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Using a Master Narrative Framework to Examine Conversations About Race and Ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Systemic racism, reinforced by color-evasive ideology, shapes the ways that emerging adults process and discuss race/ethnicity. In this preregistered and mixed methods study, we used a master narrative framework to examine narratives about race/ethnicity among U.S. emerging adult friend-pairs.

Method: Participants consisted of 107 friend-pairs ($N = 214$ total) who provided individually written racial/ethnic narratives and engaged in an unstructured conversation with each other in which race/ethnicity was brought up.

Results: Using quantitative methods, we found that *meaning making* of racial/ethnic experiences was higher in written relative to spoken narrative contexts. Additionally, using qualitative methods, we identified specific conversation dynamics capturing how young people discussed race/ethnicity, including subthemes of *mitigation* and *encouragement*, finding that encouragement dynamics were related to higher meaning making.

Conclusion: Our discussion centers on the value of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how the meaning of race/ethnicity is silenced or encouraged, and to reveal how master narratives perpetuating racial inequality may be disrupted.

1 | Introduction

Systemic racism in the United States (U.S.) profoundly shapes emerging adults' experiences with race/ethnicity,¹ including how these complex and multifaceted issues are discussed with others and inform personality (Moffitt et al. 2024). *Master narratives*, or the dominant stories within a culture that individuals interact with as they develop their own stories and identities, play a significant role in this process, as they reflect the views of the dominant group and generally uphold an unequal racial hierarchy (Hammack 2010; Syed and McLean 2022). *Color-evasion*,² or the view that race/ethnicity should not be discussed, that all people are equal, and that racism is in the past, is an ideology that shapes master narratives about race/ethnicity in the United States (e.g., narratives of racial progress; Richeson 2020; Rogers, Niwa, et al. 2021). Color-evasion encourages silence and

denial of racism, which serves to uphold racism by obscuring its existence (Bonilla-Silva 2018).

These systemic processes can be observed at the individual level by examining *meaning making* about racial/ethnic experiences. Meaning making can provide insight into how emerging adults negotiate identity, a core feature of personality, while being influenced by and in turn either upholding or resisting broader cultural forces. What this looks like can vary across contexts; however, even at the individual and interpersonal levels. Indeed, past research finds that individuals engage with master narratives differently across personal and relational contexts, with each providing distinct insights into how sociocultural experiences are interpreted and integrated into identity (Bamberg 1997; Korobov and Thorne 2007; McLean et al. 2017). Building on this research, we use a

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master narrative framework and a *mixed methods approach* to examine how emerging adult friend-pairs make meaning of racial/ethnic experiences. We focus on how narrative context, composition of friend-pairs, and conversation dynamics shape meaning making to reveal how dominant conceptions of race/ethnicity are reproduced or challenged.

1.1 | Studying Narrative Identity in Context

Meaning making is a process capturing the extent to which individuals connect an experience to their understanding of themselves and/or the social world (Bruner 1990; McLean and Pratt 2006). This process is rooted within the *narrative identity approach*, a theoretical framework that, drawing on Erikson's (1980) psychosocial theory, views identity as a developmental process progressing toward enhanced integration (McAdams 1995). The construct of *narrative identity* is a component of personality in which identity is viewed as both developing via storytelling activity and that identity takes the form of a story; it is this psychosocial and storied representation of the self over time that provides one with some degree of self-continuity (McAdams and Pals 2006). Foundational research finds that a core dimension of narrative identity is autobiographical reasoning, or the extent to which one interprets and reflects on their experiences to achieve greater self-understanding (McLean et al. 2020). Meaning making is a distinct form of autobiographical reasoning, which captures novel insights about the self that reveal identity development or change. Emerging adulthood is an important period for this process, as individuals are actively engaged in identity exploration (Arnett 2004), including interpreting racialized experiences (Mitchell et al. 2018; Rosario et al. 2024). Thus, our study is situated in the realm of narrative identity and seeks to elucidate meaningful variations in this component of personality based on sociocultural context.

Identity develops as people construct narratives about their experiences, which are, in turn, shaped by the contexts in which they are narrated (Bruner 1990; McLean et al. 2007; Thorne and McLean 2003). For emerging adults, racial/ethnic experiences can take on different meanings depending on whether they are reflecting alone or talking with a friend, likely because each context carries its own unique goals and expectations (e.g., Chung et al. 2024). For example, an emerging adult might personally reflect on a racialized experience in a direct and emotionally honest way but soften or downplay the same experience when sharing it with a friend to maintain harmony or avoid discomfort. Thus, macro-level ideologies regarding race/ethnicity are not distal to everyday life but are present and shape individual and micro-level experiences, such as conversations with peers (Rogers, Rosario, et al. 2021). In line with the master narrative framework, it is macro-level forces, including the deeply rooted systems of racism and white supremacy, which dictate color-evasive views regarding whether and how race/ethnicity should be addressed at the micro-level of conversations (Hammack 2010; Syed and McLean 2022).³ Examining narratives across contexts and exploring specific dynamics of conversations in relation to meaning making can illuminate how young people negotiate dominant cultural views of race/ethnicity and how this might contribute to identity.

1.2 | Examining Variations in Meaning Making

Color-evasive ideology informs how individuals talk and think about race/ethnicity, reflecting the ways in which macro-level forces necessarily shape and are shaped by daily experiences and interactions at the micro-level (Rogers, Rosario, et al. 2021). The extent to which individuals conform to dominant color-evasive views and whether this impacts meaning making can be revealed in part through examining narratives about race/ethnicity across personal (i.e., written) and relational (i.e., spoken) contexts (Rogers, Niwa, et al. 2021). Although most narrative identity research is the stuff of *big stories* (life narratives often gathered through interviews or written prompts; Adler et al. 2017), *small stories* (brief interactional narratives that are likely to arise in conversation; Bamberg 2004) afford distinct opportunities for identity work (see Breen et al. 2021). For example, written “big” stories (e.g., narrating a moment of racial/ethnic awareness) provide space for deep reflection, whereas spoken “small” stories (e.g., short back-and-forth exchanges about race/ethnicity) enable greater co-construction of the self with others (McLean et al. 2007). Small stories are thus well-suited for revealing how interpersonal dynamics reflect active, *in the moment*, positioning in relation to master narratives, offering critical insight into sociocultural experiences. For example, in one study examining gender narratives across contexts, McLean et al. (2017) found that written narratives often centered gender equality, whereas spoken narratives shared between emerging adult peers tended to reflect traditional gender norms. This work shows that narrative context matters for how emerging adults make sense of sociocultural experiences in relation to dominant views. Thus, examining variations in meaning making across contexts can illuminate how meaning of race/ethnicity is navigated and shaped by systemic inequality.

In addition to narrative context, meaning making of race/ethnicity might vary based on micro-level dynamics of conversations, which can reveal how young people reproduce and challenge color-evasive ideology (Rogers, Niwa, et al. 2021). Past research has assessed variations in the content of racial/ethnic conversations, or *what* events are discussed (e.g., positive connection to culture) and their structure (Moffitt and Syed 2021), but less work has examined specific *conversation dynamics* capturing *how* talk unfolds. These dynamics are important because they can shape opportunities for meaning making, providing insight into how speakers situate themselves in relation to each other and dominant cultural discourse (Thorne and McLean 2003).

One dynamic that might be especially relevant in emerging adult conversations about group experiences is *mitigation*—a set of rhetorical devices that downplay knowledge and emotional investment by casting the speaker as detached, relaxed, uncertain, or distracted (Brown and Levinson 1978). Mitigation often arises when a topic is perceived as relationally risky and reflects what Goffman (1967) termed “gauging,” or adjusting one's position in relation to the listener. Korobov and Thorne (2007) identified several forms of mitigation in their study of romantic problem talk among adolescent friend-dyads, finding these dynamics helped youth discuss challenges without fear of judgment. Mitigation fosters emotional comfort and enables youth to discuss topics in

a carefree way. But discussing race/ethnicity can evoke complex and deeply rooted emotional responses, especially in relation to systemic injustice (Moffitt et al. 2024; Rivas-Drake and Umaña-Taylor 2019; Tatum 1992). Consequently, mitigation might detract from meaning making of race/ethnicity through reinforcing color-evasive ideology. Indeed, van Dijk (1992) found that in public discourse about ethnic relations, mitigation contributed to the denial of racism by attenuating the impact of racist experiences.

In addition to examining mitigation, we were also interested in whether emerging adults resisted color-evasive ideology by *encouraging* conversation about race/ethnicity. Prior research has conceptualized encouragement through scaffolding, or phrases that prompt speakers to elaborate (e.g., Bird and Reese 2006). For example, McLean and Jennings (2012) examined forms of scaffolding (e.g., *elaborative questions*) in conversations about personal memories among adolescents, finding scaffolding related positively to narrative meaning making. Similarly, Moffitt and Syed (2021) noted that positive scaffolding (“uh huh,” “oh”) encouraged discussion of race/ethnicity among emerging adult friend-pairs.⁴ Notably, scaffolding in the latter study was constrained by the segregated experiences of white youth, which limited their ability or willingness to discuss race/ethnicity. Growing scholarship finds white youth are taught to avoid race/ethnicity, whereas youth of color are encouraged to recognize and engage with these domains (Abaied and Perry 2021; McLean et al. 2025; Satterthwaite-Freiman and Umaña-Taylor 2023; Umaña-Taylor and Hill 2020). As such, the way young people contribute to conversations about race/ethnicity might also differ depending on their social positionality.

1.3 | The Role of Social Positionality

Emerging adults' understanding of their experiences is a key component of their identity, and is shaped by intersecting systems of oppression, including racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1991; Rogers, Rosario, et al. 2021). Exploring how emerging adults make meaning of identity-related experiences can reveal how macro-level systemic forces operate at the micro-level (Settles and Buchanan 2014; Westberg et al. 2024). Although research in this area remains limited, there is growing evidence that this process differs based on minoritized group membership. For example, McLean et al. (2018) found that individuals with minoritized racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities provided more elaborated written narratives about deviating from cultural norms than those with non-minoritized identities. Further, Moffitt et al. (2024) examined conversations about race around the 2020 U.S. election, finding that racially minoritized emerging adults made more connections to the self when reflecting on sociopolitical events than white emerging adults. Youth with structural advantages might dissociate race/ethnicity from their self-understanding and sustain the belief that these domains are irrelevant to identity, thereby minimizing their own role within systemic racism and allowing it to persist unchallenged (Bonilla-Silva 2018). This might also occur among men of color who may emphasize their privileged male identity over their minoritized race/ethnicity (Rogers et al. 2025). In contrast, women, especially women of color, who are well-represented in our study, are typically more attuned to how racism and sexism shape their identity, with past work finding that they often draw on their own experiences to illustrate connections between race/ethnicity and

gender and provide more negative stories about these domains relative to men (Juan et al. 2016; Westberg et al. 2024). In sum, it is likely that those from minoritized racial/ethnic groups and women will engage in higher levels of meaning making in racial/ethnic conversations. Examining these differences can illuminate the contextual challenges of meaning making and when meaning persists despite dominant color-evasive views.

1.4 | The Present Study

In this preregistered study, we use an *embedded mixed methods design*, with the quantitative analyses treated as primary (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017), to examine variations in meaning making based on (1) narrative context, (2) the composition of emerging adult friend-pairs, and (3) the dynamics of racial/ethnic conversations. Our approach sheds light on the contextual features that support or limit meaning making of racial/ethnic identity and the specific conversation dynamics through which this process unfolds. Additionally, through considering how meaning making differs based on racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs, we address questions about how social position shapes reflection and dialog.

We focus on friends because peers are a crucial source of racial/ethnic socialization during emerging adulthood who provide unique insight into racial/ethnic identity (Wang and Lin 2023). Emerging adult friends might be more likely to discuss ambiguous experiences about race/ethnicity requiring co-navigation (Bamberg 2004). Investigating dynamics of mitigation and encouragement can reveal how opportunities for meaning making vary when emerging adults talk with friends. In sum, our mixed method analysis reveals how meaning of race/ethnicity is silenced or encouraged, thereby uncovering ways master narratives that perpetuate racial inequality are reinforced or disrupted. In so doing, we aim to clarify connections between micro-level interactions about race/ethnicity and macro-level systems of racism and inequality. Our investigation is guided by three research questions listed below. Analyses of racial/ethnic differences were preregistered; analyses involving gender were added later based on theoretical considerations suggesting that gender would also be relevant.

1. Does meaning making vary across written and spoken narratives about race/ethnicity and based on racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs?
2. What conversation dynamics manifest within discussions about race/ethnicity and how do they vary based on the racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs?
3. Does meaning making in spoken narratives about race/ethnicity vary based on conversation dynamics?

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants and Procedure

Participants were drawn from the Ethnicity and Friends study, which took place at a large university in the U.S. Midwest in 2009–2010. Recruitment occurred through flyers

posted online and around campus. Target participants needed to be at least 18 years of age and able to bring a friend within 2 years of age who was not currently in college.⁵ To ensure representation of racial/ethnic minorities, no more than 25% of the target participants in the planned sample of 100 friend-pairs could identify as white (the friend the target participant brought with them was not restricted). Quotas were tracked by target participants, with the full sample identifying as 63% racial/ethnic minorities and 37% white, reflecting intentional oversampling relative to the 78% white campus. The full sample included 107 friend-pairs ($N = 214$ individuals; 56% women, 86% U.S.-born; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.39$, $SD = 2.25$), 88% of whom were enrolled in a 4-year college. The first author manually coded race/ethnicity into five categories using participants' open-ended responses, identifying 85 Asian American, 83 white, 26 Multiracial, 12 Black/African American, 4 Latine, 3 Native/Indigenous, and 1 unreported participant. This information was used to determine that participants included both racial/ethnic minoritized ($n = 51$), racial/ethnic minoritized and white (i.e., *mixed*; $n = 32$), and both white friend-pairs ($n = 24$).⁶ Notably, because Multiracial participants identified with one or more racial/ethnic minoritized groups, we categorized them as racial/ethnic minoritized. Participants were not asked to recruit same-gender friends, yielding 43 women, 33 woman-man, and 29 men friend-pairs, with two unreported participants. Racial/ethnic composition and relationship closeness did not vary based on gender composition of friend-pairs (see Moffitt and Syed 2021). White pairs reported higher relationship closeness ($M = 5.99$, $SD = 0.64$) relative to racial/ethnic minoritized pairs ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 0.96$), $F(2, 67) = 3.69$, $p = 0.03$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$. Mixed pairs ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 0.94$) did not differ significantly from either group. Relationship closeness was assessed by averaging two items rated from 1 (Not at all close) to 7 (Extremely close), asking participants how close they were to their friend relative to (1) all their other relationships and (2) what they know about others' relationships ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 0.99$, range = 3–7). Friend-pairs completed an online survey in a research lab on campus, containing measures of identity and health. On the survey, participants responded to the following prompt, adapted from Syed and Azmitia (2008):

Please describe a particular time in your life, either positive or negative, when you felt aware of your race/ethnicity. Tell us how old you were when this happened, where you were, whom you were with, what happened, and how you reacted. Include details that would help us see and feel as you did.

After the survey, friend-pairs moved to a simulated living room where they engaged in a 10-min “catch-up” conversation (Thorne et al. 2007). Participants were told they could discuss whatever they wanted, with no further instructions, and then the research assistant left the room. This was done to capture spontaneous conversations about race/ethnicity, which we anticipated would arise due to the content of the survey, and can provide enhanced insight into racial/ethnic identity (Mayukha et al. 2025). Conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants each received a \$15 honorarium.

2.2 | Deriving Spoken Racial/Ethnic Narratives

Given that conversations were not all about race/ethnicity, analytic subsamples were drawn from the full sample using a comprehensive two-step process, which took 2 months to complete. Analyses were preregistered unless otherwise specified. In step one, the lead author and three trained coders highlighted when race/ethnicity was mentioned in the transcripts based on agreed-upon key terms including: race, ethnicity, nationality, and specific racial/ethnic groups, recording the frequency of mentions in a spreadsheet. Coders also noted terms related to language, religion, and culture, which were discussed and resolved during coding meetings to ensure relevance to race/ethnicity (coding criteria: https://osf.io/nrupq/overview?view_only=5e7fc085cc6b4d44ba418f0f3fd5ae67). Through weekly discussions of independently coded batches, we agreed that 70 friend-pairs ($N = 140$; 51% women, 67% U.S.-born; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.50$, $SD = 2.50$) mentioned race/ethnicity at least once, identifying 1443 total mentions across transcripts. The first author reviewed all mentions of race/ethnicity in the transcripts to delineate the start and end of each exchange, identifying 283 racial/ethnic conversations. This first subsample of participants who mentioned race/ethnicity included 31 racial/ethnic minoritized, 21 mixed, and 18 white dyads. Mentions of race/ethnicity in conversations and whether the event described in the written narrative was shared in conversation did not vary by racial/ethnic or gender composition of friend-pairs (see Table S2). Although not preregistered, we also found that relationship closeness was unrelated to whether race/ethnicity was mentioned or the event described in the written narrative was shared in conversation (see Table S2). This analytic subsample was used for the thematic analysis of conversation dynamics.

In the second step, the first author determined what conversations qualified as spoken narratives. Consistent with past research, spoken narratives were defined as a specific conflict or plot that is set in time (Coates 2003; Thorne et al. 2007). To capture this, we used a coding system for *specificity* (adapted from Blagov et al. 2022; Blagov and Singer 2004; Singer et al. 2007), which captures the extent to which the narrator describes the cause and/or circumstances of the main conflict/plot as being: 1 = Very general recurring event, 2 = Memory grounded in time, 3 = Finite event but not described in play-by-play, or 4 = Very specific, clear details and context. Conversations that received a score of ‘1’ were not considered spoken narratives and were excluded from the second subsample. Based on coding conducted by the first author, 54 friend-pairs ($N = 108$; 54% women, 72% U.S.-born; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.30$, $SD = 2.40$) evinced a total of 144 spoken racial/ethnic narratives across transcripts. Participants in this second subsample included 21 racial/ethnic minoritized, 17 mixed, and 16 white dyads.⁷ Of these participants, 34% retold the same story in conversation as they shared in the online survey. This second analytic subsample was used for all analyses involving the theme of meaning making.

2.3 | Quantitative Analysis Plan

Analyses were conducted in R (version 4.3.1) using RStudio, with data cleaning and visualization performed using *dplyr*

and *tidyr* (Wickham et al. 2023, 2024), and statistical modeling conducted using *lavaan* (Rosseel 2012). Interrater reliability, descriptive statistics, standardized coefficients, and effect sizes were computed using the *irr*, *psych*, *lm.beta*, and *effsize* packages (Gamer et al. 2019; Revelle 2024; Stanley 2021). In pursuit of research question 1 (*does meaning making vary across written and spoken narratives and based on racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs*), we quantified meaning making within written and spoken narratives about racial/ethnic experiences. Based on past research (Lilgendahl et al. 2013), meaning making was coded using a three-point scale including: 1 = No explanation about meaning of event, 2 = Some growth or change in self but specifics of change are unclear, and 3 = Narrator gleaned specific insight from the event that applies to broader areas of their life. Higher scores were indicative of greater meaning making. Only participants in the second subsample, who told at least one spoken racial/ethnic narrative during their conversation, were included in this analysis. Following conventions in the published literature (Adler et al. 2017), a trained research assistant coded 25% of the spoken narratives and 65% of the written narratives for meaning making to establish interrater reliability (ICCs = 0.70 written, 0.93 spoken). The research assistant was trained via a 1-h meeting with the first author in which the theme was reviewed in-depth. They then coded two practice batches over the course of two weeks, containing ~60 narratives from a separate project, before coding the present study narratives. To determine whether meaning making varied based on narrative context (written vs. spoken), we used a dependent sample *t*-test at the participant level. In addition, we used a one-way ANOVA at the pair level to determine whether average levels of meaning making in spoken narratives varied based on racial/ethnic composition of friend-pairs. If the ANOVA indicated a difference at $p < 0.05$, we report results of Tukey's HSD.

2.4 | Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis Plan

To address research question 2 (*what conversation dynamics manifest within discussions about race/ethnicity and how they vary based on racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs*), we conducted a theoretically driven thematic analysis of conversation dynamics, focusing on the higher-order dynamics of mitigation and encouragement. Each higher-order dynamic comprised multiple subthemes, which were coded at the phrase-level in a non-mutually exclusive fashion (i.e., phrases could contain multiple subthemes). Based on past research (McLean and Jennings 2012; Moffitt and Syed 2021), preregistered subthemes of encouragement included *asks about race/ethnicity*, *asks for details*, *positive scaffolding*, and *open to education or shifting perspectives*. During our thematic analysis, the last subtheme was further differentiated into two distinct forms: *solicits input* and *offers education* and we identified the additional subtheme of *offers racial/ethnic narrative*, which captured when youth spontaneously narrated a racial/ethnic experience. In contrast, the preregistered subthemes of mitigation included *changes topic from race/ethnicity*, *humor*, *idiomatic expressions* (e.g., “whatever”, “that’s cool”), *casual ignorance* (e.g., “I don’t even know”), *systematic vagueness* (i.e., nonspecific descriptors or fillers) and *displacement* (i.e., temporarily directing attention to something unrelated in the physical space; Korobov and Thorne 2007). Our thematic analysis yielded two additional mitigation subthemes

including *avoids responding* and *expresses prejudice* (see Table 1). Frequencies of each subtheme within each conversation were tallied to produce a single score of mitigation and a single score of encouragement for each participant. A coding manual describing these subthemes was developed by the first author, who initially reviewed 10% of the conversations and documented examples of each subtheme. This manual included the preregistered subthemes, which were reflexively refined throughout coding, and broadened to include the additional subthemes noted above. The first author coded 25% of the conversations for subthemes with two trained research assistants. Prior to coding, research assistants read the preregistration and Korobov and Thorne (2007), before attending a two-hour training with the first author to discuss the subthemes and practice coding with three randomly selected transcripts. After training, coders met weekly to discuss coding discrepancies and achieve consensus. Using the master coder approach, the first author then coded the remainder of conversations independently and her codes were used in all analyses (Syed and Nelson 2015). Conversation transcripts were detailed and typically included markers of tone, such as laughter, allowing coders to interpret conversational context without regularly consulting the audio files. Although audio files were available to coders, they were reviewed only as needed and used during coding meetings to help resolve discrepancies.

Regarding the quantitative analyses for research question 2, we first examined whether conversation dynamics varied by the racial/ethnic and gender composition of the dyad. We aggregated scores across subthemes for one total score of encouragement and one total score of mitigation for each participant. Scores for each theme ranged from 0 to 3+, leading us to conduct one-way ANOVAs with Tukey's HSD used to identify differences at $p < 0.05$. To address research question 3 (*does meaning making in spoken narratives about race/ethnicity vary based on conversation dynamics*), we used multiple regression models to examine whether meaning making related to aggregated subthemes of mitigation and encouragement, while controlling for racial/ethnic and gender composition of the dyad and length of conversations. Length of conversations was obtained by calculating the number of lines within each spoken narrative and then averaging across narratives shared within each friend-pair ($M = 18.78$, $SD = 13.44$, range = 6.67–55). We present qualitative case examples to demonstrate variations in meaning making based on conversation dynamics.

2.5 | Researcher Positionality

Our author team includes one Chicana cisgender woman, two white cisgender women, and one Mixed-Race cisgender man, all with extensive experience using qualitative and quantitative methods to study racial/ethnic identity among adolescents and emerging adults. Our scholarly expertise on racial/ethnic identity and systemic inequality, together with our focus on addressing structural inequities through the lens of personality and developmental psychology and our diverse lived experiences, informed all analyses. Despite the myriad differences in our positionalities, a unifying thread is our commitment to anti-racism, including in our scholarship. For example, we began with the assumption, grounded in past research, that

TABLE 1 | Conversation dynamics with frequencies and examples.

	Frequency (Proportion)	Description	Example
Encouragement			
Positive scaffolding	364 (52%)	Participant provides positive feedback and scaffolding to the other person to encourage them to continue speaking.	F1: There were so many other people in the room but we ended up talking to each other. And I think it was because, you know, for me, I found that Asian girl. F2: <i>Oh yeah.</i> F1: Like she'll relate to me, you know F2: – <i>Yup.</i> F1: – She won't think I'm weird. F2: – <i>I'm the same way.</i> F1: <i>I just talked about umm, entering grad school and being the only person of color in my cohort and how I was kinda—</i> F2: Uh huh— F1: <i>I was surprised by it, but I was appalled! I was really upset about it, I'm like I cannot believe like of all the candidates they had and um I mean the [redacted] is a very prestigious you know school, especially for the program I'm in and to be the only person of color like I mean in a way I should feel glad about it but I'm angry at the same time.</i> F1: <i>When, when do you feel most, like something, most aware of your race or ethnicity?</i> F2: I just said the time I went to like the Black Student Union meeting, and I just felt awkward. F1: If I chose to live the American way of life and left the Hmong culture completely then yeah you do feel bad about leaving the Hmong culture because you're— F2: <i>Do you think you feel bad?</i> F1: Not that you feel bad but it's like, you, something's missing. F1: Took me forever to think of whether certain groups were interrelated. F2: Yeah no same, same. F1: I was—I didn't know. F2: <i>I mean I think they kind of have to be though, right?</i> Like, I don't know. <i>All of mine were at least.</i> F1: And it's like, and then people complain about how there are not enough umm, people of color in like professional roles and you're like— F2: (laughs)— F1: <i>Well, there is a systematic reason for that you know—</i>
Offers racial/ethnic narrative	77 (52%)	Participant offers a racial/ethnic narrative.	
Asks about race/ethnicity	63 (50%)	Participant asks the other person to share a racial/ethnic narrative.	
Asks for details	100 (46%)	Participant asks the other person questions pertaining to their racial/ethnic narrative.	
Solicits input	82 (42%)	Participant expresses that they are open to multiple perspectives about their racial/ethnic narrative.	
Offers education	41 (38%)	Participant tries to educate the other person about race/ethnicity either through sharing facts or their own experiences.	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

	Frequency (Proportion)	Description	Example
Mitigation			
Systematic vagueness	122 (52%)	Participant uses nonspecific descriptors or fillers.	F1: Like you know how people always talk about oh you know Hmong girls should get married early, and they should become housewives and <i>blah blah</i> and all that! Right! But like for me you know taking Hmong values and American values I'm like well you know I wanna be a good wife one day but I would define that in what my terms of a good wife means. F1: Yeah. Eh—I <i>don't know</i> ! We talk about like movies we don't really talk about, like, I think we talk about race but it's not like— F2: But we're not like— F1: Overtly, it's like— F2: Let's talk about race
Casual ignorance	77 (42%)	Participant expresses casual ignorance about race/ethnicity.	F1: Um, my dad owns a grocery store it was like right down by [redacted] and during Cinco de Mayo they closed off all the streets and it was like, <i>Mexicans, everywhere</i> . F2: (<i>Laughs</i>) F1: (<i>Laughs</i>) F2: <i>MEXICANS! Hahah!</i> F1: Not in like, a bad thing, but—
Humor	79 (40%)	Participant makes fun of the other person or tells jokes to mitigate the importance of race/ethnicity.	F1: She said, um, "I'm sorry for calling you an Asian." F2: (<i>laughs</i>) F1: Like, that's ok, I was like, <i>whatever</i> .
Idiomatic expressions	79 (32%)	Participant uses colloquial expressions to appear nonchalant, thereby diffusing serious aspects of conversation.	F1: A lot, a lot of people I work with are like, Caucasian or something. In the psychology department anyways. Um. So yea, we'll see, we'll see, you know, maybe ah, maybe it'll help me out in applying to graduate school you know? (<i>sighs</i>) Boy. F2: <i>What else?</i> — F1: <i>Oh yea, uh, State Fair?</i>
Changes topic from race/ethnicity	22 (20%)	Participant completely changes the topic away from race/ethnicity.	F1: <i>I saw a lot of 'em there. Yeah they're at Walgreens.</i> F2: Oh, I think they're Hmong though. F1: <i>They're Asian.</i> F2: True. Normally when I go there, I don't see Asians. F1: Hm. <i>Do you dislike Hmong?</i> F2: <i>Neutral</i> . What about you? (<i>laughs</i>) F1: <i>I don't really care</i> . So are you excited to go back to salsa dancing? Or can you still?—
Expresses prejudice	24 (14%)	Participant expresses prejudice in a way that undercuts the significance of race/ethnicity.	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Frequency (Proportion)	Description	Example
Displacement 16 (12%)	Participant temporarily brings attention to something unrelated in the physical space to diffuse the seriousness of the conversation.	F1: And yeah. So, I was going to the Washington Convention Center and there were groups of people outside chanting you know, chanting racist stuff to Jews — F2: (laughs) F1: And it was like, goood job. If you wanna piss me off. F2: Yeah. (laughs) F1: It's actually kind of humorous. F2: Yeah. F1: In a way, yeah. Upsetting in a way, humorous whatever. F2: Yeah. <i>Dude, I wish I had the, like an office up here. It's a pretty sweet view of the river.</i>
Avoids responding 9 (0.08%)	Participant avoids responding or does not address an issue raised in conversation.	F1: Were you really, did you write a thing about your life, a really personal thing, or did you just write whatever? F2: I wrote something about my life. F1: Aw, I wanna know. F2: <i>Aw, too bad.</i> (laughs).

Note: Subsample 2 was used to calculate frequencies ($N = 108$). Frequency reflects the total number of times a conversation dynamic occurred across racial/ethnic narratives, and percentage indicates the proportion of participants who exhibited that dynamic at least once. Each excerpt could include multiple subthemes, but only the subtheme being highlighted is italicized.

color-evasion governs conversations about race/ethnicity and that racism functions as a macro- and micro-level force shaping these experiences. While these perspectives are supported by substantial scholarship, we acknowledge that they reflect a particular stance toward the data that both strengthens and biases our investigation. We prioritized rigor and reflexivity throughout the analysis, recognizing that our positionality shaped our approach to examining the written and spoken narratives of race/ethnicity.⁸ The thematic coding team included the first author and two undergraduates, identifying as one East Asian cisgender woman and one South Asian cisgender woman. They were trained to code with consideration of color-evasion and it was through our meetings, and consulting with the other authors, that we refined the analytic subthemes.

3 | Results and Discussion

In this embedded mixed-methods study, we integrated quantitative and qualitative analyses to reveal differences in meaning making of racial/ethnic identity across written and spoken narratives as well as based on friend-pair identity composition and dynamics of friend conversations about these domains. Our quantitative analysis of meaning making motivated our qualitative analysis of conversation dynamics, which provide insight into how meaning unfolds in conversations. For each research question, we first present the quantitative findings, followed by qualitative case studies that serve as interpretive anchors. Throughout our analysis, we emphasize how color-evasive ideology surfaced, advancing understanding of how young people negotiate meaning amid dominant cultural views. To ensure our conclusions are grounded in young people's experiences, we present an integrated Results and Discussion section, followed by a Conclusion, highlighting the contributions of the study.

3.1 | Meaning Making Across Contexts

Addressing research question 1, we found that meaning making of racial/ethnic identity was higher in written narratives ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 0.83$) relative to spoken narratives ($M = 1.44$; $SD = 0.54$), $t(104) = 6.65$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.78], $d = 0.89$ (Figure 1). Notably, meaning making across the two narrative contexts was not correlated ($r = 0.10$, $p = 0.28$), suggesting young people engage these tasks differently. Meaning making in written and spoken narratives did not vary based on participant race/ethnicity or gender, or on the racial/ethnic or gender composition of the friend-pair (Table S3) and was unrelated to relationship closeness ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.46$). Although conversations are important sites for the co-construction of meaning (e.g., Fivush et al. 2011; Pasupathi et al. 2022), our results are consistent with past work showing that dominant norms are salient in relational contexts and instill unspoken rules of how conversations and storytelling should progress (Delker et al. 2020; McLean et al. 2017; Thorne and McLean 2003). Moreover, our findings suggest that dominant ways of discussing race/ethnicity, including color-evasion, might override even the racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs in shaping levels of meaning making how the conversation unfolds. The influence of color-evasion

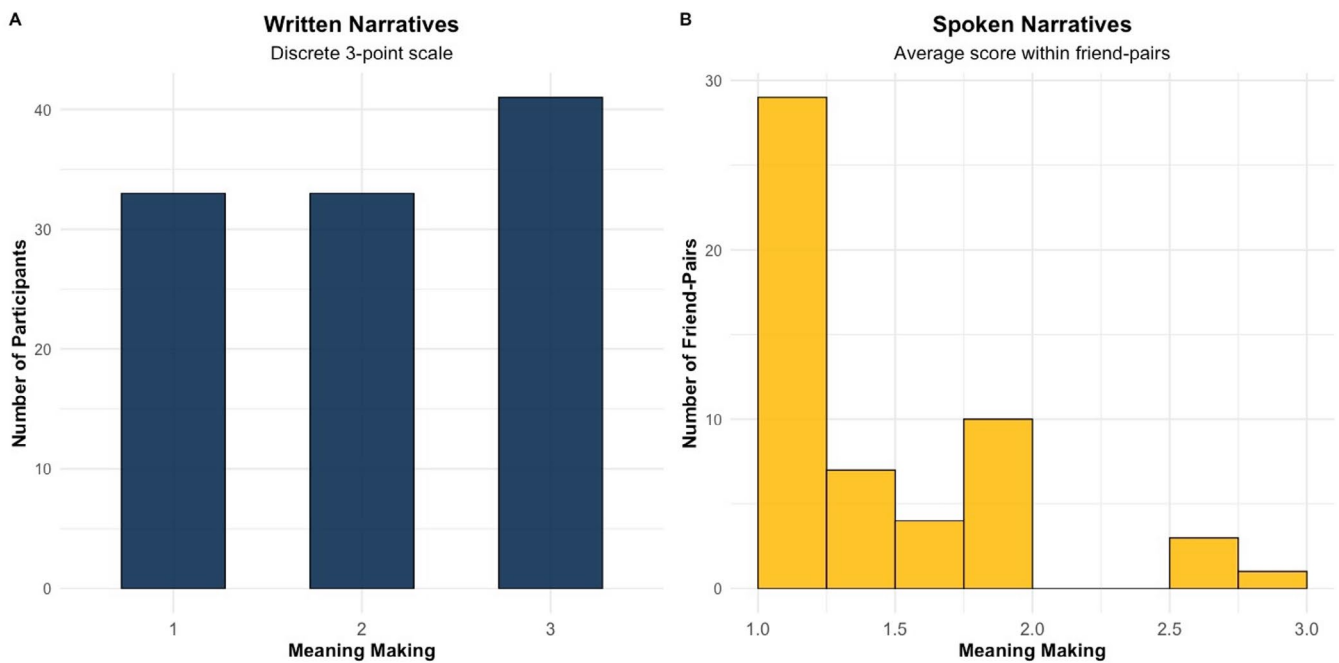


FIGURE 1 | Meaning making across written and spoken narratives. Note. Written meaning making scores were coded on a 3-point scale and displayed as the number of participants at each score. Spoken meaning making scores were coded on the same 3-point scale, averaged within friend-pairs, and displayed as the number of friend-pairs at each average score using a histogram.

may be especially strong in the predominantly white and Asian American context in which data were collected. White emerging adults are typically taught to minimize the impact of race/ethnicity (Abaied and Perry 2021; Bonilla-Silva 2018; McLean et al. 2025), whereas Asian American emerging adults are generally treated as model minorities and experience a high degree of pressure to conform to dominant group expectations (Mitchell et al. 2018). Thus, racial/ethnic minoritized emerging adults in this context may be accustomed to minimizing race/ethnicity and racism even when they are relevant to their experiences.

To explore this process in greater depth, we turn to the conversation between Samuel, a Nigerian/Ghanaian man, and Carmen, a Dominican woman, which was characterized by low meaning making and highlights how color-evasion can permeate conversations between two racially minoritized individuals.⁹

Carmen: Whatever, what did you say about the time that you noticed your race?

Samuel: Huh—

Carmen: What, what story did you say for the time that you noticed your race?

Samuel: Uh, the time I went to Africa.

Carmen: You had to go all the way over there to notice your race. (laughs)

Samuel: (laughs) Yeah, I said, but I said, I said it was a positive experience.

Carmen: That's good.

Samuel: Yeah so, how about you?

Carmen: I put when I went to junior high, I didn't know I was Black until I got to junior high, I don't know (yawning) I really didn't think about it

Samuel: Hmm

Carmen: (yawns)

Samuel: So, what you wanna do when we, when we get outta here?

Carmen prompts Samuel to share his story, and when he references his trip to Africa, Carmen responds with humor. However, in writing, we see that Samuel describes this event as meaningful and identity affirming.

My Family took a trip to Africa (Nigeria and Ghana). There I became more aware of my traditional background and my parents upbringing. My surroundings were much more different than [U.S. state]. There were much more people that looked like me. It made me proud to have roots coming from these countries and I embraced the experience. I was excited to experience as much as I could within my limited time period. I went to the beach, ate various foods, interacted with the people and made connections to the environment. I felt amazing. It was good to be in such a different environment. Yes, I am proud to say I am Nigerian/Ghanaian.

Despite the high-level of personal meaning in his written narrative, in conversation, Carmen's teasing deflects attention away

from the significance of the event. While Samuel briefly asserts that the experience was positive, he does not elaborate or connect it to deeper identity processing as he did in writing. When the focus turns to Carmen, she summarizes her experience quickly. She does not elaborate or explore its meaning, instead she changes the subject, demonstrating low engagement with the topic. This conversation provides some evidence that the person who mitigates can gain greater control over the conversation, perhaps because their stance aligns with dominant color-evasive ideology. Again, in this case, Carmen's written narrative tells a different story.

It was when my best friend at the time, Emma (who is white) was sitting at the cafeteria and we had just switched over to junior high from elementary school. I saw her sitting with all these white people that I didn't know then I saw some other girl, Cassie, from my elementary school. Cassie (who is Colombian) and I never really talked but for some reason I went and sat with her and all the other Latino kids. I just stopped being friends with Emma and for two years I hung out with mostly Latino and Black people. I felt shocked because I didn't know that I wasn't white and I didn't know that it mattered so much until there were other Black and Brown people around me. On some level it made me embrace my ethnicity and not be so ignorant of who I am and what other people saw when they looked at me.

The absence of meaning in this conversation contrasts with the written narratives, which contained rich reflections on belonging and identity development. We identified a similar pattern in the conversation between Michelle, a Chinese/Japanese woman, and Liz, a white woman, who also engaged in low meaning making.

Michelle: I talked about Chinese New Year at um the Chinese American student association party—

Liz: At [redacted]?

Michelle: Yeah—

Liz: With the chopsticks and the forks? That—

Michelle: (laughs) I actually didn't talk about that—

Liz: (laughs) Oh my god, you should have mentioned that—

Michelle: But that's really funny—

Liz: You should have put that—

Michelle: How the white people got the forks and all the Asians got chopsticks—

Liz: I know, I would have been sooo offended

Michelle: (laughs)

Liz: But then I would have got over it. Actually, I'm not too bad at chopsticks. It took years of practice—

Michelle: Ok—

Liz: But I'm a pro—

Michelle: Yeah, I'm a pro at using a fork so it's all good.

Liz: I don't believe that for a second (laughs).

Michelle: (laughs) What do you have going on after this?

Michelle initiates the conversation about race/ethnicity by referencing a Chinese New Year event that she attended. Rather than exploring the significance of this experience, the conversation shifts toward humor. Liz makes light of the event by focusing on the use of chopsticks and forks, a racialized observation that trivializes the moment and redirects the tone away from deeper reflection. Michelle participates in the joking but soon changes the subject, which could signal a desire to move away from the racialized topic that has become a source of humor rather than meaning. Michelle's written narrative about the same event offers a stark contrast.

The Chinese American Student Association threw their annual Chinese New Year Party. It was a fun celebration but I felt a little "white-washed." I look Asian but was raised in a White America so I'm only semi-Asian. I know that I am American. I get used to being a little ignorant of my own heritage. It's always fun to go to these cultural events. Despite sometimes feeling like I do not fully belong to America nor Asia, experiences like these help me feel proud of being different. In the end, I am very proud of my heritage even though at times I do not know as much about it as I should.

Here, Michelle reflects on the complexities of navigating a bicultural identity, articulating both pride in her heritage and insecurity about her cultural knowledge. Notably, we see that Michelle considers what it means to be Asian in white America, a topic relevant to her conversation with Liz that ultimately goes unexplored. Her personal reflections reveal a high level of meaning that was absent from the conversation. The discrepancy between the written and spoken narratives highlights how conversations may constrain expressions of meaning around race/ethnicity, especially when vulnerability is involved. Indeed, past research shows that individuals prefer stories with positive endings that minimize personal vulnerability (Delker et al. 2020; Thorne and McLean 2003). Racial/ethnic minoritized individuals may sidestep conversations about their identity that risk invalidation or rejection, particularly in discussions with white peers (e.g., Moffitt and Syed 2021). This is likely given that voicing racial/ethnic concerns is often equated with "exaggerating" or "being too sensitive," reactions that uphold an unequal racial hierarchy (Rivas-Drake and Umaña-Taylor 2019, 2). Thus, the qualitative conversation data reveal how racial/ethnic composition may still shape meaning making, even though quantitative differences did not emerge.

In sum, the markedly lower level of engagement with racial/ethnic identity in spoken relative to written narratives suggests that something about the relational context makes discussing these topics more difficult (McLean et al. 2007). Young people may feel trepidation about discussing race/ethnicity, because the topic is emotionally charged and can garner unexpected responses (Tatum 1992), or because they are told, either implicitly or explicitly, to avoid

these discussions (Abaied and Perry 2021; McLean et al. 2025). Conversation dynamics like humor or topic shifting reflect discomfort and can minimize racial/ethnic content, limiting opportunities for meaning and reinforcing color-evasion. To better understand this process, we next used qualitative methods to identify conversation dynamics of mitigation and encouragement and explored whether they related to meaning making.

3.2 | Conversation Dynamics and Meaning Making

Addressing research question 2, we qualitatively identified six subthemes of encouragement and eight subthemes of mitigation (see Table 1). Our quantitative analyses indicated that the mention of encouragement subthemes did not vary based on racial/ethnic or gender composition of friend-pairs and was unrelated to relationship closeness ($r = -0.07$, $p = 0.94$) (see Table S3). Similarly, mitigation subthemes did not differ by racial/ethnic or gender composition of friend-pairs and were unrelated to relationship closeness ($r = 0.02$, $p = 0.82$). These results suggest that, rather than the racial/ethnic or gender composition of friend-pairs or their relationship closeness, conversation dynamics may be most reflective of macro-level systems of inequality that regulate discussions of race/ethnicity (Rogers, Niwa, et al. 2021). That is, friend-pairs occupying different racial/ethnic and gendered social locations may engage in similar levels of mitigation and encouragement because they are navigating shared oppressive forces that consistently constrain how race/ethnicity is discussed.

Addressing research question 3, we found that mitigation was unrelated to meaning making in spoken narratives while accounting for racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs and length of the conversation, $b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.012$, $B = 0.06$, $p = 0.46$. In contrast, conversations with higher levels of encouragement also contained higher levels of meaning making while accounting for these covariates, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.006$, $B = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$ (see Figure 2).¹⁰ To better understand these relations, we turn now to the qualitative case studies. Consistent with past research, we selected conversations representing a range of subthemes. We italicize portions of conversations that represent mitigation and underline portions representing encouragement, noting the specific subtheme in the right margin.

Mitigation played a complex role in conversations about race/ethnicity. If we had relied solely on quantitative analysis, we might have simply noted that mitigation was not related to meaning making and stopped there. Yet, a detailed qualitative analysis tells a different story. Consistent with past research, this rhetorical device sometimes enhanced comfort and fostered meaning (Korobov and Thorne 2007). At the same time, mitigation sometimes undercut the experience being shared and minimized meaning making (van Dijk 1992). The nuanced role of mitigation is evident within the exchange between Amir, an Indian man, and Sharon, a Guyanese woman, who discussed the first time Sharon felt like a minority.

Sharon	I wrote about my first time in [redacted location].	Offers RE narrative
Amir	<i>Oh god!</i> (laughs)	Humor

Sharon	I walked in my school, it was 90% one ethnicity, and I felt...	
Amir	<i>In-white?</i> (laughs)	Humor
Sharon	I felt like a minority for the first time in like...	
Amir	<i>My god! You sound like a drama queen!</i>	Humor
Sharon	(laughs) Heyy! Hey—	
Amir	<i>Hi! You do sound like a drama queen!</i>	Humor
Sharon	It's sad!	
Amir	Okay, I was one of the three Indian kids in my high school!	
Sharon	Yeah, and <u>I never experienced that because I lived in [redacted location] where there's all Guyanese and Spanish and brown people.</u>	Offers education
Amir	<i>Brown people!?</i> (laughs)	Humor
Sharon	I'm serious!	
Amir	<i>Are you brown?</i> (laughs)	Humor
Sharon	Everybody was brown where I lived, and then, I came here and it's just, oh my god.	
Amir	White people. <i>Wow, good for you.</i>	Humor
Sharon	(laughs) I transferred schools at first.	
Amir	<u>Why?</u> I would like to embrace all the cultures <i>and stuff</i> , you get to know more people.	Asks details; Systematic vagueness
Sharon	I was scared.	

Sharon describes moving to a predominantly white area, an experience she frames as difficult. From the outset, Amir mitigates her account, repeatedly making jokes that devalue her experience. By contrasting Sharon's discomfort with how he has navigated majority white spaces, Amir positions his experience as normative and Sharon's as exaggerated. Sharon attempts to reassert the importance of her experience, but also responds with laughter, reflecting how mitigation maintains social harmony while also possibly limiting meaning making.

In contrast, the conversation between Vivian and Anh, two Vietnamese women, demonstrates how encouragement can foster meaning making of racial/ethnic identity. Anh begins by asking

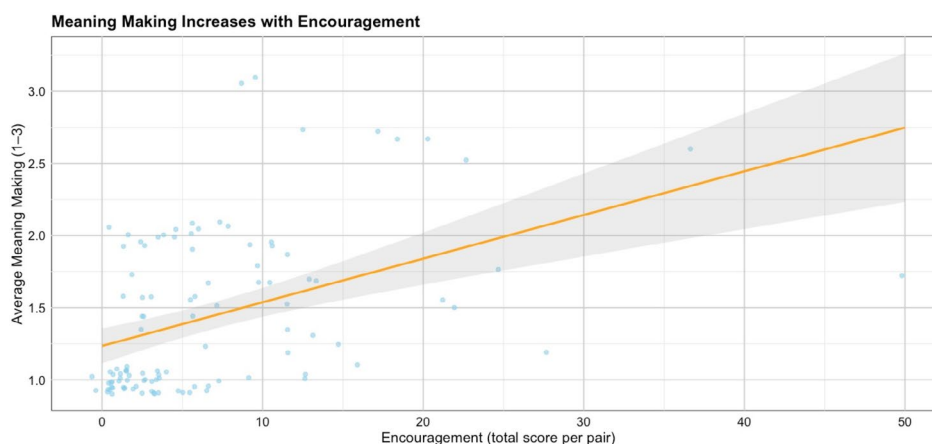


FIGURE 2 | Co-Occurrence of Encouragement and Meaning Making. $N = 108$ participants who evinced at least one spoken narrative about race/ethnicity.

Vivian about the survey, with Vivian saying that the prompt asking for a racial/ethnic event was difficult because, “I couldn’t think of anything.” Anh responds with surprise, noting, “I could think of so many.” Their conversation from here is shown below.

Vivian	Yeah, I don’t think I really like, thought about it in my lifetime. I’m like, I never, I don’t know. I never made my race such a big deal ‘cause I grew up in such a white dominated society that I felt like I fit in.	Casual ignorance
Anh	<u>Really?</u>	Asks details
Vivian	Yeah.	
Anh	<u>‘Cause I grew up in a white school. Guess there was like, um, Black people also but like, I grew up in a white school too. But I think that made me think about it even more.</u>	Offers RE narrative; Systematic vagueness; Offers education
Vivian	<u>Really?</u>	Asks details
Anh	I think I’ve suffered a lot because of it too. Well not necessarily suffered, but struggled. Suffered’s not the right word.	
Vivian	<u>Yeah.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Anh	<u>I dunno, it’s kinda sad. Like just thinking about everything. Like I wrote about, I used to go to bed and I would go to sleep hoping and wishing that I would wake up as a white girl. I wanted to be one of those American girls that had everything. ‘Cause we were really poor.</u>	Casual ignorance; Offers RE narrative

Vivian	<u>Mhmm.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Anh	And like, well, look at all these white people, they have everything. We were really poor, going to garage sales, and coupons and <i>everything like that.</i>	Systematic vagueness
Vivian	<u>Yeah, like in the survey, I was writing about like how I grew up, having just white friends, with like maybe five Asian friends. Then, once you get to college, you join ASU [Asian Student Union] and all I’m around is Asian friends. And I’ve noticed that I’ve gotten closer to all of them than I’ve ever gotten close to any of my white friends.</u>	Positive scaffolding; Offers RE narrative
Anh	It’s ‘cause we can relate.	

Although Vivian begins by engaging in mitigation, expressing casual ignorance about her racial experiences, Anh’s use of encouragement, like asking for details and sharing her racial experience, eventually leads Vivian to share that she has noticed the significance of race in her friendships. Throughout the conversation, Vivian and Anh express a desire to learn from each other, engaging in several forms of encouragement including asking for details, offering education, and positive scaffolding. There is a sense of reciprocity created through the encouragement dynamics that may foster greater meaning in conversation (“It’s ‘cause we can relate”). Interestingly, elements of mitigation (i.e., casual ignorance, systematic vagueness) also appear in the conversation, softening the tone in ways that seemed to make both women more comfortable. Thus, mitigation was paradoxical, both supporting and undermining the process of meaning making. This example highlights that while mitigation alone might shut down deeper engagement and meaning making, mitigation

in tandem with encouragement might be key in fostering meaningful dialog on race-ethnicity related topics among emerging adults.¹¹

Indeed, mitigation and encouragement sometimes worked together to sustain dialog when participants navigated emotional discomfort. This dynamic is evident in the conversation between Kai, a Chinese man, and Jeff, a white man, in which Jeff narrates an experience on a local bus.

Jeff	It was pretty crowded you know... these two African American people got on the bus and they were like ah just talkin' pretty loud you know...	Systematic vagueness
Kai	<u>Yeah.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Jeff	Kinda <i>you know, being obnoxiously loud.</i>	Systematic vagueness; Expresses prejudice
Kai	<u>Okay.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Jeff	And ah... the African American girl said to the guy she was with, she's like, "man look at all these white bitches."	
Kai	<i>Oh! (laughs)</i>	Humor
Jeff	<i>I was like oh my god!</i>	Humor

Here, Kai engages in positive scaffolding to maintain the flow of conversation, even as Jeff mitigates through expressing prejudice. Kai's remark and laughter are a form of humor that diffuses tension to preserve a sense of camaraderie (Korobov and Thorne 2007). Working from this foundation, Kai later offers education about the racial meaning of Jeff's experience.

Kai	For people of color you know, like the African American woman on the bus... what she sees maybe is merely the color of people's skin because she is so exposed to judging by color.	Systematic vagueness; Offers education
Jeff	<u>Yeah.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Kai	<u>So, you might not see her as a Black woman, but she sees everybody as the color they are because that's a central idea of her life... everybody keeps pointing out that what's important about her is the color of her skin, which for a white person it's not.</u>	Offers education

Although Kai's tone is both didactic and invitational, Jeff responds with mitigation through prejudice, remarking that, "when I came down here, I find that it's more the people that were the minorities where I grew up are the ones that are more racist." In response, Kai redirects to the broader significance of race, emphasizing that discrimination makes racial difference more salient for minoritized individuals. As the conversation continues, the interplay of mitigation and encouragement remains evident.

Jeff	Especially in the U.S. we like try to just push race aside. And I don't know. I kind of agree with it just because ah, kinda like you know, ahh the more you tell yourself something is true eventually you believe it. So ahh you ever heard that like—	Casual ignorance; Systematic vagueness
Kai	<u>Yeah!</u>	Positive scaffolding
Jeff	If you keep telling yourself—like <i>I kinda</i> feel that if people keep saying, telling themselves <i>you know</i> that race isn't that important—	Systematic vagueness
Kai	<u>But it is important!</u>	Offers education
Jeff	Well, it's important to—yeah it's important but I'm saying	
Kai	<u>Important yeah.</u>	Offers education
Jeff	Race in terms of distinguishing people apart just by their race—	
Kai	<u>Yeah! Okay.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Jeff	isn't important, and I think if people <i>you know</i> do that eventually it will die out. I mean look at racism like back in like the sixties even <i>or whatever</i> compared to now.	Systematic vagueness; Idiomatic expression
Kai	<u>Yeah.</u>	Positive scaffolding
Jeff	<i>Like ah you know</i> United States adopts this policy of <i>you know</i> don't talk about it and even though it has not been totally successful it's been a lot more successful than previous, previous, <i>ah, I dunno.</i>	Systematic vagueness; Casual ignorance

Kai	That's interesting. <i>Because I think an approach to end racism is exactly the, the opposite (laughs). It's not that you just can't talk about it. You have to talk about it in order to understand where that difference is coming from and to say, I guess it's to know that there's a difference but then not to judge people because of that difference. I don't know if that makes sense.</i>	Humor; Offers education; Solicits input
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Jeff's use of mitigation succinctly and explicitly upholds color-evasive ideology and associated master narratives of racial progress. In contrast, Kai actively resists this discourse, using positive scaffolding to sustain the conversation and ultimately offering education through a counter-narrative. Kai's words resist the notion that race/ethnicity should be ignored. This rich interaction illustrates how, consistent with past research, mitigation arises in challenging conversations and can help provide common ground (Korobov and Thorne 2007). But it can also limit meaning making of race/ethnicity, especially when young people conform to rather than resist the mitigating device. Kai's response is unique because rather than complying with the dominant view, he emphasizes the importance of race/ethnicity and uses mitigation to diffuse tension. This is suggestive of the possibility that person-level characteristics (e.g., socialization experiences; McLean et al. 2025; Moffitt et al. 2026) are relevant to fostering encouragement in the face of mitigation, but that doing so necessitates resistance to social norms. Overall, encouraging dynamics may promote racial/ethnic identity meaning making and perhaps offset some barriers introduced by mitigation dynamics.

4 | Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to advance understanding of the factors that contribute to meaning making of racial/ethnic identity among emerging adults, for whom exploration of these domains is often salient (Mitchell et al. 2018; Rosario et al. 2024). Racial/ethnic identity is a developmental asset that enables emerging adults to maintain healthy functioning, especially in an increasingly pluralistic society like the United States (Rivas-Drake and Umaña-Taylor 2019). Thus, it is important to identify factors that may promote or diminish young people's understanding of this aspect of identity. Using a master narrative framework, we examined how meaning making is situated within the context of narration and how color-evasive ideology is actively negotiated through emerging adults' conversations (Hammack 2010; Syed and McLean 2022). In this way, we were able to contribute to an understanding of racism and color-evasion as macro-level forces that are enacted across micro-level exchanges in ways that can systematically constrain meaning making of racial/ethnic identity (Rogers, Niwa, et al. 2021). We first used quantitative methods to explore how emerging adults engaged in meaning making of racial/ethnic identity across personal (i.e., written) and relational (i.e., spoken) contexts and whether this process

differed based on race/ethnicity and gender. We then used qualitative methods to identify specific conversation dynamics that either encouraged or mitigated discussion of race/ethnicity and explored their relation to meaning making as well as racial/ethnic and gender composition of friend-pairs. Our multi-method approach revealed when emerging adults were likely to engage in meaning making of racial/ethnic identity and the features of interpersonal exchanges that might promote this process.

Extending past research showing that master narratives are especially salient within relational contexts (Bamberg 2004; McLean et al. 2017; Moffitt and Syed 2021), we interpret the lower meaning making in spoken narratives as consistent with the idea that young people must navigate their own and their friend's negotiations with master narratives in real time, whereas written narratives allow more distance from these relational pressures. The difference in meaning making across contexts reflects how conversations are a meeting ground of self and culture, offering a window into how individuals negotiate identity within the boundaries of shared norms (Thorne and McLean 2003). Whereas personal contexts provide space for self-reflection, relational contexts can activate dominant views that minimize discomfort, including color-evasion (Abaied and Perry 2021; McLean et al. 2017). Historically, the U.S. has upheld hegemonic whiteness, creating a sociopolitical context in which the practices and behaviors of white people are viewed as normal, and race and racism are made invisible (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Consequently, events that are explicitly racial or ethnic are rendered visible and deviant (Westberg et al. under review), making them more challenging to discuss (Moffitt and Syed 2021). In this way, discussions of race/ethnicity can resemble those about trauma, insofar as they are often perceived as uncomfortable or even inappropriate (Delker et al. 2020; Thorne and McLean 2003). Indeed, conversations about race/ethnicity often position the narrator as vulnerable, which can elicit discomfort or defensiveness from the listener, especially when there is a fear of being perceived as racist (Linder 2015). Thus, color-evasion operates as a macro-level force but also, an interpersonal process that can be reproduced and resisted through micro-level conversations (Rogers, Niwa, et al. 2021).

Speaking to this, we conducted an in-depth thematic analysis of racial/ethnic conversations, identifying key dynamics of mitigation and encouragement. The qualitative conversation data revealed that these dynamics provided different opportunities for meaning making. Encouragement related positively to meaning making, supporting past work finding that explicit scaffolding can foster the co-production of meaning (McLean and Jennings 2012; Moffitt and Syed 2021). Since racial/ethnic identity is an important developmental resource for youth of color in particular (Rivas-Drake and Umaña-Taylor 2019), it is critical to identify how young people can reason productively about these domains, especially in interaction with others. The encouragement dynamics we identified provide a descriptive foundation for supporting meaning making of racial/ethnic identity among emerging adults. Adopting these dynamics may facilitate conversations about race/ethnicity, particularly amid ongoing national tensions that limit discussions of human diversity and downplay or discount the realities of racism (e.g., Luthra and Rodriguez 2025).

In contrast, the role of mitigation dynamics in our study was more complex. Consistent with past work, our qualitative analysis revealed that mitigation provided common ground and helped maintain social harmony when discussing race/ethnicity, a relationally risky topic (Korobov and Thorne 2007). At the same time, mitigation detracted from the seriousness of the conversation in a way that could limit discussions of race/ethnicity and indeed seemed to shut down or shift the focus of many conversations. The qualitative data further revealed how color-evasion operated through mitigation in conversations to distance youth from racial/ethnic experiences. Thus, the way mitigation was used reflects how embedded the master narratives that minimize race/ethnicity are across conversations involving white emerging adults as well as emerging adults of color. While color-evasion enables white emerging adults to ignore race/ethnicity and racism and avoid recognizing unearned advantages, emerging adults of color may also defer to it due to socialization experiences or relational expectations, even at personal and collective cost. But color-evasion is harmful for all individuals. It may decrease racial literacy and hinder understanding of race/ethnicity—an important piece of who one is in relation to society (Satterthwaite-Freiman and Umaña-Taylor 2023). Nevertheless, mitigation dynamics reveal some emerging adults' desire to remain in a "safe space," one that prioritizes comfort and aligns with social norms, rather than a "brave space" that embraces the discomfort of discussing race/ethnicity and challenges dominant views of color-evasion (Arao and Clemens 2013). Indeed, researchers argue that there is an overemphasis on social comfort in relation to race/ethnicity, especially among college students, and that purposeful engagement with racial discomfort is needed to foster racial literacy and recognition of contemporary racism (Cabrera et al. 2016).

Our study provides preliminary evidence that mitigation serves a dual function in discussions of race/ethnicity of maintaining relational harmony and downplaying racial content, while also sometimes fostering an atmosphere conducive to meaningful conversation, when used in conjunction with encouragement. Future research should further examine whether there is some optimal amount of mitigation that can foster meaning making of race/ethnicity or whether there are additional strategies that young people can use to persist despite these dynamics. These questions are especially important given that meaning making and conversation dynamics did not differ by racial/ethnic or gender composition of friend-pairs. Although the qualitative data revealed important nuances in how discussions of race/ethnicity were shaped by participants' social location, the lack of quantitative differences suggests that color-evasive ideology may operate as a shared constraint on how race/ethnicity is discussed. Still, these findings should be interpreted cautiously, as our sample was underpowered to detect group differences.

4.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

Although our multi-method study possessed several strengths, there are also limitations to discuss. Our sample is relatively small for assessing differences based on race/ethnicity and gender, which might have prevented us from identifying meaningful variations in meaning making and conversation dynamics. Although past research supports such differences

(e.g., Moffitt and Syed 2021), future research would benefit from larger samples that can substantiate these findings and better elucidate the important role of social positionality. For example, future research with larger samples could examine whether conversation dynamics vary across same-white, same-minoritized, white-minoritized, and different minoritized friend-pairs. A related direction for future work with larger samples is to quantitatively examine how multiple aspects of identity, including gender, social class, sexuality, and other social positions, jointly shape racial/ethnic conversations. This intersectional approach could provide deeper insight into how interlocking systems of oppression structure these conversations (Crenshaw 1991; Settles and Buchanan 2014). Future work could also better articulate the role of nationality, as existing scholarship indicates that color-evasive views are stronger outside the U.S. and might exacerbate mitigation of race/ethnicity (e.g., Moffitt et al. 2020). Another limitation is that the written and spoken narrative tasks might have invited different levels of meaning making. Although the unstructured conversation may have enabled us to capture something ecologically valid about how participants discuss race/ethnicity with others, the written prompt for a specific racial/ethnic experience may have fostered deeper reflection. Additional research is needed to compare levels of meaning making across multiple racial/ethnic narratives and within conversations where participants are prompted to discuss race/ethnicity. The sample was also limited in that it was composed primarily of Asian American and white participants, leading to an underrepresentation of Black/African American, Latine, Native/Indigenous, and Multiracial individuals. Our analysis also speaks mostly to the experiences of emerging adults enrolled in college and in a predominantly white geographic context where color-evasion was perhaps more common than elsewhere. Finally, these data were collected in 2009–2010. The sociopolitical landscape has shifted significantly since then, so the way that young people discuss race/ethnicity might differ. Still, color-evasion remains highly prevalent, suggesting that many of the conversation dynamics we observed may persist today.

A final note is that while our findings reveal meaningful variations in meaning making across narrative contexts and suggest that encouragement may promote meaning in conversation, future research should examine why some emerging adults embrace the emotional comfort offered by mitigation, whereas others persist in resisting it. One possible explanation lies in socialization experiences, through parents, peers, and social media, that shape youths' beliefs about when and how it is acceptable to discuss race/ethnicity (e.g., McLean et al. 2025; Moffitt et al. 2026). These experiences might inform whether individuals engage in or avoid the discomfort required for relational identity work. Ultimately, this study points to the importance of creating developmental and social spaces that encourage youth to engage meaningfully with racial/ethnic identity, supporting both personal growth and collective understanding in an increasingly diverse society.

Author Contributions

Dulce W. Westberg: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, visualization, writing – original draft,

writing – review and editing. **Ursula Moffitt:** methodology, writing – review and editing. **Kate C. McLean:** writing – review and editing. **Moin Syed:** conceptualization, data curation, methodology, visualization, writing – review and editing.

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Data Availability Statement

All study materials, analytic code, and quantitative data are available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/nrupq/overview?view_only=5e7fc085cc6b4d44ba418f0f3fd5ae67. Qualitative data are not made publicly available but are available to request.

Endnotes

- ¹ Following established conventions, we use the combined terms race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic to capture that race and ethnicity are overlapping social constructs with shared developmental processes and outcomes (Rivas-Drake and Umaña-Taylor 2019).
- ² Although color-evasion and power-evasion have been conceptualized as distinct components of colorblind ideology (Yi et al. 2023), we use the term color-evasion more broadly to refer both to the denial of race/ethnicity and racism. This usage is consistent with recent efforts to reject ableist language while centering the denial of race/ethnicity and racism (Satterthwaite-Freiman and Umaña-Taylor 2023).
- ³ We intentionally lowercase white to distinguish racialization into whiteness from processes of racial minoritization and to reject white supremacist traditions of capitalizing white to elevate whiteness as a category of power.
- ⁴ Moffitt and Syed (2021) used a subset of the same sample used in the present study to investigate different research questions. See our preregistration for a detailed description of how this data has been used: https://osf.io/srygh/?view_only=885eae749ceb435b969b08c0647f9969.
- ⁵ Although this was specified in the study recruitment materials, in practice target participants either often ignored the request to bring a friend not in college or brought a friend that was simply not enrolled that term.
- ⁶ See Table S1 for specific racial/ethnic breakdowns of the sample (https://osf.io/nrupq/overview?view_only=5e7fc085cc6b4d44ba418f0f3fd5ae67).
- ⁷ There was high variability in how long international participants had been in the U.S. across subsample 1 ($M = 6.08$ years, $SD = 6.42$, range = 1 month–24 years) and subsample 2 ($M = 7.91$, $SD = 7.02$, range = 1 month–24 years).
- ⁸ We did not engage in a formal reflexivity process. But we have a history of collaboration and an ongoing dialog about our perspectives, orientations toward this topic, and underlying theoretical and epistemological assumptions.
- ⁹ All names are pseudonyms. Conversations are presented as they occurred without editing. Written narratives are edited for brevity.
- ¹⁰ A set of un-preregistered analyses showed comparable effects when controlling for relationship closeness along with the other covariates.

¹¹ Although mitigation and encouragement were positively correlated when controlling for length of conversations ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$), indicating these conversation dynamics are interconnected, mitigation did not moderate the relationship between encouragement and meaning making ($b = 0.02$, $B = 0.000$, $SE = 0.001$, $p = 0.828$). These analyses were conducted in response to reviewer feedback and were not preregistered.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Racial/ethnic composition of the analytic subsamples. **Table S2:** Variations in conversation features by pair composition and relationship closeness. **Table S3:** Variations in narrative themes by race/ethnicity and gender.