UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Race, Education and #BlackLivesMatter:

How Social Media Activism Shapes the Educational Experiences of Black College-Age Women

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Tiera Chante’ Tanksley

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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The #BlackLivesMatter movement, which rose to prominence following the state-sanctioned murders of several unarmed Black Americans, shed light on the power of social media to serve as a platform for transformative resistance, counter-storytelling, and civic engagement for marginalized youth. With some of the highest rates of social media use to date, it is not altogether surprising that Black college-age youth, particularly young Black women, were the primary curators of the politicized social media storm that captured the nation's attention and spurred a viral hashtag into a historical movement. While Black women's persistent use of social media to enact resistance in their schools, in their communities and in popular media is indicative of its importance in their socio-academic experiences, there remains a substantial dearth in educational scholarship examining the nexus of race, gender and resistance as it relates to the digital realm. By drawing upon critical race theory in education (CRT), Black feminist thought (BFT), and Black Feminist Technology Studies (BFTS), this study centers the voices of 17 Black undergraduate women from eight universities across the US and Canada in an attempt to answer

these research questions. Findings revealed the ability of social media to provide young Black women with a sense of safety, visibility, and community that is not regularly available in offline settings. In addition to the benefits of digital resistance, this study also illuminated a spectrum of unintended health impacts of reading, responding to and witnessing anti-Black violence online. A growing skepticism of internet technology to single handedly transform society also emerged from the findings.

The dissertation of Tiera Chante’ Tanksley is approved.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Monica Tanksley, my father, Paul Antonio Tanksley Jr. and all of the resilient Black women in my family that started this educational relay race long before I did.

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Tanksley, T. (2019). “Lessons from the borderlands: Learning to leverage multiracial consciousness and multicultural wealth in academe.” In *Reimagining the Invisible Knapsack: Narratives of Family Assets, Community Gifts and Cultural Endowments. Lexington Books*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The #BlackLivesMatter movement, which rose to prominence following the state-sanctioned murders of several unarmed Black Americans, shed light on the power of social media to serve as a platform for resistance, activism and counter-storytelling for historically marginalized groups. In mere moments, cellphone footage capturing the tragic murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Philando Castile surfaced online. As the graphic images went viral and the nation erupted in political unrest, many Americans turned their attention to social media to express grief, challenge anti-Black rhetoric, and organize for collective change. Data from social media analytics show rapid spikes in user traffic following each murder, with the use of hashtags like #Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter and #ICantBreathe growing exponentially in only a few short hours (Zerehi, 2014). Studies documenting the offline effects of online activism identify the virality of these hashtags as being key determinants to the movement's viability, sustainability and political impact beyond the computer screen. With some of the highest rates of social media use to date (Lenhart, Duggan, Perrin & Stepler, 2015; Rideout et al, 2010), it is not altogether surprising that Black college-age youth, particularly young Black women, were the primary curators of the social media storm that captured the nation's attention and spurred a politicized hashtag into a historical movement.

Though they represent a minoritized group in the US, young Black women play a prevalent role in constructing national discourse on racial justice through their politicized social media engagement. A 2017 Nielsen report, titled "Our Science, Her Magic," identified young Black women as social media powerhouses that regularly define cultural, social and political trends through their unprecedented social media presence (Grace, McCaskill & Roussell, 2017). To date, young Black women have been primarily responsible for developing high profile social

justice campaigns and their associated hashtags. The viral #MeToo movement, which brought the stifling presence of sexual violence against women to global attention, was created by Tarana Burke, an African American civil rights activist from New York City. Likewise, #BlackLivesMatter, now internationally renowned for its plight against anti-Black police brutality, was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, all of whom identify as Black women and two of whom identify as queer. The list of globally recognized social justice campaigns that have originated as a result of the digital influence and political agency of Black women is nearly endless, with #SayHerName, #BlackGirlMagic, #TakeAKnee and #BringBackOurGirls being only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, the ability of young Black women to bring oft-silenced issues of oppression to international attention in a matter of hours is a testament not only to their technological brilliance, but also to their indispensable role as leaders of political revolutions.

Black women maintain an undeniable social authority online, and data showcasing their ability to create virtual groundswells about racial injustice is exemplified by the appearance of Black-led hashtags at the top of trending topic lists (Foley, 2017; Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010). A robust analysis of Twitter, a social networking site oriented towards fast-paced discussions of hot button issues, reveals that the site's trending topics are regularly defined by Black youth that use strategic forms of hyperlinking and re-tweeting to bring marginalized perspectives to the digital forefront (Brock, 2009, 2012). A recently published list of the site's most used hashtags similarly highlights the digital potency of young Black Twitter users. According to the list, tweets created by and for Black audiences were disproportionately located at the top of the hierarchy, with #BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite and #Ferguson occupying some of the highest ranked spots on the list (Foley, 2017). Social media analytics have similarly

revealed that that young Black women are responsible for the lion's share of Black Lives Matter tweets as well as other resistance-focused social media campaigns, including #HandsUpDontShoot, #ICantBreathe and #SayHerName (Freelon et al, 2016). On the one hand, these data are demonstrative of the imperative role Black women and girls play in leading global discussions of race, politics and social justice. On the other hand, it suggests that young Black women have become particularly adept at manipulating Internet algorithms to bring unprecedented attention to issues of anti-Black racism issues that would otherwise be overlooked in mainstream media.

Black women's position at the top of the social media hierarchy is not by accident but due, in large part, to their unparalleled rate of social media use. Contrary to popular belief, the internet's most visible and vocal users are not young white males as popularized conversations about the digital divide may have us believe. In 2016, African Americans were the group to most frequently be on social media throughout the day compared to White and Latinx youth (Lenhart et al., 2015; Duggan & Brenner, 2012; Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016).Similarly, college-age women maintain higher rates of social media use (72%) than their male peers (66%), and young Black women regularly out-consume Black men by at least one hour of popular media intake a day (Pew Research Center, 2017). Cumulatively, these studies indicate that college-age youth, particularly those that are both Black and female, are some of the most connected and largest consumers of media on the Web. Thus, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, where young adults spend a mammoth share of their time on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016; Anderson & Hitlin, 2016), social media has become a crucial space for civic engagement, transformational resistance and counter-storytelling for young Black women.

While social media analytics highlight the scope of Black female media consumption, a casual scroll through popular hashtags, trending topics, and viral videos can concretize just how pervasive Black girl civics, resistance and counter-storytelling is online (Tanksley, 2016). Though society is riddled with troubling images of Black girls as aggressive, uneducated and deserving of anti-Black violence, social media tells a much different story. The virality of hashtags declaring that Black girls rock, Black girls matter and that Black girls are magic is not only a testament to Black girls' technological acumen, but also to their ability to curate counter-spaces that resist narratives of Black inferiority in creative and influential ways (Grace, McCaskill & Roussell, 2017). Though these digital counter-stories are innovative and attention grabbing, they do not exist for mere entertainment. Black girls make clear their intention to use social media to make material impacts beyond the screen. Whether it's creating a GoFundMe account to financially support survivors of anti-Black violence or polling their Twitter followers to organize a local protest, Black girls are increasingly leveraging Internet technologies in transformational and liberatory ways (Bowen, 2016; Gill, 2015; Bradley, 2015; Tanksley, 2016).

The power, prestige and influence of Black girls' voices online cannot be understated. The ubiquity of their digital activism sheds light not only on social media's ability to support new civic activities among marginalized youth, but also to foster transformational resistance and the creation of digital counter-stories. Embedded within Black girls' viral justice campaigns is a critique of structural oppression, a desire for social change and an attempt to disrupt dominant narratives of Black criminality that undergird police brutality. Indeed, the rich legacy of Black female resistance exemplified by activists like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks and Ida B Wells has not only been upheld by contemporary Black girl activists, but has been digitally remixed and reincarnated online.

Young Black women's unparalleled participation as social media content creators, curators and circulators is not only noteworthy, but invaluable to the movement's offline success. But what exactly are the consequences of Black girls' resistance, particularly in a digital age? If history has taught us anything, it is that Black women's resistance comes at a cost – one that is usually paid in physical, mental and emotional hardship. For as long as Black women have survived and resisted oppression, they have also been unduly obligated to uphold the trope of the strong Black woman. Forged during slavery, the myth of the "Black Superwoman" was used to rationalize the sexual, emotional and physical exploitation demanded of Black bondswomen in order to uphold the violent plantation system. The myth of Black women's everlasting resilience is one that makes invisible the pain and trauma that come part and parcel with Black female resistance while simultaneously desensitizing the public to the complexity of their pain and fatigue.

Research Questions

In recognizing the complexity and historicity of Black women's resistance, this study is led to interrogate digital defiance more closely. As Black girls' use of social media to foster digital resistance continues to rise, more research is needed to understand the impacts that heavy participation in digital resistance & counter-storytelling online has on their lives and schooling experiences. Despite popular belief, college students' cyber experiences do not occur within a vacuum, and Black women's virtual interactions have a tendency to materialize in offline campus settings (Tynes, Rose & Markoe, 2013). More often than not, social media trends and conversations overflow into college campuses and classrooms, blurring the once-rigid contours of higher education to include the complex, ever-changing dynamics of social media (Tynes, Rose & Markoe, 2013). While the growing popularity of social media amongst Black college-

age students is indicative of its importance in their higher education experience, there remains a substantial dearth in scholarship examining the nexus of race, gender and digital activism particularly as it relates to education. Recently, scholars have begun to disentangle the blurred boundaries that exist between social media and higher education by documenting the ways social media impacts students' civic engagement (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, 2012), perception of campus culture (Tynes, Rose & Markoe, 2013; Tynes & Markoe, 2010) development of social capital (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007), academic performance (Lepp, Barkley & Karpinski, 2014; Tess, 2013), mental health & life satisfaction (Liu, LaRose, 2008; Lou, Yan & Nickerson, 2012; Nabi, Prestin & So, 2013; Park & Lee, 2014), and general well-being in college (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Manago, Taylor & Greenfield, 2012; Tandoc, Ferrucci & Duffy, 2015; Burke, Marlow & Lento, 2010). Yet conspicuously absent from this burgeoning body of scholarship are the voices and experiences of the internet's most visible and vocal users: Black college-age women.

Given their digital omnipresence and their noteworthy commitments to leveraging Internet technology in subversive and liberatory ways, it seems like an opportune time to examine the effects of transformational resistance and counter-storytelling online for Black women and girls in the United States. By centering the voices and experiences of Black girl cyber activists, this study attempts to augment gaps in educational scholarship that overlook the Black female experience by posing the following research questions:

1. *What explanations do young Black women give for their disproportionate use of social media as a platform for counter-storytelling and resistance?*
2. *What effects, if any, does participation in online movements for social change have on the socio-academic experiences of Black college-age women?*

3. *How can young Black women's insights on education, resistance and digital technology foster new theoretical considerations and models of research?*

Significance of the Study

Current scholarship on counter-storytelling and student activism remains primarily focused on using media to amplify the voices and experiences of Students of Color in the classroom context. A host of these studies focus on the potent connections between digital storytelling and critical pedagogy, highlighting the power of digital media to inspire pre-service teachers to reevaluate their racial biases and blind spots (Gachago, Ivala, Chigona, & Condy, 2015; Kraehe, 2015; Gachago & Cronje, 2015; Blum, 2010; Aşık, 2016). Other studies focus on the ways youth use digital storytelling to leverage marginalized funds of knowledge, challenge narratives of cultural inferiority, and navigate the inequitable power structures in creative ways (Vivienne, 2011; Lenette, Cox, & Brough, 2013; Rolón-Dow, 2011; Wånggren, 2016; Wargo, 2018). More recent scholarship focuses on the use of digital counter-stories to call out overabundance of visual micro-aggressions that pervade school textbooks, instructional videos, and classroom media (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Vasudevan, 2015; Reid, Derby, & Cheng, 2018). Though this body of scholarship is rapidly emerging, there remains a critical gap in research that examines the creation and dissemination of critical *race* counter-stories in digital spaces beyond the classroom setting.

This study is significant to the field not only because it amplifies the voices of a woefully overlooked group in educational scholarship, but also in that it documents the digital literacies, storytelling practices, and narratives of resistance developed by and for young Black women. In doing so, this study challenges the implicit assumption in conventional research on youth resistance and civic engagement that Youth of Color become activists only after being shown

the way by educators, researchers, or afterschool programs. Instead, this study is grounded critical race theory and Black feminist thought, two bodies of critical scholarship that readily acknowledge the historicity of Black female resistance to challenge misperceptions about Black girls' political passivity within and beyond popular media. As a critical counter-story of its own, this study serves as a testament to Black girls' technological brilliance, their political agency, and their undeniable role as some of the nation's most prominent techno-social change agents to date.

There is a growing body of empirical scholarship focusing on hashtag activism and its multidimensional impacts on internet users (Maxwell, 2016; Noble, 2018; Stewart, Schuschke, & Tynes, 2019, 2019). These are some of the first studies to critically examine the causes and consequences of viral Black death and dying. Primarily quantitative in nature, these works have helped establish a baseline understanding of how heavy participation in social media activism has a range of detrimental health effects on Youth of Color that surf the Web (Maxwell, 2016; Stewart, Schuschke, & Tynes, 2019). Empirical studies on Black Lives Matter and social media activism are rapidly increasing (Freelon, Mcllwain, & Clark, 2016a, 2016b) and researchers are using statistical analyses to generate preliminary conclusions about the effects of social media activism on internet users is beginning to emerge. Yet, there remains a dearth in scholarship that focuses on the everyday lived experiences of youth internet users themselves. Numerical accounts of trauma, resistance and activism are important, yet they can not single-handedly capture the rich and complex experiences of young Black women online. In order to truly understand how social media activism impacts the lives and educational experiences of Black women, more qualitative research must be done that centers Black women as the experts of their own experiences. This dissertation study adds to the growing body of scholarship in critical

internet studies, educational research and psychology by augmenting large scale quantitative data with rich qualitative interviews.

Because it is situated at the nexus of educational research, critical internet studies and media studies, this dissertation offers a unique contribution to an otherwise rigid and impermeable field. To date, this dissertation is the first empirically grounded exploration of the educational experiences of Black women that encounter traumatic images of Black death and dying online. It is simultaneously the only work that bridges educational research and critical internet studies to complicate conventional understandings of social media as a space of objectivity and liberation for students of color. By using participant narratives of trauma and fatigue to interrogate the infrastructure of Web 2.0, this study makes visible the algorithmic racism responsible for the virality of traumatic content, Black girls' digital harassment, and the commodification of Black death online.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Over the past 40 years, Black women have experienced significant gains in college enrollment (Shahid, Nelson, & Cardemil, 2018). Black women's college participation nearly doubled between 1971 and 2005 (Winkle-Wagner, 2015), and in 2008 Black women made up 65% of the Black student population on college and university campuses across the country (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2008; Henry, Butler & West, 2012). Black women are also responsible for 68% of all associates degrees awarded to Black students, as well as 66% of all bachelor's degrees, 71% of master's degrees, and 65% of all doctorate degrees awarded to Black students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Due to their increased rates of college participation, Black women have recently been identified as "the most educated group in the U.S." by the National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette et al,, 2016; Bronner Helm, 2016).

Scholars note that as Black women continue to rise to the top of the college enrollment statistics, Black men remain academically disenfranchised across demographics. Extant literature has shown that Black women experience greater levels of college success than their Black male counterparts across nearly all demographics (Chavous et al, 2004; Constantine & Watt, 2002). Not only are Black women statistically more likely than Black men to graduate college within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), but they are also more likely to enroll in college shortly after graduating high school than young Black men (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014; Jones-DeWeever, 2014). Likewise, 62% of Black women enrolled in college in 2016 while only 38% of Black men did the same (NCES, 2019). Based on these statistics, it would appear that Black women are gaining increased access to higher education and are taking advantage of it.

Though informative, studies that dichotomize the experiences of Black men and women construct a gendered narrative of educational success that prioritizes the needs of Black male

students while simultaneously overlooking those of Black women. Placed in the margins of many research agendas, studies about Black women in college have been overshadowed by studies about Black men (e.g., Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Narratives of Black women's college success are often used to rationalize an increase in scholarly attention to Black male students while simultaneously relegating Black women's experiences to the margins. In her study of Black women college students, Domingue (2015) found that using singular analyses of race to understand Black women's educational experience oversimplifies the reality of intersectional marginalization by reinforcing the myth of the "strong Black woman" that leaves Black female students overlooked and under-protected. Winkle-Wagner (2015) argues that notions of college success are often placed within racial constraints, and academic advancement is almost exclusively determined by comparing the achievement of men and women within the same racial group. However, since they exist at the nexus of race and gender subjugation, Black women navigate overlapping systems of power and oppression that distinguish their educational experience from those of white women and Black men (Cohen & Nee, 2000; Crenshaw, 1990; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013). Thus, in order to authentically understand Black women's educational plight, their experiences must be analyzed through an intersectional lens that considers race and gender simultaneously.

With this in mind, the subsequent literature review will strive to make clear the need for more focused attention on the educational experiences of Black women. My inclusion of literature showcasing the myriad of discriminatory obstacles endured by Women of Color in college is intentional, and is meant to complicate prevailing narratives of the "strong Black woman" that has overcome educational marginalization and no longer requires institutional

support or scholarly focus. Winkle-Wagner (2015) encourages researchers to do this, and warns that "a lack of focus on Black women hinders the efficacy of institutional policies geared towards maximizing academic performance, reducing attrition, and enhancing college experiences for these students" (p. 172). Though they are uplifting, popular narratives about the highly educated Black woman are misleading in that they overlook the rhetorical and material consequences of gendered racism that Black undergraduate women regularly endure. Albeit unintentional, these oversimplified narratives reinforce images of the "strong Black woman" that leave Black female students under-protected, underserved and under-theorized.

Importantly, the goal of this literature review is not to position Black undergraduate women as helpless victims, but rather to offer a more holistic and humanizing account of their collegiate experience. By showcasing the pervasive ways gendered racism alters the higher education landscape for Women of Color, this study pushes institutions of higher education to develop more nuanced considerations for retaining and supporting young Black women.

An Intersectional Analysis of Black Women's College Experiences

While it may appear that Black women are faring better than Black men in college, an analysis that simultaneously considers race and gender reveals that Black women remain at the bottommost rungs of the educational ladder when compared to women from other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Shadid et al, 2018). For instance, only 44% of Black women who start college earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years compared to 65% of white women (US Department of Education, 2014). Black women simultaneously have the lowest 6 year graduation rate compared to all other race-gender groups, except Black men. Equally troubling is the fact that Black women's current 6 year graduation rate is almost exactly the same as it was in 1996,

whereas the rates of all other groups - including Black men's - have increased over time (US Department of Education, 2014).

Feminist scholars agree that Black women's increase in college enrollment and lack of comparable outcomes in degree completion is a cause for concern (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The fact that they are experiencing gains in college enrollment as compared to Black men is marginal when the reality of their holistic underachievement is fully considered. Statistics showcasing Black women's continued struggles with degree completion, retention and achievement challenge the popular belief that they are "the most educated group in the U.S." (NCES, 2016). Such narratives obscure how frequent encounters with racism, sexism and gendered racism create unique challenges for Black women as they navigate their higher education experience. Black women remain one of the most academically disenfranchised group to date, and as such require more nuanced examinations into their unique experiences in college (Patton, Haynes, & Croom, 2017; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Bennett & Lutz, 2009). The following section provides detailed examples of how interlocking systems of race and gender collide to shape the overall experience of Black undergraduate women.

Intersectional Barriers to College Success

As they move through the higher education pipeline, Black women encounter a number of stressors that mediate their overall educational experience. Like most undergraduates, Black undergraduate women encounter general stressors that come with the college transition, including time management challenges, relationship issues and independence to name a few (Bartman, 2015). At the same time, young Black women must also contend with additional challenges derived from institutional racism and anti-Blackness on campus. Longitudinal data on the frequency of racist encounters on campus suggest that anti-Black racism is a near constant

experience for African American students (Prelow, Mosher & Bowman, 2006). In one study of 135 African American college students, researchers found that 98.5% of their participants had experienced racism on campus in the previous year (Prelow et al, 2006). Research has consistently shown discrepancies between perceptions of campus racial climate between Black and non-Black students. Lo et al. (2017) found that Black students perceive race relations on their campus more negatively than white students.

Black students are acutely aware of the ways racial stereotypes influence their treatment on campus, and as a result they regularly describe faculty, academic supports, and developmental services as uninviting and inaccessible to Students of Color (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Stage & Hamrick, 1994). Black college students also report feeling less respected than white students due to assumptions of cultural and intellectual inferiority (Yosso, 2005; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Harper, 2015). This in turn can make Students of Color feel they have to "work twice as hard to get half the credit" for their accomplishments (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Solorzano et al., 2000). Research has shown that negative interpersonal dynamics are common for Black students, including unwelcoming dorm environments, less friendly peers, and less supportive residence hall staff as a result of anti-Black racial sentiments (Harper, 2015; Johnson-Durgans, 1994). These subtle and blatant forms of racism often alter Black students' social, emotional and academic experiences in college.

Studies have simultaneously shown that college campuses are particularly unwelcoming for female students (Jean-Marie, 2006; Lester, Struthers, & Yamanaka, 2017). Generally, college-age women report higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than male college students (Misra & McKean, 2000). Scholars have connected these higher levels of stress and depression to gendered discrimination. Data consistently shows that female students of all

backgrounds report higher accounts of sexist discrimination than males college students (Lester, Struthers, & Yamanaka, 2017). They are also more likely to feel invisible, isolated and doubt their academic ability than male students (McCabe, 2009). Women college students also report higher levels of sexual assault, harassment and stalking than their male peers (Nadal, Mazzula, Rivera, & Fujii-Doe, 2014). Cumulatively, these gendered stressors increase women's risk for mental health issues.

Since Black women experience intersectional oppression, their experiences on campus are mediated by both their race and gender identities (Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis & Thomas, 1999). Consequently, Black women's collegiate experiences are unique in that they endure multiple systems of race and gender oppression simultaneously. This difference is exemplified in statistics showing that women in college report higher levels of stress and anxiety than men, but that Black women sustain some of the highest rates of anxiety and depression among female college students (Misra & McKean, 2000). Furthermore, Neville et. al (2004) found that Black women experience greater difficulties with psychological and interpersonal stress in college than their Black male peers, and accounts these marked differences to double marginalization. These findings echo Howard-Hamilton's (2003) assertion that Black undergraduate women face the additional stressors of racism and sexism to a degree unmatched by any other student group.

Black women encounter unique barriers to college enrollment, retention and completion. More often than not, stereotypes of Black femininity are used to understand, interact with and evaluate Black women in educational settings (Harris-Perry, 2011; Misra & McKean, 2000). These controlling images, which undergird nearly every aspect of higher education, are regularly called upon to determine Black women's access to campus resources, academic supports, health services, and other seemingly objective facets of higher education (Givens & Monohan, 2005;

Monohan & Givens, 2005; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Thus, a holistic and authentic examination of Black women's collegiate experiences requires an in-depth exploration of raced and gendered stereotypes that pervade college campuses and classrooms to create inequitable opportunities for Women of Color.

The Effects of Stereotypes on Black Women's Collegiate Experiences

Covert and seemingly innocuous racial remarks and putdowns are the substance of modern day racism (Pierce, 1995; Yosso et. al, 2009; Solorzano, 1998). Critical race scholars assert that contemporary racism is perpetuated through micro-aggressions, defined as subtle, innocuous, preconscious degradations or put downs meant to keep women and People of Color in their subordinated place in society (Pierce, 1995). These assaults, which manifest as low expectations and stereotypical assumptions about Black female students, are made possible through organizational and ideological structures of patriarchal White supremacy (Yosso et. al, 2009; Bell, 1992). Thus, the stereotypical lenses through which Black undergraduate women are viewed are microaggressions.

Stereotypes of Black womanhood have a long, contemptuous history in the United States. Forged during slavery, controlling images of the hyper-sexual Jezebel, the overaggressive Sapphire and the uneducated Mammy were used to rationalize the continued exploitation, brutalization and commodification of Black women's bodies without consequence (hooks, 1992; 1996; Davis, 1972; West, 2008). In her discussion of gendered racism, Collins (1989) asserts that the enduring legacy of these images continue to provide ideological justifications for Black women's political, economic and academic marginalization. When it comes to higher education, these three interrelated stereotypes have worked throughout U.S. history to ensure the subjugation of Black women within and beyond the college classroom.

Mammy as Invisible, Unintelligent & Self-Sacrificing

WEB Du Bois (1903) was amongst the first African American philosophers to take note of Black Americans' acute awareness of racial stereotypes in his renowned work *The Souls of Black Folk.* Detailing the complexities of "double consciousness," DuBois poses a proactive, unanswered question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" By way of this rhetorical device, DuBois (1903) adequately captures the painful duality through which many African Americans perceive life in America. Not only do they maintain personal understandings of what it means to be Black, but African Americans are also acutely aware of stereotypical constructions of their identity, their community and their perceived intelligence.

This acute awareness of societal prejudice has been found to have a range of negative effects on Black students' educational achievement, one of which is stereotype threat (Steele, 2003; Martin, 2008). As explained by Steele (2003), stereotype threat occurs when African American students fear that they will be judged by stereotypes of Black intellectual inferiority (Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). Beliefs in Black intellectual inferiority are prevalent in society and when Black students are made aware that they could be perceived through such a distorted lens, their academic performance suffers (Steele, 2003). In his study of standardized testing, Steele (2003) found that the mere mention of race invoked fear, anxiety and decreased levels of academic confidence within African American test takers. These sentiments were directly related to academic achievement and the fear of being stereotyped produced deflated test scores each time the experiment was conducted. Steele's (2003) study was groundbreaking in that it uncovered material consequences of racial stereotypes and how they impact even the most well-read, and adequately prepared Students of Color.

Similar to Steele's (2003) notion of stereotype threat, damaging stereotypes about gender and femininity have deleterious impacts on the academic aspirations, performance and attitudes of female students. Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein (2002) demonstrated that extensive exposure to negative gender stereotypes often undermine women's confidence and academic performance in the classroom. Decreased interest in quantitative studies, poorer performance in math and a more favorable stance towards verbal items are only a fraction of the consequences women students faced when exposed to heightened levels of gender stereotypes (Davies et. al, 2002). Given Black women's dually marginalized social status, it is quite possible that they experience compounded stereotype threat in the schooling context. The fear of being stigmatized according to race and gender could be one of many explanations for Black women's academic struggles in college.

The image of the doting Mammy has additional impacts on Black women's collegiate experiences when it is employed by faculty, staff and administrators. Mammy's key character traits are incompetency, the desire to be self-sacrificing and the ease at which she is rendered invisible (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). Each of these character traits undergirds contemporary beliefs about and treatment of Black women in the college classroom.

Mammy as unintelligent describes the pervasive belief that young Black women lack the intellectual capacity or work ethic to achieve academic excellence in college. Popularized images of Black women as "dumb," "lazy," "irresponsible," or "dimwitted" are often used to rationalize their subordinated position in both society and in academic spaces (Crenshaw et al, 2015; Morris, 2016; Evans-Winters, 2015; Brown, 2013). Such racially degrading notions of socio-academic failure often inform professors' beliefs about Black undergraduate women and are subsequently used to justify having low expectations for educational outcomes, remediating the curriculum

and pedagogy, and expecting Black women to one day occupy certain types and levels of jobs (Wun, 2016a, 2016b; Blake, Butler, Lewis & Darensburg, 2011).

Mammy as invisible speaks to Black undergraduate women feeling as though their voices and contributions to the campus culture are unacknowledged or unimportant (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). Studies show that educators dedicate more attention during classroom instruction towards males, including their provision of one-on-one assistance to students, their choice to select certain students to engage in dialogue and discussion, and their decision to choose group leaders for activities and projects (Wun, 2016a, 2016b; Blake et al, 2011; Crenshaw et. al, 2015). Additional research reveals that women are chronically ignored, interrupted and overlooked in mixed-group academic settings more often than their male peers (West, 1995; Wun, 2016a; West & Zimmerman, 1983). These studies indicate that when young women speak in mixed-gender settings, they are less listened to than men; they are interrupted more often than men; the topics they introduce to the conversation are less likely to be taken up; and they do more work to keep the conversation going than young men (West & Zimmerman, 1983). Moreover, women's ideas are more likely to be attributed to male peers, leaving them to believe that their voices are unheard and that their ideas are not valued (West & Zimmerman, 1983). In a classroom context, labored speech and chronic silencing can decrease women's willingness to participate in classroom discussion or have lowered academic self-esteem and contentedness. Since matrices of domination exacerbate mechanisms of silencing, it is reasonable to assume that these practices are intensified when the speaker is both a woman and an African American student.

The third tenet – Mammy as self-sacrificing – denotes how Black women's intellectual contributions are often described by educators in terms of their nurturing ability rather than their

academic ability (Howard-Baptiste, 2014). It also speaks to the expectation for Black women to sacrifice their own well-being for their community, family or peers (Crenshaw et. al, 2015; Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011). In her study of Black female push-out, Crenshaw and colleagues (2015) noticed that young Black women were being disproportionately pushed out of school because of caretaking responsibilities at home and in their communities. There was an unspoken expectation for many Black undergraduate women to take care of younger siblings and household chores – responsibilities that were not only unexpected of male family members, but that also took away from their ability to fully focus on college (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Jezebel as Hypersexual & Un-Rapeable

Though seemingly unrelated to education, the trope of the hyper-sexual Jezebel plays a crucial role in Black women's college experience (Crenshaw et. al, 2015). The common construction of Black women as promiscuous and sexually insatiable helps sustain a culture of rape, sexual assault and harassment on college campuses that disproportionately affects Black undergraduate women (Crenshaw et. al, 2015). Although college women of all racial backgrounds endure sexual assault and harassment at alarming rates (Abbey, 2002; Fisher, Cullen & Turner, 2000; Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987; Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss & Wechsler, 2004; White & Smith, 2004), Black college-age women sustain some of the highest rates of sexual assault, harassment and stalking on campus (Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2016; Krebs, Barrick, Lindquist, Crosby, Boyd, & Bogan, 2011). In their study of sexual assault in the lives of Black female college students, Carmody and Washington (2001) found that 37.6% of their participants had experienced sexual assault in their lifetime. West & Johnson (2013) similarly found that 36% of Black female college students in their study experienced sexual assault in their lifetime. In one of the few studies that documented sexual assault during college,

Krebs et al., (2011) found that roughly 10% of Black undergraduate women in the study survived a completed rape since entering college. Cumulatively, these data shed light on how gendered racism alters the form, function and severity of racist oppression for Black undergraduate women.

Scholars have identified the Jezebel stereotype as contributing to Black women's unprecedented rates of sexual assault because it constructs Black girl bodies as licentious and "unrapeable" (Crenshaw et al, 2015; Donovan, 2007). They simultaneously acknowledge how these stereotypes along with racist systems coerce Black women into remaining silent about their abuse. Studies of sexual violence shed light on this silence, suggesting that for every 1 young Black woman that reports a rape, 15 Black women will not report (Crenshaw et al, 2015). Fully aware of how the Jezebel image shapes societal perceptions, young Black women are often reluctant to report assault for fear of not being believed or for fear of being blamed for their own victimization (Francis-Favilla, 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Lindquist et al., 2013). Unfortunately, Black women's concerns are far from fictitious. Donovan's (2007) study anchors these fears in empirical evidence, suggesting that college students perceive Black victims of sexual assault to be less believable and more responsible for their assault than white victims.

Black women's keen awareness of institutional racism at their college or university is also an important factor deterring them from seeking support after an assault (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2016: Lindquist et al., 2013; Francis-Favilla, 2019). Black women who feel that their college has been insensitive to issues of race and racism more broadly often find it harder to seek help for sexual violence (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2016). A steep history of racial and gendered violence in the police force has also made Black women distrustful of campus police and more reluctant to confide in them for help (Krebs et al, 2011; DeFour, 1996). All said, Black

undergraduate women endure various types of gendered violence that go unnoticed and unchallenged due to gendered racism at organizational, ideological, and systemic levels.

Research has consistently shown that experiences with gendered racism and sexual violence directly impact Black women's higher education experiences. In general, Black women that survive sexual assault on campus are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health consequences, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (West & Johnson, 2013; Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral, 2009; Jordan, Campbell & Follingstad, 2010). These mental health stressors, in turn, can limit Black women's educational achievement and participation. Baker et al.'s (2016) robust study of sexual victimization similarly indicated that exposure to sexual violence predicted poorer college academic performance for undergraduate women. As postulated by Combs, Jordan and Smith (2014), experiencing sexual violence is directly correlated with a lower college GPA. Likewise, in her qualitative study of school attrition, Crenshaw and her colleagues (2014) found that fear of sexual assault, harassment and stalking were identified by young Black women as prevalent concerns that threatened to limit their academic success.

Sapphire as the Angry and Difficult to Work With

In her study on student leadership, Domingue (2015) found that Black undergraduate women were overwhelmingly viewed through a Sapphire (angry Black woman) stereotype. Believed by peers and faculty to be the "angry Black woman," the study participants encountered significant barriers to academic success, inclusion and visibility. Their attempts at self-expression and leadership were commonly misinterpreted as signs of anger or hostility. As a result, and the women in this study experienced feelings of invisibility and voicelessness in the college classroom (Domingue, 2015). They simultaneously reported interpersonal challenges in

which white peers became reluctant to work collaboratively with them in academic, professional or extracurricular spaces (Domingue, 2015).

In their study of intersectional micro-aggressions, Lewis & Neville (2015) found that the angry Black woman stereotype caused significant psychological stress for Black college women in their study. In fact, one of the highest factor loadings in this study was for the item "As a Black woman, I have felt unheard in a work, school, or other professional setting" (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Black women also discussed how images of them as "loud" and "angry" serve to silence them because they feel reluctant to speak up in educational settings to avoid being negatively stereotyped (Lewis et al., 2010; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Huntt, 2013). The vast majority of young Black women in Lewis & Neville's study (2015) reported experiencing the angry Black woman -related micro-aggressions at least once in their lifetime. Stereotypes about the angry Black women directly impact Black women's learning experiences because it deters them from participating in college classrooms in meaningful and impactful ways.

Despite there being ample evidence to showcase Black women's disparate educational experiences, narrative accounts by young Black women reveal a pervasive skepticism of their oppression by higher education faculty, administrators and researchers (Winkle-Wager, 2015; Porter & Dean, 2015; Holland & Cortina, 2017). In 2005, Givens & Monahan (2005) substantiated Black women's claims by empirically testing the potency of gendered racism on white college students' perception of their Black female peers. After priming the students with a stereotypical video clip, the researchers played a secondary video showcasing a Black woman applying for a competitive job. The experiment sought to determine the effects of raced and

gendered stereotypes on white college students' perception, treatment and evaluation of Black women in real life campus settings.

Two major findings from this experiment are worth considering. First, when asked to select adjectives to describe the young Black woman, participants were more likely to select stereotypically negative terms to describe her. The participants also made these mental associations more rapidly than they did positive traits (Givens & Monahan, 2005). The second finding worth considering involves the participants' perceptions of career possibilities for Black women. When asked to select a job position that would be "more suitable" for the applicant than the one she was currently applying for, study participants overwhelmingly chose stereotypical career choices, such as nannies, maids, cocktail waitresses and sex workers.

Soon after their first experiment, Givens & Monahan (2005) conducted a second experiment replicating the original design. The main difference was the purposeful inclusion of the racist and sexist image of the Black Welfare Queen (Monahan, Shtrulis & Givens, 2005). This stereotype positions young Black women as lazy students that siphon support from government assistance programs, like Pell grants, Affirmative Action and welfare. Once again, response time data revealed that African American women were more quickly associated with negative traits. Shockingly different though, was the potency of the Welfare Queen stereotype in comparison to the Jezebel and Mammy images of the first study (Monahan & Givens, 2005). In this subsequent experiment, participants readily selected adjectives and job positions that positioned the Black female job applicant as ignorant, complaining, and lazy welfare recipients.

Such rapid response times suggest the association of negative character traits to Black women can be nearly instinctual for non-Black college students. The research conducted by Givens and Monahan (2005) showcases the ease at which non-Black students operationalize

deficit views of Black womanhood to evaluate and interact with their Black female peers. When analyzed through an educational lens, one can't help but wonder how automatic associations would impact student-to-student or student-to-faculty interactions when one of those actors is a young Black woman.

The Strong Black Woman as Unbreakable

A robust body of literature examining the multidunal effects of positive images of Black womanhood is quickly emerging (Winkle-Wager, 2015). These studies recognize how controlling images - be they positive or negative - can be detrimental to the health and wellness of Black women because they work to exploit, control and silence. The Strong Black Woman schema (SBW) promotes overcoming obstacles by way of dogged determination, and data shows that its strong emphasis on emotional suppression and self-reliance may hurt rather than help Black women's well-being (Walley-Jean, 2009; Lewis et al, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011). Psychologists have found injurious connections between the SBW trope and psychological distress among Black women in college, particularly because women who ascribe to this mental schema have reduced perceptions of social support (Walley-Jean, 2009; Lewis et al, 2013). In other words, the SBW image causes young Black women in college to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms to oppression, including emotional suppression and self reliance (Lewis et al, 2013; West et al, 2016). Black women in college have also reported feeling reluctant to seek out support from peers, faculty and mental health staff because of this image (West et. al, 2016; Donovan, 2011; Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Though some Black women demonstrate resilience and strength in overcoming oppression, adversity, and racism, it is unrealistic to expect all Black women to be resilient and exempt from needing external support from others. Unfortunately, stereotypes about the

mythically resilient Black woman may hinder Black women from receiving the assistance they need from both faculty and staff due to misinformation about their dogged resilience. Because of this, many faculty and staff are not equipped to address warning signs of stress and isolation exhibited by Black women (Watt, 2006). Such stereotypes make Black women feel as though other students, faculty, and staff are insensitive to their needs and culture (Rosales & Person, 2003).

Concluding Thoughts on Black Womanhood Stereotypes

As demonstrated through a carefully constructed intersectional analysis, controlling images of Black womanhood help locate Black undergraduate women at the bottommost rungs of the educational ladder. By constructing them as angry, unrapeable, incompetent and hyper-resilient, dominant society is able to render the Black female body as a welcoming site of violence and invisibility on campus. Cumulatively, Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and the Strong Black Woman relay "common sense" messages about young Black women that reify educational structures that exclude, exploit, and overlook Black women. Reiterations of Jezebel, Sapphire and Mammy are insidious, and regenerate in college classrooms to influence the ways faculty, staff and peers come to perceive and treat Black undergraduate women.

Black Women Resist, Survive, and Thrive

Despite these well-documented challenges, there is also a growing body of research that chronicles the ways Black women survive and thrive within discriminatory and racially hostile college environments, to which this study contributes. This newly emerging body of work, which focuses on resilience, resistance and coping, disrupts deficit narratives of Black women as educational victims and college failures. By analyzing Black women's experience through an asset-based and culturally-situated lens, these works make visible the myriad of cultural,

spiritual, and gendered knowledges that Black women draw upon in order to achieve academic excellence in college. These studies work collaboratively to illuminate the pervasive presence of gendered racism that creates inequitable college experiences for Black women while simultaneously acknowledging the strategies that Black women use to endure and overcome these challenges.

Educational Resilience and Coping

Educational theorists have long argued for more asset-oriented analyses of Black women as a means of rectifying a knowledge canon that demonizes and victimized Women of Color. Although studies exposing the presence of intersectional oppression in the experiences of Black undergraduate women are a crucial step towards achieving educational equity, a disproportionate focus on challenges and barriers can inadvertently reinforce deficit notions of Black women as educational failures (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Such conversations neglect to acknowledge the ways Black women are surviving and thriving in hostile learning spaces, ultimately relegating their resistance strategies to the sidelines (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

In his study of African American college students, Solorzano (1997) characterized stereotypes as "images or words that wound" and found connections between stereotypical treatment and academic, mental and social hardships for underrepresented students. At the same time, he found links between experiencing racism and developing culturally situated and identity-centered coping mechanisms that ultimately foster educational resilience. Solorzano's (1997) scholarship is important because it complicates prevailing narratives that position Students of Color as helpless victims that have limited agency with which to survive and resist oppression. It is important to remember that experiences with marginalization do not solely

produce negative health and educational outcomes, but can also lead students to develop coping mechanisms that help them thrive in higher education.

In a similar vein, it is important to remember that Black women's college process is multifaceted and cannot be fully understood through an analysis of hardship alone. Though a host of literature has worked to uncover the causes of academic failure for Black students, very few studies have rigorously examined the sources of their success (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). Consequently, the subject of educational resilience, or why students persist through college despite facing systemic, organizational and individual barriers to success, has become an important focus of research in recent years (Sule, Bush, Chambers, & Walpole, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, Bush, Chambers, & Walpole, 2009 ;Strayhorn, 2008). This body of work acknowledges that despite the stifling presence of raced and gendered barriers to success, Black women continue to draw upon raced, gendered, and cultural funds of knowledge achieve academic excellence during college (Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Shadid et al, 2018).

In one study of resilience, researchers found that frequent encounters with discrimination actually resulted in the development of nuanced navigational strategies that helped Black lesbian women survive hostile environments (Bowleg, Huang, Brooken, Black & Burkholder, 2008; Napier, 2015). Negative encounters encouraged the study participants to develop and strengthen internal characteristics that bolster educational resilience, including self-esteem, spirituality, optimism and humor (Bowleg et al, 2008). At the same time, the young women in the study enacted agency by deciding when and how to deal with discriminatory encounters. They also found that Black women engaged in resilience processes including directing confronting oppression, assessing their power to change situations, not allowing others to define reality for them, and choosing not to bar the burden of other people's bigotry. Black women also choose

when and how they will engage with oppressive circumstances, which demonstrates both an agency and a desire to protect themselves from unnecessary harm (Bowleg et al, 2008).

Experiences with racism have also been associated with the development of supportive social networks. In her study on resilience, O'Conner (2002) found that Black women who report having deeply caring friends, family and mentors often excel in hostile learning spaces despite the odds. Researchers believe that informal networks comprised primarily of other Black college students provide the necessary social and emotional support to negotiate inhospitable racial climates (O'Conner, 2002). These culturally situated and identity-centered spaces often serve as critical counter-spaces, or counter-hegemonic spaces that affirm marginalized identities and drawing upon cultural wealth to effectively navigate higher education spaces. Students of Color participate in counter-hegemonic affinity spaces because they offer a protective barrier for racially hostile learning environments. Cultural organizations, diversity programs and identity-specific spaces are just a few of the counter-spaces that Students of Color leverage to foster academic resilience. For Black women, counter-spaces can be physical or digital, and can manifest within or beyond the college campus (Tanksley, 2016).

Transformational Resistance & Political Activism as Resilience

In recognizing the way that Students of Color are not passive victims of oppression but rather struggle against interlocking systems of domination in creative and subversive ways, critical race scholars have theorized a transformational resistance framework (TR). This framework, which identifies a plethora of oppositional behaviors including conformist and resilience resistance, has regularly been used in educational scholarship to challenge the deficit narrative of student resistance that currently pervades research and education (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Brayboyo, 2005; Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003; Covarrubias, 2005). By

submerging student opposition into an interdisciplinary, historically-anchored and culturally relevant context, CRT scholars are uniquely able to examine student resistance from an asset-oriented approach.

Though there are a number of oppositional behaviors, transformational resistance has regularly been positioned as being the most positive form of push back because it employs the highest level of student agency (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Brayboyo, 2005). Unlike the other forms of resistance, which contain varying levels of social awareness and desire for reform, TR is defined by actions that contain both a critique of structural inequity and a motivation for social transformation (Raygoza, 2016). Thus, the goal of transformational resistance is to make meaningful change - be it ideological or practical, individual or institutional - that creates a more equitable reality for Students of Color. Since it contains both a critique of structural oppression and and a desire to make social change, student activism is an exemplar of transformational resistance.

Scholars suggest that political activism may serve as an adaptive coping strategy and active resistance to inequitable conditions on campus, including racial micro-aggressions (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Research suggests that political activism is one means by which African American students from historically marginalized backgrounds challenge oppressive policies, practices and ideologies in their colleges and in society at large (Hope, Keels & Durkee, 2016; Gorski, 2019). The relationship between race-based discrimination and political activism has been thoroughly explored (Hope & Jagers, 2014; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). In a study of political activism, Hope & Jagers (2014) found that an awareness of institutional discrimination was directly related to political activism for Black youth. In this case, the more Black youth acknowledged anti-Black racism, the more political activism activities (e.g., engaging in a

boycott) they participated in. Szymanski and Lewis (2015) similarly found that activism in the Black community was directly related to a recognition of systematic disadvantages experienced by African Americans. In another study of activism among Black college students, more frequent experiences of racial micro-aggressions (e.g., being followed in a store) were related to more frequent civic engagement among Black participants as well as a greater sense of civic responsibility (White-Johnson, 2012).

Research has also established strong connections between racial/ethnic discrimination and the development of political efficacy among Black youth (Hope & Spencer, 2017). According to Hope, Keels and Durkee (2010), political efficacy is "the personal belief that one has the knowledge and skills to understand and affect community change through purposeful political actions" (p. 205). An important theoretical assumption within political efficacy literature is that people take action when they believe their voices and behaviors can meaningfully impact their lives and their communities (Watts & Guessous, 2006; Hope, Keels & Durkee, 2016; Hope & Spencer, 2017; Kirshner, 2009). In the present study, political efficacy can be understood as young Black women's perceived capacity to change social conditions through individual and collective acts of resistance in person or online.

New Forms of Political Activism for College Students of Color

Interestingly, as Students of Color continue to participate in political activism during college, research examining the civic activities of young people continue to position women and Youth of Color as being politically disinterested and disenchanted (Hirshorn & Settersen, 2013; Syvertsen et al., 2011; Twenge et al., 2012). Indeed, extensive scholarship has documented longitudinal drops in conventional indicators of youth civic engagement, including voting, volunteering, reading a newspaper, and enrolling in public affairs or political science courses

(Delli Carpini, 2000). Collectively, these studies suggest that young people, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, suffer from a growing dissatisfaction with the current political structure, the political leaders of the day, and their ability to make tangible change through conventional forms of civic engagement (Hajnal & Lee, 2011). Consequently, their participation in these traditionally defined methods of civic participation continues to diminish. While it is true that today's youth express distrust, dissatisfaction and disinterest in narrowly-defined indicators of civic engagement, their staunch participation in alternative forms of civic engagement challenges the normative assumption that they have become politically inactive. Black women's statistical overrepresentation in social media use and their hyper-visibility at the forefront of online movements for social justice suggests that youth civic engagement hasn't declined so much as it has undergone a digital transformation.

In an attempt to counter popular rhetoric that positions young people as politically disconnected, recent scholarship has emerged chronicling the nuanced forms of civic engagement that have manifested in the digital sphere (Gil de Zuniga et al, 2012; Loader et al, 2014; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). According to a 2018 survey by Pew Research Center reveals that a majority of Americans believe that social media are *very* or *somewhat* important for accomplishing offline political goals, such as getting powerful politicians to pay attention to issues (60%) and creating sustained movements for change (67%) (Anderson et al, 2018).

While these new iterations of civic engagement are gaining popularity across a wide range of demographics, they are particularly prevalent amongst users that are young, low-income and belong to historically marginalized racial groups (Anderson et al, 2018). For instance, only a third of white survey participants in Anderson et. al's (2018) study considered social media to be

very or somewhat important to their political engagement. Conversely, over half of Black social media users identified these platforms as being critical venues for expressing their political views and getting engaged with issues that are important to them. Black social media users were also more likely than white users to view social media as *very* or *somewhat important* to them when it comes to finding others who share their views about an important issue (54%), getting involved with issues that are important to them (52%) and giving them a venue to express their political opinions (53%) (Anderson et al, 2018).

In regards to civic agency and visibility, Black users overwhelmingly describe social media as being an invaluable political tool for those who are historically marginalized. For instance, 36% of Blacks said social media is very important for getting elected officials to pay attention to issues that are important to them, compared with only 19% of whites (Anderson et al., 2018). Likewise, roughly 80% of Black survey participants say that social media "highlight important issues that might not get a lot of attention otherwise" and "help give voice to underrepresented groups." In addition to race, age and gender are crucial determinants in the choice to leverage social media as a site of civic engagement (Anderson et al., 2018). Young internet users aged 18-29 are the group most likely to use social media as a venue for civic involvement, and girls tend to gravitate towards social media more than boys to raise awareness on or politically engage in a social issue (Keller, 2012; Harris, 2008). Similarly, young Black women under 29 years old are statistically overrepresented as creators and circulators of politically-oriented posts, particularly as it relates to Black Lives Matter (Olteanu, Weber & Gatica-Perez, 2015).

How Identity Informs Social Media Use & Political Activism Online

In order to understand the political authority that Black women garner on the Web, it is pertinent to first understand the how intersectional identity shapes social media engagement in general. Robust scholarship on the complexities of social media use indicates that race, age and gender all play crucial roles in users' social networking preferences, from the types of content they see and post to the particular platform used. For instance, Black youth are more likely than their white peers to choose Twitter or Instagram as their preferred social media platform (Brock, 2012; Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Similarly, young women are more likely to use social networking sites that focus on image sharing, such as Instagram and Snapchat, and that offer opportunities for communicating with friends and like-minded people, like Facebook (Lenhart et al., 2015; Tanksley, 2016; Brock, 2012). Young men, on the other hand, are disproportionately represented on platforms like YouTube, which favors video creation and consumption, and websites that support video game culture (Smith & Anderson, 2018). When it comes to age, young adults between 18 and 29 are similarly fond of image-sharing platforms like Facebook and Instagram (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Examined intersectionally, these data provide preliminary insights into why young Black women are statistically overrepresented as social media content creators, especially in spaces like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (Tanksley, 2016).

When it comes to creating online content, African Americans are more likely than whites to post comments, articles and images about race and racism (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). In fact, 28% of African American social media users report that a *majority* of the social media content they create is about race while only 8% of white users report the same. When it comes to newsfeeds, where users interact with posts created by friends and colleagues, a similar racial disparity exists. Black social media users (68%) are nearly twice as likely as white social media users (35%) to report that at least *some* of the posts they see on their newsfeed is about race

(Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). These differences suggest that Black social media users are not only creating more race-based digital content than white users, but they are also encountering race-based content more frequently than users who are non-Black.

While these studies reveal that racial identity informs the contours of users' social media choices and behaviors, they simultaneously suggest that racial politics have become increasingly prevalent discussion topics online. In 2015, Pew Research Center found that there were nearly 1 billion tweets about race posted to twitter, which works out to be roughly 66 million tweets per month and 2.1 million tweets per day (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). These "race-based tweets," defined as posts that mention Black Americans, white Americans or race in general, often include a range of sub-topics like pop culture, sports and personal experiences. However, an overwhelming majority (60%) of race-oriented posts are politically-inclined, suggesting that when users post about race to Twitter, they are more likely to be discussing news, politics, and criminal justice than topics unrelated to civics (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Cumulatively, these reports suggest an illicit connection between intersectional identity, youth activism, and young Black women's proliferating social media use.

Social Media Activism as Digitized Transformational Resistance

Deemed innocuous and trivial by mainstream scholarship, young Black women's social media engagement is in fact deeply politicized, historically anchored and indicative of their technological expertise. For far too long, Black women and girls have been overlooked, undervalued and presumed unworthy of scholarly attention in the fields of education, political science, and media and technology (Noble, 2012; Scott & White, 2013; Scott, Sheridan & Clark, 2014). This chapter stands in direct opposition to these anti-Black, anti-woman narratives by

asserting that Black girl resistance and engagement online provide a gateway into more nuanced examinations of race, gender, and political activism in the digital era.

The litany of scholarship conducted on transformational resistance identify counter-storytelling as a liberatory tool that enables Students of Color to challenge deficit narratives that often pervade schools, society and popular media (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Raygoza, 2016; Casanova & Cammarota, 2018). By drawing upon experiential knowledge and minoritized ways of of knowing, counter-stories in the Black Lives Matter movement challenge stock narratives of post-racialism, colorblindness and police objectivity that reinforce racial disenfranchisement both historically and contemporarily (Gallager, Reagan, Danforth & Dodds, 2018; Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017). Counter-stories identify systems of power that manifest in taken-for-granted norms, beliefs and practices and in doing so pulls back the curtain on hegemonic myths of cultural deficiency and criminality used to justify anti-Black violence. By sharing stories from the margins, counter-stories illuminate the "truth" of racial injustice and shifts the blame of police brutality away from "aggressive" or "unruly" Black civilians towards the insidious structures of white supremacy that benefits from Black death. For many Students of Color, counter-stories expose the ideological, institutional and individual mainstays of anti-Black racism and is often the first step towards accomplishing transformational change (Gallager et al., 2018; Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017; Yang, 2016).

Recent scholarship chronicling the new forms of civic engagement that have emerged within the context of internet technology suggest Black girls' social media posts are indicative of transformational resistance and counter-storytelling. According to a 2018 survey by Anderson et al. (2018), using hashtags related to a political or social issue, changing their profile picture to show support for a cause, and looking up information on local protests or rallies are just a few of

the ways Black girls are engaging in political resistance via social media. Findings from this study reveals that users who are young, Black and/or female are all more likely to view social media as being *very* or *somewhat important* for their political engagement as historically marginalized groups. When it comes to the perceived ability of social media to support counter-storytelling, roughly 80% of Black participants believe that social media highlight marginalized issues "that might not get a lot of attention otherwise" and "help give voice to underrepresented groups." Youth, women and Black Americans were also more likely to cite social media as being indispensable for making offline political change, including getting elected officials to pay attention to issues that are important to them, creating sustained movements for social change, and influencing policy decisions.

A closer analysis of race-based tweets reveals the clear intention to use hashtag activism to foster transformational resistance and counter-storytelling online. In Carney's 2016 study, tweets containing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter consisted of three main categories, each with its own purpose towards fostering offline change (Carney, 2016). The first category, termed "A Call To Action," consisted of posts that demanded an end to structural racism. These posts focus on the presence of historically anchored systems of power that foster anti-Black violence and encourage Twitter audiences to move beyond intrapersonal causes for police brutality (Carney, 2016).

The second category, which directly opposed the emergence of the #AllLivesMatter hashtag, was used to challenge stock stories of colorblindness and Black criminality that currently reinforce state-sanctioned violence (Carney, 2016). According to scholars, #AllLivesMatter is a digital reiteration of social hegemony meant to obscure the rationality and validity of the #BlackLivesMatter campaign against police brutality and anti-Black racism

(Freelon et al., 2016). Thus, the “Struggle over Signs” subsection was meant to showcase the insidious presence of white supremacy and colorblind racism embedded not only within the criminal injustice system but also within counter protests asserting that “all lives” and “blue lives” matter.

The third and final category of Black Lives Matter tweets was comprised of posts aimed at collective organizing and were meant to schedule local rallies and protests (Carney, 2016). Findings from this study, and others, concretize just how strategic and intentional hashtag activism is (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Jackson & Welles, 2015; Freelon et al., 2016). Contrary to popular belief, the race-based tweets that undergird social media movements are far from random, but instead contain each and every element of transformational resistance and counter-storytelling. Not only do they challenge stock stories of Black criminality, white cultural superiority and colorblindness, but they also contain an acute awareness of structural oppression and a desire for social change.

While the aforementioned studies highlight the prevailing belief among Black girls that social media resistance is an avenue for offline change, research on the material impacts of online activism concretize the power of digital activism to change lived realities beyond the computer screen (Freelon et al, 2016). For instance, studies of mainstream media display a connection between what trends online and what is subsequently covered on prime time news. In the case of Michael Brown, whose fatal encounter with Ferguson police was photographed and uploaded to Twitter, news of racially provoked police brutality nearly broke the internet, spreading across social media networks in mere seconds. Photographic evidence of Brown’s extrajudicial killing, which first appeared on social media at 3:05 CST pm on August 9, 2014, was extensively shared and discussed online for almost 4 hours before it was reported on a

mainstream news outlet. The graphic murder of Philando Castile, which was live-streamed on Facebook around 9 pm on July 6th, 2016, was shared over 2.5 million times online before the story was picked up by mainstream news the following day (Freelon et al., 2016).

The tendency for news about anti-Black violence to surface online well before it is covered on mainstream television is one reason scholars assert that social media heavily impacts national coverage about race and justice. It has been argued, and well documented, that authentic accounts of anti-Black racism are rarely covered in mainstream news outlets, and when they are discussed they are often used to uphold hegemonic constructions of Black criminality (Freelon, Lopez, Clark & Jackson, 2018). The tendency of social media to "break the internet" with news of racial violence and galvanize national attention inevitably pressures mainstream news outlets to cover stories of underrepresented groups that would otherwise be left untold.

Not only do digital counter-stories put pressure on mainstream news channels to center the experiences of People of Color in more accurate and holistic ways, but they also catalyze individual, institutional and systemic change on a global scale (Freelon et al., 2016; Freelon et al., 2018). In 2014, the militant group Boko Haram kidnapped more than 270 Nigerian schoolgirls from their boarding school. It wasn't until after the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls went viral and garnered support from high status celebrities, activists and politicians that the issue become international news and institutional action was taken (Green, 2018). The existence of a viral hashtag and global demands for a resolution, the Nigerian government got involved and offered a hefty cash reward for anyone willing to help locate the missing girls (Green, 2018).

In 2017, a hashtag demanding clemency for Cyntoia Brown, a teenage victim of sex trafficking that was serving a life sentence for killing her rapist, went viral. It didn't take long for high profile politicians, activists and celebrities to give renewed visibility to Brown's case

through social media posts highlighting the gendered racism beneath the harsh sentence. After learning about the gruesome injustice facing Cyntoia via the #FreeCyntoiaBrown hashtag, social media mogul Kim Kardashian hired a high profile lawyer to represent Brown. The viral hashtag, which brought in fundraising money, raised awareness, and ultimately acquired high quality legal resources, was one of the reasons Brown's case was revisited and she was granted clemency (Gafas & Burnside, 2019; Cusumano, 2019).

As exhibited by these case studies, social media are perceived by marginalized peoples, particularly young Black women, to be a viable platform for critical race counter-storytelling. Moreover, the connection Black women activists are making between online activism and their ability to transform policies and structures that foster intersectional oppression are crucial, and highlight the potential of social media to foster transformational resistance well beyond the computer screen.

The Creation of Digital Counter-Spaces

Despite the nefarious presence of racially-biased internet protocols, digital harassment and the pervasive presence of gendered racism online, Black girls continually find ways to challenge mechanisms of algorithmic silencing to center and make visible their voices, their girlhood and their humanity (Tanksley, 2016). Aside from creating viral memes, hashtags and social media commentary in the public internet sphere, Black girls simultaneously partake in collective organizing, counter-storytelling and communal healing in private, identity-specific safe spaces online. These safe spaces, or subaltern communities, often take place within the contours of conventional social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram, but are only accessible by way of a personal invitation by a current member, a thorough screening to confirm identity, and administrative approval. Unlike hashtag campaigns like #BlackGirlMagic or

instagram posts that like Cargile's "You Okay Sis?" exist in a cyber public and are subject to rhetorical violence and algorithmic silencing, secret groups exist just outside of the dominant gaze of the white patriarchal internet gaze.

Although seemingly new, the develop of safe spaces beyond the dominant male gaze has deep historical roots. During the 1950's and 60's, the term "safe spaces" was coined by mainstream white feminists to describe spaces where activists could "meet outside the public eye to discuss social issues, develop frameworks for interpreting them, and organize collective action accordingly" (Clark-Parsons, 2018). These submerged networks not only promoted freedom from violence and harassment but also "a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance" (Kenney, 2001, p. 24). In addition to providing opportunities for collective healing and open expression, safe spaces played an important role in developing and enacting a political agenda that could transform the structures of society to better address the needs of women and girls.

While the term "safe spaces" become highly publicized during the mainstream feminist movement, its intellectual roots extend far beyond the twentieth century, reaching as far back as the Era of African Enslavement. Black women have a rich legacy of resistance that often remains overlooked in conventional literature on feminist safe spaces, both on and offline. From organized work slowdowns and damaging farm tools to participating in full on slave revolts, Black bondswomen drew upon an arsenal of oppositional behaviors to challenge the violent plantation system that subsisted on their mental, physical and sexual labor. A common, albeit more subtle, means of rebellion was escaping the plantation to live, either permanently or temporarily, in hideaway communities built by and for runaway slaves. These communities, called maroon colonies or "maroonages," were secret communities located just outside of the

boundaries of the plantation. These spaces provided activists, runaways and freed slaves safety, support and restoration from the brutalities of plantation life. Shielded from the plantation's exploitative gaze, Black women's emotional, corporeal and sexual labor were reclaimed and repurposed as means of fostering gendered resistance for communities of Black women and girls.

Drawing upon a rich history of Black female escape and absenteeism, Black girls have become particularly adept at designing digital counter-spaces, or maroon communities, that shield them from the white masculinized gaze of internet protocols while simultaneously bolster communal healing and restoration. As a digital plantation that monetizes Black women's sexual, emotional and physical labor, racially biased internet protocols pose direct threats to the Black girl activists. Thus, to avoid being controlled and surveilled by suffocating gaze of the internet, Black girls and women often escape to gendered and raced communities that are designed by and for women of color on the digital margins. Contemporarily, it would appear that Black girls have recreated digital maroonages - just beyond the scope of white masculinized internet protocols - that work not only to shield them from digital harassment and silencing, but also to bolster their resistance and provide opportunities to heal from algorithmic oppression.

Complicating Notions of the Internet's "Liberatory Possibility"

Although educational scholars have positioned the internet as a democratic space that increases access to opportunities for democratic participation, communities of support, feelings of visibility and educational resources, critical technology scholars beg to differ. Critical race theorists have long argued that racism is prevalent and permanent in American society. This reality is not merely true for physical society, but also for digital and cyber technologies as well. Noble reminds scholars that the internet is a tool of white supremacy such that its hardwares, softwares and protocols are designed to uphold and normalize intersectional subjugation.

While it is crucial to highlight Black girls' resilience and political activism in college and online, it is equally important to note that this ongoing fight for visibility is an attempt to combat a social, economic and political system that thrives on Black girl oppression (Noble, 2014). Unfortunately, as Black girl activism and visibility continue to surge online, the the creation of racially biased internet technologies has likewise grown exponentially (Tanksley, 2016; Harris-Perry, 2014; hooks, 1992; 1994; Noble, 2012). The existence of technological infrastructures that are racially biased creates a drastically different social media experience for Black women than for students from other backgrounds.

Digital Harassment & Abuse Online

Despite its popular construction as liberatory space, the internet poses serious threats to the health and well-being of Black girls and women. One of the most prevalent digital dangers is the threat of online harassment. The prevalence of rhetorical violence online is rapidly growing, with 40% of Americans reporting experiencing harassment (Duggan, 2017). Online harassment exists on a spectrum, with less severe forms of abuse such as name calling on one side and more severe types of harassment include threats of rape or murder on the other. Not surprisingly, harassment is especially common for college-age youth, with nearly two-thirds of young adults (67%) experiencing some form of harassment. A noteworthy share of young report experiencing more severe form of online abuse, including receiving physical threats (25%), sexual harassment (%15) sustained harassment (16%) and stalking (13%) (Duggan, 2017). All told, nearly half of young adults (41%) youth have endured severe forms of digital harassment.

The severity of digital abuse by young adult internet users is magnified by the presence of minoritized identities. Among young adults ages 18 to 29, women are more than twice than likely than men to report experiencing sexual harassment online (Pew Research Center, 2017)

and the youngest of women (age 18 - 24) are more than three times as likely to be sexually harassed online (Duggan, 2017).Similarly, 25% of Black adult internet users have experienced harassment online as a result of their race or ethnicity while only 3% of whites have endured the same (Duggan, 2017).

A robust and intersectional analysis of digital harassment on Twitter revealed the pervasive presence of anti-Black misogyny online. This study, which surveyed 778 women journals, found that nearly 8% of all tweets sent to their participants were abusive (Dreyfuss, 2018). Women of Color were 34% more likely than white female journalists to experience online harassment and Black women were the most targeted of all groups surveyed (Dreyfuss, 2018). According to Milena Marin, senior adviser for tactical research at Amnesty International, " Although abuse is targeted at women across the political spectrum, women of color were much more likely to be impacted and black women are disproportionately targeted" (Dreyfuss, 2019).

Unfortunately, repercussions of digital abuse extend well beyond the contours of the internet. Thirty-one percent of people that experienced online harassment report having mental or emotional stress as result of that encounter (Duggan, 2017). Young people experience the offline ramifications of harassment at relatively high rates, with 24% experiencing mental or emotional stress and 14% reporting having reputation damaged. Another 15% of young adults report having problems with friends and family as a result of online harassment while 7% have had problems at their job. Perhaps most salient is the effect of digital harassment on education - 11% of young adults reported problems with school as a direct result of digital abuse (Duggan, 2017).

Those seeking to understand why social media has become the primary forum for discussions of race and justice need only consider the rapidly changing contours of social

networking platforms. Recent changes to social media interfaces, including the addition of Facebook's "Trending Topics," have begun to blur the lines between conventional news and social media. The seamless incorporation of local and global politics into popular platforms like Facebook, Twitter and SnapChat has arguably sparked a paradigmatic shift in users' understanding of and engagement with social media. Now more than ever, social networking sites act as a "public sphere" for college-age youth (Habermas, 1991) and enables users to access news, gather political information and participate in national political debates with relative ease (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016).

Encountering Traumatizing Events Online

The increased presence of current events on social media has not only increased users' ability to engage in political activism and social critique, but is has simultaneously increased their exposure to traumatizing events and rhetoric (Stewart, Schuschke, & Tynes, 2019). According to a robust analysis of #BlackLivesMatter tweets, images depicting fatal interactions with police were among some of the most shared images on Twitter in 2016. For instance, the image of police officer Darren Wilson standing over a then-deceased Michael Brown was shared on Twitter over 40 thousands times, making it the second most-shared Twitter image of the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Freelon et al., 2016). Similarly, within 24 hours of cellphone footage documenting Philando Castile's real-time murder being shared online, the video had been viewed over 3.2 millions times (Worland, 2016). The circulation of these images necessarily revealed a largely overlooked injustice facing Black Americans. What had for decades been a relatively invisible tragedy was now at the center of national discussion (Freelon et al., 2016; Nobles & Tynes, 2016). Largely overlooked, however, have been the unintended

consequences of entering visual evidence of Black death and dying into national spotlight, particularly when it occurs within social media spaces that attract high rates of young adult users.

Escaping the violent imagery can be nearly impossible for young Black social media users, especially as social media friends and followers continually comment, share and write updated statuses on anti-Black violence as it unfolds. Generally, Black youth report significantly higher rates of coming into contact with race-oriented social media content than White youth. It is more than likely that these rates of exposure dramatically increases in periods immediately following a major event, such as a fatal shooting. For some users, encountering graphic imagery of Black death is merely a nuisance and for others, an unfortunate but necessary part of politics. However, for African Americans overexposure to race-based violence and racist rhetoric has a slew of detrimental effects (Stewart, Schuschke, & Tynes, 2019; Adetiba, L. & Almendrala, 2016; Jackson, 2016).

Research on the psychological impacts of race-based trauma is quickly emerging (Noble, 2014; Noble, 2016; Sutherland, 2017; Anderson, 2016). Chronic exposure to or experience with racism has been found to cause stress in African Americans (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012), and such race-related stress can lead to a host of mental and physical consequences. These consequences include, but are not limited to, depression (Hunter, Case, Joseph, Mekawi, & Bokhari, 2016), psychiatric distress (Pieterse et al., 2012), lowered self-esteem (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000), and increased Similarly, Maxwell (2016) found that encounter social media use is a significant predictor of race-related stress, anger and anticipatory body alarm responses. Her findings suggests that “to the extent that she outcomes can collectively impact the health of African Americans, social media may be more maladaptive to young African Americans than previously thought” (p.1). (Everson, Goldberg, Kaplan, Julkunen,

& Salonen, 1998). In their study of Black and Brown adolescents, psychologists identified witnessing a graphic police shooting online as a traumatizing event such that it triggers psychological effects reminiscent of post-traumatic stress syndrome (Stewart, Schuschke, & Tynes, 2019). Ultimately, more research must be done to understand how witnessing, discussing and reading about racial violence online impacts the offline experiences of young Black women, particularly those who engage heavily in digital resistance and counter-storytelling during the school year.

Algorithmic Silencing of Black Female Voices

While Black girls work tirelessly to bring attention to issues of racial and gendered justice, seemingly neutral internet algorithms work diligently to flag and delete posts aimed at making Black girls' intellectualism, activism and collective anguish visible to larger society (Noble, 2012; Noble, 2016). Soon after news broke of the brutal slayings of Nia Wilson, a young Black teenager from Northern California, Black girls around the world took to their screens in an attempt to shed light on the ubiquity of Black female suffering at the hands of a racist patriarchy (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Their politicized media posts, videos and broadcasts called for ideological change, pushed for systemic reform, and fostered identity-specific counter-spaces for Black girls to partake in communal restoration and solidarity. In an attempt to highlight Black female suffering, Rachel Cargile, a Black female activist from New York City, created a viral Instagram that asked, "You Okay Sis?" The post, which was directly to Black women and girls, encouraged social media users to share their feelings of grief, fear, anger and turmoil so that they could receive love and support from women undergoing a similar pain. She writes,

"Hey sis, Are you okay? As we see another one of us being murdered to bleed out in the streets we can't help [but] think: that could be me, that could be my daughter, a sister, my best

friend. For me, a heavy cloud gets heavier when my feed shows over and over again how unprotected, how uncared for we as black women are. As we do double the work for less than half of the benefit it can be a breathless existence of both trying to keep up as well as trying to survive. You okay sis? I get it if you're not. At this moment i feel heavy and distant and numb. I feel angry and deflated and heartbroken."

In moments hundreds of thousands of Women of Color flocked to the post to express collective grief and outrage at the prevalence of racial violence leveraged against black female bodies. Not long after that, the post was mysteriously deleted. Cargile received a message from Instagram citing the websites community guidelines. According to the automated message, Cargile's post had violated the standards for safety and was identified as "hate speech."

After receiving this message, cargile posted another post filled with heartbreak and outrage. She writes, "someone reported the post as hate speech and instagram immediately took it down. Do you see this? Do you see how not only are we killed in the streets we also are punished for grieving. We are not seen as human, we are not regarded as beings who live and breathe and feel and are worthy of existence. We are oppressed, then we are killed, then we are silenced."

The algorithmic erasure of Black female suffering forces us to reconsider popular constructions of the internet as post racial, ungendered and inherently neutral. Black women's posts are more likely to be deleted, flagged as hate speech and heavily monitored than other groups (Tynes & Noble, 2016). They are also less likely to be listened to when they report racist, violent or traumatizing content online (Noble, 2018). If the internet was, indeed, a wholly transformational space for Black lives, then the codes that undergird social media would amplify rather than subjectively silence the voices of Black women and girls. Not only do these data

illuminate the presence of racially-biased algorithms, but they also challenge popular assertions of the internet as post-racial, ungendered and apolitical.

Algorithmic Bias & The Science of Virality

In her groundbreaking work on algorithmic oppression, Noble (2018) sheds much needed light on the science of virality and its relation to the fetishization of Black pain and suffering. By analyzing the algorithmic underpinnings of viral images, Noble found that racially-biased internet protocols are programmed to mass-circulate images of Black death and dying not for the purposes of liberation, but because Black death is – and always has been – a monumentally lucrative commodity. She states, "While certain types of objectionable material is filtered out of view by software or human beings, images of African Americans dead and dying are often the titillating object of persistent media spectacle, and such material is hyper-circulated and often goes viral through online media platforms" (p. 148). We must not forget that viral images of Black death foster news ratings and advertising revenues, even as they simultaneously promote national conversations and public policy changes around racial injustice. Noble's (2018) work illuminates how the internet traffics in Black death, and in doing so reveals the looming presence of digital interest convergence.

According to critical race scholars, significant gains in civil rights for minoritized groups are accomplished only when their interests converge with those of the group in power. When analyzed through this framework, it appears that although images of Black death helped showcase the ubiquity of anti-Black racism, their over-circulation was a product of convergent interests in profit and news ratings. This nuanced analysis of the inner-workings of Web 2.0 help explain why gruesome images of Philando Castile and Eric Garner went viral while posts textually morning the brutal murder of Nia Wilson, a young Black woman from San Francisco,

were flagged and deleted by the same internet protocols. Black women's posts are more likely to be deleted, flagged as hate speech and heavily monitored than other groups (Tynes & Noble, 2016). They are also less likely to be listened to when they report racist, violent or traumatizing content online (Noble, 2018). If the internet was, indeed, a wholly transformational space for Black lives, then the codes that undergird social media would amplify rather than subjectively silence the voices of Black women and girls.

By revealing the commercial value of Black death and dying online, Noble's (2018) scholarship transcends singularly-focused analyses of the internet's liberatory nature to more thoroughly examine how technological systems of power create oppressive material realities for Black women and girls (Noble, 2012; Noble, 2018; Tynes & Noble, 2016). Her work pushes researchers to consider the limitations of social media as a platform for transformational resistance and to interrogate the psychological consequences of viewing Black death and dying at a near-constant rate. She and other feminist technology scholars assert that inquiries about digital resistance must also include sociopolitical context that makes clear Black girls' hyper-marginalized position within and beyond internet technology. Such an analysis would steep Black women's digital resistance into a rich historical context that considers how gendered tropes informs *who* engages in digital activism, *why* they engage in digital activism, and the multidimensional consequences of engaging in digital activism at unprecedented rates.

Such revelations about the prevalence of anti-Black internet infrastructures not only demand more nuanced interrogations of technology, but also of conventional understandings of transformational resistance and digital storytelling. Contemporary scholarship on counter-storytelling and transformational resistance online often focus on how *making* or *sharing* digital counter-stories provides a sense of empowerment to queer students, undocumented students and

Students of Color. Rarely, if ever, do these studies question the presumed objectivity or post-racial infrastructure of the technologies that host and make visible these narratives of resistance. Although it is true that social media provides numerous benefits to youth on the margins, including providing increased access to information and new opportunities to engage in the political sphere, its limitations as a wholly liberatory space for oppressed groups must be fully explored.

Critical technology scholars have consistently warned against oversimplified constructions of the internet as apolitical, post-racial and ungendered Daniels, 2009a, 2009b; Brock, 2009; Noble, 2018). Keeping in mind the subjectivity of internet codes and algorithms, these scholars urge for more balanced analyses of Web 2.0 that take into consideration the ways seemingly objective technologies actually reinforce systemic oppression for the Black community offline (Brock, 2009; Daniels, 2009; Noble, 2016, 2018). Ultimately, the inability of social media campaigns to create and sustain large-scale, macro-structural change to criminal justice system forces us to reconsider popular constructions of the internet as post racial, ungendered and a wholly liberatory tool for oppressed communities. The rapidly growing field of critical race and digital studies is taking up many of these concerns.

Closing a Gap in the Literature with this Study

The purpose of this literature review was to paint a more holistic and complicated view of Black women's college experiences, especially in the digital age. Several majoritarian stories were introduced and disrupted in this chapter. First, the popular assumption that Black women are "the most educated group in the U.S." was challenged. A thorough and intersectional examination of literature on Black women's collegiate experience show that Black women are still one of the most academically disenfranchised group to date. Though uplifting, stories about

their mythical rise to the top of the academic hierarchy directly restricts the development of academic supports and resources that specifically address the needs of Black women in college.

Following this exploration, studies that document the ways Black women survive and thrive within racially hostile colleges were presented. These data were meant to complement the literature on structural oppression by showcasing Black women's resilience, empowerment and political agency. In general, these studies focused on the explicit connections between experiencing discrimination and developing resilience strategies. Several coping strategies were covered, including finding supportive social networks, developing critical counter-spaces and engaging in political activism. These studies, which focus on Black women's transformational resistance and political agency, provided an entry point into a richer discussion of contemporary activism in the lives of Women of Color.

The next section included a survey of student activism literature and highlighted how student activism is undergoing a digital transformation. No longer restricted to traditional civic activities like voting or campaigning, contemporary activism includes social media activities like changing a profile picture to support a cause, sharing a news article and posting about an important political issue. Popular rhetoric positioning women and Youth of Color as politically disinterested and technologically incapable were disrupted through a careful analysis of empirical data on race, identity and digital civics.

At this point, a critical disjuncture from educational literature occurred. Though educational scholarship typically positions the internet as a liberatory and democratic space, the inclusion of feminist technology studies complicates this narrative in important ways. These studies worked to uncover the racist and sexist infrastructures that undergird the internet and allow Black women to be silenced, harassed, and inundated with graphic imagery of Black death

all at the same time. This study addresses a critical gap: the way in which Black college-age women specifically use social media as a form of resilience in their college experience.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks

The ubiquity of Black girl resistance and political action online sheds light on the transformative power of social media to serve as a platform for participatory democracy in the digital era. Nevertheless, there remains a dearth in scholarship analyzing the intersections of youth civic engagement and social media, particularly as it relates to Black girls and women-becoming. Extent literature examines the ways social media engagement influences numerable facets of civic engagement, including the development of social capital (Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), political awareness (Pasek et al, 2006; Macafee, 2013); protest behavior (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2014; Valenzuela, 2013), and civic efficacy (Beaumont, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Yet conspicuously absent from this burgeoning body of scholarship are the voices and experiences of the U.S.-based internet's most visible and vocal activists: Black college-age women.

While existing quantitative data begin to shed light on Black girls' overrepresentation on social media as civic actors, they nevertheless fail to provide narrative explanations for why Black girls choose to participate in online civics as heavily as they do. By centering the voices of Black undergraduate women, this study seeks to supplement these informative numerical findings with substantive qualitative data grounded in the every-day perspectives, lived experiences and digital civics of Black college-age women. With such an overwhelming online presence, particularly as it relates to social media activism, Black women's cyber civics undoubtedly provides a critical point of entry for scholars looking to conduct more nuanced examinations of political activism in the digital era.

As explicated by race theorists, examining issues related to People of Color requires

one to employ the standpoints and analytical lenses created by and for said group. Thus, an empowering analysis of Black female experience necessitates a theoretical approach grounded in race-centered, Afro-feminist values. In this chapter, I draw upon critical race theory in education (CRT), Black feminist thought (BFT), and Black feminist technology studies (BFTS) to center the digital experiences of young Black women in college. In doing so, this study is uniquely equipped to document the ways Black girls read, resist, and revise multitudinous micro-aggressions in digital justice spaces in transformational and subversive ways. Embedding the data into a rich historical context simultaneously allows for a complicating of conventional notions of transformational resistance that overlook or minimize the mental, physical, emotional and educational ramifications of digital activism for vulnerable student groups, such as young Black women. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to paint a more holistic view of Black girl resistance and in doing so engender institutional awareness and support for Black women that are engaging in political activism while in college.

Critical Race Theory in Education

As a social justice framework, critical race theory in education was designed in response to the emergence of colorblind racism, particularly in its manifestations in schools. Its purpose, as explicated by CRT scholars, is to deconstruct colorblind ideology at "its racist premise" in order to transform those structural aspects of society, including educational institutions and mainstream media, that maintain the subordination of Students of Color (Huber, Benavides, Malagón, & Solórzano, 2008; Solórzano, 1997). As applied to the digital, the-macro component of racism is the endemic and institutionalized disease of White supremacy (Huber, Benavides, Malagón, & Solórzano, 2008; Bell,1992) that allows for the commodification and digital proliferation of Black death (Noble, 2014, 2018) and digital misogynoir that leave Black girls

horrifically unprotected both on and offline (Tanksley, 2016). The micro-component is the cumulative racial and visual micro-aggressions (Solórzano, 1997; Huber &Solórzano, 2015) present within social media that disproportionately silence, exploit and target Black women and girls. The five tenets of CRT in education can be used to address the complexity of Black women's resistance, within, beyond and beneath the computer screen:

1. ***The Centrality of Race and Racism***: CRT in education acknowledges that racism is permanent and deeply ingrained within the very fabric of American society (Bell, 1992; Huber & Solórzano, 2015) and should therefore be centralized in discussions of Black students' educational experiences (Huber, Benavides, Malagón, & Solórzano, 2008). This tenet also helps frame the over-simplification of the internet as an objective and racially neutral space. Considerations of racism's permanence must extend to information technologies where white supremacy has been updated and digitized to become all the more threatening and insidious.

2. ***The Challenge to Dominant Ideology***: CRT encourages scholars to challenge, interrogate and expand upon dominant narratives of race, gender and resistance. Currently, discussions of students' resistance focus on how transformational resistance enables the highest form of student agency. Though not the intention, singularly positive articulations of transformational resistance erase the exhaustion, fatigue and emotional trauma that often comes as a result of transforming and interrogating systems of oppression. CRT is forward-thinking and reflexive, encouraging each new wave of CRT researchers to complicate earlier understandings of resistance that can construct a more authentic and emancipatory analysis of transformational resistance.

3. ***Commitment to Social Justice***: In its struggle toward social justice, CRT in education aims to completely abolish racism, as well as to eliminate all other forms of marginalization such as class, gender, and linguistic oppression (Solórzano, 1997). This objective must transcends education, and I argue that CRT as applied to the web should aim to eradicate algorithmic oppression that currently pervades internet technology and sustains educational inequality offline.

4. ***The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge***: CRT in education recognizes that lived experiences of young Black women are legitimate and critical to understanding the current condition of social, technological and educational inequality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a, 200b; Huber, 2009). For far too long, Black women have been spoken about and spoken to, but rarely ever have they been centered as the speakers. CRT acknowledges the myriad of ways Black women share experiential knowledge, from theatrical performance and spoken word to church testimonies and academic writing. Importantly, Black women and girls engage in this type of counter-storytelling as a means of challenging, resisting and speaking back to anti-Black racism, both on and offline (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Huber, 2009; Tanksley, 2016).

5. ***The Interdisciplinary Perspective***: Critical race scholars actively integrate race and racism within a historical context by drawing upon scholarship from ethnic studies, feminist theories, history, film, social science, and other fields (Yosso, 2005).

Collectively, CRT's tenets can be used as a starting point to examine the "racialized layers of subordination" that have historically restricted Black students' access to safe, empowering educational spaces (Yosso et al, 2009, p. 663). My use of CRT goes beyond the physical space of education to help make visible how these layers, often manifesting as invisible

policies, protocols, codes and algorithms, not only set the context for Black female subjugation on the internet, but also in schools and classrooms.

Though rife with benefits, critical race theory nevertheless embodies prominent shortcomings. While its purposeful focus on race is both powerful and indispensable in the age of “post-racial” internet rhetoric, CRT’s narrow focus on racism in offline spaces limits its ability to fully recognize the compounded ways that interlocking systems of domination collide to create exacerbated challenges for Black women and girls online. Although the frame thoughtfully incorporates intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) into its core anatomy, CRT was not designed to specifically address issues of Black female oppression and thus lacks the necessary cultural, sociopolitical, and historical specificity to do so adequately. Instead, this analytical frame was designed to be a comprehensive template, equipped to analyze a range of oppressions endured by a myriad of marginalized communities. While this broad and inclusive design renders CRT incapable of single-handedly examining the intricacies of Black female subjugation, it simultaneously provides the frame with the necessary flexibility to effortlessly combine with other, more specific theoretical lenses.

Unable to holistically capture the historically situated and culturally informed behaviors, beliefs and perspectives of Black college-age women, CRT can be augmented by a thoughtful inclusion of Black feminist thought (BFT). By drawing more heavily upon the strength and specificity of BFT—a theoretical body designed by and for Black women, CRT can become better deployed to understand and validate the voices, histories and standpoints of young Black women in college.

Black Feminist Thought

Few theories have been specifically designed to capture what it means to be young, Black and female within a society that is markedly racist, misogynistic, and capitalistic (Lorde, 1993; Davis, 2011). The notion of intersectionality, a definitive tenet of Black feminist thought, acknowledges that race, gender, and class operate as mutually constructing systems of domination that are inextricably linked in the lives of Black women and girls (hooks, 1992, 1996, 2003). Though they have been a source of liberation and unity for marginalized people, singularly focused identity frameworks run the risk of overlooking or minimizing intra-group differences. Placing Black female oppression into a historical context begins to unveil the complexity of intersectional domination. In her examination of Black women's history, Crenshaw (1991) chronicles the ways sexism and patriarchal privilege undergirded race-centered frameworks, frequently resulting in the exclusion and suppression of Black women's gender-specific issues. In the case of the Civil Rights movement, where Black women played an indispensable but nearly invisible role in popular narratives about the movement, conceptions of race and racial justice were conflated with maleness in both subtle and not so subtle ways. For many, the fight against sexism was a separate issue from the struggle against racial oppression. From this masculinist perspective, advocating for Black women's rights could be potentially divisive, if not altogether obstructive, to the needs of the Black community at large. Ultimately, the masculinization of race, though not the intended outcome of the Civil Rights struggle, inevitably advanced the visions and voices of Black males to the detriment of African American women (Collins, 1989; Davis, 2011; Guy-Sheftall, 1995).

Drawing connections between the suppression of Black female voice in the Civil Rights movement and the utter exclusion of Black women's issues in the mainstream feminist movement, Collins (1989) asserts that gender has undergone a process of racialization in the

same way that race became synonymous with maleness. Using the mainstream feminist movement as a point of entry, Collins (1989) addresses the ways racism and White privilege worked to paint gender oppression as strictly a White female issue. By omitting and subduing the voices of Black women, mainstream feminism reified a problematic construction of gender that assumed Black women endured the same form, severity and repercussions of sexual oppression as did White women (Crenshaw, 1991). In the eyes of many, gender was a totalizing force that equally afflicted (and therefore united) all women, irrespective of race (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). The refusal to acknowledge the ways race creates differential experiences with sexism inevitably resulted in a divisive vision of freedom wherein Black women experienced only a fragment of the movement's eventual success.

It is often assumed within educational research, as it was in identity-centered liberation struggles, that since young Black women experience both race and gender oppression their issues will be addressed in broadly defined race or gender frameworks. It can be seen from these demonstrative historic moments that this is not often the case. Instead, the masculinization of race and the racialization of gender render Black women's issues virtually invisible in educational scholarship (Collins, 2005). In recognizing how easily intra-group differences can be overlooked, forgotten or deemed less important in one-dimensional frameworks, Black feminist scholars make clear the need for a nuanced lens that considers multidimensional oppression in its analysis of Black girlhood. Such scholars offer Black feminist thought (BFT) as an epistemological lens designed to identify the ways racism, classism and sexism work indivisibly and in mutually constructing ways to dominate Black girls in their schools, in their communities and in the media.

Since matrices of domination (Collins, 1989) create an exacerbated form of subjugation, they denote a distinct set of experiences for Black girls, differing in form and function from those of Black boys and White girls. These distinctive experiences inevitably garner a nuanced way of navigating and reading the world. This Black feminist standpoint, containing all of the cultural knowledge, sociopolitical experiences and historical insights of everyday Black women, forms the infrastructure of Black feminist theory. While positivist theories may dismiss this experiential wisdom, BFT asserts that Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge is required to fully understand their triply marginalized status in school, society and popular media (Collins, 1995, 2005). Scholarship seeking to examine the experiences of Black girls must therefore incorporate the common themes, cultural practices and traditions of Black women in its intersectional analysis. Through its incorporation of dialogue, affective knowledge, historical embedding, and experiential insight, BFT lends a helping hand to scholars hoping to gain authentic acumen of the educational and digital experience of Black girls.

Both BFT and CRT recognize that despite the prominence of colorblind rhetoric, racial stereotypes such the ones noted above are ever-present and remain deeply embedded within the American psyche. Derrick Bell, one of the founders of CRT, argues race and racism are permanent, indivisible aspects of U.S. culture (Bell, 1992). He notes that although the nation has discursively embraced racial equality, everyday expressions of racism are unceasing. No longer socially or politically acceptable, overt expressions of racism transformed into subtler, more clandestine forms following the Civil Rights Movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Bell, 1992; Tate, 1997). This neo-racism, perpetuated as "colorblindness," has positioned race as an issue of minimal importance.

Though colorblind racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) has dominated public conscience for nearly five decades, a new racial paradigm is rapidly emerging (Cabrera, 2014). Scholars first identified this ideological shift in the wake of the 2008 presidential election, wherein the nation embraced its first African American President. Following this momentous occasion, U.S. citizens began utilizing rhetoric of post-racialism, asserting that race was no longer relevant, but was instead a “non-issue” in contemporary society. The reframing of racial domination from one of minimal importance to one lacking in any substantive merit has worked to further entrench ideologies of White supremacy. Whether or not it is their intention, lingering sentiments of colorblindness and burgeoning notions of post-racialism have enabled systems of oppression to remain intact while making public acknowledgement of discrimination a social taboo (Bell, 1992). Now more than ever, recognizing and challenging racial inequality engender violent backlash, as many Americans believe wholeheartedly that the legacy of racism has been utterly abolished (Howard & Flennaugh, 2011).

Similar to CRT, Black feminist thought asserts that Black women’s everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge is required to fully understand their triply marginalized status in school, and society (Collins, 1995; 2005; Harris-Perry, 2011). Critical race and digital studies scholars are also applying CRT and BFT theoretical frameworks to the internet (Noble, 2016, 2018; Tanksley, 2016). Scholarship seeking to examine the experiences of Black girls must therefore incorporate the common themes, cultural practices, and traditions of Black women and girls in its intersectional analysis. Through its incorporation of dialogue, affective knowledge, historical embedding, and experiential insight, an Intersectional Black Feminist Technology Studies (Noble, 2016) lens lends a helping hand to scholars hoping to gain authentic acumen of the digital and educational experience of Black women.

Black Feminist Technology Studies

The nation's belief in post-raciality extends far beyond physical society, manifesting regularly within digital and cyber spaces as well (Daniels, 2009; Noble, 2014). Social media often circulates in the context of a post-racial utopia wherein viewers willingly consume fictional, value-free images as a form of escapism (Noble, 2013; Senft & Noble, 2013; hooks, 1992; 1996). This colorblind construction of internet technology, coupled with the prevailing belief in a post-racial America, poses a unique challenge for scholars attempting to document the deleterious effect of "algorithmic oppression" (Noble, 2018) on the experiences of young Black women (Noble, 2016; Daniels, 2009; McMillan, 2016). The struggle against perennial exploitation of Black bodies and the erasure of Black girlhood has been fervently challenged (Tanksley, 2016), and critical scholars continuously strive to achieve socially just internet protocols. Ultimately, the reluctance of Americans to acknowledge the pervasive realities of racial subjugation, especially within the confines of beloved, "apolitical" entertainment spaces, necessitates the use of what Noble (2016) calls an intersectional Black feminist technology studies (BFTS) framework to make sense of the ways algorithmic oppression shapes how Black girls navigate and survive digital racism on and offline. This study is an important addition to this emerging field of critical technology studies that foregrounds CRT, BFT, and BFTS.

Undergirded by critical race theory and Black feminist thought, Black feminist technology theory disrupts dominant social narratives that characterize the internet as post-racial, apolitical and a democratic equalizer for users from all racial backgrounds (Noble, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). Instead, a Black feminist technology lens acknowledges the power systems embedded within twenty-first century information systems and "shifts discourse away from simple arguments about the liberatory possibilities of the internet toward more critical

engagements with how the internet is a site of power and control over Black life" (Noble, 2016, p. 2). In her theoretical treatise of BFTS, Noble explicitly links Black women in the U.S. to Black women in the Third World, and offers a theoretical frame that nuances and illuminates the tech industry's reliance upon Black female bodies for the extraction, consumption, and decomposition of twenty-first century media products and platforms. A Black feminist technology lens is also intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) and makes more visible the ways Black women "intersect with, and are intersected by technologies" (Noble, 2016, p. 2).

This study is concerned with the use of these three intersectional, liberatory frameworks in educational research as a theoretical foundation that can deconstruct the ubiquitous characterization of Black women as technologically illiterate, politically inactive, and the source of their own socio-academic challenges (Boylorn, 2008; Shorter-Gooden & Jones, 2003). Taken together, these theories simultaneously recognize the potential for exposure to visual microaggressions (Huber & Solórzano, 2015; Solórzano, 1997), and racialized trauma as a result of engaging in race-based social media dialogue while navigating higher education spaces (Tanksley, 2016).

Chapter 4: Methodology & Data Collection Methods

This research is designed to elucidate answers to the following questions: What explanations do young Black women give for their disproportionate use of social media as a platform for counter-storytelling and resistance? What effects, if any, does participation in online movements for social change have on the socio-academic experiences of Black college-age women? How can young Black women's insights on education, resistance and digital technology foster new theoretical considerations and models of research?

In order to answer these questions, this study employs qualitative interviewing as the primary data collection tool. By embedding these methods in Black feminist, critical race frameworks, this research intends to forefront the marginalized voices of Black girls while simultaneously grounding the analysis in a rich, sociocultural context.

A Qualitative Approach to the Study

To address the above stated research questions, I will draw from three theoretical and epistemological approaches to research, which make up the methodology: 1) qualitative research and thematic analysis methodology; 2) Black feminist research and outsider-within methodology; and 3) critical race theory (CRT) research and counter-story methodology.

Qualitative Research & Thematic Analysis as Methodological Approach

This study will operationalize qualitative research as an epistemological stance towards inquiry. Standing apart from quantitative research in its promotion of words and images over numbers and statistics, qualitative research is an epistemological stance towards scholarly investigation that attempts to make meaning of the world through an in-depth exploration of people's experiences (Merriam, 2009). While qualitative research is influenced by a plethora of theoretical traditions, my inquiry is informed by critical qualitative research. The aim of this

particular strain of research is to challenge and critique systems of power while simultaneously working to empower marginalized groups and transform those structures in society that maintain oppression and subordination (Merriam, 2009). Two critical qualitative research epistemologies, Black feminist thought and critical race theory, are operationalized in this study in order to center the voices of Black female students and work towards transformational resistance.

My operationalization of qualitative research is also informed by thematic analysis – a tradition that encourages researchers to "attend to what we hear, see and sense while gathering data" (Charmaz, 2014, p.3). While traditional positivist theories emphasize the separation between research, affective knowledge and researcher positionality, thematic analysis notes the unique strength in pursuing hunches and intuitive analytic ideas when collecting and interpreting data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3). thematic analysis recognizes that the researcher is not a "passive receptacle into which data are poured" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27). Instead, it acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of the researcher and positions her values, personal experience and positionality as valid forms of knowledge that strengthen the analytic process. This idea flows from thematic analysis' firm stance on the inability of researchers to "dismiss scrutiny of our values by claiming neutrality and authority" (p. 27). Not only does thematic analysis acknowledge the ways lived experience and personal standpoints influence a researcher's analytic lens, but it also recognizes the influence her positionality has on the participants' sense of trust. The understanding that how a participant identifies you shapes what they will tell you is of particular salience to this research given the prevalence of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903), Black communal solidarity (Brock, 2012) and the discursive constitution of Black identity (Brock, 2012), where one's role as an "insider" grants them differential access to participant knowledge, rather than as an "outsider." Though thematic analysis merely scratches the surface

of the notion of insider-outsider status, Black feminist research offers an intricate description of this pertinent sociological notion.

Black Feminist Research and Outsider-Within as Methodological Approach

The use of Black feminist research serves to strengthen the thematic analysis methodology employed by this study. Since Black female academics have extensive personal knowledge of Black women's triply marginalized state, Black women and girls' culture and language practices, and Black women's shared standpoint, they are at a particular paradigmatic advantage when it comes to conducting research on African American girls (Collins, 1986). Just as thematic analysis asserts that a researcher's intuitions are a valid source of knowledge that assist them in accurately interpreting data, so too does outsider-within methodology position the insight gained from experiencing the world as a Black woman as an invaluable analytic lens needed to adequately interpret data collected from Black women and girls (Collins, 1986; Brown, 2015). Black feminist theorists define the dualistic paradigm embodied by many Black female researchers the "outsider-within" (Collins, 1986). This idea asserts that Black female scholars embody two forms of knowledge that is invaluable to scholarly research: an expansive understanding of the intricacies of theory and research; and the linguistic, sociopolitical, and historical knowledge necessary to understand Black women's triply marginalized state.

Thus, my lived experience as a Black female scholar and the entire constellation of beliefs, techniques, and values I gained from living within the contours of this triply marginalized social identity help strengthen my analytic paradigm.

Critical Race Research and Counter-story as Methodological Approach:

CRT is an epistemology towards research that serves to expose the workings of racism and white supremacy. The five tenets of CRT form the infrastructure of this study's methodology

and can be surmised as: 1*) A central focus on race and racism; 2) a challenge to dominant ideology; 3) a commitment to social justice; 4) the importance of experiential as knowledge; and 5) an interdisciplinary approach to research.* There are a variety of themes that inform its research method, however, I draw heavily upon the notion of *counter-story methodology* (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001) in this investigation. Counter-storytelling enables members from marginalized communities, such as Black girls, to center their voices, name their struggle, and work towards dismantling the matrix of domination online and in schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Crenshaw, 1991).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred in three phases (see table below), the first of which examined Black girls' use of social media to engage in resistance, their experience as digital change agents, and perception of the impacts on their schooling experiences via semi-structured interviews. The second phase consisted of transcribing and coding the interview for common themes, patterns and perspectives related to race, resistance, social media activism and education. During the tertiary phase of data collection, the data was analyzed in order to make claims about the ways Black girls perceive cyber-activism and digital resistance to shape their socio-academic experiences in college.

As data was collected, codes and categories were reworked, developed, and collapsed to understand Black girls' perception of cyber activism and its socio-academic effects. The initial phases of data analysis will involve open coding (Merriam, 2009). This process consisted of jotting down relevant themes, topics, or quotes that will inform the more specialized coding schema in subsequent phases. From these initial codes, categories and sub-categories were constructed (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the entirety of data collection and analysis, categories

moved from numerous categories to start, and then they were reduced, refined and collapsed into more specialized categories and subcategories.

Interview Protocol: Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviewing is the method of choice for this study namely because of its ability to gain insight into behaviors, feelings and standpoints that would otherwise be unknown or misunderstood to the casual onlooker (Merriam, 2009). With its ability to unveil covert behaviors, narratives or worldviews, interviewing can be a powerful tool in educational scholarship attempting to elucidate Black girls' standpoint on race, gender, media and schooling. Thus, semi-structured interviews with college-age Black women were conducted in order to get a better understanding of the way students use social media to engage in transformational resistance and counter storytelling online.

The interview questions fell into 4 main categories: 1) social media engagement and experiences online; 2) political activism online; 3) strengths and challenges of college for Black women; and 4) the effects of heightened social media activism on their college experience. Example questions from the first category, "Social Media Engagement and General Experiences Online" included items like "Tell me about the various websites or apps you use for social media," "how often do you go on social media each day?" and "what types of activities or conversations do you usually engage in on social media?" The second category of questions focused explicitly on political activism and included items such as, "Have you ever changed your profile picture, shared a news article or made a status about an important political issue on your social media?" and "What are some of the most common political topics, images or conversations you have seen on your social media?" The third category probed the participants about their general college experiences by asking questions about their major, the types of

courses they're taking, clubs and organizations they are affiliated with and positive experiences they've had since they've been on campus. This section also included questions that probed at intersectional identity by asking participants to describe the differences and similarities between their college experience as Black women and those of white women and Black men. The final section, which focused on the effects of social media activism on the overall college experience, included items such as "Does talking or reading about political issues online have any impact on you or your schooling experience?" More pointed questions were then asked about graphic images, such as "Have you ever encountered a graphic image or video related to police brutality online?" and "How did seeing videos, images and hurtful commentary about police brutality make you feel?"

Sampling and Recruitment

Since Black women make up a historically underrepresented student group in institutions of higher education, it was necessary to use purposeful sampling in order to accumulate a sizeable sample. Consequently, recruitment fliers were posted to University-affiliated social media pages that included demographic identifiers in the title that related to the target population (i.e. "Black Student Union," "Educated Black Women," "Black Girl Magic in College," etc.). Keeping in mind that Black women utilize Facebook, Instagram and Twitter most prevalently (Lenhart et al., 2015), I posted recruitment fliers to these three social media platforms throughout a six week period. Prospective participants filled out a brief survey that recorded relevant demographic information such as name of college or university, current year in school, salient identities that influence educational experiences, and frequency of social media engagement. Participants that completed the online questionnaire were contacted via email to participate in one semi-structured interview. Interviews lasted about 45 – 60 minutes and were conducted in

person or via telecommunication software (e.g. Skype, Zoom, Google Hangout, etc.) for participants that were out of state.

Study Participants

To qualify for the study students were required to be enrolled as a full-time college students, and primarily identify as African American/Black (this includes multiracial students). Purposeful sampling yielded a total of 32 self-identified Black women in college. Each participant completed a brief intake survey that gathered basic demographic information, including class status, race/ethnicity and gender. Since intersectionality is a priority consideration for this study, the intake survey asked participants to type in their race/ethnicity and gender. There was also a fourth demographic question that asked for participants to include "any other identities that are salient to your experience in college." By making the demographic options text-based response rather than multiple choices, this screener purposefully centered the identities and labels created by and for each participant. Participants typed in various identity markers that influenced the way they navigated college, including being queer and trans, low income, multiracial and multiethnic, second generation immigrant, living outside of the U.S., and being a non-traditional student.

Although 32 people completed the demographic survey and indicated an interest in the study, only 17 participants were successfully contacted for an interview. All 17 of the participants self-identified as either "female" or "women." In terms of race/ethnicity, a majority (12) of the participants self-identified as "Black." The remaining 5 participants used multiracial and multiethnic identifiers (e.g. "Mixed Race" or "Black-Creole).

A diversity of class status was present among the participants. Five of the women in the study were freshman, five were sophomores, six were juniors and one was a senior. A majority

(14) of the participants were from the U.S., while three (3) were from Canada. The participants represented 11 universities across the U.S. and Canada. There was also a diversity of institution type. Universities (13), state colleges (1), community colleges (2), and Ivy League institutions (1) were represented, and participants came from both public and private institutions.

Because this is a relatively small data set, the findings from this study are not meant to be generalizable to the greater population of young Black women in college. They do, however, provide rich, preliminary insights into the phenomenon of social media activism for these particular participants.

Privacy and Confidentiality

For participants that requested an in-person interview, interviews were conducted in a location mutually agreed upon by me and the participant. Conducting the interview in a space where other people could not overhear the conversation ensured privacy. Likewise, confidentiality of interview transcripts was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and codes that only I had access to. Names of participants were removed from study transcripts and reports, as was any other potentially identifying information, to protect participants' privacy.

Trustworthiness

Researchers argue that "trustworthiness" and "validity" are crucial aspects in determining the rigor of a qualitative study (Johnson & Christenson, 2008; Merriam, 2009). While "validity" is a term frequently used in quantitative research, "trustworthiness" is more regularly discussed in qualitative research. In this study, "valid" results are those that are trustworthy and defensible (Christenson & Johnson, 2008). Trustworthiness in this study was enhanced by member checking and transcript analysis for coding and theme interpretation. Participants reviewed and agreed upon their information in the transcripts, while members of my academic writing group

reviewed my data analysis. Additionally, I served as the only interviewer, and I actively engaged in critical self-reflection concerning my own perspective, as the representation of participants' experiences was most vital. By engaging in a member checking, peer review and transcript analysis, I was able to strengthen the data's trustworthiness through triangulation.

Chapter 5: Findings

This study sought to understand the reasons young Black women in college give for their heightened rates of social media use in general, and their overrepresentation in social media activism more specifically. This study was simultaneously interested in the perceived impacts that online political engagement had on the lives and schooling experiences of young Black women in college. Five main themes emerged from the data: *Social Media as a Venue for Political Engagement, The Benefits of Online Activism, The Downsides of Online Activism, Strategies of Coping,* and *A Growing Skepticism of the Internet's Liberatory Potential.*

The first theme, *Social Media as a Venue for Political Engagement,* identifies political engagement as one of the main reasons Black women use social media. Political engagement included two main activities: gathering information about social justice and talking about social justice with other people online. Similarly, this section discusses how intersectional oppression and the presence of multiple identities influenced how, why, and when Black women engaged in politics online.

The second theme, *The Benefits of Online Activism*, speaks to the various reasons Black women prefer to engage in politics online versus offline. Participants in this study identified three benefits to online activism: safety, visibility, and community. The third theme, *The Downsides of Online Activism*, describes the unforeseen consequences of online political engagement. Feelings of fatigue and exhaustion, digital harassment, and educational ramifications are three downsides discussed by participants.

The fourth theme, *Strategies of Coping*, describes how young Black women addressed their feelings of fatigue and exhaustion. Avoidance and humor were two coping strategies commonly enacted by the women in this study. The fifth theme, *A Growing Skepticism of the*

Internet's Liberatory Potential, captures the questions and concerns that the participants had regarding the ability of social media activism to single-handedly produce transformational change offline. In the following section, I have grouped the participants' responses based on the emergent themes from our interviews. Next, I will explain each theme and its associated sub-themes in greater detail using the voices of the participants. All names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

Social Media as a Venue for Political Engagement

I asked participants a series of questions that would allow them to discuss the contours of their social media engagement, and participants overwhelmingly identified political engagement as one of their primary activities online. Many participants described political engagement as having conversations about or sharing posts about social justice issues online.

Jakara (not her real name), a first-year student at a large West Coast University, states "most of the topics I post about on Twitter are politically based…I would say probably about 50% of them. My Twitter bio is actually 'protect people of color'." For Jordyn, a third-year at a public university in southern California, "[social media] is where I'm really political…I follow people who are grad students or people who express more political views that I share." According to Diamond, who goes online to talk about issues related to immigrant rights, "social media is huge for any type of discussion on race, gender, migration, mobility, displacement… It's amazing because the conversations that we have there are so advanced and it's so beautiful." When asked to define the "we" in her statement, Diamond admits that most of the people engaging in political conversations on her social media timeline are Black women.

Jordyn explained that she uses social media to regularly confront racist beliefs or anti-Black commentary online. She says, "I loved showing people they were wrong or showing them

that they're stupid and citing sources." Likewise, Adriana uses social media conversations to educate people about oppression. She says, "I'm out here on Twitter trying to fight, or debate with people ... and trying to prove to them that they're ignorant or that their views are wrong." Gabrielle had similar goals as Jordyn and Adriana. She too used social media to educate others about issues of oppression. She says, "I cite scholarly sources like what about this statistic? ... this scholar has conducted a 10-year research study on [racism]. So you look dumb."

While online political engagement included having conversations about oppression, it also included information gathering. For instance, Imani says she uses social media, "to share my own stuff, to share my opinion and just to have conversations about [political] issues. And also to learn stuff." Reflecting back on her social media engagement, Danielle explains, "I usually get my news through Twitter" while Evelyn notes, "every major news thing that happens, I find out about it through social media." Aaleyah, a fifth-year student at a New England college, explains "I think I use [social media] a lot because I want to keep my ear to the ground to the public, to my communities, to see what's going on." Adriana learned about anti-Black violence and police brutality through social media. "The first time I heard about Black lives matter was on [social media]," she explains. "I remember learning about Trayvon Martin on Twitter." Danielle had a similar experience as Danielle. She says, "Twitter was actually where I really found out about Ferguson for the first time just because no one really talked about it at school or at home. So twitter, that's where I really started getting engaged in Black Lives Matter." Imani adds, "I usually go [to social media] to find out about Black issues, Black political issues."

When asked why they elected to gather information on social justice issues from social media, the women in this study considered it to be a more trustworthy source on minoritized issues than traditional news channels. Bre'anna explains that she doesn't trust conventional news

"because they show us what they want to show us. They only cover what they want you to know." After discussing a moment when a Black celebrity was removed from a news station after discussing racism in a live news briefing, Bre'anna explains, "That's why I believe there's an agenda in conventional news. If you're not following the plan, you get cut off." A general sense of distrust for conventional news was palpable amongst participants, particularly when it came to gathering information about issues of race and racial injustice. Bre'anna explains, "I feel like we will never get the full truth in terms of the news, and that's why I prefer social media."

Like Aaleyah, the other participants' perceptions of social media as a more valid and reliable source of political information was due, in large part, to intentional curating of their social media networks. Jordyn explains, "I see information about everything and it's just because I have a lot of friends on social media that are very politically active and very interested in what's going on." Explaining her preference for gathering information on Black Lives Matter from Facebook as opposed to television networks, Aaleyah says, "A lot of my friend network on social media are activists, artists, educators…so I like to get on Facebook to see what they're saying as well as to get the news from them." According to Danielle, "Most of the people I follow on twitter as far as getting the news tend to be black women."

For the women in this study, experiences at the intersection of race and gender oppression informed how and why they engaged in social media activism. According to Danielle, "There are a lot of Black people in general on Twitter, but it's Black women who are really pioneering this movement. Most of the people I follow on Twitter as far as getting the news tend to be Black women." Diamond echoed these sentiments, stating, "there's Black men definitely in the [#BlackLivesMatter] movement, but Black women specifically are the ones bringing the things out and the ones correcting people online." When asked to explain why they

thought Black women were playing such a prevalent role in activist movements, the women in this study cited double marginalization as a primary catalyst. Danielle asserts that that Black women are "a double minority. We're receiving backlash from white people, but also from Black men. So it's more important for us to say something [about racial injustice]." Sydney adds, "I think most Black women are aware of [oppression] so they're starting to talk about it more on social media.

The Benefits of Social Media Activism

In addition to having prolific access to critically informed and culturally situated information, the Black women interviewed were also granted a sense of visibility, safety, and community that was not readily experienced in offline campus settings. For Natalie, a third-year at a private East Coast university, "social media is where a lot of political debate happens for me more than in real life." Like Natalie, many participants identified social media as a space where they engaged with politics more frequently than in real life. Participants identified a number of reasons for this, a prominent motive being visibility. Gabrielle states, "I'm politically active in real life, but I would say I'm more so online because you share that platform with so many people. You have so many followers and you follow so many people. You feel that you have a voice in the [#BlackLivesMatter] movement because that's your account, that's what you have it for: to voice your own opinion on these issues." Ashley explains that, "on [social media] I have more of a chance of being seen by other people than just those people who follow me…you have a little bit more visibility." Simone echoes these sentiments, stating, "you can have a conversation with 10 people in real life and maybe get your point out, but if you put it on social media you can share it with 200 or 300 thousand people all at once. It's an easier way to get out your ideas."

For Evelyn, who attends a predominantly white and Asian/Asian American university on the West Coast, invisibility is a form of discrimination she regularly experiences offline. She says, "I just feel kind of invisible. [White students] will literally walk past me or if we're in a group they literally won't talk to me unless I talk first." Although her race and gender render her invisible in offline campus spaces, Evelyn feels seen and heard online. She notes, "I think there's a need for social media spaces ... I feel supported there. When I go to other spaces on campus or in class I feel almost invisible, like I can't talk about anything that's not surface level or class related. I feel like the [white supremacy rally] that happened in Virginia or [the Black Lives Matter protests] in Ferguson, if I was to be in class or the residence hall when those events happened I would have to pretend I'm not upset and not talk about it. On social media, that's not the case." Imani had a similar experience at her university. Like Evelyn, Imani didn't experience overt racism but was rather made to feel invisible on campus. She states, "people don't really bother me. But they don't really talk to me or speak to me, and that's because I've gotten a lot of 'you look mean,' or 'you look mad' and that's something that a lot of black women get on campus." After identifying how stereotypes about race and gender leave Black women feeling invisible, Imani goes on to say that visibility might be why Black women engage so heavily in online discussions. She states, "A lot of Black women feel like [social media] is the only way to really get their opinion out there and be heard."

Participants in this study felt that visibility offered them a unique chance to speak back to power and have their opinions heard in a way that could make change offline. Evelyn says, " I feel like when we [as Black women] can take charge of our own narratives on Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat ... I think it's way better than when we're not involved in the other processes." Jordyn echoes these sentiments, stating "what's powerful [about social media] is

being able to respond, whether it's you or someone else, just being able to respond to those racist narratives." She goes on to say that, "So many lives have been lost at the hands of police brutality and silenced when we try to talk about it [offline]. And we all kind of forget about it….But with hashtags, at least were able to know about [the anti-Black violence] and interact with people who feel the same way as we do or who have wrong opinions on it. We're able to voice our opinions and in some way get justice for the lives that are lost."

While visibility was an important rationale for their heavy engagement in digital resistance, participants also confessed to feeling significantly safer participating in civic actions online. In discussing her thoughts on the safety of Black girls online, Layla admits to feeling particularly vulnerable at real life protests and political gatherings. She notes, "I definitely feel safer online. When there are rallies, white people can safely walk away. That's not always the case for Black women." Imani described a time she participated in a social justice affinity group on campus, and her personal stories and perspectives on social justice issues were shared with males outside of the healing circle. She states, "there was an incident where we got an anonymous note to each of the members in the group that I was affiliated with...we had some sort of healing circle where we were supposed to be vulnerable...Some people's personal information got out and then a hate letter—a hate email, came out. one of the guys wrote mean things about each person, but in particular with me they started talking about rape." Immediately following that incident, Imani removed herself from the organization for fear she could be harmed.

Danielle shared, "I think with social media and especially in today's political climate with real life you don't necessarily know what people are thinking, or how people are going to react. With social media anyone who follows my twitter knows what I tweet about wants to see it I assume. So it's not as dangerous... you don't have as much of a random reaction. You can kind

of gage what people are going to think of the things you're going to say." The ability to curate your social media to include like-minded or supportive individuals was a reason Tatiana felt safer engaging in political activism online. As a transwoman of color, Tatiana is particularly concerned about the risk of racist, sexist, and transphobic violence. She states:

> I feel more comfortable talking about these issues online, especially being a LGBTQ+ /person of color too, you never really know who's safe to talk to. And I think that is a concern shared by LGBTQ+ women of color in general...in college, you never really know who's a friend or an ally or who is potentially your enemy...you never know who's going to be a friend or a foe. Especially because your gender identity or your sexuality is something so personal that you never know how somebody's gonna react because again a lot of people are strangers and they could attack you. I'm a trans woman. They could kill you, which is very, very scary. Especially when you want to confide in somebody about this very personal thing that's only a minute portion of your personality and again it's very personal and you're telling somebody cuz you trust them enough. A lot of people don't take it nicely. So it can feel a little safer to talk about these things and share these things online.

Aaleyah provides an eloquent overview of gendered violence and Black women's overrepresentation in online activist spaces when she says:

> I think black women experience violence all the time. Just statistically we're more likely to experience violence from people in our own community. We experience hella microaggressions outside of our community too. We are also in spaces where we have to be alone. We are often taking care of a whole household so we find ourselves in college or in protests where we are alone trying to advance our families, to provide for our families. We don't have the same support systems so we are more vulnerable to different types of attacks in those spaces…. I think Black women live in violence. I think it is a miracle every day we do not become overcome by it. But I think that's what [social media activism] offers us: safety and solidarity. We don't have to be alone.

Many participants felt similarly to Aaleyah, in that, social media provided a sense of community otherwise absent from their offline realities. For Ashanti, a third-year at a large private university on the West Coast, social media provides a sense of support and community that institutional campus culture lacks. She notes, "[social media] brings Black people together…I think especially in undergrad, being at a PWI sometimes it can feel isolating... Even

if those people don't agree with you ideologically and aren't woke, aren't conscious, whatever, you still feel like they have your back or they can relate to you on some level." Iyanah said, "To me I feel like [Black Twitter] is a safe space when I'm at [my university] 'cuz I can go to it and just have a feeling of closeness to Blackness that I don't get on campus."

Jordyn enjoys feeling like she can support and be supported online. She explains that, "With Black Twitter or memes, you have options to retweet and that can show that you agree or you're standing in solidarity. And that's powerful because you don't even have to know the person or be in the same country as them to show your support." For Aaleyah, social media serves as "a site of resistance because it has many safe spaces." She goes on to explain, "I'm in different [social media] groups and pages. I'm in page for queer housing…and even in that queer housing page people post about different things like this one person posted about needing someone to help them get out of an abusive situation and everyone jumped in to help... So I'm in a bunch of Black student union pages and a bunch of artist pages and a bunch of Black artists page. A bunch of little mini communities of resistance I guess. I like it."

Black Women's Ability to Resist Oppression Offline vs. Online

For the women in this study, a significant benefit of social media activism was being able to enact social transformation in the world beyond the screen—something that was not always feasible in real life settings. Sydney describes a time she experienced racialized sexism from her teacher, and tried to address it using conventional means of reporting:

> I had this one teacher. He was my environmental science teacher... I really wanted to get an A and he told me 'maybe science isn't for you. You know what you're good at?" (cuz I cleaned his classroom one time for extra credit). He told me, "you know what you're good at? This is what you're good at, this is what you should be doing. You clean my classroom really well.

Experiencing a microaggression directly related to the Mammy image hurt and shocked Sydney . She remembers that, “when he said that I literally went home and cried because I had never experienced anything like that.” Unfortunately, using conventional means of addressing racism, including reporting incidents of racism to the school administration, did not yield satisfying results for Sydney . She says, “ I tried to tell the administration [about the environmental science teacher’s comment] and they wouldn’t listen to me. I went to a meeting and then six months later I was like I’ll take the B plus or whatever and just go.”

On another occasion, a teacher used a dress code to hyper-sexualize the bodies of Black girls in Sydney ’s class. She recalls:

> My junior year they tried to enforce a dress code and there was this one teacher he was really creepy and he would scan our chests. He would walk around the class and scan our chests to see if anyone had cleavage showing or spaghetti straps...They wanted you to just shut up and sit there and take whatever they say or do to you but I just would not... And administration obviously wouldn’t do anything about it.
>
> When going through conventional pathways of reporting didn’t work, Sydney and her classmates leveraged social and popular media to bring community awareness to Black girls’ oppression. She says, “some people posted about it. We got on the news about this. A lot of the kids were protesting about the dress code after that and it was on social media. We got on the news about it.”

Aaleyah captures the discursive and material power of digital resistance when she says, “My other favorite thing to do is get on Facebook and watch all the sad people who lost their jobs because they posted something racist and I see how my friends, they was like ‘who is this person? Look at this screenshot or an email or something that they sent,’ and then the whole Facebook community hops on it like ‘okay I’m Googling them right now. My coordinates say that they work at this location at this time, there’s the manager. Call. Fired. Like that is a great

thing. I think Facebook is a space of miracles. It's a great space." Evelyn had a similar experience, stating, "There were a couple of pictures for people who got hurt, there was a Go Fund Me page for one of the Black males that, it was a picture of him bleeding...they put a Go Fund Me for him to go to the hospital." Diamond remembers a time when a prominent social media campaign was successful in overturning a decision to deport an immigrant Black woman from Canada. She recollects, "a couple of months ago there was this woman named Beverly Breham. I think and she was pregnant and she was about to be deported. She was eight months pregnant and she was about to be deported to Jamaica even though she was marrying a Canadian citizen and her sponsorship was pending. There was amazing push back to that. [The hashtag] circulated so quickly. Everyone called the immigration minister. There was an image that circulated around and everyone was on it. Her deportation order got delayed an extra three months. So that was successful in itself." Danielle adds, "On social media I've also seen the people identifying people that were in the hate group they'll be like this is Tom, and Tom works here, and this is his P.O. box. I even saw somebody post on social media the guy got fired from his job. That never happens in real life." Many other participants shared these sentiments, emphasizing how "miraculous" or "magical" social media was in its ability to change lived realities beyond the computer screen.

For Diamond, social media activism holds racist people accountable in ways that offline spaces do not. She says:

> I used to see on Tumblr where if someone said something [racist], they would just post all their information. Like a teacher at a school or a principal, they'll post all their information on Tumblr and then it'll keep circulating until everyone calls that school. I think that's really cool because I love to see white supremacists lose everything. I think that's an awesome phenomenon that exists online and I hope that exists forever. I think it's cool to get [white supremacists] either fired or just face some repercussions for doing [racist acts] because I think its criminal to do that type of stuff and it doesn't get addressed like that in real life.

The Downsides of Social Media Activism

While participants recognized the crucial need for People of Color, particularly Black women, to engage in racial politics online, they simultaneously noted that online activism had a host of unforeseen consequences. Many participants identified over-exposure to graphic images and anti-Black rhetoric as an unanticipated cost of online activism. Natalie captures this reality when she says, "of course, having a lot of politically active friends on my Twitter has the unfortunate after-effect of just seeing Black death on my newsfeed all the time." She went on to explain, "after a specific string of police murders happened, I had to take a break from social media for a while. I was emotionally exhausted." Natalie wasn't the only participant that experienced emotional fatigue from witnessing racialized violence online. Gabrielle admitted that the social media storms that often follow police shootings is "a lot of information for me to get at one time. Sometimes I do find myself exiting out of the app because it is a lot. It's emotionally draining."

The prevalence of anti-Black violence online was similarly overwhelming for Evelyn, who noted, "When people die or when Black males are shot by the police and people post the video, that's traumatizing. Last summer, there was a lot going on and everybody would post everything and I was just sad and exhausted. I was like I should just sign out for a while." Gabrielle echoed these sentiments, stating, "Last summer there was a lot of Black Lives Matter and the massacre of Black people circulating online… In a matter of 2 weeks there were four or five people that had been killed. That was really exhausting. I couldn't even go on social media and talk about it anymore."

For Bre'anna, seeing a Black woman killed by police triggered a racialized trauma that had long lasting psychological ramifications. She explains:

> I have been driving since I was 16. I just got my first ticket in May and I swear I have PTSD. It didn't happen to me before [seeing police brutality online], but I swear I have PTSD now. When the cop pulled me over I was like am I going to live?

When asked if her experience was unique, Bre'anna explained the collective psychological horror facing her friends, family members, and other Black people around the globe. She says, "We all have PTSD…because of social media, because of all this constant coverage, we have this fear of the police. Emotionally, I can say that it has taken a toll on me. It's taken a toll on all of us." Natasha echoed her sentiments, stating, "seeing Black people get killed online, that does something to you psychologically. You get sad or you get very, very angry. You're like this could be me next. If this cop pulls me over, am I gonna live?"

For Black undergraduate women, feelings of fatigue, anxiety, depression, and paranoia were not only triggered by internet videos of Black death, but were also brought about by the anti-black commentary that often followed high profile events. The most damaging impact for Danielle is, "how people react to [police killings]. When you see it online, the scary part is that everyone is hidden behind a computer and so everyone can give their opinion and a lot of them are dangerous. A lot of [the opinions] are things like he deserved to die. That's frightening just looking at it and it's exhausting." Iyanah admits that racist rhetoric following a high-profile police killing is, "really tiring to hear and read about all the time," while Sydney feels, "It's really fatiguing, especially hearing the comments. People are still trying to justify [anti-black violence]. That gets tiring."

Diamond says, "all I know is when I'm watching these [images of Black death] I just don't want to be. Regardless of what is happening, if I need to bear witness to it or not. I don't need to see visual evidence of it to believe that it's happening and that it's true." Aaleyah was similarly fatigued by anti-black, anti-woman rhetoric online saying, "I get tired of having

conversations of why just showing up [for Black women] matters. How that's not divisive or separatist or detrimental to the progress of a whole racial class. I get exhausted having to explain and justify my humanity." After explaining how viewing Black death is mentally draining, Sydney adds, "what also gets tiring is hearing black people having to explain. I'm tired of that. It's like we can keep talking about [injustice] but no one's acting on it." Evelyn feels similarly, saying " I just feel bad for all the Black and Brown people that have to keep repeating ourselves. That gets tiring. They're still not listening."

In addition to the emotional risks and physiological effects of witnessing graphic images of Black death, the young Black women in this study were also targets of digital harassment as a result of their political engagement. Danielle describes a time when a satirical meme she created about white privilege went viral:

> I made a tweet a long time ago about the movie Get Out. It was a tweet about something like, 'if you seen this part of the movie you've seen the epitome of white privilege' and it got some really good numbers, like 40,000 something retweets. It became a very popular thing, but with that came a lot of DMs calling me a lot of names I had never heard before in my life...when these messages keep coming in and people keep calling you things for pointing out a fact and you're calling me a racist, you're calling me a nigger, you're calling me a porch monkey. I had never heard the term porch money in my life. And so that just takes a toll on you and you're like okay let me just step back for a little while and not be online.

Likewise, Danielle describes when the president of the Black Student Association was threatened for critiquing a racist statue on campus:

> She made a point about our [university mascot], our [university mascot] that we have on campus, has the same name as [a Confederate reference]... she said that at a rally and LA Times got a hold of that quote, so everyone got a hold of that quote. People were calling for her to leave the school. The administration started getting involved... it's that dark side of activism: a misconstrued quote may cost her her education.

Educational Impacts of Digital Resistance

Feelings of fatigue as a result of consuming racially-traumatizing social media content were not contained to social media; rather these traumatizing experiences had offline manifestations that affected participants' educational experiences. When asked if social media debates affect her college experience, Iyanah responded, "most definitely. Every time something happens on social media or there's an uproar about a police murder, people will talk about it on campus." Diamond noticed that, "a lot of these murders happen during the school year…that has a lot to do with how deeply it affects you and actual life at school." Evelyn notes, "depending on what time I got onto twitter or what time I saw a certain piece of news, that could affect my whole school day. Especially if it's something that really upset me like Black men getting killed by police."

Danielle's academic experiences were also impacted by overexposure to racial violence and racist rhetoric online. She notes that a lot of the videos and comments "are frightening and it makes you not want to leave the house. It makes you want to lay low." For Danielle, "laying low" meant staying home from class. She states, "When you see these images online you see hundreds of thousands of people collectively agree that person deserved to get shot, that can make you not want to go to school. For me I would hear these conversations [on campus]." Gabrielle adds that for "a black woman who is sitting in the classroom and someone's telling her how much her people deserve to die… that can make you not want to go school, that can make you want to spend less time studying, it'll take a toll on you." For Victoria, videos of Black death and dying at the hands of police can trigger feelings of fear and anxiety that affect her school day. She notes, "There's sometimes where I see the actual video and that's when I don't want to leave my room because it's scary….when I saw Philando Castile, I didn't want to go to class I

was so upset. Certain circumstances with police brutality and certain situations [involving anti-Black racism] I just feel done. I just want to zone out."

Participants also talked about the ramifications of participating in Black Lives Matter protests when the story goes viral online. Danielle describes a time a Black undergraduate woman critiqued a racist statue at her university. When the local newspaper got ahold of that quote "then everyone got a hold of that quote and people were calling for her to leave the school. The administration started getting involved and it was like that side of activism, a misconstrued quote [about racial injustice] may cost her her education." Natasha described a similar incident at her school. She says, "Some Black women, they had just graduated from [my university]. Well A picture of them at graduation putting their fist up in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick got out. It was all over social media. After that, they were getting death threats. People were trying to get them killed or kicked out of school, just for standing up for something they believed in."

For Danielle, creating political content online while in college made her more vulnerable to racial attacks and online harassment. After making a meme about white privilege, Danielle's post went viral, accumulating over 40,000 retweets. She notes, "it became a very popular thing, but with that came a lot of DMs calling me a lot of names I had never heard before in my life. When these messages keep coming in and people keep calling you [racial slurs] for pointing out a fact… That just takes a toll on you and you're like okay let me just step back for a little while and not be online." Diamond adds: "I have a friend who her uncle was recently shot and there was an image where he was laid on the ground for a while…anything to do with that will affect her way greatly more than anything else…when something happens to you and your family, if its triggering an actual thing that you know of or you know a friend has gone through, it will actually affect the way you move through the world and how you perform in school."

Strategies of Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue Online

While political resistance was described by many participants as being an empowering labor of love, it was nevertheless described as labor. Diamond says, " in terms of the labor part... I've had conversations with my friends where we're like it's clearly exhausting to always keep up this conversation online or host these events or do this stuff... I feel like they're happier when they're not doing it. I had a conversation with someone, she just joked like "the last couple of months I've been living like a white straight man and it's the happiest I've ever been and I've been living my best life since." You know? Just not engaging in [social justice activism online]... I think that it's worth noting 'cuz as much change and as much dialogue is important sometimes, it's *really* important to just tune out and just not have to do that labor."

Many participants shared these sentiments and elected to "tune out" social media as a form of coping. Strategies of avoidance were prevalent among the study group and participants readily talked about "stepping away from" or "taking a break from" social media during times of peak #BlackLivesMatter issues. For instance, after experiencing mental fatigue following several high-profile police killings, Natalie describes a time when she had to step back from social media She states, "There was a period between freshman and sophomore year where there was a lot happening there were multiple murders in a couple months and I just couldn't be on Facebook because the discourse was just talking about murder. Having those conversation was really important, but I just couldn't do that labor." Many participants felt similarly to Natalie, admitting that although they knew they played a leading role in discussions about race and violence online, the emotional and psychological trauma was often too much to bear. "I felt like as a Black woman I should be able to step back," said Tiana. "So that's what I did."

Natalie explained her retreat from social media somewhat abashedly, saying, "I just wasn't on social media for a while and that was weird for me because I love social media." Sydney discussed the notion of choice and self-preservation when discussing her engagement with anti-Black imagery online. She notes, "it's definitely mentally fatiguing. You have to decide what you want to see. Do you want to see the video of them beating him up or do you just want to read about it?" For many of the participants in the study, engagement in radicalized social media was a difficult choice and a dangerous battle. While too little participation in the movement could trigger negative attention from the Black community, too much participation in the movement could have psychological impacts. Bre'anna explains the importance of self-care in the midst of the racial violence online saying, "if you don't take care of yourself, if you don't have religion or faith in a higher being or something to keep you grounded, you'll go crazy thinking about all this injustice."

Another strategy used by the participants in this study was participating in digital counter-spaces focused on collective healing and solidarity. Danielle admits that she enjoys participating in digital counter-spaces online because of the wide availability of counter-stories of Black girlhood. After expressing admiration for hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackGirlsRock, Danielle adds that she's drawn to social media counter-spaces because, "I can't find anywhere else where you get those affirmations. It's nice to see yourself represented in images and wording that is not putting you down, but telling you the great things about yourself and other people like you who are doing great things. It's inspiring to me so that's why I participate in those spaces." Imani also goes to social media spaces for feelings of unity and uplift. she says, "I think there's a lot of that even though there is a lot of negativity on social media, but there's also a lot of positivity. there's a lot of Black unity that I see on Twitter

especially…There's a lot of Black women on my timeline that I re-tweet. There's a lot of that support that goes on. There can be a lot of uplifting comments, which is nice. Iyanah shared similar feelings, noting, "Black Twitter is so great... it feels like a community space you can go and laugh or grieve or just connect with the rest of the Black community."

Humor was another method of coping utilized by the women in this study. Danielle says, "People on Twitter are just funny. I don't understand why Black Twitter is free. I don't understand why people aren't being paid because I can just sit there and just laugh for hours. Especially if I'm feeling bad. It's just funny, the context is funny but then also its usually funny because it's relatable...It's an experience that everyone on Black Twitter has ever had. That's what makes It funny." Natalie notes that memes are both a means of talking back and using humor to cope with racial trauma. After explaining the various jokes and "clap backs" that occurred on this particular social media page, Natalie notes that reading meme threads is one of her ways of coping with racial trauma. She says, "I actually the other night read through an entire thread of memes about this racist building at Yale and people fighting about it. And it was interesting to kind of read that fight, but also hilarious and uplifting because of the memes people of color were making to kind of fight back."

The Role of the Strong Black Woman

Participants discussed the unstated pressure to be hyper-involved with social media activism for Black women. When asked to explain her motivations for participating in social media activism at such stifling rates, Jordyn states, "Well Black women have a stereotype that's kind of positive as caretakers ... having to really hold it down for the black community. A lot of times I see Black women are the ones combatting or going in on someone saying something [racist online]...In a sense we are uplifting everyone... it's always Black women who are the ones

that have to come save the day." Sydney adds, "Black women seem to be at the forefront of activism so when you see them [at a protest] you know it's a serious and important issue. So on that note, I feel like we always have to be there at the protest. We always have to be the ones posting about it and bringing awareness to it."

Danielle provides context to the notion of compulsory political participation for Black women, stating, "It's not necessarily like we have to be involved, but we feel compelled to be involved with everything. Especially when it comes to activism." Adriana echoes these sentiments, stating, "when Black men are killed in the street like dogs, the first people to say something are Black women. Black women are the ones to be vocal about it. Black women are the first ones to want a community outreach, are the ones to plan the funerals, are the ones to take care of the finances." When asked where this pressure to be the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement and the caretakers of the Black community comes from, Jordyn says, "its intergenerational where we've always had to do it."

The participants' reference to the Black female caretaker highlights the insidious presence of the intergenerational and historically-anchored stereotype of the strong Black woman. Forged during slavery, the image of the strong Black women as superhuman, unbreakable and self-sacrificing played a crucial role in rationalizing Black women's exploitation by a violent plantation system. Bre'anna admits to internalizing the SBW image, admitting, " I feel like I fulfilled caretaker roles as well. Definitely having heightened expectations that I feel like other people have on [Black women] to fix everything." Jordyn adds, "I think those tropes of our caretaker roles and how the Black community we take pride in being unified … [I think that's why] Black women are always the glue that keeps everything together."

Danielle highlights the exploitative nature of the SBW image, stating that Black women are expected to, “take care of everything and everybody except for themselves.”

Participants also identified how the SBW trope is used to punish Black women that fall short of the high expectations set by the trope. Danielle admits to feeling pressured to remember and commemorate every single Black man that is killed by the police—a requirement placed on Black women that she feels in unreasonable and exhausting. She notes, “it’s quite exhausting because, speaking as a woman of color, it’s bad that when it comes to addressing certain issues [of anti-Black violence] it’s something I have to keep up with in order to keep up with other people.” For Bre’anne, there is an unstated pressure to conform to standards of the Strong Black Woman activist that can lift up the entire community and meeting this standard is required to “keep up with” or be included in the Black community. She goes on to say, “these [tragedies] they happen so rapidly and they’re so in your face you can’t possibly remember every single detail or every single case.... I feel exhausted at not only having this thrown at me so frequently, but also having to remember these names of people... how do you expect me to keep up with all this information and then scold me for not remember [ing] it all. That’s not what I have to do in order to be supportive or to be passionate about a particular issue as a Black woman.”

Several other participants echoed Bre’anne’s sentiments, asserting that the image of the Strong Black Woman also works coercively to silence Women of Color struggling with feelings of exhaustion and fatigue. Danielle captures the damaging mental health effect of the strong Black woman trope when she says:

> Look at how many [Black women] feel that we can’t talk to one another. Look how many of us feel that... if we had’ve just tried to bend ourselves a little bit more perhaps that struggle wouldn’t exist. Even within our own. I think that also contributes to why many Black women carry these different stigmas… because we’re discouraged from speaking about [mental health issues]. So even having the extra support, a shoulder to lean on, people who genuinely care about us seems impossible. I think those are the

> things that really cripple us the most and that keep us harboring pain… because of all we have to carry, we end up harboring pain and other people's problems, and we have our own [problems]. So it's like here we are, we're dealing with bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and we might have families of our own, we have different responsibilities, and I mean it just really wears and tears on us.

Jordyn goes on to discuss how Black women struggle to find support for their racial battle fatigue and activist burnout as a result of the Strong Black Woman trope. She says, "Black women are always the glue that keeps everything together… and I know black women are suffering from it, I just can't really pinpoint it because of this strong woman mask that I'm still struggling with." Imani also believes that the strong Black woman trope causes a range of mental health problems. Reflecting back on Black women's hyper-participation in online activism, she says, "Black men] are at higher risk of physically losing their lives, but Black women are at a higher risk of losing their minds. Losing their sanity." According to Aaleyah, Black women are expected to, "take care of everything and everybody except for themselves."

Although several participants reported health concerns as a result of their political engagement, they felt like they couldn't step back from political activism. Their intersectional marginalization made it impossible or dangerous to take the time to deal with their mental health concerns. Although Sydney is fatigued by witnessing and discussion anti-Black violence online, she admitted that she doesn't have adequate time or ability to address it. She says, "I just want to zone out. But then it's like the next day you just have to get up and go. There's too much to do." For Aaleyah, being overcome by mental illness and emotional fatigue is not an option. She is of the firm belief that Black women, "can't afford to fall apart. You have to take care of yourself and other people. and what is the alternative to moving forward? Dying?"

Danielle captures the urgency at which scholars must recognize young Black women's mental health concerns related to activism, resilience, and the SBW trope. She says:

> I would say Black women are definitely the ones behind the scene and have been taking a back seat that we're not really given our time to relax. A few years ago, a woman named Karyn Washington, she died by suicide. And she was one of those Black women, she had her blog, darker skin black woman. She used to have her hair pretty. She used to wear great makeup. And she wanted to show that you don't have to be a certain skin tone to wear this kind of lipstick, or wear this kind of makeup. That you could be comfortable in the skin that you're in and be fabulous. And it's like I remember hearing when she passed away and I said why isn't there an outcry about that? A black woman who had depression and yet she felt that there was nobody else in the world who cared about her and she took her life….whereas when we talk about Black men, we have to protect them. We have to figure out better ways to make sure they're safe. But who's worried about the safety of Karyn Washington[1]? Who was worried about the safety of Shaniya Davis[2]? Who was worried about the safety of Aiyana Stanley-Jones[3]? What about those Black girls? Don't they matter?

These narratives about the political and personal complexities of the SBW are sobering because they illuminate the ways controlling images can be empowering and transformational, yet simultaneously isolating and emotionally damaging. By characterizing Black woman as having superhuman strength and endurance, the myth of the Strong Black Woman poses a threat to the wellbeing of Women of Color because it normalizes backbreaking work ethic while simultaneously erasing the prevalence of fatigue, trauma and mental health concerns.

A Growing Skepticism of the Internet's Liberatory Potential

In general, participants felt that social media activism positively contributed to real life change. At the same time, they recognized the permanence of racism within, beyond and beneath

[1] Karyn Washington was a 22 year old African American woman, blogger and activist. She was a Maryland-based founder of an anti-colorism website "For Brown Girls"(FBG) as well as a viral campaign #DarkSkinRedLips Project. Washington passed away in April of 2014 from suicide.

[2] Shaniya Davis was a five-year-old African American girl from Fayetteville, North Carolina that was trafficked, sexuaully assaulted and murdered in September of 2009. Her death resulted in a Supreme Court case.

[3] Aiyana Stanley-Jones was a seven-year-old African-American girl from Detroit, Michigan that was shot and killed during a police raid on May 16, 2010. Her death drew national media attention around anti-Black violence and police brutality.

the computer screen. Jordyn points out the inability for social media activism to single-handedly produce long lasting, revolutionary change offline when she states:

> I don't think we're actually getting justice for [the victims of police brutality]. We're just talking about it. Until we actually do get justice, where it's not even just one officer gets convicted and found guilty and they suffer consequences, but where [anti-Black police brutality] is not happening... You know how nowadays we're like 'oh [the police officer] gonna get off" and we have this really defeated mentality? Until that mentality is abolished completely where it's like, "Oh that happened? It's a given that they're going to be found guilty, they're going to go to jail. Until then, justice is not happening.

Like Jordyn, most of the participants felt that social media activism was a first step in solving the problem of anti-Black violence. Danielle explains how social media activism has a simplifying effect that renders invisible the interlocking systems of power that control Black life:

> Hashtag activism really simplifies the way resistance or taking down the system works because it really just simplifies the work into a telephone call or just showing up. I think people really need to understand the core of what [the problem] actually is: it's anti-Black, it's misogyny. It's really, at its core, hating Black women and pregnant Black women, and really stopping their ability to have families and make families and keep families together…All of this is reduced to individual cases when this is a huge problem and there's hundreds of Beverly's.

Reflecting back on the emotional, mental and psychological trauma that resulted from images of Black death that flooded their social media timelines, multiple participants asserted that video evidence of Black death wasn't necessary and actually caused more damage than most people realized. Natalie, Evelyn, and Sydney all admitted that they would rather read about anti-Black violence than witness a video of it. Though they created and circulated posts about Black lives matter and the importance of intersectional activism, none of the participants admitted of sharing a video of Black death. When asked why she refused to share such graphic content, Jordyn asserts:

> I think it has a dehumanizing effect on the individual... Yes it's great that we're able to connect, interact, we can reveal who's problematic and clap back [through social media activism] but then those [victims] are real people and their lives should not be reduced to

> a video like that. they did not live for that purpose, to be a hashtag. Their death should not be subjected to the purpose of identifying problematic people online.

These comments raise several important questions that force us to reconsider popular constructions of transformational resistance online: if young Black women, who sustain the highest rates of social media engagement to date, aren't sharing images of violent Black death, then how or why are these images so prevalent online? Why are the text-based posts they create and share about Black women's issues rarely, if ever, going viral?

Conclusion

Interview data revealed that social media activism provided participants with opportunities to engage in political debate, discussion and information gathering. It also provided them with a sense of safety, visibility and community that was believed to be either inaccessible or unavailable to them offline. As a result of witnessing graphic imagery, reading racist commentary, and becoming targets of digital harassment, an overwhelming majority of participants experienced depression, anxiety, anger and fear that inevitably impacted their educational experiences. Ultimately, these findings support the establishment of institutional resources, supports and programs that can adequately address the specific mental health and educational concerns for young Black women exposed to racial violence online.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Not unlike studies about student activism and transformational resistance, this study found a strong connection between online activism and feelings of empowerment, visibility, and community for Black women college students. These findings align with asset-based bodies of literature that identify activism and resistance as crucial protective factors against Black students' institutional push out. At the same time, the findings from this study challenge the current knowledge canon in powerful and important ways. By centering the invisible suffering of Black female activists, this study expands upon current higher education scholarship that primarily focuses on the academic, emotional and political benefits of student activism and resistance, and engages with these themes as it relates to their social media engagements. Despite their overrepresentation at the forefront of digital justice movements, Black women in college remain largely overlooked in educational research, especially in studies focusing on transformational resistance, digital democracies and youth activism. By focusing on an incredibly active but largely invisible sect of the student activist population, this research offers invaluable insight to the complexities of transformational resistance and digital activism for higher education students and is an important pilot for future longitudinal studies.

The first research question addressed in this was: What explanations do young Black women give for their disproportionate use of social media as a platform for counter-storytelling and resistance? This study found three explanations for Black women's hyper-participation in digital movements for social justice: 1) social media provides young Black women with a sense of safety, visibility, and community that is not regularly available in offline settings; 2) feeling connected to and supported by a community of Black women from similar dispositions was of crucial importance to the participants, who felt unseen, unheard, and under-served in offline

campus settings as a result of their multiple marginalization; and 3) participants felt their position at the intersection of race, class, and gender made them more aware of oppression and subsequently more poised to directly confront anti-Black sentiments online.

The second research question addressed by this study was: What effects, if any, does participation in online movements for social change have on the socio-academic experiences of Black college-age women? This study found several benefits to hyper-participation, including feelings of visibility, community and safety; and increased access to educational and identity-centered resources. In addition to the benefits of digital resistance, this study also illuminated a spectrum of unintended health impacts of reading, responding to, and witnessing anti-Black violence online. Although participating in #BlackLivesMatter involves a plethora of actions—from reading news articles to sharing uplifting stories of Black excellence, to digital fundraising for victims of police brutality; watching videos of Black death stood out to Black women as a particularly traumatizing part of digital resistance. Many participants reported experiencing fatigue, exhaustion, depression, anxiety, fear, and anger as a result of witnessing countless instances of Black death online. Exposure to racist rhetoric, both on and offline, was also particularly troubling for participants. Constantly reading, writing, and thinking about anti-Black racism caused psychological turmoil which was subsequently compounded when participants encountered hate speech online.

The culmination of these self-reported mental health consequences inevitably affected Black women's educational experiences. Participants discussed experiencing headaches, feelings of numbness, an inability to focus or study, and a deflated desire to attend or participate in class. Finally, a growing skepticism of social media to single handedly transform society was palpable amongst participants who felt that viral images of Black death were both degrading and

traumatizing. In the following discussion, I will situate the findings within the literature to more thoroughly examine the practical and theoretical implications of Black women's digital resistance.

The third focus of this study was: How can young Black women's insights on education, resistance and digital technology foster new theoretical considerations and models of research? I argue that the narratives presented in this study reveal the hidden cost of resilience for Black undergraduate women, which has implications for scholarship on resilience, resistance, and the experiences of Black college students. Each of these implications is discussed below.

Implications for Resilience Literature

A growing body of higher education scholarship takes a critical approach to studying Black students' collegiate experiences. Rather than focus on the ways Students of Color are struggling to survive hostile campus racial climates, these studies focus on the ways students thrive within and resist against inequitable education systems. By approaching the issue of educational inequity from an asset-based lens, these studies are uniquely able to highlight culturally relevant and historically anchored strategies of resistance that foster academic excellence for minoritized students. Prior to the emergence of these critical studies, culturally situated ways of surviving and thriving in college were overlooked and undertheorized in higher education scholarship. Instead, conventional scholarship focused on showcasing the racialized hardships and disadvantages that plagued the higher education system and explained Students' of Color disproportionate academic failure.

Critical race scholars have fought long and hard to change the narrative of failure and victimhood that currently surrounds Students of Color in higher education scholarship. Through their articulation of transformational resistance, a theoretical framework that centers

intersectionality, experiential knowledge and historical analysis in its interrogation of school failure, CRT scholars have challenged ahistoric depictions of Students of Color as passive victims and self-defeating troublemakers. Literature from this theoretical body of scholarship is intentionally asset-oriented and centers student success and resilience rather than failure and struggle. The findings from this dissertation study closely align with those from the aforementioned body of critical race scholarship.

At the same time, the findings from this study challenge the current knowledge canon in powerful and important ways. By centering the invisible suffering of Black female activists, this study expands upon current higher education scholarship that primarily focuses on the academic, emotional and political benefits of student activism and resistance.

The findings from this study suggest that contemporary scholarship on resilience has been unable to holistically capture the experiences of young Black women that constantly have to resist against racism, sexism, and gendered racism both on and offline. Literature glorifying Black women's resilience without simultaneously acknowledging the ways they are suffering from the SBW image are dehumanizing and reinforce Black women's marginalized status in college. In order to fully grasp Black college women's experience in digital justice movements, research much complicate oversimplified notions of resilience to uncover authentic accounts of struggle and success for Black women. Studies on Black women's resistance must recognize that Black women's resilience is mediated by stereotypes that not only exist at the nexus of race, class and gender oppression, but also stem from a historically specific context of slavery.

Data from this dissertation study reveals how the legacy of slavery creates nuanced articulations of Black womanhood that co-opt Black women's resistance in exploitative and dehumanizing ways. The incorporation of Black feminist thought made visible how the trope of

the “strong Black woman” is indivisibly woven into popular narratives of “student resilience” used to describe Black women’s collegiate experiences. Thus, scholarship on student activism and resilience could benefit from employing an intersectional, historically anchored lens that can better articulate the ways that race-conscious, but gender-neutral understandings of resilience disproportionately harm Black women in college.

Implications for Campus Mental Health Providers

Perhaps one of the most important findings of this study is that Black undergraduate women are in crisis. When asked to describe their academic experiences in college broadly, the participants almost immediately shared feelings of fatigue, exhaustion and post-traumatic stress disorder that were a direct result of their participation in social media activism. The pervasive and unaddressed presence of emotional trauma is a noteworthy finding in this study because it forces scholars to reconsider rhetoric that glorifies Black women’s resilience and hyper-participation in activism as wholly positive protective factors against academic push out.

Participants’ stories suggest that monolithic narratives of student resilience can be harmful and dehumanizing for Black women, who are often expected to do twice the work for half the credit and minimal support for their mental health. For instance, several participants expressed concerns about being unable to address their mental health concerns due to the stigmatized nature of mental health in the Black community and the trope of the strong Black woman. Danielle attributes high levels of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation among young Black women to SBW image and being “discouraged from seeking support” for mental health. At the same time, Jordyn admits to being unable to clearly articulate Black women’s mental health issues because of the strong Black woman mask she herself has internalized.

In order to understand the how the SBW - masked as resilience - silences Black women in need of mental health support, one must first understand that controlling images have both a historical origin and a sociopolitical purpose. Not all controlling images are negative and Collins (1998) reminds scholars to interrogate all images that construct Black womanhood in monolithic, one-dimensional ways. It must also be noted that the SBW is at once necessary for and detrimental to Black women's survival. One the one hand, the internalization of the strong Black woman trope enables Black women to survive a system that is fundamentally anti-Black and anti-woman. By internalizing the stereotype of Black woman (SBW) as unbreakable, Black woman leverage the strength and anger that energizes protests against a political structure that dehumanizes and disenfranchises Communities of Color. The political changes made possible by Black women's strength and resilience are innumerable; from Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth to Rosa Parks and Angela Davis, the political power and importance of SBW can not be understated. Wyatt (2008) also notes that "being a strong Black woman is in the first instance a necessary response to living conditions within a racist economy" because it forces Black women to bear unusual hardship while simultaneously surviving and caring for others in unbearable circumstances.

At the same time, this study found that the SBW has psychological and emotional costs for Black women because it "requires the denial of their spontaneous feelings and needs" (Wyatt, 2008, p. 57). Collins locates the origin of the SBW in slavery, where the myth of Black women's superhuman strength was used to rationalize the grotesque brutalities of African enslavement. Contemporarily, the SBW image requires that Black women deny vulnerability, imperfection and neediness as a show of superhuman strength and survival (Morgan, 1999). With an intentional focus on resilience, this controlling image necessarily requires a denial of stress, fear,

pain or helplessness. Morgan (1999) notes that logic of the SBW is that, "black women were strong and that black women do not get depressed" (Chambers, 1996, p. 72). In order to survive, Black women must be strong, and to succumb to feelings of fear, anxiety, exhaustion or depression is to succumb to oppression.

For a handful of participants, the aftereffect of witnessing, discussing and challenging graphic anti-Black content online was political avoidance. Several young women admitted to "zoning out" and "avoiding social media conversations altogether" because they were no longer able "to do that labor." Stripped of energy, mental wellness and affective capacity, Black women are left ill-equipped to catalyze a political revolution. Ultimately, the participants' descriptions about Black women's role in social media activism reveal a troubling reality: though deceivingly positive, the image of the SBW is used to reinforce Black women's political subjugation through fatigue and burnout.

Implications for Student Support Programs

Although participants shared feelings of fatigue, exhaustion, anxiety and depression, they rarely spoke about receiving institutional support to help them heal from these traumatizing encounters. Iyana surmises Black women's precarious existence in institutions of higher education, explaining that "moving through undergrad as a Black woman [can be] really stressful, discouraging at times. Just not having the right resources on campus is probably the main thing that's an impediment." Findings also revealed that being involved in political dialogue and cultivating an activist-oriented presence online opened the door for Black women to access emotional, educational and/or political resources that were perceived to be either unavailable or inaccessible offline. Since the study participants identified in a variety of complex and overlapping ways, singularly defined campus spaces like the Black Student Union or the

Women's Center were ill-equipped to address their needs as queer, trans, first generation college, low-income, survivors of assault, and/or first-generation immigrant Black women.

As a result of these institutional resource gaps, young Black women turned to social media affinity spaces to acquire emotional, educational, financial, and medical information and resources. Digital affinity spaces, including secret Facebook pages and private GroupMe chats, more adequately addressed intersectional needs of young Black women that are often dismissed or overlooked by singularly focused student organizations or diversity initiatives. For instance, Aaleyah admits to participating in intersectional Facebook pages like "queer women of color housing," that support the varying needs of women, queer folk, people of color and low-income students all at once. Social media pages oriented towards Black women and girls were considered to innovative strategies to distribute scarce resources. As Evelyn put it, "the Group Chat I'm in for Black women on campus... it's definitely about making our own resources for black students." Participants discussed being able to find affordable school supplies, information on how to transition, support networks for escaping an abusive relationship, housing assistance and professional development opportunities catered towards Black women. Being apart of these "mini communities of resistance," as Aaleyah calls them, fostered a sense of critical hope that enabled the young women to continue pursuing their educational and career goals despite the myriad of institutional obstacles that were in their way.

Implications for Researchers

The pervasiveness of Black women's pain and turmoil was only made visible because of the purposeful inclusion of Black feminist thought, which allowed the researcher to ask questions yet to be asked of resilience, resistance and activism. As an outsider-within, I was able to ask questions informed by my own experiences as Black woman and, in doing so, surfaced complex

findings about the SBW that may have otherwise been overlooked. The findings from this study support assertions by Black feminist scholars that stereotypes of the strong, angry and self-sacrificing Black woman have served a dual purpose when it comes to ensuring Black women's subordinated position. Not only did the SBW contribute to participants' feelings of fatigue and exhaustion, but it also silenced their attempts to talk about or address their looming mental health concerns. Such findings concretized just how complex and contradictory the SBW image is for young Black women: It bolsters political agency while simultaneously intensifying personal struggle. On the one hand, the SBW distorts the severity and complexity of Black women's resistance and oppression in college. On the other, the image makes addressing mental health issues seemingly impossible because public knowledge of Black women's trauma, fatigue and exhaustion are not widely available. Although it has never been foolproof, the muting of Black female trauma has attempted to catalyze feelings of isolation and paint freedom as impossible, nay foolish, due to the lack of a substantive, well-organized support system for Black women's resistance (Davis, 2011; Sharpely-Whiting, 1999).

Additionally, participants' narratives showcased that the image of the SBW does not solely function solely on a social level, quieting the actions of Black women as a collective group, but it has also been utilized in scholarly research to advance a racialized, hyper-masculine knowledge canon. For decades, Black women's intersectional oppression has been overlooked and understudied due to an institutional push to focus on their superhuman resilience. Black women in this study were reluctant to discuss their pain or trauma to non-Black women for fear of being perceived as weak or problematic; I would argue that researchers are subjected to this same logic when producing scholarship on Black girls' schooling experiences, and are institutionally silenced if they attempt to center Black women's struggles rather than their

resilience. By discouraging researchers from thoroughly documenting and recognizing Black women's fatigue and trauma through research, the SBW sustains a knowledge canon that normalizes Black women's resilience, silences their trauma and maintain the oppressive status quo.

The SBW image has played a rich, and profitable role in the construction of the academy and the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Academe has relied heavily upon Black women's resilience through suffering. Throughout U.S. history, Black women's bodies have served as the sacrificial infrastructure for the development, maintenance and advancement of scientific knowledge: their slave labor toiled the fields and constructed the brick and mortar foundation of the nation's oldest and most prestigious universities (Wilder, 2013); their bodies were used for scientific experimentation that lead to some of our greatest medicinal discoveries in anesthesiology and gynecology (Sharpely-Whiting, 1999); their roles as caretakers, surrogate mothers and domestic servants made it possible for slave-owning academics to produce scholarship unbothered by the needs of the house and family (White, 1999). In many ways, the narrative of the SBW is true: Black women have have survived - and continue to survive - the atrocities of the academy. But at what cost? And to whose benefit?

Coercive silence and the muting of Black female narratives has long been used as a tactic to control and contain Black women (Wilder, 2013). The machinery of suppression employed against Black women both historically and contemporarily has included a diversity of weapons, including policies that threatened the lives and wellbeing of Black women that attempt to speak back to power (Davis, 2011), stereotypes working to distort or hide Black women's oppression (Howard-Baptiste, 2014), and the near erasure of Black women's voices in the canon of scholarly knowledge (Howard-Baptiste, 2014; Collins, 1989; Davis, 2011).

The consensual silence that controlling images demands has become seamlessly embedded into the fabric of Black culture and language practices (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999; Richardson, 2002; White, 1999). The legacy of this silence was not lost on the Black women in this study, who were reluctant to share their stories with non-Black women given the violence, disbelief or invalidation that often awaited them (Davis, 2011; Crenshaw et. al, 2015). In recognizing the powerful traces of consensual silence within the Black female community and the use of societal images to sustain it, this study elected to employ an outsider-within interview methodology that intervened upon and directly confronted Black women's collective silence in society, in schools, in popular media and in educational research. In doing so, this study acknowledged the powerful ways schools, media and research, as consciousness industries, work to mute the Black female narrative. By enabling Black girls to directly address the popular narratives about their personhood that pervade their schools, their communities, and their social media spaces, this research strove to challenge these problematic discourses and begin a dialogue that could produce change, reformation and transformational resistance in institutions of learning.

Findings from this study simultaneously revealed the importance of researcher positionality as a protective factor against coercive silencing. My positionality as a young Black woman served as a protective factor that enabled the participants to speak candidly about their experiences with pain, trauma and mental wellness. On multiple occasions, participants shared feelings of relief and gratefulness for the opportunity to share their struggles with "someone who gets it." Several participants shared that they were excited about participating in this research study because they felt that academic research was a legitimate platform through which their pain could be humanized. At the end of her interview, Evelyn said, "I think it's important for you

to give us this platform to speak and then formalize it. Formulate it, make it research, put it on paper, documented. I just appreciate that platform to speak because I feel like Black women a lot of times in these informal sisterhood circles we talk about [trauma, fatigue and mental health concerns] and then we just go back and deal with it." Aaleyah felt similarly at the end of her interview, stating "I appreciate that you've given us a space to be like, give us a space to make our stuff researchable, make it a real article, make it real, make it prevalent and give us our own narrative because we don't get the chance to do that a lot. Especially in respectable or legitimate ways. not just our instagram account so like something that people are really gonna read for information. So I appreciate that and I liked our conversation." When asked if she had anything else she'd like to share at the end of the interview, Sarah added, "this work is important. [Black women] need to be heard." Likewise, Jasmine said, "I was really intrigued by this study...I thought it was really cool that you would talk about [Black women's oppression] because a lot of times when people talk about racial stereotypes and that sort of issue they focus on Black men and Black women kind of get pushed to the side and not talked about. And that's awful because nothing's happening really to change it. People keep speaking out about police brutality and I fully understand that we need to protect men, but that doesn't change the fact that black women deal with tons of issues on a daily basis too. those issues still need to be talked about. Our pain needs to be talked about."

Implications for Teacher Education

There exists a growing body of teacher education research dedicated to teaching, bolstering and cultivating strategies of resistance, survival and empowerment in urban schools within the context of media. These bodies of work support the development of students' critical media literacies – or the ways of understanding, creating and reading media – in order to help

them challenge and interrogate problematic stereotypes about their social identity (Kellner & Share, 2007a, 2007b). Perhaps the most well-known of these disciplines, critical media literacy (CML), is broad and inclusive, encouraging students to critique representations of race, gender, class, language, sexuality and beyond in order to achieve social justice (Kellner, 2003). CML is particularly powerful because it moves beyond mere critique and encourages students to take a stance against social injustice through the creation and dissemination of counter-hegemonic media (Morrell, 2008). Critical media scholars position CML as a form of social justice pedagogy, pushing educators to equip students with the skills to critique and transform both school and society (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2008). The findings from this dissertation can strengthen and nuance current conceptualization of critical media literacy. By drawing upon Black feminist technology studies, critical media literacy can go beyond creating and critiquing social media content to simultaneously interrogate the perceived objectivity of the internet.

A social justice agenda in education must include trauma informed, culturally relevant training for pre-service teachers. Teachers must acknowledge the ubiquity of social media in the lives of their students and be cognizant of the emotional, academic and mental health consequences that social media activism can have on their students. Teachers must be prepared to address students' racial battle fatigue or social media trauma in the classroom.

By helping pre-service teachers understand how the internet works as a tool of white supremacy to reinforce intersectional oppression both on and offline, teacher education programs can better prepare their educators to address issues such as digital harassment, activist burnout, and the perceived psychological impacts of witnessing graphic content that their students are likely experiencing. Pre-service teachers that enter classroom with a critical awareness of technology can also provide their students with practical strategies for navigating

traumatic social media spaces during times of crisis. For instance, teachers can show students how to add safety features to their social media accounts that censor or block traumatic content, encourage them to seek out mental health support, or support a student-run organization dedicated to processing traumatic online experiences. Encouraging students to utilize empowering and counter hegemonic social media products to heal from and fight against anti-Black sentiments is another way teachers can address students' racial battle fatigue. For instance, teachers can make students aware of fugitive counter spaces online with a focus on healing, activism, humor and community uplift such as the popular instagram page @SpitJustice. They can also meaningfully incorporate online resources into their curriculum, such as having students complete a 10 minute writing exercise responding to a humorous meme, a line of empowering poetry by Rupi Kaur, or a lyric from Kendrick Lamar's song, "Alright."

The findings from this dissertation simultaneously urge scholars to move beyond reactionary means of merely surviving algorithmic oppression to more proactive means of altering the internet. Opportunities to meaningfully incorporate critical internet studies into the K-12 curriculum are plentiful, and the nation's push for more rigorous STEAM education is an ideal starting point. By providing pre-service with a critical, intersectional, and historically-anchored understanding of the science, technology, math and engineering, teacher educators can make K-12 educators more aware of the cultural, racial and technological assets Students of Color bring to the STEAM field.

For instance, this dissertation posits that although Black girls play a prevalent role in creating, curating and circulating popular media content, their technological contributions are largely overlooked due to racialized misconceptions of who "can," "should" and "is able to" engage with information systems in meaningful ways. Popularized discussions about the

overrepresentation of white males in STEM as heads of technology start-ups, as digital entrepreneurs and as tech innovators helps normalize technology use and development as inherently white and male. Further, characterizations of the internet as "the Wild West" draws upon a history that has been largely attributed to White male exploration and expansion. At the same time, extent literature has thoroughly documented the ways girls and youth of color remain at the bottom of the ever-growing digital divide, inevitably positioning them as the digital "have not's," "know not's" and "should not's."

Indeed, these disparities are the result of interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression that produce startling gaps in knowledge, resources and opportunities for Black girls wanting to rigorously engage with technology in formal educational settings. Teaching preservice teachers about the systematic exclusion of underrepresented groups from STEAM is a crucial step towards increasing their access to, engagement with, and agency over technology concepts and practices, a disproportionate focus on the challenges and barriers can inadvertently reinforce deficit notions of girls, low-income youth, Students of Color, and queer youth as technologically illiterate. More often than not, conventional discussions of STEAM exclusion and the "digital divide" neglect to acknowledge Black girl success and innovation in media and technology spaces, ultimately relegating their technological contributions to the margins.

Despite the voracious presence of the digital divide and Black girls' perennial exclusion from formal tech training and resources, data highlighting Black girls' noteworthy visibility in popular and digital media challenges the validity of their position at the bottom of the tech totem pole. The study participants' ability to create digital fundraisers, politically-oriented web pages, informational video clips, and the creation of digital affinity spaces is indicative of their technological prowess. Beyond this study, young Black girls are leveraging computer science

technology to combat systems of oppression that affect their day-to-day lives, from designing apps that help make people more cognizant of implicit bias against Black women (Scott et al, 2017) to innovating wearable technology that can alert local authorities if the wearer ever becomes a target for sexual assault (Genesis STEAM, 2019). By placing Black girls' social media activism in conversation with computer science skills and literacies, this study intentionally connects Black girls over participation in social and digital media to their formal exclusion from computer science spaces. It simultaneously showcases Black girls' burgeoning interest in and aptitude for computer science as well as other science, engineering and technology fields. A social justice agenda in education must include asset-based approaches to STEAM that meaningfully incorporate the technological skills, interests and acumen that underrepresented students bring with them into the classroom.

Such an agenda also includes teaching students about the political economy of race, gender and sexuality on the Web. Most AP courses in computer focus on understanding how the internet works, and a socially just approach to STEAM would consider how power and privilege undergird all technology. For instance, having students conduct a content analysis on Google search results for "professor," "pretty," or "criminal" is one way teachers can introduce the concept of algorithmic bias and reveal just how intentional racial and gender exploitation is in both popular media and information technology. From there, students can learn how to develop their own codes, algorithms and content moderation protocols to create a more socially just internet.

Conclusion

Instead of merely focusing on Black women's resilience, this study places equal importance on centering the pain and tragedy of resistance. While CRT made visible Black

women's resistance in the digital realm, the incorporation of Black Feminist Thought brought into the forefront the personal and political complexities of resistance for young Black women. As we work to challenge deficit narratives that overlook and undermine Black girl resistance and political agency, we must simultaneously ensure that their stories are authentically and holistically told. A more complicated look at digital resistance and counter-storytelling can examine the invisible consequences of transformational resistance and work to create institutional supports, resources, and policies that help young Black women in college cope and heal from racial battle fatigue. Universities should work towards fostering offline counter-spaces that can recreate the feelings of safety, visibility, and community that Black women experience in digital settings. If literature on resistance and resilience continually praises transformational resistance without simultaneously accounting for racial and gender battle fatigue that stems from talking back to power, then we as researchers and educators are complicit in making an already vulnerable population even more vulnerable. This work is not meant to quash Black women and girl's resistance online, but rather to urge institutions of higher education to provide Black female students with ample academic, socio-emotional and mental health resources that can counteract racial and gendered battle fatigue that could eventually contribute to their institutional push out.

The goal, therefore, is to restore and support Black women activists so that they can continue to engage in transformational resistance in empowering and revolutionary ways. In particular, using a Black Feminist Technology Studies framework to think about the intersectional dimensions of Black women's hyper-participation in social media activism. The incorporation of Black feminist technology studies made visible how racism, sexism and gendered racism on the Internet works to commodify and hyper-circulate traumatic images of

anti-Black violence. To date, work on digital resistance and social media activism has primarily focused on its benefits to democratic participation without much attention to the political economy of race and gender and the web.

From creation and circulation to ingestion and deconstruction, Black girls play an indispensable and largely invisible role in the field of media and technology. Yet Black girls remain largely undervalued and overlooked in digital media and technology scholarship. Thus, if we are to truly address educational inequity and more adequately acknowledge the crucial part Black girls play in the fields of media and technology, more scholarly attention must be paid to the ways Black girls intersect with and are intersected by information technology both on and off the screen. We must expand the canon of Black feminist technology studies so that we can better articulate the experiences of Black girls in a digital era and intervene upon their oppression within and beyond the screen.

Future Work

While extent literature has focused on Black girl misrepresentation in media and underrepresentation in technology courses, few scholarly studies have explored their participation in the media and technology industry beyond the flickering screen. Just outside the scope of popular media exists the IT industry, a global behemoth responsible for developing, disseminating and deconstructing technology products, media platforms, and information infrastructures. Like popular media, the IT industry and the products it creates are often seen as inherently objective and devoid of racial, gender or political bias. Yet, research has shown time and time again that raced and gendered exploitation play an indispensable role in the creation, consumption and deconstruction of Twenty-first century IT products in the US and abroad. Around the globe, physical, mental and sexual terror are systematically leveraged against Black

girls in order to foster the creation, consumption and deconstruction of Twenty-First Century IT products. Black girl laborers work in and around mines in the Congo to extract minerals used to devise mobile phones, car batteries and motherboards; Girls of Color are illegally employed in sweatshops and electronic factories where they are responsible for cell phone and computer assembly; and E-waste from Europe and North America is systematically disposed of in Africa, where Black girls toil in toxic electronic graveyards as scrap collectors and water vendors. Indeed, the triangular liaisons between Africa, Europe and North remain intact even after the age of European imperialism has supposedly ended. More work must be done to unearth the IT industry's reliance upon Black girl labor, and illuminate the mechanization of neoslavery and the recreation of a digitized Middle Passage.

Indeed, more work in Black feminist technology studies can help disrupt the normative construction of technology creation, consumption and disposal as post racial, ungendered and politically neutral. An expansion of BFTS can also make clear that Black girls are increasingly engaged in all aspects of media creation and regularly leverage information systems to bring attention to their voices, experiences and passions. It can also illuminate how showcases of Black girl joy, creativity, activism and techno-literacy are regularly dismissed, dismantled and devalued by Internet algorithms designed to uphold a power structure that profits from Black girl suppression. Work on digital activism and STEM resilience can highlight that although they regularly excluded from formal learning spaces focusing on technology and digital media use, Black girls express immense interest in and aptitude for computer science, tech innovation, and media production through their social media engagement.

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