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# An Analysis of Black Undergraduate Students' Social Activism through Social Media Usage

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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An Analysis of Black Undergraduate Students' Social Activism

through Social Media Usage

BY

Tayla Richards

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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An Analysis of Black Undergraduate Students' Social Activism through Social Media  
Usage  
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### **Abstract**

Social media has become a tool for college students to engage in social activism. Black undergraduate students is one population that actively utilize social media's impact as illustrated through recent activist movements and demonstrations within university communities. This study sought to explore and analyze the ways that Black undergraduate students utilize social media platforms in general and for activism. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with three Black undergraduate students and analyzed their posts on each of their frequently used social media platforms in order to study how their personal narratives were connected to their social media use.

Results showed that participants frequently utilize social media to engage in social activism through information acquisition and dispersal, discourse with peers, or mainstream media critique, but do not frequently participate in large-scale physical acts of activism such as demonstrations or protesting.

*Keywords:* social media platforms, Black college students, social activism, culture

*This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Edna Guidry. Thank you for teaching me the importance of using my voice.*

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The notion that anybody can become an activist and be a successful one has become widely accepted in recent years (Oteng, 2014). Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and the like have given the Millennial generation access to formerly unprecedented amounts of information and to a worldwide audience. This wide spreading reach reinforces the notion that the use of social media can successfully effect change. A recent study showed that 81% of United States Senatorial candidates with more Facebook fans than their opponents were the candidates that won their respective campaigns (Obar, Zube, & Lampe 2012). Because of its unique capability to integrate various modes of communication with several types of content, the Internet has become an extremely important subject of social science research (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). There are critics of social media activism that state that this generation is infatuated with highly publicized fads and that the movements that result from social networking lack longevity, but the fact is that social media has altered the ways that students are able to engage in social activism, specifically at institutions of higher learning (Oteng, 2014; Wong, 2015).

Internet and social media has become a tool for accessing political information in recent years (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). An article published in 2002 in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* by Kaye and Johnson presented a study that outlined the following primary reasons for individuals' use of information provided online: information seeking and surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. This is an example of how the use of social media has changed in recent years. Research has shown that

there is a positive relationship between frequency of Internet/social media usage and civic engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). In addition to using their agency gained through access to social media, and by default larger audiences, Millennials have utilized social media to create calls to action through the viral trends via social networking (e.g. Kony 2012, #HandsUpDontShoot, #OscarsSoWhite) (Oteng, 2014). This is an increasingly effective way that individuals have been able to be made aware of worldwide injustices and furthermore be able to rally behind a movement that is significant to them.

The increase in social media based activist movements is a culturally significant phenomenon that can no longer be viewed as a viral trend. The impact of social media movements can be seen through mainstream media's reporting of protests led by students on college campuses. A recent example of the rise of student activism in the United States is the impact of the University of Missouri student protests. Creating spaces for students to feel they can speak their voices and effect change is imperative to the success of institutions of higher learning as a facilitating entity (Lake, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

As a student of anthropology whom identifies as a black woman, the Black students' narratives about their civic engagement and cultural expression while attending a predominately white institution (PWI) is an important topic to me. The significance of cultural expression of black students through social media at an institution of higher education is a facet of collegiate experiences that, from my personal experiences, I have observed is to be uncovered or discovered. I seek to understand the cultural significances of social media use within the community that I am a part of. Within the context of current events surrounding topics of race-based discrimination and systematic oppression,

the use of social media as not only a means to express one's self but also to foster awareness of the conversation about race relations in the United States is a facet of social media use that I believe to be pertinent to higher education administrators. I have seen the use of social media as an outlet for unabridged cultural expression, which has created a visible community known to some as Black Twitter. In order to begin to understand the sense of belonging and comradery that I have watched social media engagement cultivate, hearing black students' stories and conducting a type of ethnography of black social media culture is necessary in order to present the value and validity of an online community that has become culturally significant to me. The purpose of the proposed study is to explore how black students at a midsized Midwestern four-year state university utilize social media. One aspect of this study is to investigate how these students use social media specifically as a tool for social activism. Another aspect of student social media use that will be explored will be the creation of culture and place on popular social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. With the rise of social media activism among college aged students in addition to the prevalent use of social media platforms as a source for news and forum-type discussions, it is important for student affairs professionals to understand this still developing form of activism (Wong, 2015).

This study will be seeking to understand student activism through social media use from the personal perspectives of Black students that identify themselves as social media users. Rather than an etic interpretation of data, this study will strive to present the emic perspective of the culture that has been created surrounding activism in conjunction with social media use. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to be successful in

presenting a holistic picture of the Black students' experiences with social media use and activism in an attempt to better inform how changes on campuses are made and how to assist institutions of higher learning in creating spaces for a wider audience of students to engage in the conversations that lead to these changes.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to understand the ways that black undergraduate students use various social media platforms as social activism tools and the cultural significances of their online interactions. Furthermore, the study seeks to investigate the relationships between the purpose and type of social media usage. Posing the following research questions will address those topics.

1. Are there social media platforms that Black students prefer to use for social activism?
2. What purposes do Black students perceive social media platforms to serve?
3. In what ways does social activism manifest on social media platforms?
4. How does the student's social media experience with social activism differ from their lived experience?

### **Significance of the Study**

Research has shown that student affairs practitioners are able to successfully increase levels of student engagement through the use of social media (Junco, 2014). Quite frequently, new events are reshaping the trends of social media use, specifically in relation to social activism among students (Wolf-Wendel, 2004). In order to engage with students of color that identify as activists in a time when activism is heavily influenced

by social media use, higher education administrators must consider the contextual implications of these students' social media use (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). The way that students engage with social media as recently as five years ago is not identical to current trends and continues to shift with continuously emerging technologies and platforms (Junco & Timm, 2008). Effective use of social media to both, hear the concerns of campus communities and to engage with students regarding their concerns is beneficial to the institution and the student. Furthermore, understanding the way undergraduate students of underrepresented populations utilize social media platforms will lend insight that will possibly inform innovative ways of collaborating with students in order to create a campus climate that is conducive to civil discourse.

An understanding of ever-changing student needs is essential to an institution of higher learning being able to successfully fulfill its responsibilities to students (Lake, 2013). With the currently evolving campus climates and student populations, institutions' ability to facilitate a civil, safe, and inclusive space for students is dependent on the level of understanding that student affairs personnel has of current student issues. Student activists have not only recently appeared within student populations; student activists have been in higher education prior to the 1930s, but student activism has since changed and continues to evolve (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014). Institutions of higher education can benefit from this study that seeks to understand the student in their formative time as an activist. An awareness and understanding of the concerns of student community will offer information that can be used to better serve this new generation of students.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Since this will be a qualitative study, my identity as it relates to the study participants is a limitation of the study that will be diligently combatted by various measures. As an individual that identifies as a Black American woman, a potential limitation of the study will be the emic interpretation of the qualitative data that is gathered. To counteract the biases and the exclusion of necessary information for the consumers of this research, a committee of four individuals, excluding the researcher, will also review interview transcripts for additional themes in the stories of the study participants.

One of the major limitations of this study is that there were no female participants. I believe that having the perspective of Black female students would have been a significant set of information that would have presented a more complete picture of Black student use of social media for activism and how Black females possibly engage in activism and social media use differently than Black male students. Another limitation of this study was the number of participants in general. With a higher number of participants, there perhaps would have been a higher likelihood of having a geographically diverse sample for the study.

Another potential limitation of the study is the variance of perceptions of the participants in the location where the data collection will take place. Each participants' reaction to the designated spaces for interviews (i.e. levels of comfort, noise levels, traffic) can affect the quality of the interviews and, in turn, have an unanticipated effect on the data being collected. To control for these variances in participants' perceptions of

the location of the study, the researcher will attempt to hold each formal interview with participants in the same location.

The possibly limited transferability of findings is a limitation of this study. Because of the international nature of social media use and activism, the research topic is widely relevant, however, in a global context, results from a study conducted at a midsized Midwestern four-year state university may not be widely transferable to larger universities or universities with significantly demographically different student populations.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Activism.** Intentional action taken with the intent to advocate or effect social, political, economic, or environmental change within a society. An activist is an individual that performs these actions (Permanent Culture Now, 2011).

**Black Student.** An individual that is enrolled in an institution of higher education that identifies as a Black American, Afro-American, or African American by ethnicity (Sellers et. al, 1998). At times, some of these terms may be used interchangeably throughout quotes from literature and student interviews.

**Culture.** The activities, habits, ideas, traditions, or interests of a people belonging to a group (e.g. religious, ethnic, national, sexuality, generation, etc.) (Eliot, 2010).

**Cultural Expression.** Acts of exhibiting one's ethno-cultural identity through art, language, music, dance, food, or other means. This exhibition and can be expressed individually or collectively (Crites, 1971).

**Millennial.** A member of the Millennial generational cohort; adults whose birth years fall between the 1980s and the early 2000s (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

**Social networking site.** An online application that allow users to create profiles and share user generated content such as messages, photos, videos, links, etc. Users are able to connect with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances on different levels depending on the social networking site. Twitter and Facebook are two examples of social networking sites (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

### **Summary**

The content in this introductory chapter is to serve as an introduction to the current landscape of social media use and to outline the significance in conducting this study at during a time when reactions to current events, political and otherwise, are being influenced through social media use of the Millennial generation. The ways that students interact with their environment, both physical and virtual, is affected by the individual's personal identifiers. Since personal identifiers and characteristics such as racial/ethnic identity and intellectual developmental placement have implications on any student's interaction with the world, research and theoretical frames that specifically apply to Black students and their personal identity development and their presence as it pertains to higher education and activism is included in the following chapters in addition to detailed explanations of methodology for conducting the study.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

As availability of information and social media technology increased, recent research has been conducted in order to better understand the uses and functions of social media. In recent news, it is apparent that activism has become more accessible to the general population, including students. This access has been mostly through movements originating or supported by social media (e.g. Twitter's #BlackLivesMatter). This literature review will explore the significances of social media use within the student community, the history and influence of social activism in college environments, and theories regarding the formulation and expression of culture and identity among black students.

#### **Social Activism**

This section will address multiple aspects of social activism and its influence as it pertains to this study. The four subsections will discuss the history of Black social activism and its effects on Black culture, the Civil Rights Movement, activism within institutions of higher learning, and the role that social media has in current activist movements. The social activism of the 1960s is not identical to the social activism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Considering the social and cultural influences on social activism throughout history is necessary in observing and understanding the current trends in social activism and the differences between activism of the past and activism of the present.

**Early history of Black social activism.** The mandated “separate but equal” status of Black Americans in former states of the Confederacy was enforced through Jim Crow laws starting in 1890 (Chafe et al, 2013). The Jim Crow laws were a form of

institutionalized racism that reinforced the economic, social, and educational disadvantages of Black Americans – this included, but was not limited to, job discrimination, housing discrimination and segregation, and segregation of public spaces like schools, restaurants and public transport (Kousser, 2003). The Jim Crow laws succeeded the Black Codes that governed the Southern United States after the Civil War from 1865 until a federally forced reconstruction took place as a result of the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 in order to reinforce the citizenship rights of recently emancipated slaves (Frohen, 2008). The Black Codes governed interactions of Black Americans with their environment prior to the “separate but equal” status of Black Americans that was established with the establishment of the Jim Crow laws (Chafe et al, 2013). These codes were designed to restrict the newfound freedoms and rights of recently emancipated slaves as a means of preserving a sort of social slavery (Fredrickson, 1989).

Decades of *de jure* segregation in the southern states of America and *de facto* segregation in northern states of America, race based hate crimes and violence, discrimination, legislative inequalities, and otherwise tumultuous race relations regarding Black Americans prevailed (Chafe et al, 2013; Fredrickson, 1989). Two historic events prior to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement that were responses to the flagrantly discriminatory race relations in the Southern United States are the Great Migration in the 1920s and the Second Great Migration in the 1940s. Both of these instances of large relocations of Black Americans from the Southern States to the West Coast, particularly Los Angeles, and to the Midwest, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, and to the Northeast, New York, were in an attempt to pursue better educational, social, and economic opportunities

(Trotter, 1991). While these areas that Black Americans were relocating to during the 20s and 40s did not have laws like the Jim Crow laws of the Southern states, *de facto* laws that perpetuated housing discrimination and police brutality against Black Americans contributed to the origins and continuation of movements for equitable citizenship in other areas of the United States besides the South (Trotter, 1991). This long-standing climate caused an iconic increase in mobilized social activism in the 1950s and 1960s (Morris, 1986; Tarrow & Tollefson, 1994). The rise of prominent activists like Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Huey P. Newton and public figures like Muhammad Ali, Nina Simone, Harry Belafonte, and Angela Davis marked a portion of time in history that would now be known as the Civil Rights Movement (Lawson, 1991). These fourteen years were characterized by demonstrations of civil disobedience like freedom rides, sit-ins, protesting, boycotts, and marches (Morris, 1986).

**The Civil Rights Movement.** The term *The African-American Civil Rights Movement* is a blanket term that is attached to a widely inclusive and diverse set of events, leaders, and strategies that all resulted in many key events that would alter race relations in the United States (Tyson, 1998). Tyson (1998) stated the Civil Rights Movement is often depicted as the peaceful, yet effective, set of events that created change; a subgroup would emerge within the Civil Rights Movement that would challenge the non-violent ideology and largely cooperative nature of the Civil Rights Movement while being nonetheless iconic and impactful. There is a differentiation in how the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement that formed in the mid-1960s are portrayed despite the argument that they “grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom”

(Tyson, 1998, p. 541). According to Joseph (2006), the events and demonstrations attributed to the Black Power Movement, like the Watts rebellion in 1965, that reinforced the popular view of the Black Power Movement as violent and punitive in its messages in comparison to the perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement “were the direct results of a troubled and contested, but no less heroic, past that has been left largely unchronicled” (p. XI). The rampant existence of trends of racial violence in postwar America, both physical and institutional, would fuel the desire to obtain political and economic self-sufficiency by “any means necessary,” a quote often attributed to Civil Rights leader Malcolm X (Joseph, 2006).

The Black Power Movement that began to form near the end of the 1960s as a statement of racial pride and afrocentrism was a source of several changes in the Black American popular culture. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense, founded by Bobby Seale, was one large influence on popular Black American culture through the ideology that “Afro-American history and culture were indispensable weapons in the black quest for freedom” (Van Deburg, 1992, p. 5). According to Van Deburg (1992) the popularity of wearing hairstyles like the afro or the wearing of dashikis that displayed pride in one’s Blackness and pride in their Afro-American heritage increased from the late 1960s into the 1970s. Van Deburg goes on to stated that art and music began and continued to incorporate the rhetoric of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. An example of this art fueled by activism is the popularly quoted poem and song by Gil Scott-Heron (1970), *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. This song was modeled after one of the mantras of the Black Power Movement; the content of the song echoed the rhetoric of Civil Rights and Black Power Movement leaders (Stokely & Hamilton, 1967). These

trends of visible expression of cultural pride and social commentary continue even into current Black American culture.

**Activism in higher education.** Social activism has become increasingly present in higher education and on campuses across the country (Chomsky, 2016; Jaschik, 2015). Recent instances of demonstrations to protest occurrences of discrimination or injustices on college campuses are done in an act of solidarity or in order to catalyze change at their respective universities. Afanna (2014) reported that on December 10, 2014, students at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Michigan staged a “die-in”, which is a demonstration where a group of individuals lie about motionless on the ground in a public space to simulate death. This was done as an act of solidarity with those outraged and grieved by the killing of two black unarmed black men, Eric Garner and Michael Brown, that happened on two separate occasions far away from Ann Arbor, but both at the hands of police officers (Afanna, 2014).

A study conducted from 1989 to 1990 noted a change in student attitudes at universities and the emergence of *collective optimism* (Levine & Hirsch, 1991). Levine and Hirsch (1991) studied changing United States student attitudes in response to current political events. This study was conducted by sampling student populations at different universities across the United States, including Tulane University, Oberlin College, Tufts University, and California State University. One conclusion that was made from this study was that a rise in student volunteerism was associated with a period of student activism. The developmental aspect of students’ narratives about what caused them to become activists was extremely important to this study. An understanding of the attitudes and behaviors that are related to activism and advocacy has become essential to

supporting those students that identify as such. Broido (2000) conducted a study to investigate the perceptions of undergraduate students that identify as social activist, allies, or advocates and their development leading to that acceptance of identity. The participants in the study were six traditionally aged white students – three participants were men and three were women. The study results found that each of the participants had viewpoints that align with the objectives of social justice work when they first started their college education. These participants also explained that their views were, at some point, changed or supplemented by perspective-taking that was facilitated by the university through hearing the experiences and concerns of members of the dominant group and especially of the non-dominant group members.

*Teaching student activism.* There exists a relationship between black social activism and academia (Whack, 2015). “Twitter and the classroom are the last two radical places in America” is a quote from activist and protestor DeRay McKesson’s guest-lecture at Yale Divinity School that has become a popular statement being shared on social media platforms, specifically twitter (Krattenmaker, 2015). Within higher education, there is opportunity for classrooms to become forums for civil discourse, developmental discussions among diverse groups of students, and the respectful challenging of perspectives. This subsection will briefly present research that explores how classrooms can be used as spaces to not only discuss and learn about sociocultural norms, but to also equip students for responsible civil engagement and activism.

Results of a study showed that of 34,000 surveyed professors in the United States, 68% responded that they encourage participatory learning through forum type discussion; 60% considered development of personal values to be a pertinent teaching goal (Magner,

1996). Hoffman and Stake (2001) conducted research to further examine relationships between pedagogical themes and learning outcomes and the social attitudes of students. Hoffman and Stake specifically examined the effect and impact of Women's Studies classes on student social attitudes regarding activism based on the following pedagogical themes: "participatory learning, validation of personal experience and development, development of political/social understanding and activism, and development of critical thinking and open-mindedness" (p. 416). The sample for this study included 111 teachers, 548 Women's Studies students, and 241 non-Women's Studies students. Of the sample, the majority of participants identified as women (teachers 91.9%, students 82.8%) and as White (teachers 85.6%, students 82.8%). The study sought to measure egalitarian attitudes toward stigmatized groups, awareness of discrimination, and an intention to engage in social activism by using distributing pretests and posttests at the beginning and conclusion of one academic semester. This study also sought to provide research on links between pedagogic themes and student change, development, or outcomes. The pedagogic strategies of professors of women's studies classes aimed to inform not only of issues strictly concerning women, but "the net of interlocking oppression in our society, including racism, ageism, homophobia, and other biases" (p. 412). Hoffman and Stake correctly hypothesized that observed positive changes in the social attitudes of tested students would relate to the pedagogic themes of political/social understanding and activism in addition to critical thinking and open-mindedness.

**Impact and influence of social media on activism.** In light of the recent frequency in widely publicized race related incidents at universities like Clemson, Cornell, Yale, and The University of Missouri, "students from targeted groups and their

supporters are pushing back and demanding action to improve the racial climate at their schools” (Jones, 2016 p. 5). While the initial catalysts of these viral demonstrations were race related incidents, these students that are demanding inclusion and equity for students of color are also demanding inclusion and equality for gender and sexuality minority (GSM) students, non able-bodied students, students of a disadvantaged socio-economic background, and/or any other population of students that has traditionally been marginalized or underrepresented (Jones, 2016). Students are increasingly turning to social media as a platform to voice their concerns about current issues in collegiate environments (Tynes et al, 2013). Racially charged incidents at institutions are becoming more visible through quickly gained viral prominence across multiple social media platforms simultaneously. For example, incidents like the hanging of nooses on college campuses, are garnering both students’ and non-students’ reactions to these incidents (Gootman & Baker, 2007; Johnston & Garcia, 2014; Mazza, 2016). Twitter feeds, Instagram photographs, and live Periscope broadcasts are only three examples of the means by which incidents that occur on college campuses or affect a collegiate community quickly gain national recognition and present the opportunity for response.

With the amount of effort necessary to mobilize students and peers around a common goal, campus activists have recognized and harnessed social media’s “ability to empower and connect individuals as well as groups” (Ober et al, 2012, p. 2). This includes organizing campus protests or in compiling an acknowledgeable list of demands to present to campus administrators. The physical, mental, and emotional energy expended through these acts is an aspect of activism that specifically pertains to activists’ roles as students (Ruff, 2016). Ruff (2016) wrote about the experiences of Maxwell

Little, a graduate student and a founding member of Concerned Student 1950, a University of Missouri at Columbia activist collective, explained concerns for his own and other student activists' self-care and furthermore, their academic performance. In the article, Little talked about how he would struggle to comprehend his coursework and having to resort to missing class meetings and asking faculty for extensions for assignments in addition to his and fellow Concerned Student 1950 co-founders' meetings that sometimes took place at 3am. There began to be a noticeable toll on student activists wellbeing. "Individuals looked sick. You could see it on their faces, because they're constantly giving energy to addressing these issues" (Ruff, 2016), Little explained. Little also explained the toll that his role in activism had on his emotional wellbeing. Inflammatory comments, harassment, and threats posted on Yik Yak, Twitter, Facebook, and the like led Little to temporarily withdraw from social media platforms – some of the same platforms that he had used to unite marginalized students at The University of Missouri's campus and their advocates.

### **Social Media Use**

Research about the use of social media and connectivity technology is pertinent to this study that focuses on groups' usage of these resources. This section will summarize research about social media usage, the functions of social media, and the role of language in social media. All of these topics are necessary in presenting a holistic depiction of students' social media use. A theoretical and research based foundation will be built for this study as a result of the research that precedes it.

In 2014, only approximately 15% of US adults reported not being a member of any social media network (Marketing Charts, 2014). Of those US adults polled by

YouGov (2014) that reported being members of social media networks, results were as follows: 75% reported using Facebook, 31% reported using Twitter, 13% reported using Instagram, 7% reported using Tumblr, and 5% reported using Snapchat. These survey results also indicated that Twitter use was highest among those aged from 18-34 (41%) and second highest amidst the 35-54 age bracket (31%). Furthermore, these survey results revealed that Twitter appealed more the Black Americans (42%) than White Americans (29%) and Hispanics (26%). Instagram also proved to be more attractive to Black Americans, being the highest percentage of 19% among those adults that were polled (Marketing Charts, 2014; Gammon, 2014). Research presented by Jones and Fox (2009) showed that the use of social media among young adults, individuals ranging in age from 18-29, neared 100% in 2009. From 2005 to 2015, Pew Research Center reports indicated a consistent increase in social media usage among adults occurred revealing a tenfold increase in reported social media usage over a decade (Perrin, 2015).

As of June 2016, Twitter has 313 million active monthly users worldwide (Twitter, 2016). Twitter is a micro-blogging social media platform that allows users to post and view text based posts of up to 140 characters, repost tweets (retweet), and exchange private direct messages with other users. These posts are called “tweets.” Twitter also enables users to livestream footage via their Periscope subsidiary, share pictures, links, and pre-recorded video. Users can subscribe to, or “follow” the tweets of other Twitter users. Users also have the capability to block users of the Twitter platform; this removes all content of the blocked user from the blocker’s feed or timeline and also prohibits interactions between the blocker and the blocked user (Smith, 2013). One of Twitter’s newer features called “Moments” is a feature that curates and compiles tweets

that are popular and pertinent to any particular event, such as the 2016 shooting and killing of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, LA (Muthukumar, 2015). This feature allows users to still use this conversational medium of “tweeting” while simultaneously allowing users to discover and participate in conversations surrounding events as they unfold (Muthukumar, 2015). Users can follow Moments just as they follow personal user accounts.

Facebook continues to be the most widely used social media platform in the world with 1.71 billion active monthly users (Facebook, 2016). Facebook is a social networking site that allows users to create personal profiles, add other users as “friends,” share posts on friends’ walls, exchange private messages, join common interest groups based on geographic location, professional networks, hometown, school, etc, in addition to the use of connection features with 3<sup>rd</sup> party applications (e.g. Fitbit or CandyCrush). Users can also share and tag pictures, share links and articles, and “like” pages of celebrities or companies that they wish to receive updates about. Similar to Twitter’s retweet function, Facebook users are able to use the share feature to distribute another user or page’s post to their own friends (Smith, 2013).

Instagram, the most popular photograph sharing mobile application has approximately 500 million users (Instagram, 2016). Instagram is a mobile photo and video sharing service and social media platform that offers users the ability to apply photography “filters” in order to present images according to any user’s preferred aesthetic (Hu, et al, 2014). Similarly, to Twitter, users can follow one another’s Instagram profiles and “like” images or leave comments. Sharing capabilities is a feature that Instagram does not offer within the application. Instagram’s growing popularity is

attributed to the argument that photograph and video have become the predominant online social currency (Rainie, et al, 2012).

The series of protests at The University of Missouri is an example of how social media has influenced change in the landscape of activism. The acts of solidarity that occurred nationwide is a testament to how the use of Instagram posts, Vines, pictures and/or videos included in Tweets or Facebook posts can enable a moment to go viral rapidly and, in turn, mobilize and unite sometimes widely dispersed student activists (Brown, 2016). While social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr offer the convenience of reaching widely dispersed individuals to discuss a common theme, the open and unfiltered structure of such sites that are used by students open these discussions to the scrutiny and derogatory comments of critics and opposition of movements (Brown, 2016). Yameisha Bell, a graduate student at the University of Connecticut and a member of the Black Liberation Collective explained the utility of social media platforms that allowed the collective to extend their reach (Brown, 2016). Hashtags like #StudentBlackOut and Twitter chats on students' experiences with microaggressions in the classroom are used to create a space, although a public space, for dialogue on these topics and to coordinate efforts for demonstrations and acts of solidarity like hunger strikes or sit ins (Brown, 2016). The influence of photos taken of demonstrations and shared by widely dispersed but united activists from Thomas Jefferson University, University of Cincinnati, and in the city of Atlanta, Georgia began to appear on the Twitter and Tumblr timelines of the collective with an inspirational message "Tonight we shut the city down. Tonight we were heard. Tonight, regardless of

the rain, we stood in solidarity with Mizzou, Yale, and campuses nationwide” (Brown, 2016, p. B8).

Barbara Ransby, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, an individual who identifies as an activist, explained that social media is going to be a pertinent tool in current campus activism “because that’s how people communicate today. When multiple campuses are able to coordinate protests, that’s when we really see a heightened impact” (Brown, 2016). While connectivity technology, specifically social media platforms, is a tactic used to seek a noticeable global presence and to ultimately “create a space where students can be unapologetically black at all times,” Bell acknowledges that it is just one aspect of the organizing and mobilizing (Brown, 2016, p. B8). Cultural trends and historical events inform and influence generational attitudes and values. This influence on values and beliefs is amplified for this generation of students, referred to as the Net Generation in Junco and Mastrodicasa’s (2007) profile of recent cultural trends of the Millennial generation in higher education. This amplification is attributed to the Net Generation’s unprecedented access to information through television, personal technology, including social media, pop-culture, and otherwise (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007). Just as activists in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement sought alternative modes of communication to increase mobilization of the movement, so is the use of social media to supplement the efforts of the Black Liberation Collective (Brown, 2016).

Keitzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) present what is referred to as the functional building blocks of social media as a model for social media functionalities. They have identified LinkedIn, YouTube, Foursquare, and Facebook as prevalent social media platforms. The following seven functionalities of social media are

illustrated with the resulting implications of social media usage, like content management and data privacy controls, in a honeycomb diagram: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. The presence functionality is defined as any user's knowledge of other users' availability. The relationships functionality is defined as any user's ability to relate to other users. The reputation functionality is defined as any user's knowledge of the social standings of other users and viewed content. The groups functionality is defined as the likelihood of users becoming ordered and forming groups or communities. The conversations functionality is defined as the prospect of users communicating with other users. The sharing functionality is defined as the prospect of users exchanging, creating, distributing, and receiving content. The identity functionality is defined as the level to which users self-disclose and reveal about themselves through any given social media platform (Keitzmann, et al, 2011). Based on the research results, it was found that Facebook's primary functionality was relationships.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classify the different types of social media in order to differentiate the usage of social media based on levels of desired or required self-disclosure. The types of social media platforms that require the highest level of self-presentation and self-disclosure are blogs, social networking sites like Facebook or Snapchat, and virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, there are exceptions to this assumption. Some of these exceptions manifest in the forms of parody Twitter accounts or content themed non-personal blogs. The generally high level of needed self-presentation to participate in the use of a social media site is the reason that sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have become forums for cultural and self-

expression; this type of sustained self-presentation is solicited by the intents, purposes, and designs of these social media platforms.

Junco, Merson, and Salter (2010) explored the differences in ownership and usage of communication technologies among college students. The three predictors of digital inequality that were focused on in their study were gender, ethnicity, and income. The researchers reported that individuals identifying as female, Black, or that reported being in the highest income brackets was positively predictive of the amount time spent utilizing a cell phone. The results from this study shed on differing communication strategies among the differing gender and ethnic demographics.

Lin and Qui (2013) presented a study of the differences of users' linguistic patterns on two popular social media sites, Twitter and Facebook. Lin and Qui studied the 100 most recent tweets and Facebook posts of approximately 230 Singaporean students. Lin and Qui's research was conducted by comparing the frequencies of different word categories (negative emotion, positive emotion, etc) in the tweets and Facebook posts excluding retweets and uniform resource locators (URLs) to external content. The researchers assert that because of the different network structure of Twitter and Facebook, each of the sites has a different communication purpose. The differences that were observed by the researchers were found in the word categories established by researchers. The word categories that showed differences were verbal immediacy, emotionality, topic, and colloquialism. Ultimately, the study results presented that the significant differences between Facebook posts and tweets were that Facebook posts tended to be "more emotional and interpersonal, while tweets are more casual, explicit, and concerned about impression management" (Lin & Qui, 2013). This difference in

language use may be used in explaining any possible preference that is shown by participants for one particular social media network.

### **Understanding Development as it relates to Cultural Expression**

Cultural expression within a group can evolve over time in response to lived experiences, changes in environment, cultural influences, or a combination of these factors (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). A review of the existing research and literature about theories regarding identity, intellectual, and ethical development is beneficial in order to understand why individuals become socially active and how this influences their expression of cultural identities. Understanding where people are in their personal development will aid toward understanding how they express themselves on and off of social media.

**Black Identity Development.** Cross, Parham, and Helms's (1991) research presents the four stage process of becoming black, referred to by the French word *nigrescence*. The three central concepts Cross (1991) presented were personal identity, reference group orientation, and race salience. The concept of race salience is the level of influence that race has on one's lifestyle. Reference group orientation is a concept that refers to one's philosophical and political views as they pertain to their values and worldview. Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001) later built upon Cross's psychological nigrescence theory to develop three separate patterns of the nigrescence life span. The sector of Cross and Fhagen-Smith's theory of black identity development that will be most relevant in the discussion and application of theory to collected data in this study is sector five, identified as Adult Nigrescence. This sector is shaped from the original model that Cross and Fhagen-Smith built upon. This sector involves the pre-encounter that

involves two types, preencounter assimilation and preencounter antiblack, the encounter stage, the immersion-emersion stages, and the internalization stage.

According to Cross & Fhagen-Smith (2001), in the preencounter stage, an individual could exhibit low race salience, identified as the assimilation region of the preencounter stage, or could exhibit internalized racism identified as the antiblack region of the preencounter stage. The encounter stage is defined as any sort of experience that challenges an individual's understanding of their racial identity (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). A student in the encounter stage may begin reading articles that engage discussion about Black cultural identity posted by others and over time feel a higher level of comfort posting articles themselves about their Black identity or about topics related to race. Another example of an encounter could be a student's first experience with conflict concerning worldviews of individuals with a differing ethnic identities or differing cultural identities.

The immersion-emersion stage encompasses two developmental processes. This first of the two developmental processes in this stage is immersion. Upon entrance into the immersion portion of this stage, an individual is well-informed in regards to the identity which they will begin to stray from in an effort to assume an identity of which they have far less information about (Cross, 1991). An individual's existence in this process is manifested through the adoption of an afro-centric, black nationalist, or pro-black identity and related ideologies (Cross, 1991). An individual's presence in the immersion stage is also characterized by the adoption and exhibition of visible aspects or symbols of black culture and identity sometimes accompanied by the opposition of white culture and objects or symbols associated with it. On social media, individuals in this

stage may only share posts, tweets, articles, or think-pieces that are about pro-Black related topics while not incorporating additional divergent perspectives or information. An individual in this stage will less critically adopt what they deem to be a pro-Black ideology. They may stifle online interaction with individuals that do not align themselves to their own socio-political platform or any non-Black friends or followers. Individuals in this stage might also seek out those who share the pro-Black ideology, but also maintain anti-White ideologies.

A progression toward the emersion portion of this stage and, in turn, the internalization stage is initiated by the decrease in anti-white perspectives while maintaining a pro-black stance in addition to increasingly balanced consideration and merging of aspects of black identity (Cross, 1991). According to Cross (1991) during the emersion phase a well-informed, altruistic, and stable understanding of one's own black identity and black identity in general is established. In social media usage, this developmental stage may be exhibited through a more critical selection of posts that are reposted or shared out of agreement and the sharing of articles, blog posts, or tweets for the sake of learning the perspectives of followers and friends.

During the immersion-emersion stage of adult nigrescence, progression to the internalization stage is a positive outcome. On the other hand, the occurrences of three negative outcomes, regression, continuation/fixation, or dropping out, are also possible developmental positions that can follow the immersion-emersion stage (Cross, 1991). Regression is in reference to an individual reverting to the comfort of their former identity. In the case that a person's negative perceptions of white culture or white individuals persist, a continuation in the immersion stage will occur. This occurrence is

also referred to as fixation. An individual that is experiencing despair or exhaustion or even a level of comfort in their development of their black identity will proverbially drop out of their blackness (Cross, 1991). An example of social media usage that exhibits an individual in the *drop out* phase within cultural development may visibly critique followers or friends that subscribe to pro-black rhetoric in contrast to their own more desirable neutral or indifferent stance. These individuals might also unfollow outspoken friends or followers, or completely withdraw from social media engagement as it pertains to their own black identity.

The final stage of adult nigrescence is internalization. Within internalization exist three separate perspectives. One of the three internalization perspectives is the Black nationalist identity within which an individual's blackness is their most salient identifier. These individuals often align themselves with civic and social entities with the intent to advance the black community (Evans et al, 2010). One way that an individual of the black nationalist internalization perspective might exhibit the developmental stage on social media would be their commentary on articles or posts from news sources about acts of violence or discrimination that call their followers and friends to immediate action in response to events in an attempt to bring about change. A call to action may be present, but will in some cases include a call for the action of White allies in an attempt to include the perspectives of both privileged and marginalized entities. Another of the three internalization perspectives is the bicultural perspective. Individuals of this perspective meld both their black identity and the identity associated with the dominant culture within which they live into one (Hoffman, 2009; Garrison, 1992). A way that this developmental stage is exhibited is by reconciling one's black identity with the proximity

of the norms established by dominant groups, in this case, White Americans. In social media usage, this can be seen through a user's reaction or commentary to the same article or post about a recent act of discrimination or violence. The other internalization perspective is the multicultural perspective that incorporate and consider a wide variety of identities and worldviews. An individual with a multicultural internalization perspective is an individual that offers commentary about acts of discrimination as it pertains not only to the Black community or White allies of the Black community, but as an overall human rights issue. This multicultural perspective can be localized or global. Exhibition of a person's multicultural internalization perspective may be the posting and sharing of a wide variance of cultural memes, articles, or think-pieces, not only regarding the prominent group that they belong to, but also regarding less prevalent aspects of their identity's intersectionality as it pertains to the world around them. This multicultural perspective is commonly the perspective of many social justice advocates (Evans et al, 2010).

**Intellectual and Ethical Development.** A student will become an activist if that student observes an aspect of society that they believe needs to be changed. This student's decision to act against an aspect of society that the student deems to be wrong is based in the student's rejection of absolute authority and their "contingent knowledge and relative values" (Perry, 1968, p. 3). This rejection of absolute authority is part of a developmental position of William Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual and ethical development. This summary of Perry's theory will outline the multiple positions that a student may progress through and possibly provide reasoning for the definitive moment of disapproval of any certain societal construct.

*Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual and ethical development.* The first of the three positions of Perry's (1968) model is duality, which affords an individual a binary view of meaning (i.e. good versus bad). For an individual in the dualistic position, learning is simply the acceptance of information shared by an authority figure without contest. An example of dualistic social media usage is the re-posting or sharing of articles, statistics, or multimedia content from various types of social media accounts (e.g. personal, celebrity, non-verified political pages) as fact without confirming sources or credibility. The second position of this model is multiplicity. This is the position in which the individual acknowledges the presence of a variety of perspectives and consider all of them to be equally valid. An example of multiplicative social media usage would be the seeking of multiple sources for multiple accounts of viral events. In the event that content on an event is shared by an individual, the commentary could likely be neutral in nature. At this point, the individual believes that the right or wrong answer is yet to be discovered. The third position of Perry's model is relativism. The individual supports all opinions but no longer considers each of them to be equally valid. The individual accepts opinions and perspectives based on evidence, either from experience or other supporting information. An example of relative social media usage could be a user's intentional welcoming of debate and discussion on an event or reactions to an event through the re-posting or sharing of content accompanied by inquisitive commentary. The relative social media user's active engaging in debate on a topic after sharing content that the user either disagrees or agrees with is for the sake of challenging their own standpoint and the standpoints of others to possibly augment their own worldview.

*Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development.* Social activism sometimes manifests in the form of civil disobedience, which, to some individuals, would be enough of a discouragement to prevent them from partaking in this specific type of activism. Kohlberg's (1976) theory of moral development describes stages of moral reasoning that can be applied to student activists that participate in actions against the social standards of legality in some instances.

The first stage of moral reasoning as outlined by Kohlberg's (1976) theory is the pre-conventional level known as heteronomous morality. In this first stage, decisions of the individual are solely made with the avoidance of negative consequence in mind. In this stage, there is no consideration for the rights or needs of other individuals or themselves. The second stage of individualistic, instrumental morality still lies in the pre-conventional morality level. In this stage, the individual decides to follow regulations and rules if it is in their best interest to do so (Kohlberg, 1976). At this point of development, the individual is aware that other individuals have rights and needs, but do not act in any way that considers those needs. Exhibition of the first two moral reasoning stages within social media could be an individual's reluctance or refusal to share content about recent acts of discrimination, social criticism, or calls to action for the sake of general comfort of people in their social network community.

The next level of morality development is the conventional level. Stages three and four lie in this level, and is where one would find most college students positioned in their development. According to Kohlberg (1976) stage three, interpersonally normative morality, is a point where an individual's actions are made with the needs of those close to them are considered. Stage four, social system morality, is the point where an

individual will make decisions based on the fact that the laws in place have the best interest of every individual in consideration and abides by these laws in order to be a responsible citizen. Kohlberg argues that most adults would be placed in the conventional morality level. An exhibition of the third and fourth stages in this morality development model relating on social media could be better related to decisions made to publicly align with organized protesting in the form of civil disobedience or not. Again, on social media, this can manifest in the use of direct or private messaging as opposed to the public sharing of content promoting organized responses to incidents of violence or discrimination that do not adhere to university policy, public or private property usage, or otherwise governing policies in various spaces.

The third and final level of morality development according to Kohlberg (1976) is post-conventional morality. Stages five and six lie in this level. Stage five, human rights and social welfare morality, is the stage in which individuals make decisions based on the evaluation of social systems' design to support basic human civil rights (Kohlberg, 1976). This is the stage of morality development at which an activist would most likely be placed. Being in this stage of moral development may be exhibited in social media usage through an individual's persistence in sharing or posting content that an individual is aware that will elicit scrutiny, threats, or *trolling* (i.e. flagrant or unrelated badgering), but continue to share and post in an attempt to mobilize and inform other individuals. Kohlberg argues that the sixth stage of morality development, morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles, is only reached by very few individuals. Mahatma Gandhi is an example of an individual that acted based on

their decisions made with the universal needs of mankind in mind, regardless of any other factor influence (i.e. de facto law and de jure law).

### **Summary**

This range of literature is all able to connect to the broader topic of student activists utilizing social media. The functions of social media, the common uses of social media, the developmental stages of student morality and intellection, and the origins of social activism among students are all topics that this literature is able to provide extensive information about. Using this literature, connections can be made between the developmental stages of a student and the way that the student perceives the world and chooses to interact with it utilizing the connectivity technology that is available to them.

## CHAPTER III

### Method

This research study utilized a qualitative design. The purpose of this study was to investigate and analyze how Black college students utilize social media, specifically as tools for cultural expression and social activism. This study was conducted in an attempt to answer the following questions: how students see social activism manifest on social media, what purposes they attribute to social media platforms, which social media platforms are preferred by Black students, and how or if social media experiences with social activism differ from lived experiences.

#### Design of the Study

This study was conducted through the use of qualitative research, which is a type of study that “investigates the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials” (Fraenkel, 2015, p. 93). One of the characteristics of the qualitative research method is to seek the contextual and personally unique perspectives of each individual involved in the study (i.e. researchers and participants). The research questions of this study required narrative based responses to gain an ethnographic perspective of current trends in Black student social media use and are, therefore, qualitative in nature (Holliday, 2007). Because of the types of research questions posed in this study, a qualitative research method was appropriate.

#### Participants

The three participants in this study were male undergraduate students of Black or African American ethnicity in their third, fourth, and fifth years of college enrolled at a mid-sized Midwestern four-year state university. At the research site, Black or African

American students (n=1,353) represent 18.8% of undergraduate enrollment. Black or African American male students (n=514) represent 7.1% of the undergraduate enrollment at the research site. A purposive sample was utilized to gain access to participants who best met the qualifications for participation to gain the greatest amount of illuminating information as possible. Research has shown that using a purposive sampling technique is effective and efficient when any particular cultural domain is being studied so that individuals who have an emic perspective of the culture or could be considered experts may be designated as co-researchers or participants (Tongco, 2007).

The researcher identified potential participants among on-campus residents, student leaders, National Pan-Hellenic Council organization members, and references from university staff. Special consideration was given to identify students who considered themselves to be civically engaged, reported that they utilize social media, and were willing to participate in the interview process. The researcher contacted five potential participants during the fall 2016 semester about their use of social media, their civic and social awareness, the purpose of the study, and their interest in participating as an interviewee. Correspondence with potential participants also included general information about participant confidentiality, a request to schedule a meeting to review participant instructions and select an interview time.

Of the five potential participants that were contacted, three were males and two were females. Three students replied to the initial participation solicitation email. None of female students agreed to participate in the study. Participants were asked to share their usernames for each social media platform that they used with the researcher for review prior to the interview. Participants were not subjected to any known risks

associated with the study. Any potential risk to the participant was minimized through ensuring participants that they could choose to not answer any question that they were uncomfortable answering and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence or retaliation. No participant declined to answer any of the questions in the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Each participant in this study was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. It is worth noting that while an attempt to seek out a diverse set of participants was utilized, all of the participants were from different suburbs of Chicago, Illinois.

**Profile of participants. Darrel**, a junior studying sports management with a minor in business administration, was raised by his mother in a single parent household. Darrel explained his decision to disassociate with some peers as his considerations for his future became prevalent after switching high schools. Darrel is a first-generation college student. He is a student athlete and has always considered himself to be “a laid-back person.” Darrel is a conscientious student and prides himself in his integrity and well-mannered disposition.

**Greg** is a fourth-year senior studying communications with an emphasis in audio. Greg was raised by his mother in a single parent household until his mother remarried when he was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Greg has had no interactions with his biological father since he was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and has a cordial relationship with his stepfather. Students at the high school that Greg attended were predominately Black or Latino. Greg’s interests are widely varied. In high school, Greg played football, was involved in theatre, and also had interest in comic books. He described himself as not being “popular, but also not

lame.” Greg is active at the university radio station, is a member of television and film student organizations, but also considers himself to be a critic of the popular media.

**Jay** is a fifth-year senior studying sports management with a minor in business. Jay’s hometown is a predominantly White, urban town. Jay grew up in a household that emphasized giving and earning respect. He attended a private Christian school until 6<sup>th</sup> grade at which time he was enrolled in a public middle school. Jay’s transition from private school to public school was also his transition into a more ethnically diverse atmosphere that included students from several neighboring communities and suburbs of Chicago. Jay is a member of a National Pan-Hellenic Council fraternity and has been a visible part of campus life at the research site. He prides himself in his openness to interactions with others while still being aware of how the way that he carries himself can impact interactions with those around him.

### **Research Site**

The research site was a mid-sized Midwestern four-year state university in a rural city with a population of approximately 21,000 residents. The undergraduate student population of the state university is approximately 7,200. Black or African American students (n=1,353) represent 18.8% of undergraduate enrollment at the university. Black or African American male students (n=514) represent 7.1% of the undergraduate enrollment. The institution reported enrollment of about 600 Black students in their third year of college or beyond. Scheduled interviews were conducted in observation rooms on campus as they were equipped for audio-visual recording of the interviews. Additionally, the observation rooms protected the anonymity of participants in the study as many students enter through this area daily for a variety of purposes.

## **Instruments**

Semi-structured interview protocol allowed for a larger amount of reciprocity between the participant and researcher in addition to reflexivity of the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were included in addition to structured interviews because of their ability to be versatile, yet powerful while conducting qualitative research and collecting personal narratives (Galletta, 2013). The instrument used for this research was a series of interview questions (appendix A) developed by the researcher. The interview questions were appropriately broad and directional in order to guide the participants' narratives without stifling their discourse that could potentially be unexpectedly influential in the data analysis. These interviews were designed to explore the ways that these students use social media platforms, specifically in the context of their identity as activists. Basic information about the participants and their experiences leading to their current positions as social media users were gathered from these interviews. The interview structure and progression varied upon the individual student being interviewed based on the progression of their narrative and the prepared follow up questions that were formulated in order to answer research questions, or by impromptu follow up questions formulated by the researcher.

## **Data Collection**

Three one-on-one interviews were conducted in October of the fall 2016 semester. Scheduled interviews were video recorded, audio recorded, and transcribed. Interview duration ranged from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. Field notes were taken during interviews as well as during meetings with participants before the interview. Prior to interviews, participants reviewed and completed the Institutional Review Board approved informed

consent form with the researcher. Participants were also asked to share their account usernames for each social media platform that they utilize with the researcher for review prior to their interview.

Each participant's individual interview was comprised of questions from the prescribed interview protocol and review of the respective participants' social media accounts from both the researcher's and participant's access level. First, the participant's social media profiles were reviewed while designating content for the participant to discuss or explain. Then, the participant was asked to log in to their social media platform to conduct the same review of their timeline to review the content to which they are exposed and that they engage with in the same manner.

### **Data Analysis**

In Vivo coding and emotion coding were two methods used to conduct content analysis on transcripts, field notes, and social media posts. In Vivo, meaning "in that which is alive," was extremely useful in the content analysis of these interviews because this method allows the exact terms that participants use to be maintained (Saldana, 2013, p. 105). This was important in this study because of the unique use of language that occurs on social media platforms and the other participant-generated terms that are used within the activist community and in communities that have been created through social media platform usage (Saldana, 2013). Emotional coding was used in an attempt to include and preserve an important part of the participants' narratives. As activists and students of color, the aspects of their experiences were essential in order to begin to have a holistic view of their stories and experiences (Saldana, 2013).

**Treatment of Data**

Prior to recording scheduled interviews, participants were required to agree to participate in the study by reading and accepting the informed consent (appendix B) distributed to them by the researcher. After individuals agreed to participate in the interviews, contact information, social media usernames, and any other identifying information was separated from interview response transcripts and kept in a different file to protect the participants' privacy. A designated pseudonym for each participant was used in interview transcripts and coding. All data collected in this study, transcripts, field notes, and recordings, are kept on a removable storage drive that will remain in the possession of the researcher at all times. According to the Institutional Review Board, all data will be kept for up to three years after the study and then destroyed.

## CHAPTER IV

### Analysis

This chapter will present an analysis of the data gathered from participant interviews. The chapter will focus on pertinent results related to the research questions and premise of this study presented in the previous chapters. The research questions were formulated to highlight Black students' narrative about social media's role in their lives and in their experiences with activism.

#### **Social media platforms preferred by Black students for social activism**

Participants, when asked, talked about which social media platforms they use, and explained how their preferences of each was based on the type of content that they sought to receive or share. Similarities among participants' social media platform preference were common. Participants did briefly discuss social media platforms like LinkedIn and Google+, but the social media platforms that were prevalently used amongst participants were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.

**Facebook.** Every participant had a Facebook account and was consistently active on this platform. Participants utilized Facebook most for general social utility and social activism. The content that participants shared on Facebook varied from the type of content shared by participants on other platforms that they use. Participants talked about Facebook posts being more tailored, polished, and family-friendly as opposed to content that they post or repost on other social platforms that they use. Darrel talked about how his Facebook posts differ from his other posts:

My Snapchat is really different from my Facebook because my mother, my aunty, my grandmother, and basically my family – my whole family – my little brother,

my little sister is also on Facebook, so that's pretty much different. My Snapchat is more just friends from here or friends back at home. My family is not on there [laughs]. On Snapchat I post going out on the weekend. I might post a party or two, also might post some motivational quotes.

Their visible Facebook posts (i.e. wall posts, comments, timeline content) tended to omit use of profanity and the sharing of content related to their own personal social lives like pictures or videos of them at parties. Facebook is one of the platforms that participants used to share news stories, participate in discussion with others about current affairs and social justice issues, and to bring awareness to such issues. Participants talked about Facebook being a preferred platform for bringing awareness to social justice issues because of increased reach and Facebook's integration capabilities available on Instagram and Twitter. Darrel talked about his current preference for Facebook:

I prefer Facebook more than Snap[chat] right now because I'm kind of new to Snap[chat] and I have roughly about 700 friends on Facebook. That's obviously more than Snap[chat], so when I say something, I feel like it can reach more people. On Facebook, you can share the posts so others can see it even if they're not your friends. Others can see it. Their friends can see it.

Participants' use of Facebook was a mixture of social utility and civic engagement.

**Twitter.** Only two of the three participants utilize Twitter. Jay and Greg both talked about their use of Twitter differing from their use of Facebook in the lack of pre-meditation when posting. Jay and Greg used Twitter similarly to Facebook in order to share content posted by others regarding social justice issues, to access information about current events, to share opinions, and to engage in discussions about these issues and

events. Jay explained one of his Twitter retweets of video footage from a recent protest and how it fit with the type of content that he shares on his Twitter:

Twitter's more of the blunt things that I feel like saying. [I have] no filter on Twitter. If I want to get a point across, I can be blunt about my opinion on certain stances in America. I just put it on [Twitter].

Twitter was used by participants in comparison to Facebook in a less formalized posting. Some posts on Twitter were about participants' personal social lives and, in some cases, included adult language. Jay did discuss his awareness of the growing audience on Twitter and explained his reasoning for having a Twitter account for personal use and a separate Twitter account for professional use:

I have two Twitter [accounts] actually. I have a professional one. I have a different email under it. I do do a lot of social media stuff. I'm one of those kids that's on my phone a lot, so it's a bad habit. I do watch what I say [on my professional Twitter] sometimes and on my regular Twitter too. You won't see me posting pictures of me with liquor in my hand...that's something my parents told me. Things come back and bite you.

Greg talked about his preference for Twitter because of the quick access to the most up-to-date or even live or real-time news and updates from incidents. Twitter served as a significant information source for both Jay and Greg. Both participants' use of Twitter was a mixture of general socializing and civic engagement.

**Snapchat.** All participants discussed their use of Snapchat. Snapchat was used by participants with the least amount of pre-meditation. Participants discussed a reason for the lack of filtering in their Snapchat use was the highly-tailored audience compared to

Facebook's low level of exclusivity. The amount of self-disclosure through Snapchat use was similar amongst participants. Greg's response about his social media use illustrated how he augments his content sharing on Snapchat by posting the same content on Instagram or Twitter. For instance, Greg talked about his recording and sharing footage of himself participating in acts resistance against what he observed as being perpetuations of social injustice: "I didn't hide it. I didn't say 'Oh, this wasn't me.' I put it on Snapchat, I'm probably going to go put in on Instagram when I get out of here." Darrel's use of Snapchat included short glimpses into his day-to-day routine including time spent in social settings or inspirational messages intended to serve as encouragement to his peers. Jay's usage of Snapchat was similar to Darrel's, but was less consistent. Greg's usage of Snapchat was a mixture of social utility and activism although activism seemed to be his primary use of the platform. While Darrel's use of Snapchat was primarily for social utility, he explained that if he had a wider reach through Snapchat, he would be more inclined to use it as a platform for activism.

**Instagram.** Similar to Twitter, only two of the three participants actively utilized an Instagram account. Jay and Greg both talked about how they shared content on Instagram frequently. This content varied between reposting content they had seen posted by others, often satirical commentary on current social and political affairs, and content from their personal lives like pictures and videos. When responding to a question about if his use of social media varies by platform, Jay shared that his use of Instagram was more of a journal and archive of his life:

I can definitely explain [Instagram] like that. Instagram pictures, you see a lot of fraternity stuff, pictures of my family, friends, my sisters on there. It's family,

friends, and fraternity. That's pretty much all it is. That's the three things I post on [Instagram] or issues that I have seen like a Black Lives Matter post, I'll repost things like that. All it really is are memories and things I want to just put out there.

Greg's use of Instagram, similar to his use of Snapchat, was predominantly tied to calling attention to social justice issues. Both participants talked about their posts and reposts being related to current affairs employed humor far more frequently than their posts on Facebook. Greg talked about his preference for Instagram use for posting content:

Instagram would be my go-to [platform] because I can tie it to my Facebook and Twitter so I can post all around. Instagram is easy because you just put a picture and a caption, whereas on Facebook sometimes words can get misconstrued. If you have a picture, it's all there.

Significantly more memes were posted on participants' Instagram accounts than on their other platforms. Instagram was the platform that participants got the least amount of information, that is to say that participants did not resort to Instagram as a news source as they did to Facebook or Twitter. Instagram was a platform that was utilized predominantly more for content sharing than reception.

### **Purposes social media platforms serve**

During interviews, the participants responded to questions about what purposes social media platforms serve. In some cases, the purposes for their use of particular social media platforms varied from other platforms. In addition to the purpose for social media being dependent on the platform, the prevalence of their use of any platform for a particular purpose, like general social use or for information, also varied.

**General use of social media as a social utility.** When participants discussed their use of social media platforms, each of them talked about social media's purpose as a tool for socializing and staying connected to family, friends, and acquaintances. Greg talked about why he uses social media in general:

I use social media because it's one of the fields that I want to go into. I use social media to its full advantage. I use Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to its full advantage, from connecting with people across the world to just talking with your friends.

Beyond socializing with others actively, social media was also used by participants to socialize passively through self-expression. Jay talked about social media's purpose for connection with others:

Social media is a platform to express yourself and the things that you do and a way for people to get to know you. [It's] just a platform to display the things you do, display yourself, people sometimes use it to gain confidence within themselves, but they don't really need it for that. It's just another outlet to talk about your life.

Participants talked about how their use of social media for social utility varies depending on the platform. Participants' comments about variance in use was specifically about Facebook. Participants attributed these calculated types of posting practices on Facebook to the larger and more varied audience that is their list of Facebook friends. On Facebook, participants talked about being friends with family members, university faculty and staff, professional contacts, and acquaintances. Jay explained how his Facebook usage differs from other platform usage:

I'm not going to promote me having liquor in my hand or maybe a party. I don't post anything like that on social media, on my Instagram, especially not on Facebook because that's a big, family-oriented platform and I don't want to disrespect my parent like that or my family or people who look up to me.

Darrel also talked about his Facebook use:

The only thing that's different as far as the [Facebook] posts go is the partying. That's it. That's just out of respect for my mother and my grandmother. That's the only thing because I'm twenty-one. I can drink. It's to be respectful to [my mother].

**Information source.** All the participants used social media as an information source. Participants' view of social media's purpose for an information source for themselves and others was broad in the sense that that the term information was inclusive of formal and informal news, social activity, and otherwise. Jay talked about how social media informed him of community perception:

I remember a fight broke out and it wasn't even with the African American [students] at all, but people were on social media talking about "Oh, this is why African Americans here need to..." this and that. It was displayed wrong.

While all the participants talked about using social media as a news and information source, Greg talked about this difference in informational use amongst platforms in particular:

I go to Instagram more just to check posts. Facebook, I read a lot of posts to see what's going on. I use Twitter more just as a news source outlet to see what's trending and what's going on in the world. When something happens on CNN,

instead of going to CNN, I'll go to Twitter and type it in the search bar to see what's going on.

**Challenging others.** A common theme that was present in participant responses was the consistency in their perception of social media's purpose as a platform to challenge others' perceptions and opinions and social media and their own use of social media for this purpose. The challenging of others manifested in multiple ways beyond political critique. Jay talked about instances of challenging other's reasoning and motivation for debate on social media:

I've blocked people on Facebook talking about certain issues. If you're going to argue about a certain issue – it could be Republican, Democratic, race issues – have a reason behind it. They could be like “Why do all lives matter?” Well, I'll explain it.

Greg talked about one of his Instagram posts that he used to challenge celebrity comments about racism:

I wanted people to hear the stupidity coming out of [Lil Wayne's] mouth. For years, he was talking about how Black people should get together, stand together, but then when the time comes, all of a sudden it's “I don't see anything wrong with [racism]”. No.

One way that Darrel used social media to challenge others was through motivation and inspiration to thrive. Darrel talked about what he recurrently posts on his social media platforms:

Basically, [I post about] the struggle of life and how you should go about it. I post a lot of stuff about the struggle and telling people – I know it's cliché – it's not

where you're from, it's where you're going. Like I said, I'm from a hard place. You know what I mean? It's not about where I'm from, it's just about what you make of it.

### **The manifestation of social activism on social media**

As the participants were interviewed they were asked questions about how they use social media platforms, then they were challenged to discuss how they use each platform as it relates to past and current social movements and activism. Common themes presented themselves in response to these questions. What was learned from this was that participants use social media to educate themselves and others, inform others, to challenge or influence others' perspectives, and to critique. Each of these topics will be further discussed below.

**Education and information.** As participants in this study spoke about their activism they spoke about using social media to learn more about current events and concepts. Their responses also indicated that they use it to inform others of current events and social issues, and to critique and supplement popular media's reporting of such events and incidents. Greg discussed an interaction on social media where he was educating a friend about the concept of privilege:

I got into an argument, it was a post, I think, last year with one of my friends. We're still friends. We talked about this [online]. I was talking about privilege and he was like "White privilege doesn't exist." No, White privilege is not you getting a job because you're White. White privilege is the fact that you can go commit a crime and still have some success.

The participants also talked about their own utilization of social media to educate and inform themselves and others about current events, local opportunities for civic engagement, and social justice. The difference between education of self and others was made faintly distinguishable through the particular type of content that was being shared or received by the participant and the desired effect that the content would have on audiences.

*Self.* Participants spoke about how they may utilize social media as a way to learn more about a specific topic. Darrel gave an example of this type of intentional seeking of information:

I follow an animal page on Facebook, but just because they show violent things people do to animals, animal cruelty, and they'll show how smart animals are. If I want to speak on something, I want to know what I'm talking about. I don't want to make it seem like I'm this person when I'm not [laughs]. I really care for animals.

The motivation for learning varied from general personal interest to gaining enough knowledge to participate in conversation and discussion about any particular topic. Jay and Darrel both talked about how lacking knowledge of a topic affects how they engage in discussions on social media. Jay specifically talked about his standards for engaging in public online discussion:

I don't want to speak about it if I don't know what I'm talking about because I could be as completely goofy as the other person across the internet posting stuff too off the top of their head. I don't want to be that person. There's structure to it.

I want to know what I'm talking about. At some points, I don't, so I won't speak on it.

Darrel talked about similar standards for his participation in public online discussion or his deciding to share specific content on his social media platforms, "not that it's not important, but I really can't – if I want to speak on something, I want to know what I'm talking about. I don't want to just make it seem like I'm this person when I'm not."

Darrel also talked about how social media, specifically Facebook, has been a source of information about current events for him:

Main thing with Facebook, I'll say, there's a lot of killings going on in Chicago, – I had a lot of close friends that have also passed within the last five years. I would probably say roughly about fifteen or twenty people that I was really close to got killed by gun violence or something. So, a lot of things I see on Facebook is people getting shot or people getting killed and then with the election and everything, people speaking on the election...then I have some of my old grammar school teachers on [Facebook]. They will put something up, but they'll have an actual debate about why Trump is not good or why people feel that he is.

Greg talked about social media serving as a news source for him also:

Facebook, I just read a lot of posts, see what's going on. I use Twitter more just as a news source outlet to see what's trending. To see what's going on in the world, that's mostly what I do because when something happens on CNN, instead of going to CNN, I'll just go to Twitter and type it in the search bar to see what's going on.

In this study the participants also discussed how they also see a lot of misinformation and that can be viewed as negative. Jay and Greg both gave examples of how they had seen an apparent lack of knowledge on any given topic play out on social media negatively. Greg's comments were about how he has interacted with social media posts that he considered to be products of misinformation; he did not speak about one platform in particular:

That was another person who blocked me. They were talking about how the Confederate flag is not a symbol of racism. I study symbolism, so I understand the fact that it's the same thing as why Germany outlawed the Nazi flag, because it symbolizes a horrible part of their history. I said "The only reason why America doesn't outlaw it is because they don't want to accept or tell that their history is bad."

Jay's examples were specifically focused on these types of posts on Facebook. Jay provides insight in to how these postings can be positive and negative:

People agree with you, or if they disagree; you can get conversation going, educate, but when someone personally disagrees with you on certain things, it normally goes south. You see it all the time on Facebook when you have a post. You can repost something and then you'll see that it'll say "5.5k likes, 50k comments," you read the comments, south. It's bad. It's irritating to see that.

Another way participants saw social media platforms serving as an educational tool was in the use of forum, especially those designed to facilitate educational conversations and insight. Jay gave an example of a forum on social media that he sees as a tool to facilitate

these types of conversation, and provides an example of one he is a member of that is mainly utilized by the Black community:

They can start a thread and talk about things like “What do you think about this?” or to ask for thoughts. Like [name of peer], we have a Facebook group... We talk about social activist stuff like that on there. He’ll ask for thoughts and they’ll say things like “this is how I feel” “this wasn’t right,” so on and so forth. It’s an open discussion. That’s why it’s a closed group of people of all races that you feel like you can talk about it and discuss it and people won’t get mad even if you do disagree with something... It’s just a conversation. In that conversation you’ll learn something about someone’s mentality. [People in the African American community] use [social media] toward African Americans more so.

Jay talked a lot about personal and community accountability in utilizing social media as an activist:

When you’re a leader, being socially active offline is more effective than online because people see you doing something. You could be behind a computer and speak a lot – all talk, no action though, you lose credibility as that social activist at the same time. I will say yeah, it is different. When you’re in the face, you’re out there promoting what you speak about online too, so it can go hand in hand. It’s definitely key. It’s more effective offline though when people see you. It makes your effect on things better... If you have to talk about it, preach it in the right way. You promote it in that way too. You can show the attention toward Black Lives Matter, but once stuff hits the fan Latinos too, you’d better be in the forefront supporting them too because they know what you’re dealing with

too...If there was more of a consensus agreement and effort on both sides to put forth a change, that's more helpful than just complaining and whining about what we're dealing with.

Greg also talked about credibility's role in social media's educational functions and how anonymity and inauthenticity affects that credibility:

I don't believe in that wall. I feel like if you have the gall to say it on social media, you should be able to back it up. When someone looks you up, it's just a picture of a flag or something like that so that way, they can't see who it is. I feel like that wall of anonymity is what defeats the purpose of Instagram or of Facebook because basically, you're just doing this...so that way, if they're sexist, if they're xenophobic, if they're homophobic...you can put it up there and be like "well it's not me." But you never know, it could be your neighbor. It could be your coworker. I have it up there so everything I do, you know that I did it...It's a mixture of posting and doing. I feel like a lot of people just post like "Hey, here is this thing about it" and then will walk away and not do anything, but you have to do both aspects of it. If you're going to post it, you have to live it. You can't be like a keyboard warrior that says all these things but then aren't about that life...I mean like marching and voting.

The topic of activism manifesting on social media through an attempt to educate was also found in practical definition and clarification of widely recognizable terms.

Greg spoke specifically about a post he had made to challenge reverse racism's legitimacy as a concept. He further explained his reasoning for the post with explaining

his response to the notion of reverse racism with a definition of institutionalized racism infused with anecdotal examples:

That [post] was on a Snapchat story feed. When people say “That’s reverse racism”, reverse racism does not exist. Black people can be discriminatory, but not racist. Racism is an institutionalized thing where one race benefits from putting down another race...That’s how racism works.

*Others.* While all of the participants discussed how social media serves as a means to educate themselves and a means by which others seek to educate or be educated, Jay and Greg were the participants that heavily used social media to supplement mainstream news cycles with viral information about current events and to call attention to incidents or issues for awareness sake. Jay talked about how he currently uses social media to inform others online and to publicize opportunities for information offline:

[Posts] are getting retweeted because we’re in a generation now, police brutality, Black Lives Matter, it’s [moves fists together in a clashing motion] and I feel like all this escalated from back in 2012 when Trayvon Martin was – his life was taken. These issues are so sensitive to people. So, me reposting it, I’m just another outlet for people to see the stuff that goes on...that’s why I reposted it, just to spread the awareness that still goes on today...Me publicizing all of our events, I’m just trying to get people involved...forums could range from anything. It could be about us, all the way to talking about racial issues in the world today. [Greek organization] normally have some on business, like I said, racial issues, dating, anything – any topic of discussion that’s hot in the world today. It could

be through social media that you see a topic that's big... Who knows? You could be talking to the chief of police about racial tensions on our campus and how they can help... Whether they do or not is on them, but your voice is heard.

Greg talked about informing others of incidents or situations that he has either learned about or that he has personally witnessed or been a part of and the importance that he places on making his stance known in response to some of those events:

I'm more on the side of just using the social media as a way to get things out. Perfect example, I no longer go into [bar]... the bouncers come over and are like "What's up? What's all the noise?" So, I'm like "He's over here using racial slurs. So, can yall kick him out?" They look at each other and debate and they're like "Well, we can't" – we're like "So yall are not going to kick him out?" So, we getting even more upset so like "Well, now yall got to leave because yall getting too aggressive and too loud." Like "So yall kick us out for being aggressive, towards somebody that's saying slurs to us." So that's – I was going to post about this probably Friday and tell everybody why I no longer go into [bar]... I was going to be like "Hey, I will not think any less of you if you go to [bar], but here's the reasons why I'm no longer going to [bar] because the security guards, instead of at least removing him from the premises, chose to throw us out for being aggressive, so I'm no longer going to [bar]. Like I said, you can go there and have fun, enjoy, but I will no longer be attending that establishment."

Greg also talked about ways that he has used social media to inform peers of activism and actions that he takes in acts of resistance:

...today, I was walking the campus, and you know that had the signs for the Veteran's Day and I walked past one and I see Stonewall Jackson. So, I'm like "No". I literally Snapchatted "So we're celebrating a Confederate General now?" So, after class I literally just went through there, picked [the signs] up and put them in the middle of the quad and said "We're not going to celebrate a general who wanted Black people to stay in chains." So, they're still in the middle of the quad right now.

*Critique.* All participants discussed elements of societal critique in both their own posts and the posts of others, but one participant's engagement in activism through social critique was more prevalently discussed. Utilizing social media as an opportunity to share and exchange social criticism was a common theme in Greg's responses. Jay and Darrel both discussed personal critiques of displays of popular culture and their observation of peers' use of social media, sometimes in relation to their face-to-face interactions. When discussing his reasoning behind many of his social media posts, Greg largely discussed his critiques of media's coverage of incidents related to race relations. Below is Greg's explanation of a post he that he shared comparing media portrayals of an individual who shoots a policeman if they are White, Black, or Brown:

...it was from the media silence because I remember distinctively during the Dallas shootings, they had, first of all, the wrong person up there for a good hour. They had the wrong person up there. He was Black and they had "He's the one who's doing it. He's shooting." He was the wrong person and he didn't even have anything to do with it. But when someone of Caucasian descent or a White man does something, kills a cop, it's media silence. People were saying "Well, it's

because it's three days out from the election." That's not an excuse...when you have the media silence or saying, "He's a lone wolf; he has mental health issues. Oh, he has no ties to any terrorist organizations." So basically what you're saying is blue lives only matter when you get killed by black people? That's why the pure utter media silence of this was hilariously ironic.

Greg went on to talk about his use of social media to augment information shared by news outlets and for organizing purposes:

You don't know about a lot of things if you just listen to the news or you just listen to CNN, MSNBC, or FOX. You won't know the full story because they hide information, but on social media, you get, probably not the full story, but you get at least a better understanding of what's going on because you're going to get it from sources that aren't – that have no political ties to anything. If you can spread it out to the world, people will actually know about it, from getting out and telling people to vote, meet up spots of where you want to have Black Lives Matter movements or marches against social injustices. Before social media, it was harder. It's that balance because sometimes the media outlets only cover the, I guess you want to say "bad" aspects of [protests].

Greg also talked about the criticisms of new outlets motivating his social media use to call attention to injustices:

...one thing about being in the 24-hour news cycle, something's always going to happen and somehow, that story's always going to get pushed down the ladder and then that's how it normally goes away, so not, at least with social media, it won't go away.

Darrel talked about the motivation behind some of his social media posts also serving as a form of social criticism, specifically when observing behaviors that make light of issues that Darrel considers to be solemn. These comments were Darrel's explanation of his motivation of an observational post about people's decline in comments made in jest after the conclusion of the 2016 presidential election:

People were playing. A lot of African-Americans were saying [on social media] "Oh, Trump going to deport Blacks back to Africa." Or "Trump going to do this. Trump going to do that.: But then when the election got down to the nitty gritty, they started realizing that it's real and you didn't see anyone making those little playful posts saying "We're going back to Africa!" They realized that taking away food stamps, and a lot of people are on those, then they got serious about that. People that are trying to get was we call now "clout", like people trying to get Facebook famous and people want to get this image of them when some of us already know the real you. So if you don't know the real someone, then you're going to think this person has money or think this person – half of the people just say stuff are being followers. That's it!

### **Comparison and contrast of Black students' social activism experiences on social media and offline**

While responding to questions about activism online compared to activism offline, participants talked about how their social media presences compared to their lived experiences. Generally, the participants' social media circles were similar to their offline social circles but with larger numbers of people and access to otherwise inaccessible entities like celebrities and special interest groups. Participants all also

discussed a congruence of substance, but difference in presentation. As discussed earlier, there were certain aspects of the participants' personal lives that were not included in their social media presence, but there was no creation of personas or a use of anonymity on social media platforms by any of the participants. Participants talked about the ways that they had engaged in civic engagement or discussion of social justice apart from their social media usage. Darrel talked about his level of offline engagement compared to some of his peers: "I think that I'm more active because the only time that they'll speak on something is if I bring it up. I'm constantly, like I said, talking about Black Lives Matter or stating my opinion about something."

**Personas.** Participants talked about their intent in being authentic in presenting themselves on social media. Participants explained how they observed their peers' social media personas differing from their offline activity. Greg discussed the topic of persona when responding to a question about how his participation in activism online differed offline:

It's real both ways. Social media shouldn't be different. There's no Kayfabe about me. Kayfabe is a wrestling term for when a wrestler has two personas. You have the American red, white, and yellow Hulk Hogan. That's the Kayfabe Hulk Hogan. Then you have Terry Bollea the actual person. A lot of people on social media are always the outlandish, loud, proud person, but then when you see them in real life, they're always quiet. I've always just been like, "This is me."

Throughout the interview, Darrel repeatedly made the point that he was careful to not present himself as something that he is not on social media. Darrel talked about differences that he had perceived between engagement online and offline:

You have people that are portraying themselves to be something that they're not on social media, and then when people get to know the real you... Some Black people are racist, some White people are racist, so sometimes people try to act like they're not racist while they're around you or on social media, but when they get around a certain group of people, their true colors show.

**Code Switching.** Similar to participants' use of discretion in formulating posts depending on the platform that they chose to use, participants' discussion of social issues and how they engage in social activism or civic engagement can vary upon the venue, circumstances, and audience. Greg talked about his hesitance to use certain venues to discuss certain topics:

I would like to [use the radio] but at the same time, I know my audience. I've had this conversation with my boss a few years ago. He brought me in the office and said "I understand where you're coming from and I know what you're saying." At that time, I was kind of considered to be one of the faces of the radio station.

Jay talked about the levels of self-disclosure varying depending on his audience: [People from home] don't know the things that I deal with out here because some things I can't talk to them about. I just keep it to myself sometimes because I can't talk about it to anybody. All of the participants talked about their use of their personal platforms at the university through their extra-curricular involvement as a means for civic engagement and discussion of social justice topics although it manifests through different ways than it does in their social media use. Their activism offline manifests through forum planning and attendance, discussion with peers, or tangible means like protest attendance and posting of information related to current issues.

## **Summary**

In Vivo coding and emotion coding were used to analyze results for all four research questions. Results for research question one revealed participants' preference of Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram for social media platforms because of technical capabilities and enhanced social reach. Results for research question two showed connection to family, peers, or colleagues, information acquisition, and challenging others through debate or information sharing were the purposes that social media platforms served. Results for research question three presented the education and informing of self and others to be one of the significant ways that activism manifested on social media platforms. Results for research question three also showed socio-cultural critique to be another way that activism manifested on social media. Results for research question four showed the use of code-switching between social media use and in-person interaction. Results for research question four also revealed that while participants were careful to be authentic in self-portrayal and self-disclosure on social media, there was observation of common use of personas on social media that differ from in-person countenances of any individual. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these results and the data analysis as they pertain to students and student affairs professionals.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This chapter will present evaluation of the data analysis results outlined in Chapter IV and their connection to identity development literature, literature related to activism, and current literature about social media. Evaluations will be made in order to contextualize the motivation to use social media in the ways that the participants described in their interviews with the researcher. This chapter will also present recommendations for student affairs practitioners, limitations of this study, and recommendations for future research.

This study took place in the month leading up to the 2016 presidential election, and this is important to note, as this was a recurrent theme in participants' posts and their explanations for some of their other posts. Many of the participants' most recent posts were responses to the news coverage of the election and their interactions with peers and colleagues on political topics. The time at which the study took place was also at a time when significantly visible activism and acts of protest were frequent. Both the 2016 presidential election and highly visible moves of activism seemed to have an influence on the content shared by the participants.

#### **Preferred social media platforms and use**

Participants are part of a generation of digital natives. Digital natives are individuals that have had access to and utilized digital technology and social media since the start of their education (Palfrey & Gasser, 2013). Digital natives are differentiated from their parents and grandparents in the sense that their parents and grandparents have had to adapt to social media platforms and some types of communicative technology that

this current generation of digital natives have a seemingly natural ability and ease in use of these platforms, hence their use of several different types of platforms in comparison to their parents or grandparents' use of only one social media platform. Participants used and preferred Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Participants also spoke of their other less significant social media use of platforms like LinkedIn and YouTube, but this use was far less significant than the use of the four aforementioned platforms. All participants used Facebook and Snapchat. Only Greg and Jay used Twitter and Instagram. Of all of the social media platforms that participants used, Facebook seemed to be the preferred site or standard among participants. Even though each participant's use differed slightly, this was the only platform that all of them used and used on a consistent basis. Participants used Facebook to keep in touch with family and peers, as a news source, and a means to share personal commentary or other information like event advertising. Twitter was used by participants for self-expression, sharing personal commentary regarding social justice issues, and as a news source. There was less use of Twitter for contact with family or peers. Participants' use of Twitter was a mixture of general socializing and civic engagement similar to that of Facebook, but less filtered and cohesively curated than content shared through Facebook. In terms of use for non-filtered social utility Facebook was used with the highest filtration, Twitter and Instagram were used with about the same amount of filtration which was less than Facebook's, and Snapchat was the platform used with the absolute least amount of filtration. This lack of filtration can be attributed to participants' very narrow audience of social acquaintances on Snapchat which differs extremely from their wide-reaching familial, academic, and potentially professional networks on Facebook.

One of the themes that was recurrent throughout participants' interviews was kinship. Participants talked a lot about family and the importance that their relationship with their family had to them as an individual. This reverence for family was illustrated in their family's influence in their own social media use. Participants took care to consider audience when sharing content on Facebook because of their families' presence and involvement with them on this platform. The consideration for shared content on Facebook out of respect for parents, grandparents, and other family was a recurrent theme in Jay's and Darrel's interviews. This reverence for familial audience was not apparent in participants' use of Snapchat; as a result, Snapchat was the platform that participants felt at liberty to share more candid content related to their lives and activity. An example of this is Darrel explaining that he will not post content about his social life and parties that he attends on Facebook out of respect for his family although he is not participating in any sort of illicit activity. Darrel further explained that as the type of content that he shares on Snapchat. Another way that reverence for family in social media was illustrated is related to how participants engaged in activism through Facebook use. Participants explained consideration for the ways that they had been taught by family to address issues and engage in conflict resolution when sharing content or engaging in debate with others through a social media platform.

### **Manifestation of activism on social media**

Mentorship was another recurrent theme that was relevant to understanding why participants used social media the way that they did, but mentorship is one of the ways that activism manifested in participants' social media use. Jay and Darrel both talked about the importance that mentorship had in their lives, and then later talked about their

social media usage being a means for them to mentor other young Black men. Darrel's use of Snapchat to encourage positivity and perseverance is an example of how mentorship was connected to activism's manifestation on social media. Jay's use of Instagram and Twitter to publicize forums and events sponsored by his Greek organization to educate students on civic responsibility is another example of mentorship's place in activism.

Another way that activism manifested on social media was participants' use of their social media platforms to frequently share content to bring awareness to incidents of racial discrimination or other social justice issues. The type of content that participants used to encourage awareness and discussion of an issue or to augment news reports of any particular incident were retweets or reposts of eye-witness accounts and interpretations, videos with content related to a general issue or incident, straight-forward commentary, pictures, and memes. Participants' use of irony and sarcasm as a means of critique of social standards and current trends was most heavily used on Instagram. The manifestation of activism through information dispersal on Facebook was predominantly through the sharing of news-site content with participants' own commentary.

### **Online v. Offline presence of social activism**

To understand the participants' use of social media for social activism and how that may be similar or different from their offline activism it is necessary to look at where they may be in their own personal development. For this we use Cross's (1991) Black Identity development model. There were several instances where participants' Black identity development related to their use of social media, specifically how at liberty they felt with sharing certain content including opinion and how they shared it (hi-filter, lo-

filter, no-filter). Participants' choices to share any of those three filtered levels of content demonstrated how they used code-switching between platforms. Participants' code switching was apparent in any posting of fundamentally congruent content on Facebook and any other platform they used, like Twitter or Snapchat, with the only variance being in the phrasing and language use in their accompanying commentary.

Cross (1991) describes the Immersion developmental process of the Immersion-Emersion developmental stage as the initial adoption of pro-black and Afro-centric ideology accompanied by exhibition of symbolic aspects of Black culture. Presence in this developmental stage can manifest in social media use through one's posting and engaging with ideologically homogenous content. Immersion and Emersion are differentiated by the characterization of Emersion through maintenance of a pro-black stance while holding more balanced consideration for external context and intersections of black identity. Among the participants, Greg's presence in the Immersion stage was characterized through a very homogenous use of social media to inform self and others as well as frequent engagement with others in debate about social justice topics and current events. Immersion stage was also characterized by a high amount of lo-filter or no-filter commentary and information output. Greg's use of social media was an illustration of his immersive developmental stage.

Presence in the Emersion stage was characterized by a more equal ratio of social media content and information input and output ranging from no-filter, lo-filter, or hi-filter depending on the difference in audiences on social media platforms. Jay's high use of social media to gain insight and understanding of divergent views of current affairs and social issues and the influence that audience has on his shared content is emersive.

High consideration for kinship, indirect or direct mentorship of others, and diplomacy in phrasing and presentation of content on social media platforms were indicative of participants' lying in the stages of Cross's (1991) model like Emersion or Internalization. The Internalization stage of Cross's model can be categorized into three different perspectives; Black Nationalist Internalization, bicultural Internalization, and multicultural Internalization. These three perspectives differ in an individual's considering and addressing societal concerns of one's own racial or ethnic group either singularly, dualistically, or multiplicity respectively. Darrel's use of social media would place him in either the Emersion or bicultural Internalization stage of Cross's model. There were many similarities in Jay and Darrel's use of social media in regards to the influence that kinship and audience has on their content creation and sharing. On the other hand, Darrel had the lowest amount of engagement on social media with ideologically incongruent entities. Darrel discussed the introspection that occurs when encountering ideas different than his. Darrel often engages in in-person discussion with teammates or peers, Black and White, about his own and theirs for the sake of understanding, but maintains his established perspective and point of view of the topic of discussion.

Participants' reasoning for content creation and sharing in addition to their individual types of campus involvement are what specifically appeared to influence participants' place in any given stage in Cross's (1991) model. Each of the participants were involved in campus activities, but each involvement was different and provided varying types of opportunities for forms of activism. Athletics, NPHC Greek organizations, and campus radio provided differing types of social outlets for Darrel, Jay,

and Greg to exert influence respectively. One of the themes found in participants' interviews regarding their influence was the importance of authenticity in self-representation. Darrel, Jay, and Greg all spoke about the importance of their lived experiences and the way that they carry themselves offline aligning with who they present themselves to be online. The participants attributed effective influence of peers to visibly conducting themselves in alignment with the values and principles that they share through their social media use.

When talking about activism explicitly during interviews, participants were reluctant to consider themselves activists though their definitions of activism matched their own action. When discussing their reluctance, it seemed that participants' view of activists and the concept of activism is one of reverence and is legitimized by extreme sacrifice. When asked to give examples of individuals that they considered to be activists, names given were those of iconic Civil Rights activists that were, in some cases, illustrations of the extreme sacrifice that legitimizes one's title as "activist." They did not see themselves as making large sacrifices through their use of social media. This may be due to a barrier that affords them a level of anonymity or the ability to engage virtually while remaining inactive in person. Participants were engaging in activism with the use of their social media platforms and social platforms at the university, they were not quick to call themselves activists. The fact that Darrel and Jay were hesitant to consider themselves to be activists because of a lack of risk-taking or grand statements made from podiums reveals a difference in their definition of activism and my own as the researcher. Their definition of social activism seemed to be highly dependent on amounts of physical presence, activity level, and associated risks.

## **Implications**

Implications of the study results will be discussed for student affairs professionals, Black student affairs professionals, and students. Implications and recommendations for student affairs professionals apply to all practitioners. Recommendations for Black student affairs professionals are specifically made because this population serves as a visual representation on campus and has the ability to provide continuous optimization by creating resources that will provide communal physical and online spaces in addition to leadership opportunities for Black students at predominantly White institutions.

**Student affairs professionals.** Results from this study showed that students actively seek information on social media. Knowledge of the way that these social media platforms operate is beneficial to student affairs professionals whether one is present and active on these platforms or not. Being aware of the ways that students are utilizing social media and which platforms they use frequently is beneficial for staying abreast of trends among students and an additional avenue for contact and information exchange. One practical way that social media can be used by student affairs professionals to reach students is utilizing social media platforms as a means to distribute alerts and updates for emergency purposes and otherwise. If one is present and active on social media platforms, one should build a presence, be visible, set examples of responsible social media use, and be vigilant and receptive of information being shared by students about issues that they face. Having a professional presence on social media with the appropriate amount of self-disclosure based on individual comfort levels can create approachability. Students will engage with others, such as student affairs professionals, besides peers if

they choose to and feel comfortable doing so. Allowing students to initiate contact with you on social media can serve as a different type of relationship or rapport building between professionals and students. Both participating in and facilitating training on effective and appropriate social media use for student affairs professionals could be a beneficial potential professional development undertaking.

*Black student affairs professionals.* Participants exhibited more civic engagement and acts of activism on social media compared to structured or planned in-person activity. One thought to consider is the reasoning for this difference in amount of engagement. While participants demonstrated an awareness and understanding of the current social justice issues and their stances on those issues, there was not a high amount of personal social action such as participation in protests or town-hall meetings. Participants talked about the importance of civic engagement for the sake of being heard and influencing local government elections or educating peers about societal structure, but there seemed to be a lack of opportunity for participation in forums or education and preparation for responsible and effective activism at the university that participants attended.

As Black student affairs professionals, we should be aware of our influence as role models to Black students at universities. Black and African American students will often-times regard Black student affairs professionals as an authority figure of sorts whether it is a role of authority that one has pursued or not. This de-facto mentorship can be a result of racially and culturally relatable experiences. In addition to an awareness of one's role in Black students' experience in higher education, being self-aware of knowledge level and comfort engaging in activity and discussion with students about

activism, social justice issues, and social media both in general and in regard to activism. This self-awareness will serve one's ability to assist in providing opportunities for students to engage in in-person discussion and civic action in order to aid in preparing students for engagement and leadership among the Black student community and the general population. Creating and providing resources for education and training on peaceful protest, resistance, and civic engagement in general (e.g. voting, legislation, active constituency) is important to all students, but addressing the differences in how Black student protest is received will be a strategy that hopefully yields productive and influential activist movements.

Another aspect of social media use that Black student affairs professionals must consider is perception of one's own social media posts or responses to others' posted content. Exercising caution in content sharing as a Black student affairs professional is necessary in some cases to avoid the possibility of information, standpoints, or personal values being misconstrued or misinterpreted by students and professional peers.

**Students.** Social media is a tool that allows one to share content that can become extremely wide-reaching. Social media can also be a learning tool to take advantage of. Because of the social media's capability to spread information far and wide almost instantly, it is imperative that students become critical consumers of information retrieved from social media platforms. Researching sources that are cited in statistical infographics often seen on Twitter or Facebook is an example of how a student can verify credibility. Exercising thoughtfulness in how one presents themselves on social media platforms can better serve your own credibility and influence in utilizing social media. Participants talked about the need for congruence in how one presents themselves online and how one

presents themselves offline. Intentional thought put into what is shared on social media platforms and how it is presented can impact influence as an activist, student, and potential employee. When using social media as a tool for activism, an extremely effective combination can come from social media platform use for informing and organizing being accompanied with action and example setting. Apart from social media, taking advantage of student leadership and involvement opportunities, or even creating them, can provide one with an additional social platform to bring about awareness and social change in a campus community.

### **Recommendations for future research**

In general, continued study of trends in social media use among students will be useful to the field of student affairs because of its ever-present relevance. One particular topic of recommended research would be investigating the particular ways that social media has altered contemporary activism. Researching cause for the current and variant perceptions and definitions of activism will also be important to the field of student affairs as institutions of higher education continue to be a hub for free-speech and civil discourse. More specific recommendations for future research of social media usage and influence would be continued research of individual platform usage and watching for shifting trends. This study focused on students who identify as Black, however other traditionally marginalized populations (i.e. Women, Latinx, LGBTQA+, etc.) should be studied to see how they are using social media related to social activism. It would also be beneficial to specifically seek out students who are leading social movements in person to identify how this is complemented by their online activity. Other aspects of this study to be further researched are different types of institutions, specifically focusing on campuses

that have historically had students who are more socially engaged in various movements. Investigating the perceived legitimacy that certain social media platforms carry compared to others is another aspect of social media use to be further researched. Another aspect of social media use to be continuously researched is the influence and use of newly developed capabilities and functions of social media platforms and smartphone applications like Facebook, Instagram, and Periscope's live-streaming capability.

### **Summary**

Through analyzing data from participant interviews, results of this study have shown that concepts of utilizing social connection and social and cultural influence is still integral to activism today as it was during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. The reason that social media usage among students is high is because of the access that it gives them to social influence and a broad audience. All of the participants displayed their position in Cross's (1991) theory of Black identity development through their social media usage whether it was used with a high focus on informing others and sharing ideologically homogenous content to encourage the adoption of one's own point of view or to find opportunities to challenge themselves intellectually through self-education and informing. While participants frequently used social media as a means to learn, influence peers, critique media or popular culture, or engage in debate, the participants engaged in-person organized forms of social activism less frequently. Participants did, however, use their influence afforded through campus involvement to discuss and debate prevalent or current social justice issues with peers. Overall, social media did serve participants far beyond social utility in allowing them access to the worlds of others and an opportunity to explore their socio-cultural and political identities in relation to the world around them.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

The questions are ordered in primary (numbered) and secondary (lettered) order. Secondary questions will only be asked if they are not answered in the primary questioning.

1. Tell me about yourself
  - a. What year in school are you?
  - b. What is your major/minor?
2. Where are you from? What here is different or the same from your home community?
  - a. What were you like in high school?
    - i. What were you involved in?
    - ii. Tell me about your friend groups – what did you do together?
3. What are you involved in on campus?
  - a. Tell me about your friend group here?
  - b. How would your friends describe you?
  - c. What sorts of things are you involved in?
    - i. How do you spend your time together?
    - ii. What sorts of things do you talk about?
4. Tell me about your social media usage.
  - a. Which social media platforms do you use?
  - b. What do you do on each of these social platforms?
  - c. Do you use your own name/photo/information on each platform?
5. How do you use social media?
  - a. What sorts of things do you post/repost?
  - b. Who or what do you follow? Why?
  - c. Have you blocked anyone? Why?
  - d. Are there any groups or collectives you follow or are a member of? Why?
  - e. Can you show me some of your recent posts?
  - f. Do you use different platforms for different reasons? Explain
6. Define social activism.
  - a. Can you define social activism as it relates to social media?

- b. From your perspective is there a difference between social activism online vs. off? Please explain.
7. In what ways do you see people using social media for activism?
  - a. Can you provide me with some examples of things you have recently seen?
  - b. How about members of the Black community?
8. Do you use social media to engage in social activism?
  - a. In what ways do you engage in activism on social media?
  - b. Can you show me some of your recent posts related to social activism?
  - c. Why did you post this information?
  - d. How would you describe your activism compared to your peers?
    - i. Tell me why you answered that way.
9. Do you consider yourself to be an activist? Explain.
  - a. In what ways are you an activist?
    - i. How is your activism the same or different online vs. off?
10. Do you prefer one social media platform over others for sharing posts related to activism or following people/groups? Explain.
  - a. How would you compare your use to your friends here at Eastern?
  - b. How would you compare your use to your friends and acquaintances?
11. How are you different/same online and offline? Explain
  - a. Do you think that your social media accounts accurately portray who you are? Why or why not?
  - b. How do your friend groups on and off line compare?
  - c. What would your friends on campus say about who you are online?
12. Are there things you are involved in online that you are not involved in on campus? Explain.
13. Is there anything else you would like to share with me at this time?