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Operating the Digital Space in the Age of Protest Participation

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OPERATING THE DIGITAL SPACE IN THE AGE OF PROTEST PARTICIPATION

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- Kyle Stanley

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Abstract

This study examines young African American adults' usage of social media and other digital spaces as tools to build community given the rise in protest participation in North American (U. S.) society while at the height of a global health pandemic. Since early adulthood is a time where African Americans are most active online, this study will examine how and why those African Americans are turning to digital spaces to find social connections. Racism and racial injustice are two of the most pressing issues in the African American community, and it is clear that it can be an emotionally laborious process. Through Critical Race Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study examines the qualitative responses of 17 participants (12 women; 5 men) age 18-35 who share how and why they are using digital spaces. Twelve dominant themes arose as a result of the study, and collectively, they demonstrate that African American young adults are using digital spaces to form social connections, fulfill various needs, and develop community as a result of racial injustice.

CHAPTER 1. PURPOSE AND INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

Introduction

When future historians look back on this period in U. S. history, they will quickly see that the beginning of the 2020s likely defined the decade by its placement in the middle of a global health pandemic and the burgeoning social justice crisis affecting the global population. As a result of the COVID-19 global health pandemic, a nationwide reckoning over racial injustice and policing in Black and Brown[1]communities, and the struggle to develop socially supportive networks when it is most difficult, communities are struggling now like never before. The need for new research regarding the relationship between digital spaces and African Americans requires immediate attention. Though racial injustice and abuse of power are not new to African American[2] communities, the U. S. public and the world witnessed the grievances of the Black community directly as a result of the Trayvon Martin killing in 2013 and every egregious death since then (Reed, 2019). Even through a global pandemic, racial injustice still affected the African American community through witnessing constant exposure to the video footage of the murder of George Floyd along with others. This reality of racial injustice is not surprising to many African Americans, yet how this racial trauma affects African American communities is becoming increasingly noteworthy. As a result of these tragedies, many African Americans are seeking community in digital spaces in an effort to establish social support in very tumultuous times in their public and private lives (Steele, 2017). Since the COVID-19 global health pandemic requires much physical (i.e., social) distance, the only place many historically

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[1] This study will capitalize *Black*, and not *white*, when referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. The term *Black serves* as both a recognition of an ethnic identity in the States that doesn't rely on hyphenated Americanness (i.e. African American)

[2] African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout this document.

marginalized groups (HMGs)[3] can find the social support or community is in digital spaces. This phenomenon of community-seeking and racial trauma is not new, but the use of social media to address this need is. Thus, this project aimed to explore three fundamental questions about how media is reshaping the overall structure of the African American community, especially as racial injustice is becoming more prevalent in contemporary society and is forcing many African Americans to use digitals space as a means to cope with and address racial inequalities. These three questions will be addressed in-depth in Chapter 1 of this document; however, each question addresses a different part of the problem at hand. Generally speaking, this study is interested in how African Americans are using digital spaces, how effective these digital spaces are in developing community, and what are the major barriers to finding this community online.

<div align="center">**Statement of the Problem**</div>

Current research is limited on how exactly the components of social networking and social support tie directly to African American digital media usage; however, researchers agree that African Americans are using social media platforms as venues for political engagement and social activism (Cobb, 2016). This, again, became far more evident throughout leadup and throughout the summer of 2020. During those few short months, the lives of Ahmad Admuad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Jacob Blake, and George Floyd were taken as a result of systemic injustice, specifically within law enforcement. Speculatively, the burden of the global health pandemic disproportionately affecting African Americans and the weight of systemic injustice bearing on the shoulders of the Black community became far too much to bear and warranted the need for immediate action (Bowman, 2020). The digital space took on a new role in the era of

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[3] For the purposes of this study, HMG are listed as: women, racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, LGBTQIA+, and low SES populations

COVID-19, as some high-risk populations could not participate in the physical nature of protest. Thus, online platforms like Facebook and Twitter[4] became paramount for African Americans in finding community.

According to a December 2020 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, African American populations were far more likely to say that sites such as Twitter and Facebook are personally important to them to get involved in political activism and/or find like-minded individuals (Pew Research Center, December 2020). Supporters of activist movements use social networking to share breaking news, circulate images and engage with news stories about corresponding protests. While these facts are vital, very little is known about how viewing racial trauma online and in the media (i.e., television, documentaries) adversely affects African American young adults[5]. The health and racial pandemics at the start of the 2020s highlight a fact that is evident to many African American communities. Overt and covert racism, both systemic and interpersonal, are dramatically affecting governmental systems that were allegedly designed to both protect and care for its citizens. From the beginning of 2013 with the murder of Trayvon Martin to the summer of 2020, online discourses have proved that the United States is reckoning with its racist past and present through the tragedies of both a global health pandemic and a racial epidemic that are disproportionately killing African Americans (Rosenblatt, 2020). African American subjugation to police brutality, government-sanctioned murders, and systemic oppression is a never-ending, daily struggle, hence the need for research on this important societal phenomenon.

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[4] Other platforms like Reddit, Google Forums, Instagram, etc. are noteworthy as well, but this study focuses on Twitter and Facebook

[5] Young adults for the sake of this study are defined as individuals from the age of 18-29.

In response to these injustices, some African Americans turn to online platforms to combat systemic oppression and build community amidst tragedy (Hu, 2020). Research showed that HMGs often use the digital space for community (López, 2020). For instance, LGBTQ+ and disabled youth often turn to online platforms to both find and build like-minded communities (Cavalcante, 2016), and African American youth are doing the same thing (Rheingold, 2011). Because of the global health pandemic that requires significant human physical distance, arguably, young African Americans are becoming even more reliant upon online platforms for activism now more than ever (Gonzales, 2017). This need created a virtual, yet real, space for them to have difficult and productive conversations about race while also sharing with each other personal accounts of racism that confirm the reality of racist systemic disparities plaguing American society.

Online platforms are, by definition, a place for the free exchange of ideas and values (Pallett, 2020), and African American young adults, specifically, use online platforms for community building (Clark, 2015). These efforts have resulted in many of them developing a common space very similar to a barbershop or beauty salon that has cultural significance and value (Steele, 2017). Police brutality and its aftereffects are now being filmed for large swaths of the American public to witness, thereby shedding light on one of the most controversial aspects of the United States judicial system (Nevett, 2020).

This study sought to discover what, if any, kind of relationship exists between media consumption of racial injustice and the new uses of the digital space for things such as political engagement and social support. The effects of social isolation have no boundaries in terms of who is impacted and in what ways. Regardless of age, race, ethnicity, educational background, and socioeconomic status, every people group in society is impacted somehow. In order to gain a

deeper understanding of this very real phenomenon, this study employed the use of in-depth interviews to discover how and why people of color use these spaces. Unfortunately, the beginning of the new decade presented challenges unlike any other post-slavery period in U. S. history; therefore, this study sought to discover the personal and sometimes uncomfortable stories about these experiences that exist for African Americans in the digital space.

Purpose of the Study

With all of the aforementioned knowledge presently available, it became clear that there needs to be a wide expansion and advancement of the research addressing both socially supportive networks and digital activism[6]. This study was designed with the intent to explore how and why young African Americans engaging in activism seek socially supportive networks online. The study focused on three main research questions. The first question was designed to explore how and to what extent African Americans are engaging in activism and operating within the digital space. According to Rideout et. al (2011), African Americans use social media at a rate similar to that of white Americans; however, African Americans are the largest consumer of television media and cinema in the United States (Perrin, 2015). This knowledge serves an important role when collecting data for this study. As a whole, media are fundamentally changing the way media observers view the world around them. As more research becomes available, it is noteworthy that total media consumption[7] appears higher amongst younger minorities[8] than that of younger white American citizens (Perrin, 2015).

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[6] Participants were encouraged to develop their own definition of digital activism as to not limit their responses during the interview process; however, digital activism can be thought of as a form of activism that uses the internet, digital spaces, and social networking platforms as places for mass mobilization and political action,

[7] This includes television, cinema, streaming, social media, and online video platforms like TikTok and Youtube.

[8] For the sake of the study this refers to Black and Latinx communities.

Perrin's (2015) research further provided evidence that communities of color are much more likely to be engaging in the digital space, which means these communities are far more likely to be influenced by the media and its overall effect on their attitudes toward using the digital space as a place for belonging. To that end, this project sought to understand the ways in which the different types of platforms, specifically social media activism, are used amongst younger African Americans. Koeze and Popper (2020) offer preliminary evidence that the digital space has become a safe space for minority groups in the midst of the COVID-19 health pandemic and racial reckoning that was plaguing the U. S. in 2020. According to Thai, Sheeran, and Cummings (2019), social media users often seek support and emotional connections with others who have shared experiences, identities, and interests. To that end, the first research question was posed in order to better understand current uses of social media and the relationships that develop in these spaces.

RQ1: In what ways do African American young adults (Age 18-35) who engage in social media activism seek interpersonal connections in digital spaces?

The interview questions were structured in a way that allowed the participants to discuss their feelings of belonging in digital spaces. Since their social media activism was related to social justice, it was anticipated that they would have either had firsthand or secondhand experiences with racism. These shared experiences might ultimately contribute to the interpersonal connections, relationships, and social support that users seek and are able to provide each other through their engagement with social media activism. Participants also had the opportunity to share how these spaces and other interpersonal resources were used as a form of social support and a place to cope with racism. It was anticipated that participants would

reveal the different kinds of racism (i.e., cyber racism, offline racism) they have experienced and the specific ways that social media activism has contributed to their coping in and through these virtual communities. As will be discussed later, participants did in fact have experiences with racism, which directly influenced their decision to be actively engaged with digital activism in very important and valuable ways.

Another aspect of social media activism that this study explored was the quality of the kinds of support users received (or not) from their virtual communities. Literature states that social media and online communities continue to provide spaces that result in support for HMGs, especially African Americans (Benson et al, 2020; Kingod et al, 2019; Liebermann, 2020; Zhang et al, 2017). For example, LGBTQIA+ and disabled communities often find a greater sense of community online than in-person (McConnell et al., 2018). This and other studies indicate that the way people consume media dramatically affects how they interact with those around them. Social media platforms have the potential to facilitate conversations, such as coming out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, that might not happen offline (Khalis & Mikami, 2018). By extension, social media consumers are more likely to be influenced by the content that they are subjected to due to social media being solely focused on the individual, which makes social media a far more personal platform. According to Power and Phillips-Wren (2011), media have the potential to shape public perceptions of major topics. Media also have the capability to impact the mental and emotional status of their consumers. While there are pros and cons of social media use, it provides many consumers the chance to connect with like-minded individuals and find a sense of community. Thus, the following research question was posed:

RQ2. How (in)effective are social media and online communication platforms in

serving as a support system for these individuals and their ability to cope

with racism and racial injustice?

A third area of interest in this study is the meanings that are associated with online communities established by social activists. There is particular interest in understanding what qualities are considered most important or vital in determining what constitutes a virtual community. Research has shown that digital spaces are now serving as support spaces for those dealing with certain experiences (Gilmour et al, 2020); therefore, this study attempted to explore this topic in relation to social media activists. The literature on modern media usage among young adults (18-35) is inconclusive regarding its findings related to whether poor mental health is directly connected to social media usage; however, it is clear that younger users are more likely to experience cyberbullying and harassment online. Ten to 20 percent of all adolescents experience cyberbullying, and as a result, they endure emotional distress and negative emotions such as anger, fear, and depression (Bottino et al, 2015). Thus, the following research question explored how the emotional and mental well-being of African American youth are impacted by involvement in digital spaces.

RQ3. What are the barriers to finding and accessing community in younger African

Americans, especially those who find themselves frequently on the digital space?

Theoretical Framework

In order to better understand how and why the digital space has become so crucial to community building in the midst of systemic oppression, this study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as one of two foundational frameworks. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), Critical Race Theory centers on the experiential knowledge of ethnic and racial minorities concerning

race and race relations (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). It focuses on the issues of racial inferiority, prejudice, and inequity, and addresses the socially constructed and discursive nature of race. It also argues that micro-aggressive behaviors contribute directly to racial discrimination and, in terms of social support and healthcare, the lack of resources available in minority communities (Ford, 2018). Effectively, CRT is a way of seeing the world in order to help others understand the historical context of institutional and covert and overt forms of racism in contemporary society. In terms of research, Critical Race Theory provides scholars with a way to understand and explain how marginalized identities affect how a person operates in the world and why their marginal identity is the result of disparities in experiences and resources rarely afforded to marginal communities. In essence, CRT offers a lens through which to understand historical instances of institutionalized racism, such as a lack of access to adequate housing, justice, and education, affect how HMG operate in said spaces.

Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bell (1973) are credited with establishing Critical Race Theory and identifying the six assumptions under which it operates. The first assumption is that race is a socially constructed product of social thought and relations. The second states that racism is normal, ordinary, and ingrained in society, thus making it difficult to recognize. The third assumption argues that traditional claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color-blindness must be contested in order to reveal the self-interests of dominant groups. The fourth assumption states that social justice platforms and practices are the only way to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression and injustice. The fifth assumption is that the experiential knowledge of communities of colors or their "unique voice" is valid, legitimate, and critical toward understanding the persistence of racial inequality. In essence, communities of color are differentially racialized depending on the interests of the dominant group. The sixth and final

assumption argues that history and historical contexts must be taken into account in order to challenge policies and practices that affect people of color, and since race is often demonstrated through storytelling and counternarratives, the stories of people of color help shape and target said challenges. Collectively, these assumptions provide a theoretical framework that is essential in helping scholars and society members better understand and articulate the complexity of race in many social contexts. Given these assumptions, this study sought to explore how race factors into consumption and navigation of digital platforms in the era of heightened protest participation. Racism is active and ordinary, and social activism is a necessary step in the way to eradication, hence the use of CRT. This study is the first step toward understanding this new and evolving phenomenon.

CRT is concerned with demonstrating how marginalized identities are the direct result of formal and informal forms of systemic oppression. As such, it offers a critical cultural approach to understanding nuanced differences in HMG that affect how they operate in daily life. Critical Race Theory recognizes that this is the case and offers a critical approach to understanding the material differences in lived experiences of those whose identities and realities are shaped by their connections to one or more HMG. Regarding this study, CRT was used as a framework primarily because of its connection to marginal identities and emphasis on the lack of institutional resources to which those groups have access.

Scholars have used CRT to study and examine education, healthcare, literature, sports, and law just to name a few (Ansell, 2008). Almost no research currently exists on how Critical Race Theory can examine digital spaces and community groups online; however, there are several studies that currently address how Critical Race Theory contributes to protest participation and can be used as a pedagogical tool (Dixon, 2018; Tate IV, 1997). Adrienne D.

Dixon (2018) used Critical Race Theory to study Black Lives Matter and activism in education. Similarly, almost 20 years prior, William Tate IV studied CRT in the classroom in higher education as a way of exploring deficits in education. Often, CRT is used as a pedagogical tool to help people of color explain how and why there are deficits that exist between institutions and resources given to them as people of color (Parker, 2004). Over time, CRT has become a way of understanding how race and privilege impact educational deficits, which expanded its scope past just legal scholarship and feminist theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

When first introduced, Crenshaw and Bell established CRT as a way of critically examining how the law approached issues regarding race and racial injustice (Ansell, 2008). As the scope of CRT broadened, scholars began using the theory as a way of examining privilege, especially white privilege, in spaces in which the public operated (Levin, 2008). Given the pervasive nature of racism in the U.S., it is surprising how little research currently exists when examining CRT in digital spaces. In 2017, Kathy A. Mills began to research how CRT contributed to interpreting representations of race and racism in media research. She argued that the digital communication environment enabled the expansion of Western ideologies and culture but did not explore how whiteness and white privilege affect the overall experiences of HMG online. This appears to be a fundamental oversight of one of the major assumptions of CRT.

Nevertheless, social media platforms are growing in usage and popularity and arguably have more influence on young adults than any other medium (Van Dijck & Poell 2013). In 2011, Rosalie Rolon-Dow examined how the art of storytelling in digital spaces contributes to critical race scholarship and found that it can be and is a useful tool for telling the stories of people of color. Given its focus, Rolon-Dow's study laid the foundation for this study. Other scholars argue similarly that CRT can be a useful framework for examining how people of color operate

in digital spaces (Matamoros-Fernadez & Farkas, 2021); however, very few scholars have ventured to do so. Thus, it is for these reasons that this study used Critical Race Theory as one of its foundational frameworks. In addition to understanding how privilege affects user experiences online, this study aimed to understand how and what users are expecting from using these platforms.

Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G) was first introduced in the 1940s by Hadley Cantril as a way to understand why individuals were choosing to consume different forms of media. However, in 1974, Elihu Katz shifted the focus of the theory to focus on the social and psychosocial needs of users that different types of media are satisfying (Blumler & Katz, 1974). He is largely mentioned as the founder of the modern theory. Researchers have since approached U&G from a motivational standpoint. Many scholars typically use U&G as a media theory, and it has recently been used to address the mental health effects of different social media platforms on their users (Apodaca, 2017). In short, researchers conceptualize U&G as a mental heuristic, a mental shortcut that ties one bit of information to others (Baran & Davis, 2003). Media now offer individuals benefits such as finding meaning, understanding reality, and considering personal values (Bartsch & Oliver, 2009). As media continues to expand, users will continue to find new uses for platforms.

In practice, scholars are more specifically applying U&G to social media platforms, mobile phone usage, and television streaming in the 21st century (Leung, 2013). Mostly, scholars have agreed that U&G functions under five basic assumptions, the first being that the target audience is active and media use is goal-oriented. The second assumption is that the audience member chooses what platform to use based on what need it is expected to satisfy. The third assumption argues that media compete with other sources for need satisfaction, and the

fourth states that media influences on behavior are filtered through social and psychological factors. Lastly, the fifth assumption is that the value judgement of media content can only be assessed by the audience that was targeted (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973).

U&G has rarely been used qualitatively; therefore, this study takes a unique approach by applying said theory. U&G is commonly used to gauge whether or not a platform is operating effectively for the user (Whiting & Williams, 2013), but it has not been used to specifically center on African American media users. A review of the literature on U&G demonstrates that the purpose of media has changed, as have users' needs, over time with the advent of new technologies. As this change also advances, it becomes conceptually clear that the individual holds most of the power in the relationship between them and the media (Lazarsfield, 1940). This study fills the gap in media research as U&G will be applied specifically to African American users as a whole.

A review of the literature on the subject of media indicates that scholars can occasionally overlook the importance of the media itself in actively persuading audiences and its influence on the audience to change their behavior or take certain actions (Ruggiero, 2009). Certain messages from the media can, and often do, affect the way an audience views an individual or another medium. Thus, it stands to reason that African Americans will report different uses and needs for social media than other racial/ethnic groups.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, the study was qualitative in nature and specifically involved the researcher conducting in-depth interviews with participants via a virtual platform (i.e., Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Team). Virtual interviews were conducted in light of the COVID-19 global health pandemic and adherence to CDC and state/local health protocols. While CRT scholars typically conduct in-depth interviews, focus groups, and critiques (Crabtree

& Miller, 1992), U&G has historically used a quantitative method for gathering data. As such, this study is unique in that it is merging these two theories and solely using a qualitative approach to answer the research questions.

Subjectivity Statement

To preserve the integrity of this research, it is imperative to understand my position as a Black man, scholar, and social activist. I, the researcher, became aware of my Blackness from an early age while operating in the South under the fallacy of a post-racialized America after the election of Barack Obama. This awareness allowed me to further recognize the limitations to which that oppression had subjected my community. After the election of Donald Trump, it became clear to me that the American public was not as advanced on the issues of race as we once thought we were. The four years that followed the presidential election of 2016 opened my eyes even further to how dangerous miseducation can be, especially on the issue of race. The United States finally had to sit down and wrestle with the racist origins of our past and the racism that still currently resides in our society even as some try to deny its existence. Though I recognize that the United States has made incredible strides regarding racial justice and equality, the work is far from done.

As I became older, I began to understand that, as an African American, I had a personal obligation to use my voice and the platforms I was given to advance all people of color, especially African American communities. As early as middle school, I knew that my voice was important for sharing the stories of people in my physical community. This was also the first time I logged on to social media by creating Twitter and Facebook accounts. I could finally post my thoughts and opinions in the open with very little fear of what was to come.

I began using the Twitter application on my computer almost daily, and quickly, I was able to find people from all over the world with whom I could connect. These connections made their way to popular messaging apps and into phone calls, which is how I became friends with so many people back then. It was at that point that I recognized it is very possible to make close

social connections with people from all over the country. I often felt as if I did not have many close social connections or friends where I lived; therefore, social media gave me such a feeling of comfort and emotional intimacy with others who were like me.

As I entered my post-baccalaureate life, I began to examine how people were making social connections in new communities. I found profound interest in this subject as I moved to a new state where I knew no one and had difficulty making new friendships. Then, a few months after this endeavor, a global health pandemic came in and changed the entire course of social connections for months to come. As I found myself sitting in my childhood bedroom every day for months, I began to grow frustrated with life; therefore, I went online to find people who were feeling the same way as me. I was able to find friends and connections through these actions; however, as the world made the transition into summer 2020, the issue of police brutality and racial injustice became more prevalent every day. I grew tired of going online and seeing yet another death of an unarmed African American. I knew I could not be alone in this feeling. Thus, the idea of this project was born. It is important to recognize that both my place as an African American engaging in digital activism and my position as a researcher impact how my participants interact with me and their likelihood to be vulnerable during the interview process.

I offer this narrative of my life in order for readers to recognize the lens through which I am interpreting said data, thus improving the validity of this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). It is possible for personal biases to affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation; however, by recognizing and controlling the bias, validity is not at risk (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I explain in detail in chapter 3 of this document how I maintain validity throughout this study, which is also why it is important to recognize my relationship to this study and subject matter. By recognizing

my positionality, I am able to better understand the experiences and responses of my participants

while allowing them a sense of comfort with me as the investigator as well.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In recent years, scholars find themselves trying to understand the significance of protest participation. Not since the Civil Rights Movement have African Americans participated in protest activity at such high levels (Reed, 2019). Activism for many is prompted by a Black identity, which is the lens through which African Americans view and experience systemic oppression. A Black identity is also a lens for understanding one's own interpretation of protest movements such as Black Lives Matter (Bonilla, Tabitha, &Tilley, 2020). Clearly, a racial identity affects just how likely an individual is to support such racial justice movements (Bonilla et al. 2020). Thus, it stands to reason that racial and ethnic identities factor heavily into personal interpretations of social movements and, in the case of a Black racial identity, are more impactful on the likelihood of support than any other factor (Holt, 2018).

In exploring the connection between racialized social support and digital activism, what is clear is that to many, especially African Americans, the presence of social support is a secondary need (Brown 2008). As racial injustices continue to play out on social media, the question remains: How are young African Americans using a digital space to build community and develop relationships? In the future, the early half of 2020s will be defined by the COVID-19 global health pandemic, which has heightened the necessity for social connection amongst historically marginalized communities. It is reasonable to assume that a shift is higher now more than ever. With the inability to travel and congregate, and a constant need for physical distance, digital spaces are serving as the foundation for many relationships (Ramsetty & Adams, 2020). Digital spaces are both a community building platform and space for engaging in civil discourse and political activism (Center for Media and Social Impact, 2016). While engaging in some of these practices, Lieberman (2020) found that Black Americans who used social media were more

likely to have participated in these activism-related actions on these platforms in the last year than people from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. For instance, African Americans (40%) were more likely to encourage others to take action on issues that were important to them. The same was generally true across different groups when it came to posting a photo to show support for a cause[9] (Pew Research, December 2020).

History has shown that protest participation can shift public opinion and alter public discourse (Wasow, 2020). By showcasing the nuances in everyday life among diverse populations, civil rights movements, such as that of the 1960s and today, demonstrate that dominant groups like white Americans can indeed be influenced by the overall atmosphere of a social movement. For instance, the more coverage a social movement gets, the more likely the public's opinions will shift. This means that, as a social movement becomes more prominent, public opinion also shifts. Thus, the question then becomes, "If a social movement can shift public opinion for dominant groups, then can a digital protest shift public opinion on taboo topics in African American communities?" As African Americans continue to fight for systemic change in digital spaces, the presence of community online could also shift opinions on supportive social networks (Clement et al., 2013). The relationship between the digital aspect of protest and the likelihood of seeking social support for identity negotiation seems to be a strong one (Williams & Goblin, 2016). For instance, the media have a distinct role to play in stigmatization. While studies remain inconclusive about whether media can dramatically affect discrimination (Betton et al., 2015; Clement et. al, 2013; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2017), it is apparent that media can reduce prejudice towards people suffering from depression related to social isolation

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[9] This is specifically related to the Blackout Tuesday Digital Protest on June 2nd, 2020

(Clement et al. 2013). Ninety percent of young adults, aged 18-29, are active social media consumers, which is a trend that remains high as the majority of Americans aged 30-64 report using social media (Pew Research Center, 2015). While social media usage does affect users' perceptions of reality (Tajvidi, Richard, Wang, & Hajli (2020). It is unclear if African Americans using social media to engage in activism change their perceptions of social movements. Previous research has shown that African Americans use social media slightly more than their white counterparts (Perrin, 2015), which makes it even more important for scholars to consider the likelihood that HMG are using these platforms as means for protest participation.

According to Larson et al (2019), an individual's social network contributes to the likelihood of engaging in a protest, which is attributed to social networking ties (Larson et al, 2019). Relatedly, digitally engaging in protests seems to be more connected to directly viewing an injustice online (Tufekci et al., 2020). These injustices were visual representations of disparities that exist in society, and while they serve the purpose of educating and informing people about these real-world issues, it is important for scholars and practitioners to offer insight into how (over)exposure to these negative media images (i. e., cyberbullying, negative interpretations of images) is adversely impacting people who are dealing with isolation and the detrimental side effects of social media usage. These HMG engage in behaviors that potentially diminish and impede self-esteem, help-seeking behaviors, and overall recovery (Stuart 2006); therefore, it may be argued that African Americans witnessing racial injustice online likely experience similar consequences.

Though social media usage can potentially be detrimental to the overall well-being of media users, African Americans who engage in digital activism can also benefit from using these platforms. Some public and private institutions are designed to cater to the very specific needs of

often-marginalized communities such as providing resources, support, and stability, and in order

to do so, they will use different methods of communication to reach them (McGregor, 2020).

Institutions such as the NCAAP, the Human Rights Campaign, the division of Civil Rights in the

Department of Justice, and the American Civil Liberties Union, just to name a few, are all

examples of organizations designed with the specific intent to advance HMG, and they can

struggle to find effective methods in getting their message out to their target audience without

the use of digital spaces. Arguably, HMG are being sought out in these digital spaces in order to

be connected with like-minded individuals. This is of particular importance given that social

media and online communities continue to provide support for marginalized groups (Marsch et

al, 2020). As previously noted, LGBTQIA+ and disabled communities often find the most

community online. These digital communities serve as a space for identity negotiation,

companionship, relaxation, escape, and information gathering (Craig & McInroy, 2014) while

also providing space for HMGs to further develop a sense of belonging. According to Craig and

McInroy (2014), some may use these spaces to seek information, become active in their

communities, seek ways to become politically active, cope with hostility, and manage their

identity. Thus, it stands to reason that media consumption, even social media consumption, can

and often does influence members of a social group for the better (Romero et al., 2017), and as

more diverse groups consume more media, the level of influence grows as well (Lukas, 2013).

The literature on social media usage and social activism suggests that interpersonal

networks established in digital spaces offer members the opportunity to become educated about

specific topics that are otherwise unavailable to them. This is both a positive and negative aspect

of media influence, especially within HMG. Since young adults (18-35) are greater consumers of

media, mainly social media, it is plausible that they are far more likely to be influenced by media

in comparison to older groups. For instance, new social networking platforms such as TikTok are gaining traction primarily from a younger audience. While many use these platforms for entertainment, they also help educate about important matters such as public health, civil rights, and public health messaging (Basch et. al, 2020). Much like young adults, HMGs are active and use these spaces to connect with others, subsequently educating those around them about the struggles with systemic oppression that they incur on a daily basis (Simpson & Seeman, 2021)

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

While current research does exist that addresses both digital activism and social support in historically marginalized communities, there is limited scholarship that currently exists addressing how the two connect with one another, especially in African American communities. There are a multitude of ways to explore exactly how these two phenomena connect, and a qualitative approach might prove most effective in providing understanding of the intersection of socially supportive communities online and use of digital spaces to participate in social activism. Granted, quantitative methods could be used to explore this relationship across a large population and through random sampling. A deeper understanding is best gathered through qualitative methods, as they require participants to have a particular relationship to the subject matter and issue being examined in order to gain valuable insight into this phenomenon (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997; Lacey & Luff, 2001). While the objective of quantitative methods is to either confirm or deny the existence of a certain phenomenon or occurrence, qualitative research examines the lived experiences of people to understand how that phenomenon affects them and how they make meaning of certain phenomena (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative research is a form of investigation that examines information conveyed in natural environments through language and behavior through firsthand observations. It is used to collect expressive information not conveyed in quantitative data about beliefs, values, feelings, and motivations that underlie behaviors (Berwick & Inui, 1998). To identify themes that emerged through the interviews, all transcriptions and narrative responses were content analyzed through grounded theory and the open-coding process (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Holsti, 1969; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In order to discover both dominant and sub-themes, the researcher analyzed all transcripts also using discourse analysis, in which words and

phrases were the primary units of analysis. The researcher discovered dominant themes through the use of latent coding.

Data Collection

A sample of 17 participants were interviewed in order to gain an understanding of digital activism's relationship to socially supportive relationships in African American communities and the motivations (i.e., Uses and Gratifications Theory). The following section details how the study was conducted in order to establish trust, accuracy, and validity of the results. Due to the nature of virtual interviews, signatures of consent were gained by using data collection software Qualtrics.

Study Site

Due to the unique nature of the COVID-19 global health pandemic, interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom video conferencing software. As a result, the participant pool was diverse in terms of the current geographical locations of the participants. A majority of the participants were based in Baton Rouge, LA, and other participants hailed from multiple regions of the United States, including the Midwest, Southwest, West Coast, and Northeast.

Participation Criteria and Recruitment

In order to participate, eligible participants must (1) identify as Black/African American, (2) be 18 years of age or older, and no older than 35, (3) have an interest in and comfort with talking about their experiences with racial injustice and community building online, and (4) been active users on at least one social media platform. Self-identified biracial individuals were eligible only if they strongly identified with their non-Caucasian American heritage (Harris et al., 2019). This criterion was created in order to capture racialized narratives and de-center whiteness and white privilege. Another criterion was that social media users needed to be active both

before and after July 2020. The goal of the last criterion was to make sure each participant had a general understanding of the media environment, which would enable them to offer comparisons, anecdotes, and differences between the two time periods. The participant needed to be active online for at least one year before the start of the COVID-19 global health pandemic as well as the racial reckoning in the United States.

Various recruitment strategies were used to identify eligible participants. Participants were recruited through emails to listservs for Black South Eastern Conference (SEC) Graduate Organization as well as the Black Educators of Louisiana (see Appendix A) and by word of mouth, which led to snowball sampling. Once those recruitment strategies were saturated, additional efforts through snowball sampling were used. The goal was to increase the likelihood of securing participants with similar yet different uses of and experiences with digital spaces due to education, socioeconomic status, gender, and other aspects of their identities and realities as young African Americans.

The participant pool included community members, graduate students, and undergraduate students from various disciplines, communities, and universities across the United States, thus creating a diverse participant pool. Eligible participants signed up via email through a time-slotted link and received an email confirmation after completion. A reminder email and text were sent the day before the interview to ensure participation.

Research Design

This study involved the use of an interview guide that consisted of 27 questions focusing on social media usage, digital activism, and digital community building (see Appendix B). More specifically, the study addressed how, if at all, African Americans' attitudes about social issues surrounding HMGs were influenced by their engagement with social media and understanding of

the implications of racial injustice witnessed in the digital space. The participants were asked about their personal experiences with racism and protest participation online.

The sole means of data collection was through in-depth individual interviews. An interview is defined as a gathering, meeting, or consultation between one interviewer and a participant designed to gain understanding of a specific issue. While interviews can include one or more interviewers and one or more interviewees (Mertens, 2010), a one-to-one interview was the most appropriate methodology considering the sensitivity of the topic. According to Glesne (1999), researchers ask questions for purposes generally only fully known to themselves, and respondents answer questions in the context of motives, values, concerns, and needs. This process involves researchers having to make sense of significant information offered by respondents in response to the questions posed. In order to gather data specific to the focus of this study, an in-depth interview protocol was developed. The development of this protocol was modeled after the Harris et al (2018) study on racial microaggressions study (2018). The protocol was used because of its focus on racialized experiences and prompts to elicit responses directly related to research questions and CRT. Both studies utilize CRT, but the current study also specifically integrates U&G to understand community building, digital activism, and the satisfaction sought to fulfill individual needs within digital spaces.

When developing the interview questions, the researcher used both frameworks to shape how the questions were worded and to offer a strong rationale for the three research questions guiding this study. The interview questions were presented in a manner that allowed participants to offer their own perspectives on, anecdotes about, and experiences with navigating digital spaces. In terms of U&G, certain questions were developed to ask if the gratifications sought were obtained through participants' uses of digital spaces. Likewise, CRT framed the questions

in a way that asks how, if at all, racism and racial injustice both on- and offline affect their experiences and uses of digital spaces. .

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through grounded theory. Grounded theory refers to a set of systematic inductive methods for conducting qualitative research aimed at theory development (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). This study also employs the use of latent coding. Latent coding, as defined by the National Institute of Health, is the process of interpreting what is hidden deep within the text. As such, the researcher must discover the implied meaning in participants' experiences through their responses. After conducting of each interview, the researcher transcribed all 17 interviews, coded the data, and identified emergent themes. The themes were subsequently grouped together for similiarity and are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Individual Interviews

For the purposes of the study, a communication-centered guide was developed (see Appendix B) that prompted study participants to think critically about their experiences navigating digital spaces as an African American. Participants were asked to describe both positive and negative experiences online in order to combat racial injustice and community build.

The interview protocol was comprised of 26 questions that are broken into four parts. The first set of 7 questions asked the participants to describe their general experiences online. The next set of 5 questions asked participants to reflect on their experiences with racism and digital protests. The third set of 6 questions asked participants to recall their experiences with community building and social support. The last set of 8 questions asked for general perceptions of how platforms and creators can make the overall digital experience better for African

Americans online. The questions were designed to ensure participant understanding of the issues of interest and encourage thoughtful reflection on their reported experiences.

Interview Process

Prior to the interview, participants were informed that the entire interview from the pre-interview material (i.e., discussion of the Consent Form, participation criteria, etc.) would be both audio- and video-recorded for record-keeping purposes, and that their participation could be terminated at any time without penalty. The interviews ranged in length from 35 to 67 minutes. Once participation had been confirmed, participants were emailed a Zoom link after completion of the time sign-up, and reminder emails were sent one day beforehand and 30 minutes prior to the interview. They were instructed to arrive 15 minutes prior to their scheduled time and remain in the waiting room until allowed in. This would allow the interview to begin promptly at the scheduled time and reduce the possibility of interruption. After a few minutes of waiting, participants were then permitted into the main room, introduced to and welcomed by the researcher, and read the confidentiality statement and Consent Form (see Appendix A). The IRB-approved Consent Form was shared with the participant at the beginning of the interview. Participants were given the option to either e-sign or give verbal consent, which was to be recorded for the purpose for data analysis and interpretation. They were also asked to either choose or be assigned a pseudonym that would protect their identity and be used to address them throughout the interview.

The interview questions (see Appendix B) were presented verbatim unless participants needed clarification or if they covered the topic or issue in a prior question. The audio-only files

were transcribed by the researcher and reviewed after the interview to ensure transcribing

accuracy (i.e., verbatim) and maintain the integrity of the data.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. After using grounded theory analysis of the data (Yancey Martin & Turner, 1986) there were 12 emergent themes: (1) global community, (2) Identity Validation (3) community accessibility, (4) pedagogical application, (5) active participation, (6) platform curation, (7) advocacy obligation, (8) performative activism (9) cyber-privilege, (10) digital binary, (11) inaccessibility, and (12) platform vacillation.

The 12 major themes that emerged were developed through latent coding of the interview transcripts and are discussed in detail throughout the findings section; however, they will be discussed later in this chapter. Interviewee discussions of their personal navigation through digital spaces made clear that social media has created a space for creating a community while dealing with racism and racial discrimination; however, there are certain spaces, such as Facebook's general feed, that are often unwelcoming to people of color. Interviewees reflected different levels of concern about using the internet for social connections, but most of them agreed that they are happy to have these spaces.

Participants

Seventeen African Americans ranging from 18 to 34 years of age were recruited through snowball sampling. Each participant either selected or was assigned a pseudonym by the researcher in order to offer anonymity and protect participant identities. Of the participants interviewed, 13 identified as female and five identified as male. The participant pool consisted of 11 individuals who identified their current residence as being in the state of Louisiana, with seven identifying the city of Baton Rouge as their current residence. Of the remaining participants, Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, Arizona, Ohio, and the District of Columbia were identified as their home states and districts (see Appendix C). All participants openly identified

as African American and active users of social media. Participants represented a variety of socioeconomic, academic, and occupational backgrounds; however, to protect their identities, not all information is provided.

Overview of Themes

Through the analysis, 12 dominant themes emerged from the interview process. Each theme is discussed below with specific examples pulled from participant interviews to illustrate the nature of the theme. Each of the 12 themes answer a different research question presented in this study. The following section breaks down and groups the themes depending on how they might answer each of the three questions. Each theme is listed in no particular order, and next to each theme in parenthesis is the research question that the theme draws direction connection.

Research question one asked in what ways do African American young adults who engage in social media activism seek interpersonal connections in digital spaces? total of five themes emerged from the data. Each of the themes answers this research question uniquely while not overlapping. Those these are global community, identity validation, community accessibility, pedagogical application, and active participation.

Theme 1: Global Community

The first theme to emerge was "global community" and is defined as a group of people connected through the use of digital spaces for the purpose of establishing interpersonal interactions and connections based on common attitudes, interests, goals, and experiences.

Universally, every participant mentioned to some extent that they are able to use social media as a way of connecting with other users from around the world despite the physical barriers that separate them from each other and the racism that is present online. This theme offered an explanation to the first research question, which asks in what do African Americans

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who engage in social media activism seek interpersonal connections in digital spaces? This

theme not only establishes what ways African Americans use these digital spaces but also why.

Eight participants explicitly mentioned that they find the most beneficial aspect of using social

media to be the opportunity to build community online, thus removing all physical barriers.

Three participants expressed that they felt as if there was a plethora of racism present in

digital spaces and specifically social media; however, when asked why they continue to use these

spaces when they see racism, they offered definitive justifications. Heather, a 26-year-old

congressional aid based in Washington, DC, said the following:

> Well, like as much as I hate using Facebook and Instagram and stuff, it's almost
> impossible for me to stay away, you know? I'm living by myself in a strange city with
> almost no friends. It's just really nice for me to...well.. It's just cool because even though
> like the racism is there, I can go to my specific corner of the social media and feel
> comfortable. If it's Twitter, I'll see racism and almost immediately after I'll a see a joke
> from Black Twitter that lets me realize why I continue to be on the app. If I go to
> Facebook, I'll go look at my little Black Girl Magic group and see girls from all over the
> country, well all over the world coming together to support and hype up each other, and
> it's just to feel seen and supported… you know? (4:127-135)

This sentiment resonated with two other participants who offered similar justifications. When

prompted with a similar question about why she felt it was beneficial to use online spaces to

build community, Peyton says

> As I said earlier, there's something out there for everyone. You'll find your community
> whether you're looking for it or not. that's so cool. That's the beauty of the digital age.
> There are some shortcomings and I won't lie. however, just think about the people who
> are getting to experience life for the first time. I specifically like ...for instance, LGBTQ
> people can find each other like never before. They can bond over *RuPaul's Drag Race* or
> *Pose* or *Legendary* or whatever they like. It just makes my heart happy. like I saw a story
> the other day, where this guy found out he had 38 siblings. his father was a sperm donor,
> but it's still cool that they were all able to find each other. doesn't that just make you
> happy? Just stuff like that is why the internet is so important nowadays. I know that there
> are negatives but it's important that we use it for good. (6:210-218)

Through the interviews, it was learned that, more often than not, people are using social media and the internet as a whole to find each other even when they feel alone or unable to make connections in their own physical community. Julia, a 30-year-old certified public accountant, mentions that,

> In the year of our Lord, 2021, it's virtually impossible to not be friends with people outside of your community. It's almost essential for you to meet people who don't live next door to you. For instance, some of my best friends live in Oakland, California; I live in Cleveland, Ohio. How did I meet them? Through college, but how do I keep up with them? Through the internet. I'm trying my hardest I understand why I wouldn't find it important. Umm, I just can't find a reason. What makes this so important for me, is the fact that we primarily go online to seek out new opinions. I know What my best friend thinks, I know what my mom thinks., I know what the girl next door to me thinks; I want to hear what someone thinks in Texas, Louisiana, New York, Florida, Arizona, or whatever you know? Like, no one's experiences are monolithic whether we be Black or any other marginal identity. So, I like seeing that online. (6:234-245)

As a result of developing community and socially supportive networks online, many participants recognize the necessity now more than ever to be in a community as both the COVID-19 global health pandemic and the racial reckoning facing the country are at the forefront of social consciousness. The majority recognized that their opinions of their online experiences are a direct result of the users they interact with online.

Theme 2: Identity Validation

"Identity validation," the second emergent theme, refers to the process of establishing documentary evidence from outside sources, thereby demonstrating that a process, activity, or experience related to one's own identity is well-grounded, sound, or correct in accordance with social constructs. In addition to the previous theme, this theme directly answers one of the ways African Americans use digital spaces to seek out interpersonal connections. The interviews revealed that participants seek to have their identities validated through social connections in digital spaces, and as a result, African Americans are able to build community with others who

have similar experiences despite the physical barriers that may exist. Through textual analysis, it became clear that these specific African Americans are using digital spaces to have their race-related experiences and racial identities affirmed. Of the participants, 5 of the 17 (4 women and 1 man, 29% of participants) used words and/or phrases directly related to identity validation. When directly questioned about their experiences using digital platforms to affirm who they understand themselves to be, 8 participants confirmed that they do, in fact, go online to form connections with other African Americans and sites that validate their Blackness.

In response to the question about which spaces make her feel the most comfortable online, Georgia, a 21-year-old college student, responded that there are a few specific spaces that serve that purpose. She explained that these spaces are unique and make her feel confident about her blackness. The essence of this experience is captured in the following quote:

> I would say Black Twitter...like to talk. Um, just social justice TikTok is funny. Um, but even within, like I said, like these Black spaces on these apps.. not just always like this serious stuff, where they reporting on like all these terrible acts. Getting to see, you know, just regular content like comedy, you know, suspense, all the different types of jokes, just seeing a variety of Black content kind of helps me because it gives me some sense of normalcy. Even though, like, you know all these big things are going on, but it's still okay to like laugh at this like sketch or like laugh at something you saw online. So say like I said, Black TikTok, Black Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat I would say just because it's like giving you insight into people's lives because you just recording your day to day it's not necessarily like set content that people are going to be talking about so I would say, those are like the main forms. (2:87-98)

Georgia further elaborated on this sentiment when asked about her definition of community and to discuss how digital platforms shape her view of the community she seeks. In essence, she viewed community as a place to find support and comfort while an active member of the digital space. She says:

> I would define community as, like, a place… a place where people can come to, you know, what am I trying to say? So, find comfort and support and it doesn't necessarily even have to be like-minded individuals, but just people with that same goal of providing

that, like, that sense of support and like you know we're here together if you need something, or if you want to talk and just having that ability to speak with others about what's going on and those shared experiences that you're having And being online is definitely given me a sense of community and that I'm able to connect with other people, whether it's, you know, shared experiences, who are going to some of the same things are seeing some of the same things that I have. It's easy to interact with them, and, you know, stay in touch. (7:269-277)

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that how these specific African Americans feel about themselves can be a direct reflection of how supportive community members are to their overall wellbeing. This is captured by a quote from Rachael, a 22-year-old recent college graduate:

[...], I definitely think that the empowerment aspect [of social media] is something that I, like the most. Seeing "Black Twitter" come together in many different cases is really interesting, and I think that it's really unique just because they're Black people from all over the world connecting on social issues, entertainment things like that. I would say that my least favorite thing about social media is the ways in which it really has taken over our lives. We didn't have social media, and it was kind of like you made more organic connections with people, and I think that through social media it's almost become a numbers game where people are more focused on leveraging their popularity or their connections, rather than making genuine connections. (2:45-53)

While this sentiment is present throughout the rest of her interview, other participants also shared that their visibility in these spaces has afforded them the opportunity to grow confident in themselves. This need for connection and affirmation seems to be of particular importance, as the world and, subsequently, the participants, were thrust into a global health pandemic that required physical distance for their literal survival.

Digital spaces are transformative for African Americans as they continue to operate in a society that inhibits the advancement of people of color, especially African Americans. When prompted, participant Julia shares her opinions on social media by saying,

[…]I mean getting [to] see Black Twitter excited about something new is so funny to me, but I definitely love that I get to go online and see so many people just validate my emotions and my feelings. Like there's this common struggle among all of us, and that's just like so cool to me. Every day is a new adventure online. Twitter and Instagram and Reddit and TikTok and other stuff, you know, just make me happy for the right reasons.

I'm discouraged some days and other days I feel so excited for the future of how we connect. (1:21-28)

From this quote, it is evident that identity validation provides Julia and others who seek it comfort in knowing that their experiences are sound or well-grounded. Through textual analysis, it was revealed that participants were more likely to view themselves confidently if other African Americans offered support to them in digital spaces whether that be in private or public forums.

When asked why he continues to use platforms after encountering racism, Ryan explains that,

There is no feeling in the world that compares to your [Black] brothers hyping you up and supporting you bro. It is a feeling like no other. Even if them white people argue with you and call you every name on the book, I know someone I love is going to hype me up in some way. If I post a picture on Facebook, one of my mama's Facebook friends is going to tell me I look good. If I post anything on [Instagram] I know my friends will hype me up or give me support whenever I need it most. (3:97-102)

Ryan's thoughts here reflect the overall human desire to be supported and connected even after encountering a detrimental experience online. Through the use of these socially supportive networks, Ryan was able to find an experience that helped him recognize how valid his identity actually was.

Theme 3: Community Accessibility

The third theme, "community accessibility," is the perception that the social connections between community members are easy, barrier-free, and limitless to anyone's participation in normal activity on digital platforms. This theme is different from the global community theme in that participants recognize the need for connection and use social media to gain access to any form of community in which they have an interest or connection to. This theme relates to both theme 2 and 3 by addressing in what ways African Americans use social media to build the all-important interpersonal connections.

Participants largely agreed that using the internet and social media was most effective for them when they sought out new social connections. Seven participants (all women) either directly or indirectly stressed the importance of having community accessibility. This was evident with Julia, who shared that some of her greatest pleasures are derived from being able to find social connections through a unique interest of hers.

> [...] Like, I like to meet people the old-fashioned way, but it's cool to meet people from all over the world who like the same stuff as me. Um, for example, I'm in this Facebook group for people who love *Bad Girls Club.* Like, all we do is talk about old episodes and laugh about how stupid they all were. Like, I met a girl on there that lives like an hour away from me, and we met up and sorta became friends. Like, it's cool that we get to use the internet to do all this stuff even when it's different parts of the world coming together. I don't think you get how stupid that show is, but the fact that I was instantly able to find other people who love that the same way I do has made me so happy. Also, it's cool to just Snapchat and Facetime people who may be in other parts of the country and strike up a conversation over the stupidest stuff. Like, it's obviously not the same as being in person, but it's cool that I still get to have that open access to my friends. Like, our parents and grandparents didn't even have that and we are one and two generations removed from them so that's cool. (2:69-80)

According to Julia's disclosures, even the most niche communities and interests have a place on the internet, which makes finding a virtual community possible. She does also concede that this is a recent development, as she is only two generations removed from not being able to do so.

Another participant, Peyton, mentions her amazement with the ability of digital platforms to bring people together over the simplest of topics. When asked what she likes most about going online to form social connections, she says

> I just love that you can go online and find anything that you want. No matter the topic, the interest, whatever…there's something for everyone online. I think it's awesome that you can connect with people from all over the world, and that's what makes the internet so special. That's what I love the most about it.(2:87-91)

This response reflects a trend that became clear throughout the interviews, which was the fact these African Americans use digital platforms to find social connections. They rarely struggle to

find a community because they are actively seeking it. This was also evidenced by Heather, who explained that, "It's just a big menu full of options, and you can't really go wrong by going to what you're most comfortable with." As the youngest participant, Heather has a unique relationship with social media in that, for the majority of her life, she has not only had access to the internet, but she also had her first Snapchat account at the young age of 11 years old.

Theme 4: Pedagogical Application

"Pedagogical Application," the fourth theme, is the use of social media as tools designed to convey important lessons about cultural experiences and allow people to improve their understanding of a social issue and its effect on HMGs. Ultimately, this knowledge is used to prompt a person to move into action and truly engage in activism. As mentioned above, interpersonal connections are important to the overall use of digital spaces to overcome racism and racial injustice; however, this theme shows that in developing these interpersonal connections using the digital spaces requires users to educate themselves and those in their support network.

Ten of the 17 participants (3 men and 7 women or about 59% of the participants) acknowledge that they have used social media and the internet at large to educate themselves on issues pertaining to HMG as well as to educate others on the issues of their community. All 10 participants used words and/or phrases related to the use of social media as an instrument of pedagogy.

Three participants specifically made it abundantly clear that, through the use of social media, they are now able to speak more freely on issues of which they were previously unaware. Eva, a 23-year-old legal assistant, made clear that she now uses social media to educate herself

about the experiences of others as well as using certain tactics to make sure she has a complete understanding of social issues from credible sources. She explains:

> Um, one thing I make sure to do… essentially, I mean with everything that's going on with the Palestine-Israeli conflict and even before then, with the issues affecting Asian Americans, and issues that are happening around the world, and then obviously BLM… I just make sure that whatever accounts are giving updates about this video's testimony and all that kind of stuff I just follow. Just to make sure that it's going to be on my timeline when I'm scrolling, and I can catch that article, or any disappear accounts are usually on top of that. I follow activists that are always kind of in the trenches that I'm seeing. And then I also like to follow people who are, I guess, politicians who are also building this but are trying to do something…like, I followed Stacey Abrams immediately, you know because she just a grassroots organizer. I'm all about on her and people like that just foundation. That's how I kind of stay in the mix, I'm just trying to learn through them, I have trouble finding I guess, smaller accounts or a little bit like more casual about things that give those daily updates, but any big updates on making sure that I just follow them and retweet and send to my friends, if needed, yeah. (8:289-302)

Through her statements, Eva makes it clear that she will use social media to push certain social issues and make sure they get the attention they deserve by sharing them with her followers. Also, she makes it clear that she wants to be fully educated on the issues and informed by following activists and prominent voices in the field.

Julia, who happened to be one of the older interviewees, made note that her understanding of modern social movements was largely related to using the internet and social media. She describes how she learns about different movements, especially through the use of social media platforms such as Instagram. Julia mentions early in the interview that she first entered the social media world in 2007 when she joined Myspace and has progressively become more active over time. As the following quote demonstrates, she has come to heavily depend on social media to learn about various social issues.

> Without social media, I wouldn't know about many of the most pressing issues in the world. For example, I knew very little about the Israeli-Palestinian issue until this year, and that's solely because of social media. Calling back to the infographics I talked about earlier, they have helped me so much in understanding their struggles. We have such a

strong obligation as marginalized communities to stand together against our oppressors. When the Asian American Community was under attack, I made sure to elevate and promote Asian voices that way I wasn't silencing them no, but I was helping the message get out. I remember what it felt like for me last summer so I can only imagine how it felt for them right? So, I was hesitant to reach out and send text messages and offer vocal support individually, but I did know my voice online would have a lot more sway in the public discourse. (6:165-174)

Julia's words prove that not only is she educating herself, but she is also educating those around her by elevating the voices of other marginalized people. This is a very common strategy among other participants. It further proves that participants are using digital media to better their understanding of racial injustice and racism.

It was abundantly clear that participants understood social media to be a pedagogical tool. According to Jay, he uses his platform on the digital space not only to educate himself, but to also educate his followers. He says:

 Okay, uhh so with my social media usage when it comes racial injustice... I try to…. um, I'll start…I would say, with African Americans, because I am African American. I try to push that information because that's mostly who my followers are, and who I'm following. So, if I see some information or something that I know other people should see and won't see, I'm pushing it out. When it comes to other races, um and this goes for African Americans, too, if I don't know the facts, all the facts, I will do my research first because I don't want to be… because sometimes stuff can just get posted, and I might be reposting something or retweeting that is incorrect information. And that's that goes from African American information to for stuff that I come across with my usage and feed um, but I just try to push information because sometimes, even though, I might not understand it completely somebody else that I'm following or that follows me might. You know, we might have to have a conversation about or something like that. Now, I don't ever try to…with my usage, I don't diminish another group's, you know, cause and racial issues and injustice. But, you know, I also don't allow diminishing of my own people. You know, racial justice trying…to uh I guess you could say one up or try to justify somebody else's…I mean you know because African Americans have been racially…you know…um, people have been racially unjust to African Americans, more than any other, race, I mean, just simple as that, So. I try to I don't allow it, and don't do it myself as best I can. (6:202-218)

As these statements demonstrate, when using these digital platforms, participants have a desire to exercise their ability to use infographics, videos, photos and other forms of content as

pedagogical tools for unknowing audiences across online. Pedagogical application is an essential part of helping individuals outside of a marginalized community learn about the experiences, deficits, and struggles of those within the community.

Theme 5: Active Participation

The fifth theme is "active participation," which is the act or action of going out of one's normal and expected behavior in order to participate in an activity online or use a specific digital space. Six participants (all women) directly relate to active participation. Of the six, all but one explains why being active online has helped them find the community online for which they were looking. This theme particularly showcases how African Americans are using these digital spaces to develop these all-important interpersonal connections. Considering that users are active, they then can use these digital spaces for purposes such as pedagogical application, identity validation, and accessing global community as mentioned before.

Peyton shares her thoughts about the necessity to use online communities for diversity of thoughts and opinions as well as helping her become further connected to others online. When asked how important it was for her to develop relationships outside of her physical community, she explains,

> Super important! I mean, how useless would [it] have been to have experienced your whole life without seeing another viewpoint? Maybe even seeing somebody else's perspective who maybe didn't grow up in the same environment as you. They bring an entirely new set of experiences and ideas that you couldn't have gotten just by staying in your close physical community. Unless you choose to like move thousands of miles away, which most people won't so going online to find these new voices is super important for me and everyone that's around me. So, to answer your question it's super important, and that's almost exclusively why I go online right now. So, I guess you could say I'm kind of active about it as a whole. (3:102-109)

Georgia also shares a similar response when asked the same question.

I would say pretty active only because it is becoming easier to find like people who are like having those conversations and, you know, trying to facilitate conversations and stuff like that online because I follow people that do that too. It's always there for me so like it's just kind of present, and then obviously you have like with the social media sites to the algorithm where, they see what type of content you're interacting with regularly and they just push it out to you, so a lot of the stuff that I see is dealing with like you know activism and social rights, all that type of stuff so it's pretty easy to find other individuals interactive awesome. (4:143-149)

Both participants state that they are actively going online to form these social connections. Peyton reveals her priority is using these sites to seek different opinions and gain new knowledge on subjects on which she otherwise would not consider herself an expert. Georgia, on the other hand, seeks out people with which to have the necessary conversations that may seem a little too difficult to occur offline.

Patricia is another participant who also believes in actively going online to seek social connections, but she offers a bit of a caveat in discussing why she is so active. When she is prompted to discuss her active participation, she says

I would say I'm pretty active, but only if those people are actively pursuing me back. I don't like wasting my time and energy, but I will give it my all if I know I will find true and genuine and loving and… you know, REAL friendships. We're only on this Earth for a little bit of time yo, why waste it trying to chase after people who don't care to chase after you? (6:205-209)

As this quote demonstrates, Patricia and the other participants have a unique relationship with their offline communities. Though they have difficulties offline, it is clear that they have to possibly search online for the community they so desire. Patricia is Muslim, Georgia is an out-of-state college student, and Peyton is a new transplant to the city she's lived in for less than a full year. For these participants, these relationships prove that community requires that members have more than a few things in common.

Research question two asked How (in)effective are social media and online communication platforms in serving as a support system for these individuals and their ability to cope with racism and racial injustice? A total of four themes emerged from that data related to platform effectiveness. Those these are platform curation, advocacy obligation, performative activism, and cyber-privilege.

Theme 6: Platform Curation

The theme "platform curation" is defined as the action or process of selecting, organizing, and viewing select content to achieve desirable outcomes and avoid negativity while navigating the digital space, especially as a way to cope with racism and racial injustice. While curating these platforms, African American users are more likely to find community and social support because the platforms are now fixed to match the preferences of the user. Platform curation not only includes the selection and organization of content, but also the avoidance of that content as well. Of the 17 interviewees, 14 participants (4 men and 10 women, 82.35% of participants) used words and/or phrases that related to platform curation to manage their mental and emotional responses while online. Five participants mentioned that they choose to unfollow, block, or mute other users online if they became a burden to their overall online experience.

When asked how she chose to have and/or avoid difficult conversations online, Peyton, a 32-year-old female middle school English teacher from Texas, shared that she specifically chooses to not engage in difficult conversations online due to the exhausting nature of digital arguments. She says the following:

> To be honest with you, I'm not. What's the point of going online just to argue? I'm there to have fun and enjoy myself. So, I'm not. I did at one point, but after what happened last summer and seeing how political the pandemic has made our society, I've decided to choose peace. So, I unfollow people I don't agree with, I block people who want to start

arguments, and I post what I want without fear or caring how many likes I get on that post or how many views I get. (2:89-97)

Peyton expressed that she uses the internet almost exclusively and chooses to follow uplifting and supportive community members rather than following users that disagree with thoughts, ideas, and invalidate her experiences. When asked about her opinions on the overall racial climate online, she says,

> That really depends on who you follow. Like for me...um, it's a very uplifting and supportive space, but I recognize that's only because I follow people of color. Like we all have this common lived experience of oppression, so we choose to be supportive of one another. (For the most part.) Um…if you choose to follow people like Tomi Lauren or Ben Shapiro or Candace Owens or any of the Trump people...you might be led to believe that racism is fixed and there's no reason you should feel that way. That is called gaslighting, but it's truly just depending upon who you follow. I mean it could be worse, but one thing I've noticed about this period is that people are becoming more aware of their privileges and positions in society and now want to advocate on behalf of those who can't advocate for themselves. (3:89-97)

Two individuals expressed that using social media has led to their development of anxiety and discomfort. T, a female 22-year-old college student, said,

> My overall experience online and social media, I would say if on a scale of one to 10 it would be a five. I believe there are some positive things with social media; however, I have social media anxiety, so I tend to stray away from it, at times, because of the negativity (2:39-41).

Patricia, an 18-year-old female recent high school graduate, also shared similar experiences. According to her, , "[...] social media gives me way too much anxiety. When I go online I just feel uncomfortable if we're going to talk about racism or like social injustice" (5:186-189).

While the vast majority of participants said they curate their platforms to present desirable outcomes or gratification, one participant made it known that using social media has led to detrimental outcomes no matter what he does. Ryan, a 28-year-old male communications specialist, notes:

> I mean, brother... it just doesn't seem as if anything I can do on, you know, [online] makes my life any better. Bruh, racism is inescapable no matter where I go or what I do. I go on Facebook, and it's like 'boom Black man gets murdered', I go on Twitter and boom 'white people calling the police on us', you feel what I'm saying? I try to block, mute, unfollow, I try it all and nothing seems to work.

From Ryan's experience, it is apparent that he, and other participants, curated his timeline and social feeds were largely accessing the pleasurable outcomes they desired. Through these actions, it became apparent that a sub-theme of emotional and mental preservation was being implemented.

Theme 7: Advocacy Obligation

The seventh theme, "advocacy obligation," is the act or course of action to which a person believes they are morally bound to offer public support for or make a recommendation of a particular cause, policy, or social movement. As their responses demonstrate, many participants feel strong personal obligations to advocate for marginalized communities and participate in digital activism. This theme connects with the previous theme of platform curation because avoiding racism and racial injustice online is not always achievable; however, when these are present African Americans feel a strong obligation to be an advocate for marginalized communities. Of the 17 participants, 9 (7 women and two men, 53% of participants) spoke about advocacy obligation and how it was important to them and how they use digital spaces.

Each participant was asked a specific question about their attitudes towards their own personal obligations to participate in digital protests. Four explained that they feel they have obligations to advocate not only for the advancement of African Americans but for all marginalized communities as a whole. When prompted, Heather offers a poignant explanation to describe her feelings towards participation in digital protests.

I don't feel an obligation in the traditional sense. Not because I'm black, but because I'm a person who feels empathy and understands the struggles of my community, or of any hurting Community to be honest. I have gone out of my way to understand more about marginalized communities. I'm now a huge advocate of Palestine Asian Americans, the kids at the border, immigrants, and anything else you can think of. All of this isn't because I'm Black all of this is because I understand what I need to do and what I have to do as a person of color and as a human with a heart. we have to stand up for one another even when it's hardest. I think the next few years will be really telling in the American story because now that we have a Democratic president people think racism is going away, and no there are still so many challenges we have yet to face. So, I will be continuing to go out of my way to learn more and to speak out whenever it is necessary. I mean that's what this is all about, right? What we're doing is changing the world one step at a time. So many people fought for us to have the right to vote and for our voices to be heard so we have to go out of our way to make sure that we are heard. (4:134-146)

Like Heather, other participants also believe that advocacy is an important step in educating themselves about the struggles and experiences of other HMGs. They explain that advocacy is necessary in order to achieve social consciousness and becoming an active and moral participant in media.

Tristan, a 23-year-old male law school, offers a similar explanation of his position towards advocacy. He specifically describes where he feels his obligations lie as an African American:

So, like the obligations I have are to, like, Black Lives Matter. I still have that in my bio and I'm, like, I when something happened…or when it happened originally, I made, like, recurring donations. Like, little monthly things, like, with the jail bail funds, and so, um, that's the way that I that I feel, like, I stay connected, like, civic-ly, with, like, the Black Lives Matter movement, and in, like, with having it in my bio, and just evolving like socially, and engaging with people from the movement, I feel, like, I have, like, found ways to, like, I guess, like, stay engaged, and, like, as we've seen, like, last summer, even though we had a big protest that doesn't necessarily mean police brutality like ended. There's still work to be done so by following like the right people, and, like, being engaged, like, last year and continue to do so throughout the year, I feel like this was a positive thing for me, and I, like, for my friends to see that, like, had their eyes open to it are like we're more engaged, like, now, with these with these issues that have happened, like, post last summer. (8:279-290)

As the statement demonstrates, while many of the participants felt a strong obligation to

participate in these protests, not all of them felt as if it was a pleasure. Three other participants

mentioned the feelings of burden when actively participating in advocacy of HMGs and other

people of color. When asked about her personal obligations, Georgia explains:

> Honestly, as an African American...when I just…. a lot of times you see all these, like, posts about police brutality or police killings or things like that and it's just...I don't know... I just feel like. I shouldn't feel this way, but I do, I feel the need to like repost and share stuff and like you know speak out about issues. But at also, at the same time, like I shouldn't have to feel that way. I shouldn't have to feel the need to educate other people or to continue to just bring awareness to these issues, all the time, like there should be some resolution coming from like all the other work that's being done, but unfortunately, I do feel that like burden to do that all the time. And even apart from issues within the African American community things that are affecting other minority groups as well, so what's going on in the Middle East, Palestine, all that type of stuff too I feel like to... Well, not even as an African American... just like as a person with good morals, I feel the need, but especially as another minority, I felt the need to spread awareness about that issue as well. (5:191-202)

Two other participants shared similar sentiments regarding engagement with social justice via

social media. When asked about advocacy, Heather states that

> I don't feel an obligation in the traditional sense. Not because I'm Black, but because I'm a person who feels empathy and understands the struggles of my community, or of any hurting Community to be honest. I have gone out of my way to understand more about marginalized communities. I'm now a huge advocate of Palestine Asian Americans, the kids at the border, immigrants, and anything else you can think of. All of this isn't because I'm black all of this is because I understand what I need to do and what I have to do as a person of color and as a human with a heart. we have to stand up for one another even when it's hardest. I think the next few years will be really telling in the American story because now that we have a Democratic president people think racism is going away, and no there are still so many challenges we have yet to face. So, I will be continuing to go out of my way to learn more and to speak out whenever it is necessary. I mean that's what this is all about rate? What we're doing is changing the world one step at a time. So many people fought for us to have the right to vote and for our voices to be heard, so we have to go out of our way to make sure that we are heard.

When Julia was asked the same question, she offered a response that was quite similar.

> Even though I wasn't super optimistic about what I saw, I was still happy to see so many people standing in solidarity with our community. So, I, of course, felt a huge obligation

to participate in the public discourse surrounding the oppression of my people. I don't see you how any African American at the time didn't feel this burden to make their voice heard. In my opinion, so many of our ancestors fought for us to be able to speak and we would be doing them a huge disservice by remaining silent. We are standing on the shoulders of giants oh, and it's important for us to not lose sight of that. So, I felt a huge personal responsibility, but I don't call it an obligation no, I call it a burden because it does feel burdensome to have to talk about so much negativity, but it's important for us to remember why we're doing it.

We can see from this statement that advocacy obligation requires action for people of color, particularly African Americans. According to participants, taking such a position is often an uncomfortable and burdensome process yet necessary for African Americans to use in order to develop and maintain community while online.

Theme 8: Performative Activism

The eighth theme is "performative activism" and is defined as activism that is done to increase one's social capital rather than their devotion to a cause. Through the interviews, it was learned that participants view white participation in digital activism as largely performative but necessary for the advancement of social movements. Performative activism can render a platform ineffective because if African Americans view their white counterparts as disingenuous then the platform isn't offering true support at all. When asked to reflect on their experiences online as a space to participate in protests, four participants (three women and one man) made specific references to performative activism and its use to advance social capital.

Peyton makes a specific reference to her displeasure with the reaction social media had because of the murder of George Floyd and the rise of political protests in the summer of 2020. She does mention that she feels the pandemic played a large role in how social media responded to the Black Lives Matter Movement in summer of 2020. When asked to elaborate, Peyton explains that,

First off, let's talk about #BlackoutTuesday. What was that? That was the biggest piece of performativity that I've ever seen. Although that's one of the biggest ways I saw it being used for protest; however, Instagram specifically has shifted to a more infographic type platform. Last summer all you saw was different infographics online. Well, let me not say all online. Instagram specifically. Now on Twitter the discourse was... crazy. Like everything was serious, and it was about changing the narrative. It was no longer about just one issue..oh, and to add. I think COVID really impacted this. Since everyone was sitting at home, all we had to do was be online, and because of that, we saw police brutality more directly. And by *we* I mean white people. Communities of color knew this how long before they became aware of it. let me tell you, the reason I know this is because every large organization Corporation or League team or franchise or whatever felt like they needed to chime in. From Nike to the MLB to the NBA to the NFL— and don't even get me started on them. How they treated Colin Kaepernick, and then they wanted us to just think that they had made radical changes. Like girl, no you didn't. But that was how the internet reacted everyone and everything shifted its focus to talking about the Black Lives Matter movement. Even more recently with issues affecting the Asian American community and the Palestinian community. (4:119-134)

Other participants expressed similar beliefs as they were presented with the same prompt. When asked about her feelings towards her engaging in protests, T responded by saying:

I don't believe I'm obligated to participate in any digital protests because, you know, some of them become very performative. I believe the work can be done elsewhere it does not always have to be on social media, and I believe in this age of social media if you don't post something, it's not important to you, or you're not doing anything about it. and that's not necessarily true, I know people who didn't post anything because they didn't use social media, but they were at every protest that they can go to and if they weren't marching, they were passing out water bottles, they were making sure people were okay. So, I don't believe if you don't digital protesting affects anything and you don't necessarily have to do it. (5:163-170)

T's comments reveal that advocacy obligation applies pressure on certain people to feel as if their actions need to be performative, which leads to inauthenticity. There are multiple ways to participate in activism that do not require digital spaces in order to be effective.

Jay, a 22-year-old recent college graduate, expressed in his interview that he was energized at the beginning of the movement last summer; however, a lot of the energy stopped there. When he was asked about his opinions on the success of last year's protests, he stated that,

> Um, in the moment, especially last summer, like you mentioned summer 2020, what I would love to have seen, though, was like it continue in certain areas… um… beyond that I think sometimes people just like did it because that was in the moment. And we were riled up and we were ready to go, and now I think I got lost a little bit. A fact coming out of it um, I think, overall, but I think it did go well in some areas, you know, in most areas really for our country um. But I think it could have been like I said, sometimes, some of them were just done poorly or you know lost because of people just doing it for the clout, and you know saying "I'm involved with the cause" so if I had to give it a grade per se, I'd give it a B. (5:172-179)

We learn from this statement that Jay agrees that there is a considerable amount of attention and energy given to the social movement, especially online, but a lot of the action stopped. His reflections reveal that leaving the digital space to continue this work would be more beneficial than just leaving it online for the performative nature of protesting.

The interviews reveal a concern for participants about the behaviors of alleged allies and their intentions. Despite these reservations, a few participants feel white voices are an essential part of the advancement of social movements, especially those that affect people of color. The necessity for white people and dominant voices to participate in these social movements was only further expressed by Ryan. He was not alone in this belief; however, he was the most expressive. As the following quote demonstrates, there is a belief that, as an African American man, his words hold very little power in comparison to whites.

> Look, if you want your message to get out there, you need to have the voices of white people and the powerful. I mean, my words aren't going to mean as much to white people as those important TikTokers. Charlie D'Amelio and Addison Rae can reach more people in 10 minutes than I can meet in two years, so you got to have them on your side. I think largely the reason our movement caused as much of an uproar as it did was because we had celebrities, powerful politicians, and influencers all jumping onboard to our side of the cause, and it was amazing. We have to be careful not to get too caught up in their actions because sometimes it's for them to gain clout rather than them doing the real work to make sure we're ok. (5:213-221)

This statement, along with others, demonstrates that participants want social movements to address the needs, experiences, and disparities of African Americans through actions. While

there is a belief that what happens online is a necessary step in that advancement, participants find it equally or more important that white participation be purposeful and not performative.

Theme 9: Cyber Privilege

The ninth theme, privilege, refers to a special right, advantage, or immunity that is only granted or available to white users while online. Three participants (one man and two women) express an awareness of cyber privilege in the digital spaces to which they have been exposed. This theme helps answering the question of how effective or ineffective these platforms are in serving as a support system. This sentiment appears to be one of the most emotionally burdensome, as two of the participants physically exhibit hesitation during the interview before addressing the interview questions about racial injustice online in particular. This was the only time in the interview where a participant becomes emotional in their responses.

Ryan shares his opinions on privilege while online, and immediately afterwards, he reaches for a tissue to wipe a tear from his eye. When probed to elaborate on how he feels to witness white responses to social movements online that are markedly different his own, he says:

> Look, it makes me so upset that I have to be so careful about what I post online so I don't lose my job, but white people can post almost anything they want, and they barely suffer any consequences. They can talk about storming the Capitol, they can call me a n--ger, they can say all this shit about Trump and not tearing down statues and shit, but if I post something about BLM, it's a problem. You feel? On God, I get so upset because I feel like nobody really gets why I'm so mad.

During his interview, Ryan shares information that indicates he has a difficult personal history with this subject. He was let go from a job a year ago, officially due to the pandemic, but in his opinion, it was because of his strong stance towards activism over the course of the summer of 2020.

Elizabeth shares this same sentiment as she discusses her struggles to post or share content because of her potential job prospects. When prompted, she explains:

> For me, it's hardest to post online because I could lose my job at any given moment for what I say, and my white colleagues can say almost anything on there [social media]. I gotta remind myself every now and then [that] if my company doesn't support me or people who look like me, then it's probably not a good idea for me to be there anyway, but it's still pretty scary.

Elizabeth's words are a direct reflection of the theme as a whole. She captures the participant belief that white users are afforded certain liberties that African American users are not. Her explanation specifically addresses the fact that African Americans have the additional burden of practicing professionalism at all times because of their racial identity.

Three themes answer the third research question posed by addressing the difficulty of staying on one platform believed to offer the most connection yet provides users the least comfort, especially as a way to cope with racism and racial injustice. They help answer the third research questions, which asks what barriers exist for these users to find and access community. Those themes are digital binary, inaccessibility, and platform vacillation.

Theme 10: Digital Binary

"Digital binary" is the tenth theme and refers to the two different personas that a user has in both the physical or public sphere and the online digital sphere. Through the use of social media, participants are able to access both a persona online and offline that do not necessarily intersect. Though it is not an inherently negative phenomena, the development of a digital binary can prevent users from finding each other as anonymity and safety become more important to users. There were multiple participants who described having digital binaries. Four participants (all women) expressed their satisfaction with using social media to create a persona online while maintaining a persona offline. As explained by U&G, users seek out different gratifications from

their uses of the internet. This theme does seem juxtaposed to identity validation; however, uses

for the internet are dependent on the participants' experiences. As some seek to be validated,

others seek to escape and become an entirely different person. Both showcase the endless

possibilities for internet uses. This theme is very evident with Courtney. Early on in the

interview, she shares that her favorite part of using social media is the ability to create a persona

online that she cannot create offline.

> I like... basically, the ability to get away from my own life and just build a...you know, a virtual persona, in which you know I can pretty much do what I want, see what I want. Um you know… So, any struggles that I'm having that day — or in life in general — I can just get away from that, but I don't like how in building a virtual persona it allows other people to just really be inauthentic because I think we do need to see authenticity. I'm on social media, and it definitely skews my perception of myself and other people and just the world in general. (1:32-36)

Courtney goes on to share that her digital communities have helped her create a space of comfort

and education. She disclosed that she suffers from a disease that affects many women across the

United States; however, she was unable to access that community in her physical environment.

When asked how active she is in going online to form social connections with other

women who share this disease, she gives a very surprising response. She elaborated in an effort

to provide clarity regarding her personas.

> I wouldn't say that I'm extremely active. I'm pretty introverted in life and online, but there are groups. One, specifically on Reddit, it's a group for people with hyperparathyroidism and that's something that I was diagnosed with last year and had to have a surgery with and it's not a complex disease; however, it is not well-researched. Very little funding goes behind it and a lot of people who have it feel disconnected from the medical field completely. So, um now that I've had my surgery and I'm cured, I really feel almost obligated to help those people who haven't had the luxury of you know, having surgery, and having doctors who listened to me, so you know those people are everywhere across the world. And it's important to me that…you know…I help someone else. Better knowing, you know how they feel, and the fact that we just don't have that much help.

As this comment demonstrates, Courtney is able to maintain her offline persona while also

connecting in digital spaces with other survivors of her particular health condition.

Another participant who also recognizes having two separate personas is Ryan. Ryan

shares a similar sentiment when asked what he loves most about going online to form social

connections.

> The fact that I can be anyone I want to be on the internet really helped me come to terms
> with myself. I didn't come out as gay until I was 25 years old after I saw that even if
> some people hated the person I was, there were people out there who would support me
> despite anything I've ever dealt with. I was living a double life for about three years
> before the world knew I was gay. I created a Reddit account where I would talk to other
> gays who were in the closet, and it was then when I realized that I will always have
> someone out there who thinks I am important and valuable.

Ryan's uniquely personal connection to using social media as a form of social connection proves

that he could live two lives, and it did not affect his overall interpretation of himself. He was able

to see his life online as a gay man and realize that he would have community even when it did

not seem so.

The ability to change personas and the digital binary do not come without some

hesitations. For eight participants, there is concern about the fact that being anonymous online

can lead to a breach of their safety. Heather sums this feeling up very well when she describes

her biggest concerns when using digital spaces to create social connections.

> This goes back to that "ish" part of safe-ish. You never really know who you're talkin' to.
> You may have full confidence that the person is who they say they are see, but people can
> scam you and it's getting easier and easier to fake who you are online. I guess I would
> just be concerned that I may be getting catfished or scammed by people. However, if you
> are pretty safe you can protect yourself. Also, it's really easy to be lied to and given false
> information, just so people can deceive you.

Heather shares she does have some hesitation when going online because people might not

always be who they present themselves to be. She reveals that catfishing is a big concern of hers,

and she is not alone. More people are recognizing the danger of an inauthentic internet personality.

For some, taking on a new digital persona has become a game of sorts. Through this recognition, the data revealed that the subtheme of "catfishing" is now more prevalent than ever. For most of the participants, digital anonymity proved to be both beneficial and worrisome; however, the ability to possess a new digital persona is what modern media describes as catfishing. [10] When prompted about her biggest concerns with using social media, Julia says the following:

> Safety, you know? Like, yes, I will probably never see you in my life, but there may be an off chance you're not really who say you are, and I am being internet stalked and tracked online. There's also the possibility that I may not be seeing true information. Though I may deem someone as credible in my mind, I may be completely biased in how I interpret and keep that information in my head. Like it could be a total lie, but I *feel* like it's true, so I believe it.

Julia's description captures the essence of many of the other participants' acknowledgement that social platforms can be used to create a digital binary. From their responses, digital binaries are not always a positive attribute. Nevertheless, some participants find these binaries necessary in order for them to feel both comfortable and connected online.

Theme 11: Inaccessibility

The eleventh theme is "inaccessibility" and is defined as the inability to reach like-minded individuals and access community due to a lack of proper instruction or non-user - friendly navigation tools on a platform. This theme answers the third research question posed

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[10] Catfishing- a deceptive activity where a person creates a fictional persona or fake identity on a social networking platform, usually targeting a specific victim or type of victim. The practice may be used for financial gain, to compromise a victim in some way, as a way to intentionally upset a victim, or for wish fulfillment.

most directly. As a result of the non-user- friendly navigation tools, many users will turn away leaving no space for connection, and as shown throughout this document, is most important for coping with racial injustice. Five participants (2 men and 3 women, 29% of the participants) relate to or directly mention the inaccessibility of community or lack of instruction. Of the five participants, two made direct statements that attributed the inaccessibility of community to their dissatisfaction with certain spaces on the internet.

According to Patricia, she often leaves a space if it becomes too difficult to find the people she's looking for online. As the participant who most recently graduated high school, Patricia shares that it is in high school where she often felt the most different and sometimes felt ostracized for her beliefs as a member of the Nation of Islam; therefore, digital spaces were where she would turn. Patricia's remarks also serve as an example of the importance of identity validation and how *inaccessibility* prevents her the necessary connection. She further explains that some platforms are easier to navigate than others, and as a result, she leaves the ones that make it difficult or too complex to navigate their platforms.

> If I go online, it's to laugh and to find people to laugh with me. When I was in high school, not a lot of people knew that I was Muslim, and those who did, didn't really get what I was going through, you know? I mean sometimes I would try to go online and find different people who understand my pain and like the stuff I was struggling with. Like my mom told me about this app where it was like… um Muslim Tinder… but when you went on there, it was, like, weird, you had to enter all this info, and it was, like, kind of anonymous but not really, and it was just too much for me, so I just sort of left that app. I tried using some other stuff, but I wasn't really happy until I found some places on the apps that are already popular like Twitter and Instagram and stuff. (4:156-164)

Through this statement, Patricia reveals that she attempts to use a dating style app specifically for Muslims. Because the directions for how to use the app are unclear, it was best for her to leave the app and join more popular apps that are user-friendly and easier to navigate.

Similarly, Courtney also believes that she is not able to access her chosen community offline. When asked what her biggest concerns are when using digital platforms to build community, she responds quite differently than the other participants. She says:

> I would say my biggest concern is how well that would be offline. Because, you know, with building, you know, your virtual life basically um, I guess, I would just be a little concerned on how I will be able to bring that from online community to the outside world so basically sometimes I feel as though it's difficult for me to be open in person and just in real life versus being online, that's like my safe space. I feel really comfortable, so I share myself a little more on there. (9:342-347)

In addition to sharing her disconnect with community, Courtney gives an account of a time when she felt alone. Surprisingly, throughout all the interviews, this was the only instance of someone explaining that they felt the absence of community.

> Um, there was one specific instance, involving um politics and race, after the first presidential debate, and um I was very open on my feelings about the candidates' performances and these two people, they were a couple, a white man and a white woman. I went to school with the white woman. We're from a small, rural town that is 75% white, and they basically just ganged up on me, you know. And [they] were just, you know, spewing all this hate, all this, you know, false things, um, and, you know, I didn't really… I didn't have anyone stick up for me. I basically had to, you know, fight them all by myself. Um, so yeah, I'd say I definitely was…I felt alone and I'm not resentful for that. I would say that I am strong enough in myself to defend myself, but I also took notice that there were multiple people who saw what was going on and what was being said and they did not say anything so that was a point where I felt alone. (10: 383-392)

Courtney's feelings of aloneness are impactful for her and speak to the lack of community that can occur in digital spaces that seemingly attempt to achieve the opposite. She explains that a healthy response is be an activist against racism on her own behalf.

Although other participants do not share this feeling, there are more instances where community inaccessibility affects participants. One participant, Tristan, made it clear that access to community can be extremely beneficial; however, without access to the right communities, it can feel virtually impossible to feel connected to others online. Tristan's relationship with

community became even more important for him as he grew to understand himself. He identifies

as LGBTQ+ and found support through digital spaces.

> Um… I think it can, I think, having access to everyone, like I said. Like I mentioned, you can make connections all over the world, you can keep up your friends from forever ago, but so I think that's positive but also having the access to people all the time can be a negative too because that can be opening for people to be negative or bring hate to people. So, I guess like that could be a negative too. Like the access let's assume you're doing good, but also the access allows people to…you know potentially harm to those on social media. If you can't find the right people online, then life becomes too boring. (2:48-54)

From this statement, it is clear that Tristan receives joy from the fact that everyone can connect

online. He also recognizes the pitfalls that exist because of the individuals online who choose to

harm those in what are deemed "safe spaces."

Theme 12: Platform Vacillation

The twelfth and final theme, "platform vacillation," can be defined as the varying levels

of comfort and gratification that African Americans feel while navigating between platforms. As

African Americans navigate digital spaces various platforms will satisfy different needs

according to what the intention is of the site. A platform like Facebook, which is designed to

engage users in conversations, may provide little comfort for African Americans seeking

connections to other African Americans in the midst of a racial pandemic. Users might be

strategically managing their identities and messages to present a positive image to family

members and friends, thus also avoiding conflict. In contrast, a space like TikTok is designed for

entertainment and to bring to users' attention others with whom they share common interests,

which may fulfill that need by providing more comfort and a space to connect. Ultimately, this

theme relates to gratifications obtained from each platform, and how said gratifications are

obtained from different platforms based on their function. Engaging with multiple platforms

provides participants with spaces that provide enjoyment, gratification, or comfort depending on

their immediate needs. Each platform's design is to engage users to participate in different ways.

Thirteen of the 17 participants (11 women and 2 men) relate directly and openly to

platform vacillation. Their opinions of different platforms became clear as their words and

phrases shifted positively and negatively according to the platform. Of these participants, 11 feel

that Facebook is the least comforting place online for them. When asked what space provides the

participants the least comfort, their responses almost universally reflect negative views of

Facebook. Jay, Georgia, Peyton, and Courtney provide the most powerful responses:

> Jay: Facebook is a lot of just people talking with some wild opinions, not a lot of facts.
> Um, I don't want to say stupid, but unreasonable. Just opinions, and they just... it's just a
> lot of energy, I just don't want to even look at some time today. Yeah. yeah so. (4:120-123)

> Georgia: Oh, probably say Instagram and Facebook, as a whole, I'm very hesitant to go
> on Facebook, just because I feel like a lot of people on Facebook are very set in their
> beliefs because, at least in my experience, a lot of the people that are on Facebook are
> like my family who's older so 29-30 plus they're on there are a lot. And I feel like on
> Facebook is really easy to get into, like, just around people with the same ideas as you.
> So it's really easy to just get into like an echo chamber so that's really all you see is
> everybody, with the same perspective on an issue, so you don't really get a lot of variety.
> So, I feel like in that is kind of hard to get like a well-rounded sense of what's going on
> and that type of thing. So, I just... I don't know. I avoid it because it's just like you're
> getting on there to see the same thing it's not really doing anything for me. (7: 255-264)

> Peyton: Facebook. 100% Facebook. I feel it is a very conservative and very white
> platform. So, I almost feel it was not created for me. You can go on Facebook right now
> and see some of the most openly racist comments from all across the internet. Like, if
> that's how the platform going to operate, then there's no purpose in me being there. I only
> have a Facebook account because that's where my friends from college, family from
> across the country, and old classmates are. if it were up to me I would delete it right
> now... I mean I can. I just... Feel like it wouldn't be appropriate. (5:172-177)

> Courtney: Undoubtedly, Facebook, um… I'll say that I go to the Facebook comments of
> local news stations just to laugh at how openly racist, some people are, you know. It's
> just... it's amusing, you know, that these people have a live on the internet, where they
> work where they live, yet they have no pause whatsoever when posting hateful

comments. (3:105-108)

As these statements demonstrate, participants hold many strong opinions about using Facebook, in that they see it as more of a platform designed to encourage debate amongst its users.

Conversely, many participants believe that apps like Twitter and TikTok are where they feel most comfortable and welcome because of the authenticity of expression on these platforms. Peyton and Heather provided two of the more in-depth answers. When asked what spaces gave them the most comfort, the two said the following:

> Peyton: TikTok and Twitter. Both spaces are welcoming places for creators and open minds. So, with Twitter, I can go on there and see New ideas that I didn't see before Oh, I can see jokes, I can see music, I can see dances, you know oh, just whatever. That is so important to have in a digital space. I just feel like I can truly be myself in these spaces.

> Heather: Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Those are my favorites right now. They just all give me this sense of I'm supposed to be here it doesn't feel weird. When I go on like a dating app I feel so much like a fish out of water page, and it kind of makes me uncomfortable. Tik-Tok is a very welcoming space, because of their very spot-on algorithm, which they call the foryou page. When they say for you, they mean for you. It's pretty funny because they know more about you than probably any other website and your interest, your likes, your hobbies, your talents, and it's perfect. Twitter does a pretty good job of this to. Instagram I feel is changing a little bit it was losing its way oh, but it's coming back around.

These two statements reveal that the platforms designed for entertainment and quick consumption are rated more favorably. As a result, they provide African Americans higher levels of both comfort and gratification.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore how African Americans used digital spaces to build community in order to cope with racial injustice and find socially supportive networks in the midst of a global health pandemic. Critical Race Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory were used as theoretical frameworks to organize and interpret the experiences of the young African American participants. This study specifically addressed the following research questions.

RQ1: In what ways do African American young adults (Age 18-35) who engage in social media activism seek interpersonal connections in digital spaces?

RQ2. How (in)effective are social media and online communication platforms serving as a support system for these individuals and their ability to cope with racism and racial injustice?

RQ3. What are the barriers to finding and accessing community in younger African Americans, especially those who find themselves frequently on the digital space?

As discussed in chapter 4, the study yielded 12 dominant themes regarding how and why Africans use digital spaces. In understanding the relationship between activism, social support, and digital community, these questions help explore how these phenomena are all interrelated.

Connections to Literature and Thematic Frameworks

The results of the study were consistent with current literature and assumptions of theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Each theme drew on different aspects of the literature and frameworks, but, as a whole, were consistent with the overall body of knowledge that scholars agree are described by each theme. Critical Race Theory proved to be a crucial

component in understanding the data. The themes of privilege, platform curation, advocacy obligation, performative activism, and identity validation can be directly attributed to CRT. When first introduced, Crenshaw (1973) argued that there are six assumptions under which this theory operates. One of the most important is that traditional claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color-blindness must be contested in order to reveal the self-interests of dominant groups. As revealed in this study, the theme of cyber privilege requires the users to challenge notions of neutrality that are dominant in certain areas of the internet.

Much like other users, African Americans go to the internet to achieve desirable outcomes (Pennington-Gray, Kaplanidou,Schroeder, 2013); however, these outcomes can be minimized or dismissed by the notions of a post-racialized society and a world where white users do not acknowledge the existence and presence of racism, especially online. As evidenced by the data, the theme of privilege is also essential in understanding how CRT fully applied to the study. As participants noted, they felt as if there was a double standard in terms of the content they were allowed to post online versus what their white counterparts are allowed to post. According to Ford (2018), CRT directly addresses the socially constructed and discursive nature of race. The theme of privilege revealed a blatant acknowledgment that HMG are unable to access the benefits of heteronormative whiteness while online. African American users felt the need to be careful about what they were posting and how their posting could affect potential employment prospects and opportunities to grow.

The results of this study support the themes of Critical Race Theory by showcasing how micro-aggressive behavior contributes to racial discrimination, especially in the digital space. Small actions that seem harmless to non-marginalized individuals actually are causing extreme harm, and often other marginalized communities feel the need to stand in for one another. (Ford,

2018). The theme of advocacy obligation offers direct support for this aspect of the theory. As noted, African American users felt strong obligations to participate in social protests, educate themselves on the experiences of other HMGs, and use their platform to organize on behalf of important social movements.

The data also revealed that advocacy obligation was a critical part of digital activism. Participants shared that their personal attitudes and opinions towards protesting were shifted in a positive direction, thus leading African Americans to experience the feeling of advocacy obligation to make sure the voices of HMG are heard. Advocacy obligation directly relates to CRT when reflecting on the themes, which is standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology argues that a member of a minority group has the authority and ability to speak about racism in ways that members of other racial groups do not have (Polhaus, 2002). As such, a person's knowledge of racism and racial injustice originates from their social position (Ansell, 2008). The data revealed that African American users felt that they had to make their voices heard when the time was right, and summer 2020 seemed to fit the standard as the world became hyper aware of the words and experiences of the African American communities.

When going online, many participants felt the need to make sure their platforms directly fulfilled their specific needs. The theme that best speaks to this is platform curation, which directly relates to both CRT and U&G. Each thematic framework requires the users to understand how they are operating the platforms online. Because of this platform curation, users are able to gratify the needs they sought out.

Another theme that fit both thematic frameworks was identity validation. Participant responses demonstrated that identity validation related to CRT, in that it was clear to tie identity validation to two components that emerged from CRTs evolution. The first component was

social stratification. Social stratification is a pattern in society that ranks and categorizes people into social positions which determine one's access to society's power, wealth, and opportunities. It's based on class, race, gender, and other social characteristics. The result is an unequal distribution of social attention and privilege because of one's social status (Joseph, 2020). Society has played, and continues to play, a critical role in maintaining hierarchies that determine the value or worth of people groups based on those qualities. Thus, it stands to reason that, the case of African Americans and other HMG, they respond to these hierarchies by turning to digital spaces to validate specific aspects of their identity deemed inferior. These spaces allow them to connect with individuals who share these identities and similar experiential knowledge attached to said identities. They may often feel their identities are less valuable than other marginalized communities.

This study also provided support for a second assumption of CRT, which recognizes the existence of white supremacy. According to Delgado (1973), this is one of the foundational pillars of CRT. According to these participants, whiteness is considered the norm both offline and on digital platforms, African Americans can, and often do, find that their personal experiences or parts of their identities refuted. To counter this reality, they responded by engaging in identity validating behaviors such as posting and sharing content in specific groups that cater to their identities.

As previously noted, U&G is rarely used in qualitative research; however, given the focus of the current study, it was an appropriate theory to explain how and why people engage in social activism in digital spaces. This assumption was supported by eight of the 12 themes that emerged from the data. Those themes are platform curation, identity validation, community accessibility, pedagogical application, digital binaries, inaccessibility to specific community,

platform vacillation, and active participation. Consistent with the literature, most of the themes supported the five assumptions under which U&G operates. For example, the theme of active participation is supported by the assumption offered, which speaks to the clear need for active users to go online for the primary purpose of finding and making social connections (Katz, 1974). U&G argues that audience members are active, and their media consumption is goal-oriented, as a result, the theme of active participation in media became abundantly clear. African Americans are actively choosing to use digital spaces, specifically social media, to find community, build connections, and seek desirable outcomes, therefore giving them gratification.

A significant finding from this study is that there is a clear relationship between U&G and the reasons why African Americans engage with and utilize digital spaces, and according to the theory, they are for convenience, escapism, social connectivity, education, entertainment, and validation (Baran & Davis, 2003). An indicator of participants' uses being gratified was their continued use of a given platform and their emotional responses when they chose to leave a platform. The majority of participants agreed that they had desirable outcomes and gratifications if they intentionally sought out a positive use when they log onto a platform. For most users, digital spaces and social media, in particular, are places to be educated, entertained, and connected and to escape the pressures of their everyday lives. As a result, many of them find themselves gratified and satisfied after going online specifically.

An important and unique finding of this study is that African Americans who have participated in activism in the digital space are returning to those spaces to find social connections and emotional and relational support. It offers further support of U&G in that users reported expending a considerable amount of energy and effort on finding those communities. Ryan sums this up well in his final response comment on digital spaces:

Look. We go online to be happy. I just had to spend the last year of my life being a social justice warrior and fighting for my people almost every damn day. I want to make sure I'm going to find a good vibe online and find my people when I'm on there too, you feel? Life is too short for me to be stressed out over some racist comments I see under a post. I'm going to find my tribe and do what I have to do.

Peyton shared a similar sentiment in her interview when asked the same question:

I feel good because I go on there to feel good and if I don't feel good, I log off. That's what the digital space is for. When these companies were founded, they wanted us to feel good when we were on them and when we left so why do we change that? If you want to feel good then feel good. I've noticed sometimes life can be too much, so I choose to be happy.

While Ryan and Peyton stress the importance of positivity in digital spaces, they and other participants identified specific barriers that foster negativity and hinder them from attaining gratification in these digital spaces. The barriers revealed were information overload, navigation complexity, and inaccessibility. Very few participants found issue with how these platforms were serving as community building spaces; however, an occasion when participants did find problems was when they were asked how easy or hard it was to find these communities., A unique contribution to scholarship that this study makes is offering insight into how African Americans navigate digital spaces while supporting many of the assumptions of CRT (Armelagos, Carlson, & Van Gerven, 1982; Akintunde, 1998; Cameron & Wycoff, 1998; Chang, 1985, Solorzano & Yosso, 2002,) regarding the continued significance of race and U&G's contention that people engage in behaviors and activities that help them attain gratification regarding social activism through their media use (Lin, 1993, Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985, Schramm, 1954), which in this case was social media. This study offered evidence that issue community accessibility for African Americans is a very important issue in this digital age.

When most social platforms are created, the white audience is the target (Asare, 2021), which limits HMGs, especially African Americans, from having proper access to digital

platforms where their voices and realities can be heard. By extension, their gratification is also inhibited since these platforms do not provide opportunities or resources to aid them in finding community and socially connecting with others, and they have difficulty, it is virtually impossible to be gratified. Mostly, it appears that participants are continuing to use

Limitations of the Study

Due to the unique nature of how this study was conducted, there are some limitations that exist. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the findings could be subject to other interpretations, which might result in other themes and analysis for other researchers. It is important to consider the small sample size and inequities in the number of male and female participants. Readers should caution against generalizing the results of this specific study to the overall population of African Americans as these experiences are unique and specific to the participants in this study.

Also, the researcher utilized snowball sampling for the study, which some may argue increases the possibility of bias and creates an unrepresentative sample of African American young adults. Because the aim of the study was to understand the unique experiences of young adult African Americans and digital activism, snowball sampling was the most appropriate method for recruiting study participants. This also achieved the goal of purposive sampling, which is conducive to the overall purpose of the study of identifying and selecting information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015)

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study is a first step in explaining and understanding how some African American young adults are using digital spaces to develop socially supportive networks as a result of racial injustice. With increased use of and dependence on technology and the racial

unrest that continues to plague the U. S., this area of scholarship is very promising and necessary in potentially creating change regarding race relations and providing HMGs with digital spaces necessary for creating community and affirming their devalued identities.

One of the most promising ways to continue this research would be by adding further research in this field and expanding the scope of what is being studied. It would be interesting to see how this study is conducted in future research through different methods, though qualitative methods are the most appropriate for this study. This study involved a qualitative approach to both collecting and interpreting the data; however, using a mixed-methods approach might add new interpretations and understandings of the data with the inclusion of more qualitative data to the overall study and the addition of quantitative data. Statistical analysis would only benefit this study as it would add more insight into how and why African Americans are using the digital space to create socially supportive networks, but it is not necessary to analyze data. However, overall research for this growing field would dramatically benefit from more qualitative work being done as this is an ever-evolving field. The study would also benefit from an increase in the sample size as well as a more diverse sample of African American men and women. Though this study did have a wide range of ages, professions, and locations, by including the thoughts, experiences, and opinions of African Americans who represent vastly different age groups, marital and parental statuses, religions, and socioeconomic levels, future research may reveal more themes than the ones presented in this study.

Lastly, it would also be beneficial to conduct this study or one similar after the effects of the COVID-19 global health pandemic are no longer present in society. The pandemic altered human behavior in a way that was not quite measurable when this study first began as most of the participants were using digital spaces for social connections almost exclusively, whether they

wanted to or not, at the time of this study. Since the pandemic altered how humans use social media, especially in a time that requires such physical distance, it would be interesting to see how people search for social connections online when human congregation is encouraged again. Thus, conducting this study under normal conditions more themes may possibly arise. By conducting this study in person, non-verbal data might become available, such as eye contact, posture, and hand gestures.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to understand how and why African Americans were using digital spaces to build community, which revealed surprising yet encouraging findings. The participants in this study viewed platforms as effective tools in building and maintaining community; however, there were distinctive barriers to these needs, such as inaccessibility, navigation complexity, and information overload, that made it somewhat difficult for them to develop interpersonal connections and socially supportive networks. Nevertheless, it is apparent that using these platforms is critical to validating their racialized experiences and identities while also creating a sense of community in digital spaces, especially amid intersecting health and racial pandemics. While some may argue that digital spaces cannot garner healthy and sustainable relationships, the findings of this study provide strong evidence that digital spaces are providing African Americans the social support they need when it seems to be the most difficult to find.

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

CONSENT FORM 2021

1. **Study Title:** Operating the Digital Space in the Age of Protest Participation: African American Accounts of, Responses To, and Coping with Racial Injustice in the digital space

2. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how media impacts the overall structure of African American community. We are interested in hearing stories of the African American community as they navigate the digital space in the era of heightened protest participation. Most important are the stories and personal experiences participants have encountered as an African American engaging in digital protest online, including stories of negative experiences from counter protesters, commenters, and counter supporters. We are also interested in hearing their stories about how participants have been able to cope, find support, and succeed in the digital space, as well as the kinds of relationships they have created to help them in the process.

3. **Risks/Discomforts:** We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Some people, however, do experience slight discomfort when discussing the topics of race and racism. Participants you may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. There is minimal risk of breach of confidentiality, as we will use pseudonyms when transcribing the interview. Interviews will take place using Zoom Pro version. The privacy policy for Zoom can be found here: https://zoom.us/privacy No identifiable participant information will be provided to the transcription company Matchless LLC. Matchless LLC will only receive audio files with basic information, such as the date and time of their interview as well participant gender. Matchless LLC assures its clients all files are 100% confidential and will be used for the purpose of transcription. The individual files will be deleted by them a few days after the research has confirmed receipt. They also guarantee that they will not use any of the participants' personal information (i.e., name, e-mail, phone number, etc.) disclosed in the audio file in any way that does not directly relate to the service being requested. Video and audio recordings of Zoom conversations will be stored on a password-protected drive in the primary researcher's university office. The files will also be stored in Dropbox, which is a secure data storage site. Only the Principal Investigator and co-Principal Investigator will have access to the files and will use a password to do so. Dropbox has a personal policy requiring them to protect client data for external parties and security breaches.

Also, we will destroy the audio and video recordings 2 years after transcription, and we will not use specific participant information in order to ensure participant anonymity. No identifiable information beyond race and gender will be reported at any point during this project. These measures will further ensure participant anonymity. Given the sensitive nature of the study, participants will be able to decline the invitation to participate if they experience stress and anxiety related to the topic of race in their day-to-day interactions.

4. Should mental or emotional support be needed as a result of discomfort, participants will be advised to seek the advice of a trained mental health professional. Information on these services provided by LSU can be found at https://lsu.edu/shc/mental-health/. Off-campus support can be found at https://www.brgeneral.org. Participants will be reminded in case of a mental health emergency call 911 if such services are ever needed.

5. Benefits: The study may yield valuable information about race, racism, protest, and community building online. Participants are contributing to a recognition that African Americans in the United States are in fact subjected to racism, racial prejudice, and racial discrimination, and the digital space is one of the few spaces that is providing support and an avenue for protest with little risk of physical harm or harm to health.

The final benefit, and quite possibly the most important one, is that they have the unique opportunity to share powerful stories on this topic, which we hope might aid the digital community in identifying ways to create an inclusive environment for African Americans and provide resources for racial reconciliation and healing. Hopefully, providing these platforms ways to understand how and why African Americans are coming online.

6. Alternatives: N/A

7. Contacts/Investigators: The following principal investigator is available for questions about this study, M-F, 8:00am-4:30 pm: Kyle Stanley, Manship School of Mass Communication kstan16@lsu.edu 318-331-4444.

8. Other investigators who are also available are listed below,

Dr. Tina M. Harris– tharris4@lsu.edu, 225-439-7218

9. Performance Sites: Virtual: Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams

10. Number of subjects: 15-30

11. Subject

    a. Inclusion Criteria: Must be between 18 and 35 years of age, Black/African American identifying, and an active member of a social media platform.

    b. Exclusion Criteria: Participants will be excluded if they are under the age of 18, over 35, and/or non-Black/African American

12. Privacy: Findings of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. A pseudonym will be used when referencing a participant. Participant identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

13. Financial Information: N/A

14. Right to Refuse: Participants may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

    ___Check here if not applicable and skip to #16. Otherwise, answer each question with yes or no. "No" indicates a consent form deficiency which must be remedied before the IRB application can be approved.

15. Unforeseeable Risks: Specify the treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable. ___

16. Signatures:

    The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. For injury or illness, call your physician, or the Student Health Center if you are an LSU student. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/research. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

The study subject has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.

Signature of Reader: _____ Date: _____

17. Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, may be used or distributed for future research.

Yes, I give permission_____ Signature

No, I do not give permission_____ Signature

Interview Protocol

Operating the Digital Space in the Age of Protest Participation and Racial Injustice: A
Qualitative Approach

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this study. My name is Kyle Stanley,
and I am conducting these interviews as a part of a research project as part of my master's
degree. I am interested in studying the way African Americans operate in the digital space after
the fatal events of police brutality over the past two years. I appreciate the time that you have
taken out of your schedule to share your experiences in the digital space, especially social media.
Before I begin this one-on-one interview, I am going to ask that you take a moment to complete
a Demographic Information Sheet provided at the link sent to you. I am asking for basic
information about you so that we can better understand your responses and observations.

We will be protecting your identity and personal information by assigning you a pseudonym
(i.e., fake name). The basic information we gather about you, such as your age, race, education,
occupation, profession, and personal history online is to help us better understand the general
experiences that African Americans have in the digital space.

Remember that there are no right answers and if you do not wish to respond simply let me know.

PROVIDE THE LINK TO THE DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. What is your name?

2. What pseudonym would you like for us to use for you?

3. What is your gender?

4. Click which age group to which you belong:

18-20 years old	21-24 years old
25-30 years old	31-35 years old

5. Please confirm your racial identity

   I.   Black or African American

6. What is your ethnic identity?

7. What is your occupation?

8. Preferred Language?_____

9. Of the following social networking platforms of which are you an active member? (select all that apply)

Facebook	TikTok	LinkedIn
Twitter	Reddit	Pinterest
Instagram	Snapchat _____	YouTube

   Other (Please Indicate in the space provided): _____

10. How long have you been a member of these platforms?

General Experiences Online

The purpose of this interview is to gain a better understanding of how African Americans use social media to create community. We are interested in hearing stories from African Americans related to how they navigate digital space in the era of heightened protest participation. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to understand how people deal with the racial issues negatively impacting our communities, actively participate in digital protests, and connect with others on these platforms, especially African Americans. It is hoped that these efforts can lead to a greater understanding of the increased value that African Americans are placing on digital activism, virtual connections, and racial affirmation.

In order to achieve these goals, I am asking you as a member of the digital space to share experiences and encounters you have had online, especially those related to race and community

building. I will ask a series of questions and will give you enough time to provide honest and thoughtful responses. Hopefully, you will feel comfortable enough to share your thoughts and experiences.

Experience Online

The first few questions we ask will be about your general experiences online and on social media.

1. How would you describe your overall experiences online and on social media?
   a. What do you like most about it? Least about it?

2. In the current era of social distancing, how do you find yourself using your social media? For example, which social media are you using to validate your identity? For entertainment? To socially connect? To share content? Network, escape or newsgather?
   a.   What sources are you using to do so?

3. When using these digital platforms, how are you finding yourself connecting with others who are not in geographical proximity to you?
   a.   In what way is it easier or harder to connect?

4. What groups are you a member of online or what spaces do you feel are important for you to feel connected and comfortable online? (i.e., Facebook groups, Black Twitter, "The Black Side of TikTok)

5. How are you using digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter to engage with difficult conversations online?
   a. What makes it easier to have these conversations online? Harder?

6. How would you describe the racial climate online? Is it mostly positive or mostly negative? Why?

7. How important has it been to have relationships with people outside of your close physical community?
   a. How active are you in going online to meet these people?

b. What have those relationships provided you that your other friendships have not?

Experiences with Racism and Digital Protest

 The following questions are asking you about your personal experiences while using social media and digital platforms to engage in political protests. We are interested in hearing how, if at all, you are using the digital space to protest and if these spaces are welcoming places for African Americans. Each question is asking something different; therefore, we are asking that you listen to each question very carefully.

8. How have people used digital spaces as an act of protest? (i.e. How did the digital space to react to the Black Lives Matter protest of Summer 2020?)
    a. How successful or unsuccessful have these efforts been in addressing issues such as police brutality?
    b. How similar or different have the reactions to these movements been for spaces that are predominately or solely Black and those that are non-Black (i.e., White)

9. Digital protests have become an increasingly popular way to address social issues. What personal obligation(s) do you feel that you have to participate in digital protest as an African American?

10. How has racial injustice altered your experiences online?
    a. How would you describe your online experiences before and after the 2020 BLM protest? What, if any differences, have you noticed?

11. How does your social media usage contribute to your understanding of racial injustice? Please describe how you've used social media to educate yourself on these issues.

 12. What racial issues and events have specifically impacted your experiences online?
    a. If applicable, why do you continue to use these spaces when racism is present?

Experiences with Community Building and Social Support

The next set of questions is asking you to reflect on your experiences using social media as a form of community building. We are interested in hearing how you feel these platforms are currently helping African American community members find each other at a time that requires such physical distance. We are also interested in examples of experiences that you have had with supportive digital communities that you feel have impacted you in a positive manner.

13. What digital spaces provide you the MOST comfort when online? Why?
    a. Least comfort?
    b. What is it about these spaces that cause you to actively use them over others?

14. How do you define "community" and how does the digital space shape that community?
    a. What do these digital spaces do to create that community?
    b. What qualities does a community need to have to make it a good community?
    c. What do you do to build community when you are new to a platform? How do you maintain that sense of community?

15. What do community members in these spaces do that make you feel supported?
    a. How does this differ from a relationship in your offline community?

16. What are some exemplary examples of community you've seen online? In other words, what are qualities they possess that you believe other platforms should have as well?
    a. What habits do you find yourself having when on these platforms?

17. How would you describe your experiences with your digital communities versus your offline communities?

18. What is it about these digital spaces that makes you feel that you are supported?
    a. Why do you seek these spaces specifically?

Improvements to the overall experience as Digital Community Member

This last set of questions will focus on how social platforms can better cater to you and your digital community and provide a better space to engage in digital protest. Also, we are interested in hearing how you feel you can further find a supportive social community online.

19. What is the greatest benefit(s) of using the digital space to find an online community?
   a.   What are your biggest concern(s)? Why?
   b.   What do you believe is the cause of this concern?

20. What are some examples of things that platforms like the ones you have mentioned can do to better help you find community?
   a.   What platform has done the best job helping you find community?

21. What has been the most difficult part of countering racism and/or protesting online?
   a.   Is it particular to one platform?

22. When was a time where you felt alone online?
   a.   How did that influence your overall opinion of the platforms as a whole?

23. What actions have you seen taken by these platforms to combat hate speech, racism, or racial injustice online?

24. What do you believe are the best ways to solve these issues you have mentioned, especially in the digital space?

25. What habits have you developed as a result of going online to form social connections?

26. Once you leave digital spaces, how do you feel and what contributed to that feeling?

Is there anything else that you would like to add that we did not cover in your interview? Thank you so much for your time and willingness to participate in this very important study. We appreciate the stories that you have shared with us. All of your stories will help our efforts to develop social media strategies that help platforms bring marginalized communities together for community building and generate programs that create safe spaces for African Americans online.

APPENDIX C.
Participant Demographic Breakdown

Gender Identity	Pseudonym	Age, Sex	Location	Occupation
F	Peyton	32	Cypress, TX	Teacher
F	Georgia	20	Atlanta, GA	College student
F	Julia	30	Cleveland, OH	CPA
F	T	22	Baton Rouge, LA	College student
F	Courtney	21	Baton Rouge, LA	College student
M	Jay	22	Ruston, LA	Recent college grad
M	Tristan	23	Baton Rouge, LA	Law student
F	Rachael	21	Baton Rouge, LA	Recent college grad
F	Lisa	21	Baton Rouge, LA	College student
M	Jasper	24	Baton Rouge, LA	Graduate student
F	JSam	23	Monroe, LA	Freelance Artist
F	Eva	23	Baton Rouge, LA	Legal Assistant
F	Micahel	22	Ruston, LA	College student
M	Ryan	28	Trenton, NJ	Comms specialist
F	Heather	26	Washington, DC	Congressional Aid
F	Patricia	18	Monroe, LA	High School grad
F	Elizabeth	34	Sedona, AZ	Pharm Sales Rep

Consent Form for Access to Potential Participant Database
Louisiana State University

Name of Researcher: Dr. Tina M. Harris, Kyle Stanley
Title of Project: Operating the Digital Space in the Age of Protest Participation

1.   PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how media impacts the overall structure of African American community. We are interested in hearing stories of the African American community as they navigate the digital space in the era of heightened protest participation. Most important are the stories and personal experiences participants have encountered as an African American engaging in digital protest online, including stories of negative experiences from counter protesters, commenters, and counter supporters. We are also interested in hearing their stories about how participants have been able to cope, find support, and succeed in the digital space, as well as the kinds of relationships they have created to help them in the process.

2.   RISKS/DISCOMFORTS:

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Participants you may refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. There is minimal risk of breach of confidentiality, as we will use pseudonyms when transcribing the interview. Interviews will take place using Zoom Pro version. The privacy policy for Zoom can be found here: https://zoom.us/privacy No identifiable participant information will be provided to the transcription company Matchless LLC. Matchless LLC will only receive audio files with basic information, such as the date and time of their interview as well participant gender. Matchless LLC assures its clients all files are 100% confidential and will be used for the purpose of transcription. The individual files will be deleted by them a few days after the research has confirmed receipt. They also guarantee that they will not use any of the participants' personal information (i.e., name, e-mail, phone number, etc.) disclosed in the audio file in any way that does not directly relate to the service being requested. Video and audio recordings of Zoom

conversations will be stored on a password-protected drive in the primary researcher's university office. The files will also be stored in OneDrive, which is a secure data storage site. Only the Principal Investigator and co-Principal Investigator will have access to the files and will use a password to do so. OneDrive has a personal policy requiring them to protect client data for external parties and security breaches.

3. CONSENT INVOLVEMENT

If you agree to allow the research team access to your database and email lists you are granting the research team the ability to: read profiles and contact individuals in the database, view demographic information such as name, age, geographic orientation, and sex, and agree to allow access to contact information such as phone numbers, email address, and addresses. However, ONLY the email addresses of the potential participants will be used.

4. DATA SECURITY AND PROTECTION

Findings of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. A pseudonym will be used when referencing a participant. Participant identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Video and audio recordings of Zoom conversations will be stored on a password-protected drive in the primary researcher's university office. The files will also be stored in OneDrive, which is a secure data storage site. Only the Principal Investigator and co-Principal Investigator will have access to the files and will use a password to do so. OneDrive has a personal policy requiring them to protect client data for external parties and security breaches, which can be found at the following address: https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/how-onedrive-safeguards-your-data-in-the-cloud-23c6ea94-3608-48d7-8bf0-80e142edd1e1.

Should a breach of data occur, all organizations will immediately be contacted as well as LSU IT Services for further guidance.

5. INDIVIDUAL ACCESS TO DATABASE INFORMATION

Only the mentioned members of the research team will have access to the potential participant database.

6. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about our use of your database and email lists you may contact Kyle Stanley (kstan16@lsu.edu, 318-331-4444) or Dr. Tina M. Harris (tharris4@lsu.edu, 224-439-7218). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board at 225-578-8692 or at irb@lsu.edu

10. RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

Participants and groups may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study entirely at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled. Groups may revoke or remove access to lists and databases at any time throughout the study.

11. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

"I, the database administrator, have read this form and decided that the designated research team has access to our database and email lists. The general purposes and particulars of the database as well as possible hazards and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time."

_____   _____   _____

Administrator Signature: Print Name: Date:

By signing below, I indicate that the administrator has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been offered a copy.

_____   _____   _____

Signature of Person   Print Name: Date:
Obtaining Conset

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