black students deftly navigate difficult circumstances and encounters at MU, which indicates and evolution of "safe spaces" into a more dynamic set of mobile digital counterspaces. Those online locals are now places in which black students find reprieve from hostile campus climates, even when confined to the physical locations of MU and the surrounding community.

The totality of these findings points to the persistence of racial bias and inequality within the academic institution. These circumstances, then, necessitated the use of online resources to ameliorate the negative affects of those conditions. I have confirmed that black students do indeed use ICTs and online interactions as bridges, decompartmentalizing traditional sites for identity formation. This finding challenge the appropriateness of offline domain-centric analyses when attempting to ascertain the means by which connected young adults engage in identity-work to form their senses of self. It is important to note, however, that online interactions and digital counterspaces are not uniformly positive sites for racial identity formation. Being online in and of itself opens black Millennials up to various types of online bias. Black students must negotiate these negative experiences as they attempt to extract the more beneficial aspects of social media interactions out of the collection of online encounters.

In the third chapter I shifted focus away from the offline setting of MU. Having established how those contexts provoke online action, I turned attention toward delineating the novel aspects and parameters of social media interactions and spaces. Included in this pursuit was an explanation and illustration of how the built environments of social media sites impact identity formation for black Millennials.

I began this chapter with a brief overview of the digital inequalities scholarship, paying particular attention to the framework for understanding youth new media behavior developed by Ito et al. (2012). Using their concepts of "Interest-driven" and "Friendship-driven" online behaviors, and the "Genres of Participation," I applied and then extended their work, which focused on generational location and class position, to account for race as a stimulus for a new "Interest-driven" online behavior geared toward black culture and identity. I filled out this analysis by demonstrating how the "Genres of Participation" map onto specific online actions (e.g. Sharing, Posting, Tagging and Liking), connections made clear through my data analysis. Moreover, I illustrated the hierarchy of online actions, couched in the "Genres of Participation," using specific examples that highlight the enactment of racial identity through online Triple A Processes.

I also identified and confirmed prior findings that indicated Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter dominate the new media "Hub" of the vast majority of Millenials (Pew 2016). These sites as the primary locations of youth online behaviors were mirrored in my survey data, with the vast majority of respondents on at least those three sites. Through my digital data analysis, I identified and defined the properties Distance & Reach, Confusion, Anonymity, Asynchronicity, Integration, Permanence, and Media Multiplexity as key features of those online sites. Each property adds nuance, autonomy, and both pressures and releases on the negotiation and presentation of identity. My respondents leverage each property to initiate a desired series of online interactions and identity formation outcomes in online spaces.

The final chapter completes the circle by unpacking how black students use their social media Hubs, and the properties of online interactions, to challenge deficit notions

of blackness that permeate localized interactions and larger mass media representations. The findings of this chapter are grounded primarily in the digital data of my respondents. I began this analysis with the foundations provided by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who argued that the systems of American social life are highly racialized. By extension, and through a presentation of data, I argued that online spaces, too, are racialized.

Within the built environments of online platforms black students experienced numerous instances of bias and discrimination, including what I defined and termed "Algorithmic microaggressions." The engineers who code and construct the look and feel of a given social media site, are also those who craft the codes that bring advertiser based content into the newsfeeds and timelines of site users. The composition of those imagery and narratives contributes to a systemic underrepresentation of positive depictions of black culture and bodies in mass media content.

Like offline experiences with bias and discrimination, study participants navigate their online worlds equipped with a series of coping strategies born out of the particular social milieu of their new media communities. Black students, in efforts to curtail the negative affects of those experiences, engage in digital boundary work in the form of Digital Venting, Covering, Digital Neglect, Digital Confronting, and Retreating. These coping strategies are conducted alongside Triple A processes in order to balance the desire for full social integration into their peer and support networks with the Anxiety inducing quality of online interactions.

I went on to elaborate on the specifics of how black student challenge deficit notions of blackness through the active, conscious, and strategic creation of counter narratives and images. These countering actions are manifestations of the ideal black

archetype, which carries several important features. First, that ideal demonstrates, in various forms, the existence and prevalence of black excellence. Those forms often demonstrate academic achievement, and also showing creativity, style, and the impact black identity and innovation has on popular cultural more generally. Second, the steadfastness of the black family as a foundational element of high character and moral fortitude. The composition of the black family in that element of the ideal black archetype includes both single and dual parent homes, as well as non-traditional family structures. The over arching theme present in conceptions of the ideal black archetype was the heterogeneity of experience within the larger black community. Each component was constructed and displayed in order to challenge and rewrite the cultural scripts that delineate the parameters of blackness contemporary U.S. society.

With those actions, I found that Black Millenials seek to create the necessary components of digital black counterspaces – places online in which black students find emotional, cultural, and academic support, as well as general reprieve from what they view as a constantly hostile campus climate. Scholars (Daniels 2012:8) have theorized that online interactions might, "convey a sense of group belonging, color consciousness and identification with groups historically stigmatized by dominant society (Grasmuck et al. 2009)." Those theoretical assertions are born out in my data, both in the digital content and the direct explanations of the impact of that content by study participants during the interview process.

The crux of this final chapter was also the core of this dissertation. The primary research question in this project is: What is the role of online interactions in black racial identity formation. In chapter four, the complexity of this question becomes clearer. The

online identity formation processes of black students are not separate from their offline lives. Rather than a detached arena in which they engage in the development of only the digital self, online interactions facilitate the development of the self more broadly - of which digital representations of self are another vital aspect of their entire collection of identities and identity-performances. These findings are in line with prior scholarship that indicates individuals negotiate, manage, and present multitudes of selves, for specific purpose and contexts, as they navigate social life.

Since the creation and diffusion of the Internet, individuals have proposed that it would serve as the first space truly free from the reach of racial animus and racial contestation. My findings, however, demonstrate that the online domain serves as another primary space for identity formation for black students, in which they fight for more accurate representations of both their individual racial selves and the larger African American community. The online domain has been elevated in the minds of black Millenials as a space paramount to their free expression of internally consistent and authentic identities – spaces equal to those traditional offline sites identified in prior scholarship such as the home, school, work, and civil society. Online space, however, is contested ground in the eyes of black Millennials. While providing greater autonomy and agency in the construction of a positive representation of blackness, it is still racialized space rife with racial contestation.

Nevertheless, black students make use of the various components of social media platforms, in conference with the use of digital skill and literacy, to build and break barriers between traditional identity formation domains. In doing so, they purposefully create and reformulate the symbolic boundaries around black identity. This process is

facilitated by increased exposure to larger and more diverse groups of others in online environments. By opening up lines of communication with the larger black diaspora online, black students are able to acquire a more robust cache of cultural capital and resources, which in turn allows them to persist in the academic environment at MU.

Identity formation in online environments is a multi-faceted set of processes, whereby the strategic use of sites by actors allows them to leverage resources for the assemblage, maintenance, and performance of racial identity. The site interface, the rules of interaction, and the demographic composition of the site's inhabitants function collectively to create complex ecosystems that individuals traverse as they acculturate into the social climate of a given online platform.

Limitations and Future Scholarship

As illustrated in the introduction to this dissertation, there are some key limitations to my study. First, each data collection stage resulted in an increasingly smaller sample size – dropping from 182 (surveys) to 87 (interview volunteers) to 47 (interviewees) to 41 (digital content participants), leading to inconsistency in the breadth of data per respondent. Second, both during and after my data collection, the Application Program Interfaces (API) and some components of the built environments of SNSs, were changed. While I cannot say with any certainty these changes adjust how black Millenials negotiate online identity formation, that variation should be accounted for in future studies if possible. It is unclear at this time how this shortcoming may be addressed, though with each study in this vain baselines are established that may illustrate how those changes adjust online identity formation over time.

Third, due to limited resources and time constraints, I did not collect data directly from the smart phones of my respondents. Because many social network sites provide deeper and more intense engagement through an increased functionality of mobile applications, I likely missed important identity formation processes enacted primarily through the phone. Additionally, I did not collect any information from what I call App-centric SNSs (e.g. YikYak, SnapChat, WhatsApp). These mobile applications do not have a full desktop version, which limited the range of sites users were able to drive me toward. Future studies would benefit from inclusion of these sites into IRB protocols and data collection efforts. Doing so would provide an even deeper view of young adult social media interactions and identity formation.

Discussion

The research questions posed in this study engaged three primary areas of scholarship: (1) sociological literature on racial/ethnic identity formation, (2) education scholarship on minority student retention, academic success, and campus racial climate, and (3) communications research on new media, "digital inequality," and identity formation online. While there is a great deal of scholarship in each of these areas, there is a dearth of empirical research that focused on their intersections. With my findings, I draw particular attention to where these bodies of scholarship overlay, how they inform one another, and how the literature addresses an understudied point of interest at their juncture.

The study of identity has become an important pillar in sociological research. According to Hughey (2008:532), identity studies, first introduced by Cooley and Mead, evolved from micro-sociological roots, grounded in psychology and symbolic

interactionism, which "focused on how interpersonal interactions mold an individual's sense of self." Identity research over the past twenty years has been driven by several key trends (Hughey 2008; Cerulo 1997). First, a scholarly shift toward group agency and political action – a shift that resulted in identity studies being directed toward the, "…site of the collective, with gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class forming the "holy trinity" of the discursive field" (Cerulo 1997:386). Second, intellectual concerns with agency and self-direction revitalized the study of identity formation processes – researchers interested in examining the mechanism by which distinctions and boundaries are created and managed, at the collective level, characterize this trend. Also, scholars began emphasizing processes of discourse rather than behavior.

These studies and trends provided the scholarly backdrop with which I situate my empirical findings. In addition to that scholarly lean, this dissertation adds new perspective to a complex history of race relations, tensions, and racial progress for African Americans in the United States. The oppression of black people in America was initially achieved through brutish physical domination. Overt systems of oppression were the replaced through an iterative process marked by numerous instances of racial contestation by African American and equal rights allies in the political arena (Omi and Winant 1994).

Racial tensions continued to escalate as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum several decades later. In those critical years, the long-standing struggle against overt and direct racism began finding success. The energy and civil unrest surrounding the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement's forced the state to revoke de-jure segregation, providing black people with voting and civil rights. While rights

were officially gained and recognized by the state, some accepted integration only in principle leaving "a symbolic gulf" between themselves and African-Americans (Wacquant 2002:49). White flight ensued leaving Black people relegated to deteriorating urban inner city; locations deprived of the monetary and social support necessary for thriving communities. In effect, African Americans were left with "shunned" public spaces, abandoned public schools, and countless roadblock to real social mobility (Waters 1999; Waquant 2002).

Slavery and Jim Crow segregation were "race-making" institutions. Wacquant (2002:54) argued that they did not simply process racial divisions, but rather, " each produces (or co-produces) this division (anew) out of inherited demarcation and disparities of group power." Wacquant went on to assert that these power disparities, "…inscribes it at every epoch in a distinctive constellation of material and symbolic form." Parts of those lasting inscriptions are the contemporary curtailments of life chances for black people.

Scholars have noted the many cases in which this restriction occurs. Massey and Denton (1994:2), for example, described impacts of residential segregation, showing active discrimination and institutional racism leading to a decline in city services and private investment in residentially segregated neighborhoods. They concluded that, "growing up in a ghetto neighborhood increases the likelihood of dropping out of high school, reduces the probability of attending college, lowers the likelihood of employment, reduces income earned as an adult and increases the risk of teenage childbearing and unwed pregnancy." Waters (1999) further notes that despite the economic gains of some

African Americans, middle class black people have not been able to convert their successes into residential mobility.

Wacquant (2002) illustrated a lasting effect in the form of mass incarceration, observing that there the composition of inmate populations has been largely inverted, with the percentage of white inmates going from 70% in the 1970s to less than 30% today - while arrest rates for property crimes and violent offenses for white and black people have remaining relatively steady. Lastly, the probability of being incarcerated for poor African Americans is the highest among races (29%), with Latinos (16%), and Whites (4%) showing far lower levels as of 1994 (Waquant 2002).

Much of the blame for the state of affairs of African Americans has been placed on black people themselves. Cultures of poverty arguments permeate the discourse surrounding the larger causes of racial inequality (Waters 1999). While there has been a significant change from overt and direct racism to, in many instances, more covert and indirect racism, the enduring quality of our racialized social system has been that the life chances and everyday experiences of black people remain significantly more difficult than those of their whites counterparts.

All of this points to the necessity of sociological scholarship to directly acknowledge and consider in both research design and data analysis the roles of racism in the lives of minority populations. Anderson (2001:197), warns against a "happy sociology" that is content to study diversity, culture, and identity without properly situating them in the appropriate structural context. She states in regards to this position, ""terms like multicultural- ism and diversity have begun to blunt the [sociological] imagination. Bell and Hartmann (2007:910) argue that the lack of sociological

imagination makes it more difficult to understand the connection between inequality, injustice, and race.

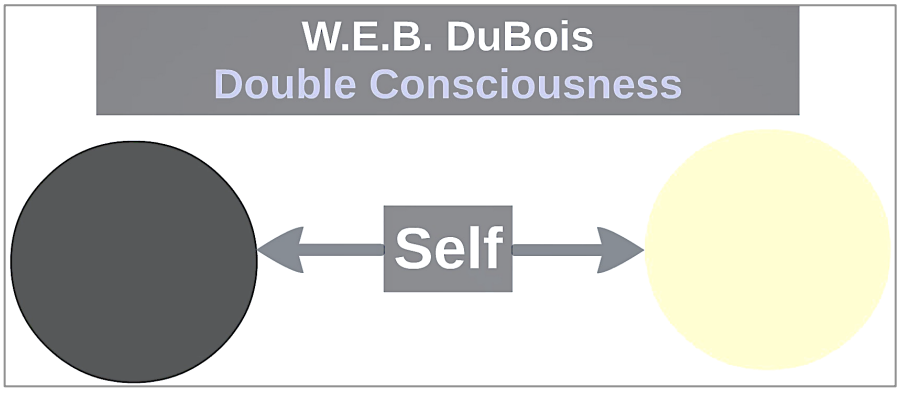
Because of the persistent quality of American racism, I couched the arguments and findings of this dissertation in a context which makes note of the relationship between racism and racial identity, and the necessity in the eyes of black Millenials, to make use of new online interactions in racial identity formation. At the turn of the 20th century, W.E.B Du Bois began some of the earliest sociological studies of the African American experience in the United states, built with robust empirical scholarship and brilliant theoretical grounding, Over 100 years ago he wrote of the significance of the "color-line" in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He stated that black people in the U.S. were, "born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world (1903:2)."

In developing his concepts of the Veil and Double Consciousness, Du Bois, unknowingly, provided an exceedingly relevant lens through which scholars of racial identity formation could view the empirical realities of connected black youth today. With the internalization of metastereotypes and the experience of microaggression, black students today are keenly aware of the contemporary manifestation of the Veil. The key difference today, however, is the new found power and agency black young adults feel are delivered by their online lives. While counteracted to a degree by the anxiety inducing quality of online interactions, Armoring and Affirmation processes combine to allow for a more helpful than harmful set of online experiences for black Americans.

To that point, online social life does not provide immunity from the experience of a developing the Double Consciousness. Social media, however, does allow black Millenials to divide the presentation of Double Consciousness, with the properties of online interaction, in the strategic use of social networking sites to shape public perceptions of black identity - an exercise I term "Digital Double Consciousness."

The negotiation of race in online spaces remains paramount in the day-to-day workings of black young adults. Today, the tensions of dual identities still emerge from offline life, provoking the development Double Consciousness. Those tensions are then fragmented by black Millenials and merged into their social media interactions, where they are in some cases intensified (Anxiety), and in others alleviated (Armor, Affirmation). Rather than a decline as a core identity, then, black racial identity remains a master status in online environments. The difference now is that this core identity is expressed in decentered forms through social media sites and interaction types chosen by the individual.

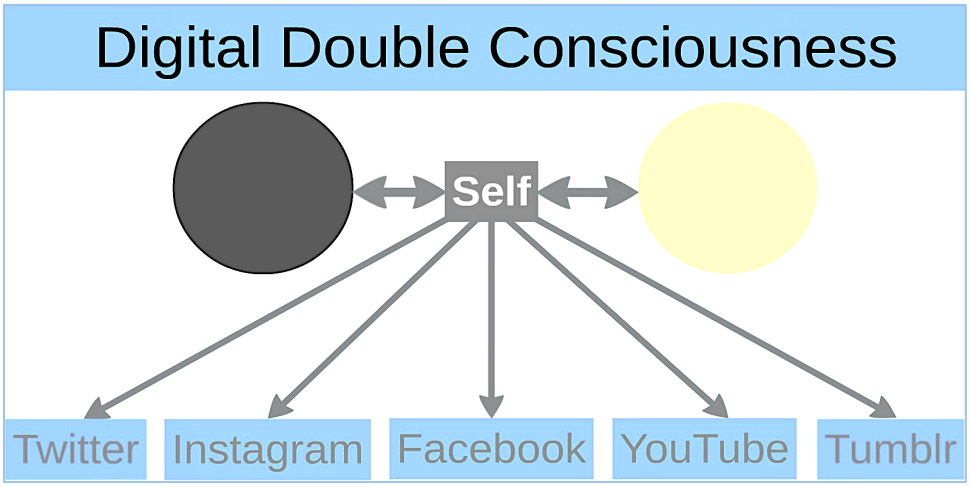
Figure 62. Visualization – Du Bois' Double Consciousness



To unpack the process by which black students splinter that dual identity structure into multiple identity presentations, I created and applied the Triple A Framework.

Armor, Anxiety, and Affirmation processes illustrate the means by which black Millennials express various aspects of their racial identities across a range of online locals. The presence of online interaction and new media call for a continued updating of Du Bois' work, as the utility of his theoretical contributions reaches through time and into the information age.

Figure 63. Visualization – Digital Double Consciousness



The construction of racial categories, the actual work of "racial socialization" occurs through both the lived daily experiences and interpersonal interactions of individuals within the social institutions they occupy (Obasogie 2010). This socialization creates conditions where racial meaning is accumulated over time, and is then turned into a sort of "racial common sense" (Obasogie 2010). Haney-Lopez (1994:7) similarly notes that race should be understood as, "neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions." Online interactions alter the relationship to identity formation established in offline contexts.

Those daily political struggles are summarized by Mary Waters (1999), who wrote that, “History and current power relations create and shape the opportunities people face in their day-to-day lives, giving some people "ethnic options" and others "racial labels." The diffusion and ubiquity of both mobile ICTs and social media sites have had meaningful impacts on both the macro forces of social and political struggle, and the micro effects of daily decisions. Due to this context, for black Millenials, the online domains, and interactions that occur within them, reconfigure the means, motivations, and methods of identity formation.

Conclusion

Racial identity formation has been extensively studied but lacked an adequate accounting of the role of online interactions and social media communication. Existing literature suggested both an implicit and complex relationship between various forms of communication and racial identity formation. Yet, how the online lives of black students affected their development of multi-layered and complex identities remained underexplored. Answering the questions at the core of this project was integral to incorporating modern communication practices into the larger sociological debate addressing identity formation for African American young adults.

Through this investigation, I have explored the intricacies of racial identity formation for black students both on- and offline. I have deepened the conceptualization of black identity, going beyond the “sense of closeness to other blacks” measure typical of previous quantitative scholarship (Harris 1995). In doing so, I provided a richer qualitative conceptualization of black identity as “situational strategy,” in line with qualitative scholarship addressing Asian (Tuan 1998) Latin@ (Roth 2012), and

multiracial identity formation (Renn 2000, 2004). I explicated the role of the social media sites as spaces for identity formation, providing a more complex construct of racial identity for Black youth in traditional sites, such as the home and school, as well as within the new online domain. My research revealed new mechanisms for racial identity formation, explained how ICTs moderate existing identity formation processes, and shed light upon new sites for existing processes to be enacted.

This study demonstrates one of the primary reasons why black young adults flock into this digital world. They are in search of the social power to select the components of blackness in the ways that more accurately reflect their internal dispositions – a truer construction and presentation of an authentic racial self. Absent the naiveté of early Internet optimists, black Millennials confront the challenges present in the online domain with a sober mind and deep conviction. They enter into those encounters aware of the bias that permeates online space, ready to mine those interactions for their beneficial resources. The goal is both to cultivate their individual successes and to ensure that the multitudes of difference within the black community find purchase in the larger context of contemporary American social life.

Social media sites, despite their anxiety-inducing aspects, are the digital continents upon which online black culture is created. These sites team with vibrant and complex black communities, linked through wireless connections, anchored with- and enable by the increased computer power and ubiquity of the smart phone.

Each foray into that online domain begins anew, as that small thin object, placed carelessly on the night stand, rumbles to life each morning in that all too familiar wake up ritual.

REFERENCES CITED

Andersen, M. 1999. “Diversity without Oppression: Race, Ethnicity, Identity and Power.” in *Critical Ethnicity: Countering the Waves of Identity Politics,* edited by M. Kenyatta and R. Tai. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield

Andersen, M. 2001. “Restructuring for Whom? Race, Class, Gender, and the Ideology of Invisibility.” *Sociological Forum* Vol.16 No.2 P.181–201.

Bailey, C. A. (2007). *A guide to qualitative field research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Beckles, C. 1997. Black Struggles in Cyberspace: Cyber-segregation and Cyber-Nazis. *Western Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 21 P. 12–17.

Bell, J and D, Hartmann. 2007. “Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of “Happy Talk.” *American Sociological Review.* Vol. 72 P. 895- 914.

Beneito-Montagut. R. 2011. “Ethnography Goes Online: Towards A User-Centred Methodology To Research Interpersonal Communication On The Internet.” *Qualitative Research.* Vol. 11 No. 716

Beniger JR. 1987. The Personalization Of Mass Media And The Growth Of Pseudo-Community. *Communication Research.* 14(3):352–71

Boero. N and CJ. Pascoe. 2012. “Pro-anorexia Communities and Online Interaction: Bringing the Pro-ana Body Online.” *Body & Society.* Vol. 18 No. 2 pp. 27-57

Bonilla-Silva, E. 1996. “Rethinking Racism: Toward A Structural Interpretation” *American Sociological Review.* Vol. 62 P. 465-480

Bonilla-Silva, E. 2010. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (3rd Ed). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Byrne D. 2008a. “Public discourse, community concerns, and civic engagement: exploring Black Social Networking Traditions on BlackPlanet.com” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* Vol. 13 No. 1 P.319–340.

Byrne D. 2008b.. The Future of (the) “Race”: Identity, Discourse, and the Rise Of Computer-Mediated Public Spheres. In: Everett A (ed.) *Learning Race and Ethnicity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, P. 15–38

Castells, M. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society. Vol. 1 of The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Blackwell, Boston.

Castells M 1997. *The Power of Identity: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. II. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cerulo, K. 1997. "Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions." *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 23. P. 385-409

Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis.* London. Sage Publications

Collins P. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought.* NewYork: Routledge

Creswell, J. 2007. *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Cruz, J. 2013. "Undergraduate Latin@ Student Organizations: A Latin@ Critical Theory Analysis." Ed.D dissertation. Teachers College, Columbia University

Daniels, J. 2012. "Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique". *New Media & Society.* Vol. 0 No.0 P. 1-25

Davis, P. (1989).Law as Microaggression. *Yale Law Journal,* 98, 1559-1577.

Dhingra. P. 2007. *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiple Identities.* Stanford University Press

DiMaggio, P. and Bonkowski, B. 2008. "Make Money Surfing the Web? The Impact of Internet Use on the Earnings of U.S. Workers" *American Sociological Review* Vol. 73 P. 227–250.

Everett A. 2004. On Cyberfeminism and Cyberwomanism: High-Tech Mediations of Feminism's Discontents. *Signs* Vol. 30 No. 1 P. 1278–1286.

Everett A. 2008. Introduction. In: Everett A (ed.) *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, P. 1–14.

Garcia, L. M., and Bayer, A. E. 2005. Variations between Latino groups in U.S. post-secondary educational attainment. *Research in Higher Education*, *46*(5), 511-533.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Grasmuck, S., Martin, J., and Zhao, S. 2009. "Ethno-Racial Identity Displays on Facebook" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.* Vol. 15 P. 158-188

Hampton, K. Sessions, L and E. Her. 2011. "Core Networks, Social Isolation And New Media How Internet And Mobile Phone Use Is Related To Network Size And Diversity" *Information Communication & Society* Vol. 14 No. 1

Hampton, K. Livio, O. and L. Session. 2010. "The Social Life of Wireless Urban Spaces-Internet Use Social Networks and the Public Realm" *Journal of Communication* Vol. 60 P. 701-722

Hampton, K. And Gupta, N. 2008. Community and Social Interaction in the Wireless City. *New Media & Society*. Vol. 10 No. 6 P. 831-850

Hampton, K. N., Livio, O., and Goulet, L. S. 2010. The Social Life of Wireless Urban Spaces: Internet Use, Social Networks, and the Public Realm. *Journal of Communication,* Vol. *60*(4), 701-722.

Hampton, K and Wellman, B. 2003. "Neighboring in Netville: How the Internet Supports Community and Social Capital in a Wired Suburb." *City and Community* 2(4), 277-311.

Haney-Lopez, I. 1994. "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice." *In Critical Race Theory* Eds. Jean, S. and R. Delgado

Hargittai, E. & Hinnant, A. 2008. 'Digital Inequality: Differences in Young Adults' Use of the Internet'. *Communication Research. Vol.* 35

Hargittai, E. & Shafer, S. 2006. 'Differences in Actual and Perceived Online Skills: The Role of Gender'. *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 432–448.

Hargittai, E. 2002. "Second-Level Digital Divide: Differences in People's Online Skills". *First Monday* vol. 7

Hargittai, E. 2003. *Informed Web Surfing: The Social Context of User Sophistication*. In P. E. N. Howard and S. Jones, eds. Society Online. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, CA:.

Hargittai, E. 2005. "Survey Measures of Web-Oriented Digital Literacy.' *Social Science Computer Review.* Vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 371–79.

Hargittai, E. 2008. "The Digital Reproduction of Inequality" In *Social Stratification*, Grusky, D. ed. Westview Press. Boulder, CO. pp. 935-943

Hargittai, E. 2010. 'Digital Na(t)ives? Variation in Internet Skills and Uses among Members of the 'Net Generation.' *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 80, No. 1

Hargittai, E. and E. Litt. (2012). "Becoming a Tweep: How Prior Online Experiences Influence Twitter Use". *Information, Communication and Society*. Vol.15 No.**5** pp. 680-702.

Harris. D. 1995. “Exploring the Determinants of Adult Black Identity: Context and Process.” *Social Forces*. Vol. 74. No. 1 pp. 227-241

hocks, m. E. 2003. Understanding visual rhetoric in digital writing environments. *College Composition and Communication, 54*(4), 629–656.

hooks b. 1984. *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center.* Boston: South End Press

Hughey, M. 2008. “Virtual (Br)others and (Re)sisters : Authentic Black Fraternity and Sorority Identity on the Internet” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography.* Vol. 35 No. 5 pp. 528-560

Hurtado. S., J. Milem., A Milem., A. Clayton-Pedersen., W. Allen. 1998. “Ehnacing Campus Climates for Racial/Ethnic Diversity: Educational Policy and Practice. *The Review of Higher Education*. Vol. 21. No. 3. Pp. 279-302

Hurtado, S. 1992. The campus racial climate: Contexts of conflict. *The Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 63* No. 5 pp. 539-569.

Ignacio. E. 2005. *Building Diaspora: Filipino Cultural Community Formation on the Internet.* Rutgers University Press.

Ito. M., S. Baumer., M Battanti., d. boyd., R. Cody., B. Herr-Stephenson., H. Horst., P. Lange., D. Mahendran., K. Martínez., C. Pascoe., D. Perkel., L. Robinson., C. Sims., L. Tripp. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media.* MIT Press. Cambridge, Mass.

Jackson, L., K. Ervin. P., Gardner., and N. Schmitt. 2001. “The Racial Digital Divide: Motivational, Affective, and Cognitive Correlates of Internet Use” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology.* Vol.31 No. 10 pp. 2019-2046

Kendall. L. 2000. “Oh no! I’m a nerd!” Hegemonic masculinity on an on-line forum. *Gender and Society* 14:256–74.

Kinnevy, S. C., and G. Enosh. 2002. Problems and promises in the study of virtual communities. *Journal of Technology in Human Services* 19:119–34

Lee, B. C. Farrell and B. Link. 2004. “Revisiting the Contact Hypothesis: The Case of Public Exposure to Homelessness” *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 69 No. 1 P. 40-63

Lee, E. 2012. “Digital Diaspora on the Web: The Formation and Role of an Online Community of Female Korean Im/migrants in the U.S.” PhD dissertation. Department of Communication, Information and Library Studies. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Massey, D. and N. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass.* Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass.

Massey, D., C. Charles, G. Lundy, and M. Fisher. 2003. *The Source of the River: The Origins, Aspirations, and Values of Freshman at America's Elite Colleges and Universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach (2nd ed.*). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meyrowitz, J. 1987. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior.* New York. Oxford University Press

Meyrowitz J. 1989. The generalized else- where. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication.* 6(3):323– 34

Morning, A. 2009. "Toward a Sociology of Racial Conceptualization for the 21st Century." *Social Forces.* Vol. 87. No. 3

Mutua. A. 1999. "Shifting Bottoms and Rotating Centers -Reflections on LatCrit III and the Black:White Paradigm." *University of Miami Law Review.* Vol. 53 No. 1177

Nakamura, L. 2008. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet.* New York: Routledge.

Nakamura, L and Chow-White. P. 2012. *Race after the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Nagel, J. 1994. Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture. *Social Problems*. 41, 152-176.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration. 1995. *Falling Through the Net: A Survey of the "Have Nots" in Rural and Urban America*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Commerce.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration. 2000. *Falling Through the Net: Toward Digital Inclusion*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Commerce.

National Telecommunications and Information Administration. 2002. *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding their Use of the Internet*.. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Commerce

Obasogie, O. 2010. "Do Blind People See Race? Social, Legal, and Theoretical Considerations. *Law & Society Review.* Vol. 44 No. 3/4

Omi, M. and H. Winant**.** 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.* New York: Routledge.

PEW Center for the People and the Press. 1995. *Technology in the American household.* Washington, D.C.

PEW Internet and American Life Project. 2000. *Tracking Online Life: How Women Use the Internet to Cultivate Relationships with Family and Friends*. Washington, D.C.

PEW Internet and American Life Project. 2009. *Wireless Internet Use.* Washington, D.C.

PEW Internet and American Life Project. 2010. *Mobile Access 2010.* Washington, D.C.

PEW Internet and American Life Project. 2012. *Digital differences.* Washington, D.C

PEW Internet and American Life Project. 2013a. *The Demographics of Social Media Users.* Washington, D.C.

PEW Internet and American Life Project. 2013b. *Smartphone Ownership.* Washington, D.C.

PEW Research Center tabulations of U.S. Census Bureau Population Projections Released December 2014 and 2015 Population Estimates

Park, J.K. 2004. "Virtual Ethnography or Ethnography of Virtuality? Methodological Analysis of Ethnographic Research of the Internet." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.

Pascoe, C. 2012. "Studying Young Peoples New Media Use - Methodological Shifts and Educational Innovations. *Theory Into Practice.* Vol. 51. Pp. 76–82

Pierce, C., Carew, J., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., & Wills, D. (1978). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. In C. Pierce (Ed.), *Television and education* (pp. 62-88). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Pierce, C. 1995. "Stress analogs of racism and sexism: Terrorism, torture, and disaster" In C. Willie, P. Rieker, B. Kramer, & B. Brown (Eds.), *Mental health, racism, and sexism* (pp. 277-293). Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press

Portes, A. and M. Zhou. 1993. "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants." *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science.* Vol. 530 P. 74-96.

Prasad, P., and A. Mills. 1997. "From Showcase To Shadow: Understanding The Dilemmas Of Managing Workplace Diversity". In *Managing The Organizational Melting Pot: Dilemmas Of Workplace Diversity* , edited by P. Prasad, A. Mills, M. Elmes, and A. Prasad. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage.

Putnam R. 2007. *E Pluribus Unum*: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first

Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture

Rainie, L and B. Wellman. 2012. *Networked: The New Social Operating System.* Cambridge MA. MIT Press

Renn, K. A. "Patterns of Situational Identity Among Biracial and Multiracial College Stu- dents." *Review of Higher Education,* 2000, *23*, 399–420.

Renn, K. A. "Understanding the Identities of Mixed-Race College Students Through a Developmental Ecology Lens." *Journal of College Student Development,* 2003, *44,* 383–403.

Renn, K. A. *Mixed Race Students in College: The Ecology of Race, Identity, and Community*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2004.

Rheingold H. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Rockquemore, K and D. Brunsma. 2002. *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America*. Sage

Roth, W. 2012. *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press

Ryan, J. 2008. "The Virtual Campfire: Ethnography of Online Social Networking." MA thesis in Anthropology, Wesleyan University.

Shiao, J, T. Bode, A. Beyer, and D. Selvig. 2012. "The Genomic Challenge to the Social Construction of Race." *Sociological Theory.* Vol.30 No. 2 P. 67-88

Sigelman, L and S. Tuch. 1997. "Metastereotypes: Blacks' perceptions of Whites stereotypes of Blacks." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Vol.61 pp. 87–101

Slater, D. 2002. "Making things real: Ethics and Order on the Internet." *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol.19 pp. 227–45

Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. 2000. Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, And Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences Of African American College Students. *The Journal of Negro Education,* Vol.69 pp. 60-73.

Somerville, P. 1997. "The Social Construction of Home." *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* Vol. 14 No. 3 pp. 226-245.

Tatum, B. 1992. "Talking About Race, Learning About Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom." *Harvard Educational Review.* Vol.62 No.1 pp.1-24.

Torres, K. and C. Charles. 2004. “Metastereotypes and the Black-White Divide: A Qualitative View of Race on an Elite College Campus.” *Du Boise Review* Vol. 1. No. 1. P. 115-149

Tuan, M. 1998. *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today.* Rutgers University Press

Turkle S. 1997. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of Internet*. Cambridge, MA. MIT Press.

Turkle, S. 1999. “Cyberspace and Identity.” *Contemporary Sociology.* Vol. 28 No. 6 P. 643-648

Vasquez, J. 2010. “The Bumpy Road of Assimilation: Gender, Phenotype and Historical Era.” *Sociological Spectrum* Vol. 31 P. 1-30.

Vasquez, J. 2011. “Blurred Borders for Some but Not “Others”: Racialization, “Flexible Ethnicity,” Gender, and Third-Generation Mexican American Identity” *Sociological Spectrum.* Vol. 53 No. 1 pp. 45-72

Wacquant, L. 2002. “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘race question’ in the U.S.” *New Left Review*. Vol. 13 P. 41-60

Waters. M. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities.* Harvard University Press. Cambridge Massachusetts

Wellman. B. 2004. “Connecting Community: On- and Off-line.” *Contexts.* Vol. 3 No. 4

Wellman, B., A. Haase., J. Witte., and K. Hampton. 2001. “Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, or Supplement Social Capital?: Social Networks, Participation, and Community Commitment. *American Behavioral Scientist.* Vol. 45 pp. 463

Wittel, A. 2000. “Ethnography on the Move: From Field to Net to Internet” *Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 1 No. 21

Wong, A. 2000. Cyberself: Identity, language and stylization on the Internet. In *Cyberlines: Languages and cultures of the Internet,* ed. D. Gibbs and K. L. Krause. Albert Park, Australia: James Nicholas.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zillien, N. and Hargittai, E. 2009. “Digital Distinction: Status-Specific Types of Internet Usage.” *Social Science Quarterly* vol. 90, no. 2.