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Tweeting Away Our Blues: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to Exploring Black Women's Use of Social Media to Combat Misogynoir

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Tweeting Away Our Blues: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to Exploring
Black Women's Use of Social Media to Combat Misogynoir

by

Kelly Macías

A Dissertation Presented to the
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University
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This dissertation was submitted by Kelly Macias under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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Dedication

This dissertation would not have been possible without the twelve amazing Black women living in the US and Britain who agreed to be participants in this study. I am humbled by their confidence in this work, remain in awe of their strength, courage and wisdom, and am honored that they allowed me to tell their stories.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the community of Black women on social media around the world who have made me a better learner and more critical thinker, who let me borrow their words to unpack my lived experiences when I didn't have my own, who have shared deep conversations and provided much needed laughs, who have tweeted about their favorite Black girl shows with me and have taught me the enduring power of solidarity and friendship. I would also like to dedicate it, in part, to Meredith Clark, PhD, who befriended me after I reached out to her and whose scholarship focused on Black Twitter, was part of the beginning of the start of serious academic study for us, by us, on how we use social media platforms.

Members of Northern Natal tribes of South Africa greet each other by saying "*Sawa bona*" which means, "*I see you.*" The response is "*Sikhona*" which means, "*I am here.*" It is through this greeting that members of the tribe are able to affirm one another and bring each other into existence; for it is their belief that by being seen, one's humanity is validated. During the course of my many exchanges with other Black women (including during this study), our feelings of invisibility, silencing, and marginalization are often brought up as painful reminders of our social location in the world. It is in the spirit of acknowledging them in all their glorious humanity that I say to all my sisters near and far, "*Sawa bono.*" "*I see you.*"

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Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	v
Abstract	vi
Glossary of Terms.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Ethnographic Context.....	4
Storytelling as a Conflict Resolution Strategy.....	8
Defining Misogynoir.....	10
Understanding Connection Between Social Media Usage and Black Women...12	
Purpose and Goals.....	17
Theoretical Framework.....	20
Researcher Context.....	21
Chapter Summary.....	23
Chapter 2: Literature Review	25
Introduction to Literature Review.....	25
Community Activism and Resistance Through Literature.....	25
Conceptualizing Blackness.....	32
Womanism.....	39
Social Media and Activism.....	45
Theoretical Framework.....	52
Black Feminist Theory.....	52
Structural Violence.....	53

Critical Race Theory.....	55
Research Questions.....	58
Chapter Summary.....	58
Chapter 3: Research Methods.....	60
Methodology.....	60
Research Design.....	61
Sample.....	62
Recruitment.....	63
Participants.....	66
Data Collection.....	68
Participant Interviews.....	68
Data Analysis.....	71
Initial Impressions.....	72
Descriptive Comments.....	73
Linguistic Comments.....	73
Conceptual Comments.....	75
Emergent Themes and Findings.....	76
Chapter Summary.....	80
Chapter 4: Findings.....	81
Introduction to Findings.....	81
Participant Summaries.....	81
Participants from Britain.....	81
Participants from the United States.....	83

Themes.....	88
Social Media’s Impact on the Self.....	89
Social Media as a Safe Space for One’s Marginalized Identity.....	104
The Formation of Community through Social Media.....	114
Chapter Summary.....	121
Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion.....	122
Introduction to Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion.....	122
Findings.....	122
Research Question 1.....	122
Research Question 2.....	123
Research Question 3.....	124
Findings on Social Media’s Impact on the Self.....	125
Findings on Social Media as a Safe Space for One’s Marginalized Identity.....	127
The Formation of Community through Social Media.....	130
Unexpected Findings.....	131
Discussion.....	134
Literature Review Connections to Social Media’s Impact on the Self.....	134
Literature Review Connections to Social Media as a Safe Space for One’s Marginalized Identity.....	136
Literature Review Connections to the Formation of Community through Social Media.....	138
Theoretical Framework Connections to Research Findings.....	140

Recommendations.....	143
Contributions to the Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field.....	146
Limitations.....	148
Directions for Future Research.....	149
Conclusion.....	150
References.....	152
Appendix A: Interview Questions.....	160
Appendix B: Consent Form.....	161

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant List.....	67
Table 2. Example of Emergent Themes.....	78
Table 3. Thematic Findings.....	89

Abstract

In the age of social media, many Black women use online platforms and social networks as a means of connecting with other Black women and to share their experiences of social oppression and *misogynoir*, anti-Black misogyny. Examining the ways that Black women use technology as a tool to actively wage resistance to racial, gender and class oppression is critical for understanding their role in the human struggle for greater peace, beauty, freedom and justice. This study explored the experiences of 12 Black women in the United States and Britain who use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives as racial and gendered minorities. The research questions were: How do Black women in the United States and Britain use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives as Black women? What is the lived experience of using social media for this purpose? How does the experience affect them and what meaning do they find in using social media for this purpose? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the researcher developed findings which show that Black women experience social media as an affirming, safe space for counter storytelling, education and transformation, negotiating identity and for connection to a larger, African diasporic identity. This research serves to increase the knowledge and scholarship about how Black women challenge damaging stereotypes and restrictive social narratives and how they use social media to challenge structural and ideological violence directed at them in an effort to promote dialogue and healing.

Glossary of Terms

Britain- refers to the island of Great Britain, and is part of the United Kingdom, which is comprised of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For purposes of this dissertation, the terms “Britain” and “UK” are used interchangeably.

Blog- short for weblog, a blog is a website or webpage, in which a user or users can create entries, known as “posts” that can be listed in chronological order or reverse chronological order and can be updated. Blog topics can vary- ranging from commentary to serving as an online diary of sorts. Blogs can be public or privately available for viewing by interested parties.

Facebook- an online social networking site in which users can create a profile and add other users as “friends”. Users have the ability to exchange messages, post status updates, pictures and videos, receive notifications when their “friends” have updated their profiles and join user groups.

Hashtag- a word or phrase on social media denoted with a hash or pound sign in front of it which is used to identify messages on a specific topic.

Instagram- an online social networking site in which users can share photos and videos with “followers” (other users) and have the ability to share their photos and videos through other social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr.

Internet- a global system of interconnected computer networks that carries a range of services and resources to users. For purposes of this study, the Internet refers to the WWW (World Wide Web) and specifically the ability for users to exchange data, messages and news with each other and includes user driven and generated content.

Intersectionality- the understanding that there are intersections that occur between forms and/or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination.

Microblogging- the practice of writing short blogs in which users publish short, small updates. Examples include Twitter, Facebook status updates, email and instant messaging

Misogynoir- the intersection of anti-blackness and misogyny, used to describe how race and gender work together to create a particular brand of hatred directed at Black women.

Social Media- refers to computer assisted or mediated tools which allow users to create, share and exchange information through online communities and networks.

Social Network- refers to online relationships, communities and networks formed among users.

Social Networking Service- refers to online platforms or services that allow users to form relationships or community based on common interests. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Tumblr- a microblogging platform and social networking site which allows users to create blogs, follow other users and make their blogs private or public.

Twitter- an online social networking service in which users are able to read and post short messages of 140 characters or less called “tweets.” Users can choose to follow other users, which allows them to read and respond to their posts.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This dissertation focuses on Black women's use of social media in the United States and Britain. More specifically, the research focuses on how Black women in those two countries use various social media platforms to share their lived experiences as Black women, how they understand their use of social media for the purpose of testimony and storytelling about their lives, the meaning that is created by it and, ultimately, how it impacts their lives. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach that sought to understand the use of social media by Black women as they described it, I selected the topic stemming from my own curiosity about how Black women's use of social media serves to speak to their experiences as marginalized members of society due to their location as racialized and gendered minorities and how they use it to resist stereotypes and various forms of oppression.

I approached the study with a fairly open mind, having my own feelings about the topic but not completely knowing what I would discover. As a Black woman located in the United States and a frequent user of social media myself, I knew that I could personally testify to the transformative and connective abilities of various social media platforms for me but was unsure what other Black women got out of using it. During the course of the research, I was particularly interested in the responses of the women I spoke to, specifically how those interviewed described social media as an overwhelmingly positive and affirming space, a vehicle for education (education about the self, education that assisted in the formation of a political identity, developing social commentary, etc.), and a tool for articulating their unique experiences while at the same time providing much needed connection to other women from the African diaspora—whether it be

locally, nationally or globally. As the literature on Black women's lives and activism demonstrates (see Chapter 2), the stereotypes and oppression that Black women face are multi-faceted and unique. Moreover, those issues become further complicated for Black women residing in Western countries when the prevailing narratives in those countries suggest that their societies have transcended racism and sexism. While Black women living in the United States and Britain may have various coping strategies for managing the impact that racism and sexism have on their lives, this research demonstrates that social media has emerged as a critical instrument for Black women to give voice to their lived experiences, connect in meaningful ways with one another across boundaries and provides a vehicle for discussion, education and advocacy.

Background

“Called Matriarch, Emasculator, and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself”
(Collins, 2009, p. 76).

There are a number of common archetypes that stereotypically describe Black women, their behavior and status in society which date back to colonial times. These examples primarily include depictions of a hypersexual, immoral and promiscuous being (the Jezebel); a finger snapping, neck rolling, back talking woman with attitude (the Sapphire); an unemployed, unmarried inner city mother with numerous children whom she provides for by living off the government (the Welfare Mother); or a desexualized,

overweight mother figure taking care of other people's children (the Mammy) (Collins, 2009; Fontaine, 2011). Despite civil rights gains in the last half century; including the election of the first Black president of the United States, a Black First Lady and claims of a post-racial world, these painful and enduring portrayals illuminate the legacy of slavery, segregation and gender discrimination that continue to result in a specific oppression uniquely experienced by Black women in the Global North. While Black women have a rich history of acknowledging their subjugation in both private and public settings, to date, there exist few opportunities to publicly share their experiences without exposing themselves to retribution, threats and antagonism from others (Golden, 2014; Sanders, 2014; Hess, 2014).

In the field of conflict resolution, while limited research exists on Black women's roles in peace activism and conflict resolution, research has not yet fully examined how Black women in the United States and Britain articulate their stories of marginalization nor the impact that their storytelling has on the interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts they experience based on their lives as Black women. This is despite the fact that there is a rich intellectual tradition of Black women engaging in the work of speaking the truth of their experiences; specifically as a form of resistance, which is often rendered virtually invisible by those outside of it (Collins, 2009). In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper published *A Voice from the South*, one of the first texts in the United States that examined the ways in which Black women are subject to specific forms of discrimination and oppression based on race and gender (Lemieux, 2014). Scholar bell hooks suggests that there can be no healing for Black women (nor for Black people as a whole) until the collective unmasking of oppression takes place, noting that the act of collectively speaking the truth

is the ultimate form of resistance (hooks, 2005). Much of this “truth telling” takes place via personal and collective narratives.

It could be argued that it is no surprise that this expression is generated through oral and written storytelling; particularly because it holds such a unique place and value in the Black experience- an oral tradition transferred from African cultures to entertain, pass on beliefs and values. In her Ted Talk on the danger of a single story, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says: “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie, 2009). While Black women have historically been on the damaging end of stories that strip them of humanity and dignity, the advent of the Internet and social media means they now have access to forums to create new stories, name their oppressions publicly thereby giving voice to their lived reality, and to engage with each other across time and geographical boundaries.

Ethnographic Context

Black women in the United States have a specific history with regard to racism and sexism but their experiences are not completely unique within the African diaspora. Mirza (1997) notes that to be Black and British is to be unnamed in official discourse while Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe (1985) articulate that documented struggles about Black people in Britain disproportionately focus on Black men while the documented struggles of women focus on the plight of White women. Thus to be Black and female in Britain often relegates Black women to a marginalized location which is often invisible, silenced and misunderstood. The activism of Black American feminists, in large part, has inspired

Black British women to speak to their experiences of marginalization and to fight for racial and gender equality (Victorian, 2012); including naming the ways that migration and colonization have deeply impacted Black women's lives in Britain. Fisher (2001) writes that Britain is a country of immigrants and a place in which the construction of nation and race converge. "...A hierarchy of belonging and a subtext of 'difference'—based on race, class, gender and/or culture—underpins the inclusion and exclusion of individuals, and how people are differentially racialized in the construction of the nation" (p. 5). Moreover, she states, "While reference to the 'English' still signifies white (Euro) people born in England, the way in which the term 'black' has been used and manipulated continues to shift" (p.5).

Upon further research, it becomes clear that the literature supports important themes about who identifies with and what is considered Black in the British context. Fisher's work (2012) specifies that the concept of Blackness as a political identity in Britain dates back to a cross-racial ethnic feminism that developed in the 1970s. This consisted of a transracial political imaginary that was comprised of Africans, South Asians, Afro-Caribbean peoples and those of the African diaspora born in Britain who chose to identify politically as Black to signify their "otherness" in British society as well as their solidarity as people of color. Thus "Blackness" in Britain has largely been constructed, in terms of racial and political solidarity, as not just a biological identity but a socio-political one as well.

A comparison of the two experiences (US and British) in terms of how individuals who identify as Black both navigate and make meaning of their Blackness is quite compelling and is present in both Chapter 2 (Literature Review) and Chapter 4 (Findings)

of this dissertation. Additionally, as part of the participation criteria for the study, a woman needed only to self- identify as Black to be included but this was not limited to an ethnic or biological identity. This yielded interesting results as two of the participants (one living in the US and the other in Britain) identified themselves as being “politically” Black but acknowledged having South Asian or mixed racial heritage.

Part of the reason I felt a desire to research the experiences of both Black American and Black British women stemmed from my own deep curiosity to understand the differences and similarities between Black women in two of the arguably most developed countries in the world. Having spent a number of years traveling and working outside of the United States, I observed that many Black Americans often have a difficult time recognizing and connecting to a Black identity outside of the context of the United States in spite of the fact that there have been many pan-African movements that encourage the solidarity of peoples of African descent worldwide. While I was unsure what were the root causes of my perceived disconnect, I was guided by a firm belief that learning about each other’s experiences, developing a sense of unity and bridging the divide is critical to moving us, as Black people, forward. Moreover, as I thought about what it means to experience life in America as a Black woman and the intersections of our identities as we wade through multiple oppressions, I found myself frequently wondering about the Black women “across the pond” in Britain who navigate similar obstacles but who seemingly have had different and less prominent social movements that have advanced their life chances and opportunities.

As I did initial research, it was difficult to find plentiful writings beyond a few authors (and very little written after early 2000s) about the experiences of Black women

in the Britain and much of what was available was heavily based on the activism and writing of Black American women. I was immediately not satisfied with this; what little I did know about the history of migration and colonization in the British context lead me to believe that there were certain aspects of the Black British female experience which were vastly different from my own. *Where were the voices of my Black British sisters? And why wasn't there much literature that reflected their lived experience in the modern day context?* This peaked my interest and subsequently, I wondered if the dearth of research and writing was based on lack of representation, lack of access or something else. Similarly, I noted that while the experiences of Black women are often represented in academic disciplines such as ethnic and gender studies, they are less prominent in my own discipline of conflict resolution and peace studies.

The lack of presence of Black female stories and voices within the discipline, especially hailing from the Western world and specifically from a comparative context, made a powerful case for study. However, I wasn't always convinced of the merit of the topic from a dual country perspective. When I first considered writing a dissertation topic that was concerned with Black women's experiences and activism, it was solely from the context of the United States. However, a trip to Britain in December of 2013 revealed a unique phenomenon. It was during that vacation when I checked my own social media accounts and realized that Black women in both countries that I was tracking through various social media platforms were having a conversation about "intersectionality" (the idea that multiple oppressions can/do "intersect" in the lives of women of color- see Chapter 2 for more information) at the exact same time. They were talking about separate causal events (explaining the nuances of intersectionality to White feminists in specific

instances involving high profile White women who didn't "get it"), which had happened in specific incidents their respective countries, and they were not necessarily even communicating with each other. However, it was then I realized that there seemed to be common experiences had by Black women in both countries, and that they had taken to social media to discuss, strategize and get support from one another. As I observed this event, I asked myself what were the other life experiences that Black women in the United States and Britain have in common and how can social media be used as a tool to illuminate these experiences and connect Black women around the world to one another? The findings of this research demonstrated that while there seems to be no difference in the experience of using social media as a tool for testimony for Black women in both countries or the meaning they make from it; there were, in fact, marked differences in how Black women in Britain conceptualize and articulate their identities and social locations as Black women compared to their American counterparts.

Storytelling as a Conflict Resolution Strategy

Stories are an integral part of how humans organize their life experiences and understand their reality. As previously mentioned, stories are central to many cultural traditions as a way of passing down information, valued behaviors and customs from generation to generation. It is through stories that we create shared social meaning, identity and order our world. According to Cloke and Goldsmith (2000), the power of stories is that they invite the listener to participate in the experience with the storyteller. Moreover, "they encourage a deep level of communication and promote a sense of community by bringing people together, through imagination and empathy, to collectively define the meaning of the world in which they live" (p. 2).

Storytelling is a natural part of the conflict resolution process since it is through the telling of stories that conflict parties are able to share their perceptions, desires and needs. In order to reach resolution, sharing requires effective communication skills and it is through stories that truth is created or dispelled. It is storytelling that allows parties in conflict to develop an understanding of the other party's perspective and experience and encourages them to practice empathy. Both conflict parties and conflict resolution practitioners are required to practice reflective listening and effective communication skills in order to mitigate, resolve and/or transform conflict. Stories of the experiences of each party involved in a given conflict are powerful; each story has the ability to lead parties toward anger or forgiveness, toward impasse or resolution, into stasis or transformation (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2000).

As a conflict resolution strategy, storytelling is often utilized in alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes, namely mediation. Mediation is a practice in which a third neutral party, known as a mediator, helps parties in conflict discuss their differences and resolve their disputes. Mediation often focuses on the discussion of differences and tries to help parties discover shared interests, motivating each to resolve their conflicts. Mediation theory and practice are built on the views that people hold about the way that the world works and some mediation theories are predicated on the idea that human beings are motivated by fulfilling their own personal interests and desires (Winslade and Monk, 2000). Narrative mediation, an emerging approach in the field of conflict resolution, acknowledges certain factors such as culture, ethnicity, gender, class, education, etc. inform an individual's narratives. By understanding the deeper meaning behind the narratives constructed by conflict parties, a mediator can deconstruct dominant

discourse allowing for the opening of space that includes other descriptions of what has taken place. Additionally, through this problem-solving based approach, it becomes possible for the parties to co-author solution bound narratives that can serve as “the rudimentary stage of a resolution to the problem” (p. 10).

While this dissertation does not include a focus on mediation approaches, the storytelling component is quite relevant to the lives of the research participants and how they utilize social media to tell their stories. Understanding storytelling as an intentional strategy which Black women use to discuss the interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts they face situates this dissertation within the field of conflict resolution. Additionally, the use of storytelling allows Black women to reframe dominant societal discourse about them. Black women’s stories and testimony via social media are a reflection of the world as they see it and the meaning they create from their various experiences. Likewise, as they communicate with others (primarily Black women) as they use social media platforms, even though they are not engaging from a perspective of conflict per se, they are passing on behaviors and values and creating shared meaning about identity and what it means to be a Black woman. The findings offer greater insight into how social media helps Black women create a shared identity that is reflective of the African diaspora.

Defining Misogynoir

As understood through the concept of intersectionality, one of the facets of Black feminist discourse is the acknowledgement that Black women experience a specific type of oppression that is different from their male and white female counterparts due to the racial and gendered oppression that they live. Misogynoir is a term that was coined in 2010 by queer scholar Dr. Moya Bailey and describes how racism and anti-Blackness

alter the experience of misogyny for Black women. The word is derived from the combination of the words misogyny (hatred of women) and noir (black). “It is a word I made up to describe the particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual and popular culture” (Bailey, 2010). Bailey further goes on to state that misogynoir refers to the myriad of ways in which Black women are dehumanized and pathologized in the world specifically, but not limited to, media, music and art.

Misogynoir is about the intersection of anti-Blackness and the degradation of women which can be and often is internalized and proliferated by Black people themselves; meaning that Black women can experience misogynoir from Whites, other people of color, and Black men and women respectively.

“Thus, this anti-Black misogyny or *misogynoir* is something Black women experience intraracially *and* interracially. Because pop culture does not exist in a vacuum and actually creates/reflects culture, as a Black woman who experiences stereotypes, violence, oppression and dehumanization unique to Black women’s bodies, experiences, lives and histories it is my evaluation that the term and what Moya wrote about it clearly expands beyond pop culture itself” (Hamilton, 2014, para. 4).

While Black women do not always name their experiences specifically as misogynoir (although some of the participants in this study did), it is part of the way they articulate their struggles as marginalized individuals and, as such, is an important and noteworthy consideration in this study that seeks to understand how Black women tell their stories and give testimony via social media.

Understanding the Connection between Social Media Usage and Black Women

In today's fast moving and virtual world, relationships are often formed and maintained online. For those with the financial and technological resources, it is nearly impossible not to be connected because modern technology allows for instant and constant Internet access. This includes both desktop and laptop computers but also through the usage of mobile electronic devices that allow us to be online "on the go" as well, such as Smartphones, iPods, iPads, Kindles, etc. The Internet began as a system that allowed users to exchange data, messages and news with each other and in subsequent years has transformed itself to include user driven and generated content which allows for the sharing of information about our private lives (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, the Internet went from a tool that was used for e-commerce and corporate web pages to allowing its users to engage with each other on collaborative projects, blogs, communities and social networking sites (p.60). For clarity, the term "social media" in this dissertation (See Glossary of Terms for more) is used to describe the forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users (p.61). There are various types of social media which include content communities like You Tube and social networking sites like Facebook which allow for both text-based communication and the sharing of pictures, video and other forms of media (p.62).

The definitions of these two terms (social media and social networking sites) are important for understanding their meaning and the distinction between the two. Moreover, they have significant relevance to the research topic as the phenomenon in question involves Black female users in the US and Britain generating publicly available

content in online communities that describe their lives and experiences and sharing them with other end users. This sharing can be instantaneous (like a real time chat taking place on a certain time/date on Twitter) or delayed (for example, a blog entry post in which users can read and leave comments for a specified or indefinite period of time).

While the exact numbers of users of the Internet worldwide is hard to calculate, research estimates that in the United States alone, 87% of all adults use the Internet and 73% of online adults use social networking sites; with 71% of adults using Facebook, 19% using Twitter, 17% using Instagram, 21% using Pinterest and 22% using LinkedIn (Pew Research Center, 2013; 2015). Women comprise the greatest number of users at 78% and 52% of online adults use two or more social media sites. But here's where the numbers tell an interesting story—while the Pew Research data shows that 73% of online adults (irrespective of ethnicity) in the US use some sort of social networking sites, other numbers state that the majority (at 73%) of all African American Internet users are engaging in some form of social media (Egwu, 2014). Similarly, during the year 2013 in Britain, 36 million adults (or 73% of the population) accessed the Internet everyday with social networking comprising the majority of Internet activities for users ages 16-44 (Office for National Statistics, 2013).

Research suggests that there are high levels of Internet access and use among ethnic minorities in the UK, specifically among Indian, Pakistani, Black African and Black Caribbean groups, though the exact percentage is not necessarily known (Jones, 2010). Simply put, it appears that figures demonstrate that in both the United States and the Britain, a large majority of social media users are Black. Worldwide, the phenomenon known as "*Black Twitter*" (a term used to describe a large network of Black Twitter

users and their loosely coordinated interactions (Ramsey, 2015) has been fast gaining notoriety because of the high numbers of young users from the African diaspora communicating online with one another, sharing jokes, news and using it as a vehicle for activism to advance racial and social justice (McDonald, 2014). Black Twitter is the subject of recent and current academic research and is highlighted in more detail in Chapter 2 (the Literature Review) of this dissertation.

Black women especially participate in this trend, often using social media to connect with each other to discuss issues pertaining to Black feminism. According to author and Black feminist scholar Joan Morgan:

[Social media] allows women to get access to women [such as] bell hooks and even me, without a classroom. It enables feminism to meet them where they are and where they live, which is actually where I think they should be getting it (Lemieux, 2014, para. 14).

Black women's use of social media to speak to the unique issues and experiences they face goes beyond access to scholars and activists. As the examples below from Black female users on Twitter and subsequent blogs demonstrate, social media's relatively easy accessibility and public nature (for those who can afford it or have access to free usage) has meant that Black females interested in feminist issues can connect with one another and generate content which speaks to the intersectionality of their experiences with other Internet users around the globe.

“When black women open up their hearts to one another, sharing memory, recollecting painful pasts, there is magic” (Dunn, 2014).

“Social Media has been HUGE in reclaiming my agency and sense of self. Comparing how I felt initially after violence to NOW. Amazing.” (Shaadi, 2014).

“Simply talking to each other as WoC [Women of Color] and affirming our views and experiences right now in this chat means EVERYTHING to me” (Hamilton, n.d.).

“The sexism white women experience takes a paternalistic edge. Black women, on the other hand are denied certain aspects of femininity. Our bodies (and our bums in particular) are appropriated by a patriarchal black media and deemed anomalous and disgusting by white eyes” (Eddo-Lodge, 2014).

“Racialised in this way, I was situated at a complex intersection-simultaneously valuable and worthless. So while I was perceived as attractive, it was complicated by race” (Dabiri, 2014).

As articulated in an earlier paragraph of this chapter, the rich tradition of Black women articulating the discrimination that shapes their lives predates modern technology. In the 1800s, Black women actively participated in collective conversations about freedom from sexism and racism in churches, communities, women’s organizations and the like (Alonso, 1994). In the 1960s and 1970s, Black women were active participants in the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent emergence of Third Wave feminism contributed to the continued ability of many Black feminist writers to write, organize and publish (Neville & Hamer, 2006; Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991). In the 1990s, Black feminist thought became recognized in academia as social theory; however, Black

women's texts were often more welcomed in classrooms of higher education than Black women themselves (Collins, 2001). Where, then, could a Black woman access writing and critical thought about her life experiences if she was not a part of the academy? Currently, the Internet, aided by social media, has made Black feminist theory accessible to Black women en masse and, in addition to recognized theorists, those generating Black feminist content are now not just scholars but also ordinary women giving voice to the daily experiences of their lives.

Researchers continue to investigate how individuals use the Internet and for what purposes. In the last four years alone, authors representing the fields of technology and communication have written about the intersection of race and microblogging¹, specifically focused on the Black community (Majoo, 2010; National Public Radio, 2013; McDonald, 2014). Some of this attention has focused on the use of social media for Black feminist perspectives and yet many disparities still exist. For example, at Social Media Week 2014 in New York City, it was noted that the presenters were overwhelmingly white and male despite a dense concentration of Black females who are actively engaged in social media (Egwu, 2014). This begs the question, "*How are the perspectives of Black female users acknowledged and represented in the research on social media?*"

Though this research study is situated specifically within the discipline of conflict resolution, due to its interdisciplinary nature, it has overlap with communication, media, gender and ethnic studies. What makes this topic worthy of consideration from a conflict analysis and resolution perspective is that it offers an innovative approach to

¹ Microblogging refers to a type of blog that allows users to publish short, small updates. Examples include Twitter, Facebook status updates, email and instant messaging.

understanding how Black women in two Western countries define themselves via social media and create meaning and identity in the face of societal injustice and oppression. As a result of the subjugation they experience as women and Blacks, there are elements of both intrapersonal conflict as they internalize damaging stereotypes and societal expectations; and interpersonal conflict with others as they challenge those prevailing and restrictive categories and redefine their lives and experiences.

It could be asked why it matters how Black women define themselves since many ethnic/social groups have been subject to stereotyping at one point or another. Simply put, it matters because discourse matters. We know that discourse is not just empty rhetoric. Racist discourse, gendered discourse, media discourse and discourses of the past have been used to stretch discourse from a genre or style to political strategy, policy and political programs (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Exclusionary discourse about Black women has resulted in policies that underprotect, underserve, damage and perpetuate structural and physical violence against them. To that end, how they create and use discourse to define their experiences and transform and challenge violence and oppression is critically important to their lives. And since one of the most significant ways in which they are telling their stories is through social media, it is a phenomenon worth researching; both for the advancement of the field of conflict analysis and resolution and to engage in constructive change that alters their reality.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how Black women in the United States and Britain use social media to document their stories of misogynoir and the meaning they make from that storytelling and testimony. An understanding of the

conflicts that Black women in both countries face as they navigate an identity often rendered as “Other” in their respective societies is important for understanding how they respond to being marginalized. As a result, one of the interview questions specifically asked the women who participated in the study to articulate the various ethnic and social groups they identified with and how they saw those groups located within society. Their responses were useful in establishing shared experiences and perceptions but also for noting the differences and nuances in each woman’s contextual reality.

As noted in the ethnographic context section of this introduction, the choice of studying Black women in each of these geographic locations was strategic—not solely based on my curiosity or perceptions as a researcher but also as much of the Black feminist discourse in both countries speaks to feelings of invisibility and silencing wherein Black women are denied the ability to speak, have a valid identity and a space to name themselves and their experiences (Mirza, 1997). What stands out about the concept of “naming oneself and experiences” is that past research in various disciplines in the social sciences and humanities has shed light on the development of empowering narratives by Black women but has yet to fully recognize social media as a tool for those narratives. As social media has added a fast, public and easily accessible dimension to our lives in which users can create content and share it with each other virtually, Black women now have greater access to information, feminist discourse and to each other which adds depth and context to how their stories are told and the meaning created by storytelling. An examination of this storytelling to yield more understanding of how Black women use social media to articulate their lived experiences in response to societal oppression is a distinct contribution to the field of conflict analysis and resolution and has

implications which allow greater understanding of Black women's lives and resistance combined with an understanding of the utilization of technology to resist oppressive societal discourse.

The first goal of this research was to understand the ways in which Black women use social media to share stories and testimonies about their experiences with oppression and how they categorize this experience. In order to fully understand this phenomenon across different sects of women, countries and contexts, the establishment of common ground was necessary. The interview questions (see Appendix A), which were elaborated in an interview protocol prior to the start of the study, asked of each participant were the same. This served to establish the shared experiences of Black womanhood and social media use, its meaning and helped to clarify the experience being investigated.

The second goal of this research was to understand how using social media as a vehicle for telling their stories impacts Black women. Each woman articulated unique experiences with misogynoir based on their age, nationality, experience and location. Likewise, their perspectives and responses to oppression were not one-dimensional. Therefore, how they articulated their lives and understood the personal experience of sharing through social media platforms became important for learning how the experience makes them feel and helps them cope.

The third goal of this research was to understand the meaning that Black women create from using social media for the purpose of storytelling and testimony about their lives. While the first two goals sought to understand how they use social media for storytelling and how it impacts them respectively; the third goal was concerned with investigating how they see and understand social media as a specific tool for storytelling

about their lives. As has been previously mentioned, the nature of social media means that the online content is user generated, shared and publicly disseminated. To this end, this particular goal focused on exploring the overall ends or benefits social media offers to Black women as they use it to give testimony about their experiences as racial and gendered minorities.

Framework

This research study is grounded in three established theoretical frameworks which provide a foundation for understanding Black women's use of social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives and Black women's experiences with oppression and marginalization more broadly. The theories are consistent with the significance of the study and its goals, and were essential in analyzing the data and evaluating the outcomes of the research. While all of the theories were essential in understanding the findings of this research, the overall research's purpose and goals is undergirded by the theoretical concept of Black Feminist Thought. Black feminist theory or Black feminist thought is characterized by the knowledge that Black women have about the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender that subjugate them in a society that denigrates both women and people of African descent (Collins, 2000). It is social thought that is specifically designed to oppose oppression and thereby includes political activism, in addition to consciousness, as a central feature. I would describe it as Black women's knowledge/lived experience + activism. Black feminist theory recognizes intersectionality as fundamental to understanding the experiences that frame Black women's lives because, largely in the context of historical liberation (i.e. racial justice or feminist) movements, they have been placed in positions that often require them to

choose between or prioritize different facets of their identities. The expectations of others which force Black women to have to select/choose an identity (e.g. Black or female, Black or British) was mentioned a number of times by the participants in this study.

The other theoretical approaches discussed in this dissertation are Structural Violence Theory and Critical Race Theory. The literature that relates to this research topic and the corresponding theoretical frameworks will be addressed in detail in Chapter 2.

Researcher Context

As a part of the qualitative research process, I was compelled to thoughtfully consider and articulate the ways in which I would conduct an ethical study and examine and acknowledge any bias or “conceptual baggage” I have that could impact the study (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). This process was an important one--not just because I had the desire to maintain the highest standards of research possible but also because the theoretical frameworks I utilized required an intentional anti-oppressive, empowering approach. From a Black/multicultural and feminist research perspective, the concrete, lived experience of participants should be primary in qualitative research and the center of the knowledge should be shifted appropriately. This is to ensure that all experiences are validated and that the researcher’s perspectives and arguments are not presented as expert or in opposition to the voices of participants (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2002). From this framework, as a researcher, I was implored to affirm participant’s experiences, consider ethical models that demonstrate care for the participants and understand the ways in which this research had social and political implications.

I come to this research from my own political, social, historical and intellectual location as a Black American woman living in the United States, a feminist researcher and user of social media for my own purposes of storytelling, testimony and activism. Moreover, I selected this topic based on my experiences as a participant who happened to identify and observe the phenomenon directly. As a Black woman who overwhelmingly functions in predominately white spaces both for work and socially, I have often felt marginalized by implicit and explicit systems of white supremacy and patriarchy and had very few opportunities to discuss those experiences with other women like me on a daily basis. I turned to social media (mainly blogs, Twitter and You Tube) to be able to connect with other Black women who wanted to talk about the same things because of its relative ease of access and its user generated content. From my own experiences, and the words I read from other Black females, I believe that Black women using social media to tell the stories of the oppression they encounter and how they actively resist it is important for bringing about self and social change. To that end, I acknowledge that I am not an objective party to this topic but instead have a subjective perspective and context. I believe this to be an acceptable position since Knight (2000) writes that our social identities, lived experiences and daily lives often intersect with our research projects and practices. Moreover, Knight notes that a researcher's focus on self and position vis-à-vis the community under study "allows researchers to confront and consider the processes of situating oneself in a conscious manner that examines the nuances of relationships and power" (p. 171).

If the hallmark of feminist research is the critical component of challenging gender oppression and improving women's lives, we must understand it to be a political

act designed to initiate personal and/or social change and acknowledge the activism inherent in its impact. I saw (and continue to see) this study as a tool for empowering Black women to have their voices heard and as a tool for self and social change with regard to the marginalization and oppression they face. I believe that the examination of their testimony and storytelling through social media allows for wider discourse to challenge stereotypes and prevailing social interpretations related to Black women's lives.

Chapter Summary

Black women have a long and distinguished history of both publicly and privately articulating their experiences as they navigate the complexities of life as racial and gendered minorities and the resulting marginalization that accompanies their social location. Their storytelling is rooted in an ideal that is greater than the individual experience but instead is dedicated to knowledge, resistance, empowerment and freedom. While the research on social media and its uses continues to emerge, Black women have established themselves as prominent users of social media platforms, using it as another vehicle for continued storytelling and testimony about their lives which enables intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict transformation and social change. In addition to the background and the ethnographic context, which establishes the legitimacy of studying Black women's experiences with social media in the United States and Britain, this chapter outlines a review of Black women's social media use, the research purpose and goals and its expected contribution to the field of conflict resolution. Similarly, it includes brief information about the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the

researcher context to demonstrate that both the literature and personal experiences of myself as the researcher substantiate the need for this research study.

The following chapter (Chapter 2) of this dissertation is a review of the relevant research literature which was consulted and validated the study; both from the perspective of Black women's lived experience and activism as well as how social media is used as a tool to facilitate social interactions and movements. The subsequent chapters (Chapters 3 and 4) outline the research methodology (including design, data collection and analysis process) and the findings/results, respectively. The final chapter (Chapter 5) discusses how the research findings are used to answer the research questions and draw conclusions and recommendations for future exploration and study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a significant body of existing literature that addresses the experiences of Black women in both the United States and Britain as they describe their lives and the social oppression they experience. Much of this research comes out of the United States in part because, to date, there are no accredited Black studies programs in the Britain despite numerous calls for this addition to the curriculum (Andrews & Palmer, 2013; Ackah, 2014). Despite Black studies being a topic of controversy in British universities, while much of the foundational literature on Black women's experiences in Britain seems to have been published between the mid/late 1980s and late 2000s, there is quite a bit of recent scholarship on the establishment of an ethnic and Black British identity. Moreover, in the last few years, there has been an emergence of material written about how social media has been used for social activism and societal transformation. For purposes of this study, the literature can be divided into four thematic areas: 22 and resistance through literature, conceptualizing Blackness, womanism and the intersection of social media (its uses) and activism. This material is significant in that it establishes critical insight into past research that supports this study exploring Black women's experiences as they articulate them and their use of social media for this purpose.

Community activism and resistance through literature

Much of the literature focused on the lives of Black women in the Western world has a common premise that identifies the unique political and social position Black women occupy in history. Whether in past or current movements for social justice, equality and change, they often find themselves ignored since discussions of the Black experience focus overwhelmingly on Black men and discussions on the conditions of

women tend to focus on White women (hooks, 1981). Yet, due their intersectional identities as both women and people of color within discourses that respond to one or the other, Black women find themselves marginalized within both (Collins, 1991). This marginalization, especially within activist spaces, has often forced Black women to organize separately and collectively to address the specific social realities that impact their own lives, the lives of other Black women and the lives of Black people as a community. Stall and Stoecker (1998) note that Black women's community organizing stems from a woman-centered approach that extends the boundaries of the "private" into the "public" sphere and bridges gaps between the two; particularly focused on the community's needs and resources and mobilizing to demand necessary state resources or the engagement in transforming institutions. "For African American women raising families in a deteriorating inner-city neighborhood, "good mothering" may require struggling for better schools, for improved housing conditions, or a safer neighborhood" (p. 733).

Neville and Hamer (2006) collected the life narratives of seven Black female activists in the US to study and document how they work to end multiple forms of oppression. They discovered that while many did not label themselves as "revolutionary" or "feminist", their work was consistent with Black feminist principles and was as significant in contribution as the work of longtime revolutionaries with international reputations. Their research uncovered five current conditions around which Black female activists were organizing, all of which reflect the social and economic realities of the greater Black community and "the women's perceptions of these realities and their efforts

to change the conditions affecting their lives” (p.3). These conditions represent collective sites of struggle informing the Black experience. They are:

- Economics and labor;
- Housing;
- Prison;
- Health;
- and Violence against women.

The authors note that most of the activists describe their childhoods and life circumstances as having shaped their political consciousness and desire to work for social justice. Specifically, they cite growing up in poverty or in working class families and having experienced various racial and gendered oppressions. These early experiences informed the areas within which the women were organizing since the overarching themes of all five can be tied to those early experiences which include poverty, systemic discrimination and a lack of access to resources. The research presents statistical findings within each of the five conditions that are consistent with these themes. For example, 25% of Black women in the US live below poverty, over twice the rate of white women at 9% (p. 4). Similarly, while breast cancer hits women across ethnicities at the same rates, Black women are more likely to die from the disease compared to their White counterparts due to disparities in physicians’ decision making influenced by subconscious racial and gender biases (p. 5). The research concludes that regardless of differences, these Black female activists are committed to liberating all Black people, which demonstrates that “the destiny of all women and all humanity are intimately connected” (p.11).

Similarly in Britain, Black women have found themselves organizing to both take up their own specific concerns while at the same time also remaining committed and accountable to the Black community (Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe, 1985). Furthermore, the literature points out that Black women's history of activism in both countries is long and distinguished, dating back to a refusal to accept the bondage of slavery, through the abolitionist movement and up until contemporary society. This includes lesser known actions like picketing movie theaters in the US that refused to show films that depicted Whites and Blacks as equals in the 1930s and organizing student sit-ins against segregation in US southern states during the 1960s (Flowers, 2005). Abdullah (2012) notes that even something as benign as Black motherhood is a form of resistance; which results in self-determination, a refusal to submit to oppression and creating an alternate reality and legacy for Black children to inherit.

Fisher (2012) has conducted in-depth ethnographic research examining Black women's grassroots organizing in Britain from the 1960s to present day. Her research connects how women first began organizing around issues of racial and gender inequality which ultimately led them to organize to address larger social justice issues that impact a wide variety of stakeholders within their communities such as domestic violence, education, violence against Black youth and the larger Black community and human rights. Similar to the context of the experiences of Black women in the United States, Black women's activism in Britain was born out of the acknowledgement that feminist organizations failed to acknowledge the racism experienced by Black women while Black activist groups did not effectively address the "gender-specific issues or concerns

of Black women such as sexism and access to free, legal, safe abortions” (Fisher, 2001, p. 127).

Fisher’s research reveals that a large feature of Black women’s activism in Britain during the late 1970s and 1980s centered on education and literacy, as education was of vital importance for Black people at that time. She notes that most of the women who were members of the various Black women’s organizations during that time were university educated. Education linked many of these women together even though they were located in different parts of the country since women’s networks often included women in universities. “For these black women, as for many today, education was a seen as a liberating force” (p. 151). It was in these women’s organizations that women became familiarized with the work of Black American feminist scholarship and read books by authors like bell hooks and Angela Davis. A compelling and noteworthy component to Fisher’s research is the impact Thatcherism and a shift toward the political right had on Black women’s grassroots organizations in Britain. As the state became increasingly conservative during Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister from 1979 to the late 1980s, progressive thought became suppressed and tensions between the Black community and state actors (like police and local councils) increased. At the same time, many previously non-state funded community groups began to receive funding from the state for various projects and in the process slowly became more institutionalized arms of the state (Fisher, 2012). As a result of this reliance on government resources to carry out their work, “the groups lost a great deal of autonomy and had to reckon with the responsibility of financial accountability” (p. 115). Additionally, bureaucratic reporting requirements along with work that was required to comply with funding meant that many

community organizations lost state financial resources for their work and ultimately disintegrated.

Another noteworthy example of Black women's activism is how language and literature have also been utilized to engage Black women in discourse about the depth and breadth of their experiences. Lorde (1984) explains that poetry is not a luxury but instead a necessity of existence which is the way women "give name to the nameless" (p.37) and articulate their hopes and dreams of survival and change and turn it from language to idea to action. hooks (2005) offers that courageous testimony in fiction and autobiography helps Black females face reality by breaking through denial. "Reading fictional narratives where black female characters break through silences to speak the truth of their lives, to give testimony, has helped individual black women take the risk to openly share painful experiences" (p. 16). It is through literature, discourse and feminist scholarship that Black women have been able to widely express their ideas, illuminate the inequality they live with on a daily basis and actively resist marginalization.

As an example of writing one's story for expression and resistance, Griffin (2012) utilizes Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) to speak to the systemic oppression she faces as a biracial (Black and White) Black woman scholar living in the United States. Situating her work within the discipline of communication, Griffin posits that autoethnography can be productively coupled with Black feminist thought for Black females in the academy to "talk back" (i.e. actively resist) to systems of oppression. The fusion of Black feminist thought and autoethnography "necessitates an explicit commitment to move from merely looking at life toward a standpoint rooted in interrogation, resistance, and praxis" (p. 143). Articulating an anger that is both just and

justifiable, in her use of BFA Griffin responds to the controlling images of Black women that often label them “angry” but do not account for the productive possibilities generated from the anger of Black women.

Boylorn (2013) also uses auto-ethnographic research to examine her lived experiences as a Black woman and to make sense of the interrelated oppressions she faces “as a result of patriarchy, racism and classism” (p. 74). While she is also an academic, she uses social media (blogging) as the primary mode of publishing her auto-ethnographic work. One reason is because, as she notes, academic journals and chapters in books restrict access to everyday people but blogging introduces her auto-ethnographic work to wider audiences who are interested in Black feminist issues. Moreover, the blog platform allows for readers to be “vulnerable, brave and vocal about their own experiences” (p. 76). Through auto-ethnography online, she states that she is embarking on a feminist project in which she interjects and interrupts cultural narratives that lack critical interrogation and creates a place to “interrogate privilege, privilege intersectionality, and consider the legitimacy and importance of marginalized lives” (p. 77). She has published stories related to experiences of depression, the contradictory messages Black girls get about sex and pregnancy and standards of beauty. The blog on which she publishes her research, Crunk Feminist Collective, “has over 13,000 Facebook followers and contains a community of 5,000 members on Twitter and Tumblr” (p. 80).

Community activism and resistance through literature as a means to free themselves and their families from subjugation provides a critical entry point for examining how Black women articulate their experiences with misogynoir using social media in today’s society. Understanding this theme was central to this research study as it

relates to both how Black women articulated their lives and their own forms of activism and attempts at social transformation. While only a small number of the women (4 out of 12) who participated in the study talked about their use of social media specifically as activism, nearly all of them articulated using social media in the spirit of “talking back” to dispel stereotypes and resist oppression of Black women. Moreover, the topics they specified they frequently discuss on social media that they feel are relevant and meaningful reflect of some of the issues of importance for the larger Black community as cited by Neville and Hamer (prisons, violence against women, economics and labor, health and housing).

Conceptualizing Blackness

An integral part of fully examining this research topic includes a thorough understanding of how Black women create and make meaning of their racial identity. Since the literature related to this study indicated that Black women’s resistance and struggles for liberation stem, in part, from negative racial stereotypes that affect them, then it becomes of overwhelming importance to recognize that Black women have varied perspectives on the meaning of stereotypes about them, how they are impacted by these stereotypes and how they understand what it means to be a Black female in society. Additionally, because both the literature and interviews suggested that context does shape the realities of Black women’s lives differently, the exploration of nuances in terms of what it means to be a Black female in the United States in comparison to what it means to be a Black female in Britain were critically important to this study.

Scott (2013) conducted research on the lived experiences of Black women in the US who function in predominately White environments and the specific communicative

strategies they employ in order to dispel negative stereotypes associated with Black women, negotiate identity and redefine themselves and what it means to be Black and female. The study utilized a phenomenological approach that consisted of collecting descriptions of the women's experiences through focus groups to learn the challenges facing the women as they work and/or study in predominately White environments, their knowledge of stereotypes about Black women, their experiences communicating in response to those stereotypes and how those communication choices informed their identities.

The findings demonstrated that the women showed a preference for communication strategies that enabled them to “construct an alternate identity of a Black woman and redefine Black womanhood” (p. 318). To this end, they engaged in practices that served to dispel negative stereotypes and overly compensated to construct identities that demonstrated competence and a willingness to be a team player. For example, participants cited that they were acutely aware of historical stereotypes such as depictions of Black women as angry, aggressive, confrontational, hypersexual and unintelligent (Collins, 2009). Accordingly, they described adjusting their language use, nonverbal cues and clothing around Whites in order to resist enacting said stereotypes as well as to dispel them. The participants also described overcompensation, a sense of going above and beyond, to prove their worthiness in their respective schools and organizations. They saw themselves as representing a model for other young Black women in terms of learning how to successfully navigate cultural borders; i.e. how to create and maintain a bridge that spans across two worlds of racial location (Anzaldúa, 1990). Scott's work is an important contribution for learning how Black women respond to oppressive structures

due to racial and gendered stereotypes, how they create identity in those spaces and the strategies they employ to actively resist marginalization.

In a similar vein, Marsh (2013) conducted a study to examine the various strategies that young high-achieving Black female students use to demonstrate their racial identity and womanhood in racially diverse academic settings. Attempting to dispute Fordham's (1988) theory of "racelessness", which suggests that Black students must suppress the racial attributes learned and practiced at home in order to maintain being seen as high performing, Marsh used interviews and survey data to determine whether or not participants were able to develop versions of Black womanhood in which they do not have to become racially agnostic. In the end, her findings demonstrated that the young women practiced a form of "accommodating without assimilating" (p. 1226) and were able to negotiate diversity; in part, because while they were a part of racially heterogeneous work/study groups in school, they actively sought out racially homogenous, primarily Black, social groups. The Black social groups served to reinforce behaviors that helped the young women to sustain their "Blackness."

While Marsh's findings offer hope for how young Black women may maintain their Blackness and cope with negative societal perceptions of Black females in multiracial environments, research from social work and mental health disciplines demonstrates that there is a pejorative impact of stereotypes on Black women, which can trigger mental health symptoms. Ashley's case study research (2014) notes that the myth of the angry Black woman results in stereotypes that may be internalized by Black women and are likely to manifest themselves in therapeutic settings in unhealthy ways (such as buried feelings of anger). While suggesting that culturally competent treatment

may counter the intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts this brings up, Ashley also suggests that the psychological stress of being Black in America as well as the characterizations of Black females needs to be addressed and incorporated into narratives for Black female clients in order for them to feel safe and to properly express their anger.

As previously stated, historically there has been much overlap between the work of Black feminists in the U.S. and Black feminists in Britain; with many Black British women claiming that the writing and discourse of Black American women has influenced their own identity and cultural movements. Yet, the issues facing Black British women are also contextually different than those of Black women in the U.S. Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe (1985) note that thanks to the contributions of Black women in the United States, the silence surrounding Black women's lives has been broken; however, the voice about those lives comes from America and while it speaks to the experiences of Black women in Britain, it does not speak directly of it. For example, the history of Black women in Britain includes slavery just as does the history of the United States, but also includes the experiences of Afro-Caribbean and African women who came as workers from former British colonies after the Second World War. These were poor women who left their home countries to seek the promise of a better life in Britain and found themselves engaged in exploitative, backbreaking domestic positions where they were often harassed and became the victims of institutionalized and individual racism. Moreover, they were afforded very little protection from the state, which had enacted laws like the Race Relations Act of 1966, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity "in public places but did not include sectors like employment or housing" (p. 27).

Further distinguishing the lives of Black British women are the notions of who and what is Black. Heidi Safia Mirza (1997) notes that

being 'black' in Britain is about a state of 'becoming' (racialized); a process of consciousness, when colour becomes the defining factor about who you are. Located through your 'otherness' a 'conscious coalition' emerges: a self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by a natural identification but a political kinship (p. 3).

Arya (2012) conducted autoethnographic research to examine her position as a Black female academic in Britain and the obstacles that restrict Black feminist thought and marginalize Black feminist writing and Black women within the academy. Although she is of South Asian descent, Arya defines herself as Black—using the term as a politically and culturally constructed category that positions her in solidarity with non-White minority feminists. Her research notes that within discussions of feminism in higher education, the writing of Black feminists and their lived experiences is consistently overlooked and ignored while the writings of White, second-wave feminists is often presented as the sole representation of feminism in gender studies courses. Moreover she concludes that including the work of Black feminists in the curriculum, while critical to the study of feminism in academia is important; it is not complete without the increasing Black female recruitment in both the academic workforce and in the classroom.

Dugan (2005)'s research examines the experiences of Black British women (born in Wales) who came to the United States as the wives of Black American servicemen during the 1950s and 1960s. This is one of few studies available comparing the lived

experiences of Black British and Black American women, particularly through the lens of women who have lived in both countries. The life histories of 10 women were collected with a particular focus on how the women experienced and navigated their racial, ethnic and national identities. Specifically, the research sought to understand the women's experiences of adjustment and adaption in the context of race in the United States and how it differs from their experiences and understanding of race in Wales. The research also paid specific attention to the time period in which the women migrated to the US, given that they arrived in the height of the Jim Crow era in which legalized segregation and racism were part and parcel of the country's institutions and culture.

Dugan's research identifies a symbolic and cultural capital element which set the Black British women apart from their Black American female counterparts in the form of their British accents. She notes "the women's use of accent, in conjunction with their race, when interacting with White and Black Americans, has contradicted and challenged the 'fixed' racial categories" (p. 8). Many of the women had grown up in a multiethnic, multiracial community in Wales that also happened to have a number of interracial and intercultural couples. Black American servicemen serving in the community post-World War II found that there were plentiful opportunities for dating Black women since a number of the town's Black men were already dating the community's White women. This resulted in a number of marriages between the town's Black women and Black American men who eventually brought their wives home. The women were overwhelmingly shocked, horrified, angry and frightened to arrive in an America where racism was openly sanctioned and practiced since, while racism in Britain did exist, the legal segregation of Blacks and Whites did not. The women were able to navigate racism

by using their British identities and accents as leverage. They recalled often showing their British passports when confronted by racists and that it, combined with their accents, set them apart from Black Americans and they were often able to circumvent oppressive laws (like sitting in the back of a bus) that other Blacks could not. However many of them, due to their own experiences and those of their husbands and children, felt great solidarity with Black Americans and joined Black radical and civil rights organizations. This research illuminates the experiences of Black British women in America and how they navigated their racial identities given the differences in how race is conceptualized in each country.

Lam and Smith (2009) examined ethnic and national identity in British youth of African and Caribbean descent. Their findings showed that participants ranked ethnicity as more important than age, gender or nationality and that Black girls reported stronger ethnic identity than boys, reporting themselves as identifying strongly as “African” or “Caribbean” than boys who were more likely to report stronger feelings of British pride and identification than girls. The researchers seem to suggest that because the matriarchal Black family structure is well documented in Britain along with assumptions that Black girls will do “just as their sisters, mothers, aunts and grandmothers had done” (p. 1252), it is possible that ethnic identification is being passed on to Black females in ways that it is not to Black males. For the four British women who participated in this particular research study about their social media use, each of them strongly identified with their ethnic identity before identifying as British, with two of them articulating a sense of feeling almost no identification with British nationality/culture at all.

Tamboukou and Ball (2010) conducted interviews with four Black British women at transitional times in their lives in which they were making decisions about education. The purpose of the study was to understand the ways in which the women navigate their locations as Black women and attempt to move beyond rigid limitations of categories like gender, family, class and race. The research provided evidence that the young women utilized a form of “nomadism,” which allowed them the ability to remain in transition while simultaneously maintaining identities that are not fixed or permanent. “The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity” (p. 267-268). In other words, the women made attempts to control the identities that they were assigned within their schools and neighborhoods in an attempt to find and redefine who they are. Their identity negotiation proved to be a form of political resistance to societal stereotypes about Black people and Black women more specifically.

A common aspect in the literature that pertains to the theme of “conceptualizing blackness” is that Black women in both countries describe a desire to be free from the confines and boundaries of how Black womanhood is constructed within society. The studies cited provide useful examples of how Black women in the US and Britain consciously attempt to create a Black identity which positions them as more than stereotypes and worthy of dignity, justice and being seen as fully human.

Womanism

The literature pertaining to this research study denotes the distinction between Black feminist and mainstream feminist theory. A long standing critique of feminism suggests that Black women and women of color often reject it on the basis that it lacks a

connection to the things that define their lives and the oppression that is specific to them (McCann & Kim, 2010). Moreover, past research has demonstrated that because the women's movement did not specifically address issues central to the concerns of Black women, Black women are less likely to identify as feminist or to see contemporary feminism as relevant to their lives (Boisnier, 2003). In her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker (1983) explored theories of feminism and its practices, specifically examining the traditions of Black women. She named this tradition "womanism" and defined womanists as Black feminists or feminists of color. The word itself is taken from a Southern Black American folk expression used by mothers toward their daughters, who would say to them, "you acting womanish" meaning that their behavior mimicked that of an adult or grown woman. She further goes on to explain that being a womanist means that one is the opposite of girlish, irresponsible and not serious.

It is important to note that since the development of womanism as a social change perspective in the 1980s, scholars across disciplines such as theology, literature, and history have begun to embrace womanist terminology and explore their disciplines utilizing a womanist framework (Phillips, 2006). Moreover, while Walker describes womanism as rooted in Black American female traditions, scholars note that womanism is not solely limited to a Black American context. In fact, "explorations of the womanist idea can be found in African, Australian (Aboriginal), Canadian, Caribbean/West Indian, Chinese/Taiwanese, European, Latino/Latina American, Native American Indian, and Southeast Asian/Indian cultural contexts, scholarly and otherwise" (p. xxi).

However, for many Black women, Walker's womanist framework presents a number of challenges and opportunities. It is clear that she identifies womanism as a departure from feminism because it is central to the experiences of Black women, noting their resistance to racial and gendered oppression. The fact that she labels womanists as bold, courageous and willful suggests that Black women go about their struggles for equality and freedom in ways that are radical and which differ from white women given the societal expectations and constraints placed upon them. This philosophy represents inclusion and empowerment for many Black feminists who have not seen themselves reflected in traditional women's movements. It also allows Black women a certain freedom from conventional ways of behaving and allows them to do what they must in their quest for social transformation and full humanity. And yet, at the same time, its specific connection to the traditions of Black women in the American South poses a dilemma in that potentially limits participation by non-American Black women and other women of color, especially those outside of the United States, who have diverse histories of struggle and resistance. Black British feminist Helen (Charles) (Mirza, 1997) notes that Black languages differ from place to place and as a result, the word "womanish" with its US Southern context is not necessarily directly linked to the same experience of Black girls and women elsewhere.

Another problematic aspect of womanism is that in the juxtaposition that equates womanism with serious and responsible and the opposite of girlish and frivolous, Walker "simultaneously implies that black women are somehow superior to white women because of this black folk tradition" (Collins, 2001, p. 10). If womanism is truly about accommodating diversity amongst women's experiences and perspectives, then the

construction of Black women's experiences as more meaningful and loftier than White women's damages the credibility of a framework intended to promote inclusion, especially given the historical and social exclusion of Black women. In other words, womanism cannot fully function to end all forms of oppression for all people if it does not promote interracial cooperation among women.

Abdullah (2012) interviewed six women who identified themselves as womanist mothers. Utilizing participant observation, she sought to discover how the women defined womanism, how they found space to be both womanists and activists and how they made meaning of the relationship between womanism and motherhood. Even though all of the women defined themselves as being social justice oriented and politically and socially conscious, some remained apprehensive about specifically taking on the label of "womanist" as well as "feminist." However, all of them understood Black motherhood as both an act of "conscious resistance and integrated into their world vision" (p. 65). Abdullah notes that for Black mothers, their intersectional identity includes motherhood and, for womanist mothers, their consciousness enables them to reject the White supremacist, patriarchal concepts of family and "build new and reclaimed definitions of womanhood, family, motherhood and community" (p. 65).

Brown-Manning (2013) study examined the emotional journeys of Black women raising sons under American racism. The study sought to understand the range of emotions experienced by Black mothers raising sons and how experiences with racism shape the Black mother-son relationship. The context of this research is situated within the reality that the leading cause of death for non-Black Hispanic males ages 12-19 is homicide and that Black males are overly represented within the prison and juvenile

justice systems. The findings of the study confirmed feelings of guilt, fear and worry as prevalent emotions among Black mothers of sons. The theoretical framework of womanism that the research utilized to analyze the findings demonstrated that each of the participants exhibited womanist characteristics that enabled resilience such as spirituality, wholeness, motherhood and sisterhood; despite their feelings of anxiety and concern in raising their sons. The two studies investigating the intersection of womanism and motherhood demonstrate that while motherhood complicates race and gender for Black women, there are often ways that they can resist oppression and injustice to create community despite seemingly insurmountable odds.

Borum (2012) examined the perceptions of suicide and depression among 40 Black American women. Utilizing a womanist framework, the research was able to identify the specific spiritual and cultural safeguards that Black women used to prevent depression and suicide risk. The study noted that depression and suicidal behavior may be culturally influenced and therefore the purpose was to examine how depression and spirituality impacted thoughts of suicide in the lives of Black women. The participants described depression resulting from feelings of isolation and a sense of spiritual forsakenness that contrast with the womanist framework that a healthy relationship between mind, body and spirit is what prevents illness. According to Phillips (2006), womanism is about self-help, balance and healing. Additionally, the women in the study identified a strong sense of community, religious/spirit and self-identity that served to protect against thoughts of suicide and depression.

Subsequent to Borum's work, Byrd and Shavers (2013) examined possible sources of self-esteem among Black women to identify the sources of Black women's

self-worth and the variations among their self-esteem related to personal experience and variables such as racial identity, womanist identity, feminist identity, religion, work and family. Using a mixed methods approach, one framework they consulted was a four-stage womanist model developed by Ossana, Helms & Leonard (1992) that represents Black women's feelings toward or against their own identity and the identity of others. The stages are:

- Preencounter- in this stage, the woman devalues both her Black and female identities and attempts to obtain self-worth through conforming to White traditional roles and cultural views;
- Encounter- in this stage, the woman has an awareness that race and gender make a difference in her life;
- Immersion-Emersion- in this stage; the Black woman challenges racial views, issues and beliefs and becomes aware of sexist attitudes and challenges them;
- Internalization- the final stage in which a new awareness of race and gender is developed and there is an integration and internalization of a Black identity/consciousness.

The findings of the study demonstrated that Black women had high self-esteem attributed predominately to their religious beliefs and their families. Moreover, they showed that the women were in the Immersion/Emersion stage of the womanist identity model and that they often countered assaults on their self-esteem with active resistance including devaluing negative relationships with family and learning coping strategies to maintain high self-esteem.

The importance of womanism to this study of Black women's use of social media is its relationship to the theoretical foundation of Black feminist thought. Since Black feminist thought states that Black women have a fundamental understanding about the oppressive experiences that frame their lives and that they actively resist them through various means, the womanist aspect of the literature highlights different coping mechanisms Black women employ in response to the meaning that race and gender creates in their daily lives.

Social Media and Activism

In the last three years alone, social media has become an invaluable tool in movements around the world designed to bring about revolution and change. From the Arab Spring, the Indignados/15-M movement in Spain to the global Occupy movement, all of these collective action measures utilized technology to connect members to each another, organize demonstrations, record instances of state abuse against protesters and run issue-based campaigns. While the country and context of each movement was slightly different, what they had in common is the use of social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter, specifically) for organizing and activism. In his ethnographic research study interviewing over 80 activists and through observations of public gatherings in Egypt, Spain and the US, Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) discovered that social media is often used by activists as a means of representation and is responsible for the construction of a public space which assembles a dispersed and individualized constituency. This represents a departure from conventional social movements, which have traditionally relied on local face-to-face networks to mobilize concerned individuals toward collective action. Gerbaudo also notes that social media technologies offer

individuals the promise of connection and are not simply the result of “absolute spontaneity and unrestrained participation” but instead allows online activists the opportunity to choreograph and construct an “emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (p. 5). However, critics often suggest social media poses significant challenges to collective action. Keller (2014) writes that skeptics say that the virtual nature of social media means that activism often remains only online and that it fragments people into thousands of smaller, independent movements instead of bringing them together in a single, larger and organized movement.

The use of social media for organizing and activism has been fraught with controversy. On one hand, examples such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and International Red Cross (IRC) campaign to raise funds for relief efforts after the Haiti earthquake in 2010 demonstrate the power of technology to mobilize individuals, raise awareness, promote and achieve humanitarian goals and create change (Rotman, Preece, Vieweg, Shneiderman, Yardi, Pirolli, Chi & Glaisyer, 2011). However, a lingering question remains as to whether or not people are actually doing anything meaningful when they engage in activism via social media. Nicknamed “slacktivism²” (a combination of the words slacker and activism), critics suggest that social media activism allows opportunities to participate in social causes and gives individuals a feeling of satisfaction but does little to further legitimate social change. Malcolm Gladwell (2010) writes that social media activism such as online petitions, tweeting, and Facebook posts don’t involve financial or personal risk or require that

² Rotman et al define slacktivism as “low-risk, low-cost activity via social media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity” (Rotman et al, 2011, p. 2).

individuals confront socially entrenched norms and practices. To this end, he states that social networks are effective at increasing participation but they also lessen the level of motivation that participation requires. Therefore, one could be a member of an online community, coalition or charity but not actually contribute time, money or resources. Facebook, for example he writes, is the type of activism that succeeds not by “motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice. We are a long way from the lunch counters of Greensboro” (para. 17).

While the main critique of social media activism is that its users are often too lazy to put in the work that “real” activism requires, little research exists examining why people choose to participate in social issues using social media, how technologies have successfully motivated practical activism³ and what are the actual outcomes of social media activism (Rotman et al, 2011). Park (2013) conducted a survey to investigate the unique characteristics of Twitter opinion leaders, their motivations and their political engagement. Opinion leaders refer to those people who “influence opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviors of others in a desired way with relative frequency” (p. 1642). Opinion leaders tend to be highly exposed to news and media content in comparison to non-leaders and because they are so well informed, they are often the main source of impact over the public. The study found that opinion leaders on Twitter do not just use Twitter as a vehicle to communicate their ideas but are also engaged in obtaining, distributing and commenting on information with other users. To that end, the public expression of their opinions combined with social contact with others resulting in public

³ Rotman et al define practical activism as the “use of direct, proactive and often confrontational action towards attaining a societal change” (Rotman et al, 2011, p. 2).

discourse via Twitter use results in making a significant contribution to their involvement in political processes. This research is relevant to the proposed study because it demonstrates that the more that opinion leaders engage in discourse with others through Twitter, the more likely they are to feel motivated to seek information, mobilize others and express their opinions publicly. This also has an impact on encouraging those individuals to participate in public and political processes.

Gaps in the current research literature on this topic demonstrate that little is known about how online activists themselves feel about their online engagement in social issues, what meaning they make of it and how it may lead to change, not just societally, but also for those engaged in those respective sites of struggle. And some research suggests that online activism is not always an opportunity. Fenton and Barassi (2011) argue that current research on social media has overlooked how current technologies affect the internal politics of groups and that social media can ultimately serve to be a communication tool that mostly encourages users to be more self-centered rather than harness the collective creativity of social movements. Their work is based on ethnographic research that examines the British Labor movement and the political culture of social networking sites used by labor organizations. The particular organization they followed relied on a variety of different online platforms including a website, an email newsletter, and social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. What they discovered through informal conversations, participant observation and textual analysis was that among members of the organization, there was no consensus on how to best utilize social media sites for political action that would not negatively impact their other campaigning strategies. Moreover, people became frustrated with the “individualistic

logic of social media and other online practices” meaning that individual messages and opinions which were posted became as important as the collective voice of the organization and were given the same prominence through social media applications (p. 187). The findings of their research show that without specific structured practices, online technologies can “contribute to greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of civic engagement” and can “fragment communication and accelerate the pace of public agenda” (p. 193-194). While this proposed study seeks to look at how Black women individually articulate their experiences, Fenton and Barassi’s research demonstrates the ways in which social media can do harm to a collective cause when individuals perspectives, experiences and need for attention override the collective goal or purpose of group advocacy.

Many Black female users of social media understand it as a tool for creating conversations about justice and equality and a way to support each other--sharing stories of abuse and survival, creating natural hair care forums, initiating dialogue about street harassment and other salient features that reflect the reality of their daily lives (Lemieux, 2014). One user tweeted “when ppl act like our service to each other as BW⁴ ‘doesn’t count’ as radical work, that’s dehumanization” (Hamilton, 2014). The intersection between how social media is used by Black women to address issues of social concern which frame their lives and how they understand it as a tool for activism is a critical point for this study. While the perception of whether or not their use of social media was regarded as illegitimate activism by outsiders did not have direct implications on how Black women understand their storytelling and testimony, the existing critiques did seem

⁴ “BW” is how users on Twitter abbreviate the words “Black Women.”

to reinforce some of the themes of silencing, invisibility and dismissal of Black women's perspectives, which are clearly articulated in the literature.

Another question that arises in the literature about social media networks and activism regards the social value of online interactions. It is possible for one to have hundreds or thousands of friends Facebook and/or hundreds or thousands of followers on Twitter but what types of interactions are they having with other individuals, what is the intensity, and what are the ties among users? Grabowicz, Ramasco, Moro, Pujol & Ehuiluz (2012) conducted a study to examine follower relations to understand where and if high quality interactions among users takes place online via Twitter. The findings showed that strong ties were related to relations with close friends, relatives and closely connected individuals in communities, whereas weaker ties existed among distant acquaintances and among those who interacted infrequently. They also discovered that because one does not need permission to follow someone else on Twitter, the levels of interaction were much stronger and meaningful when interactions (like mentions, conversations or mutual following) between users were present.

Caplan's (2003) work investigated preferences for online social interaction among psychosocially distressed individuals. After surveying 386 undergraduate students ranging in age from 19-57, his findings were that lonely and depressed individuals prefer online social interaction to face-to-face interaction and that this interaction plays an important role in the development of negative consequences associated with problematic Internet use (defined as "maladaptive cognitions and behaviors involving Internet use that result in negative academic, professional, and social consequences" (p. 626)). While this research was conducted prior to the invention of the social media platforms most used by

the Black female participants in this research study (Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr), the implications are relevant. While the participants of the study may or may not be clinically diagnosed as having psychosocial distress (this was a not a question asked of participants), almost all participants did acknowledge feelings of anxiety, stress and distress related to their social locations as Black women. And all but one participant indicated that the use of online social interactions with others (specifically other Black women) through social media was central to their identity and feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.

Clark's (2014) groundbreaking research on Black Twitter also sheds light on how community is established online through social media. Using a grounded theory approach consisting of, among other methods, discourse analysis and structured interviews with 36 Twitter users over a period of four years, Clark discovered that Black Twitter is, in fact, an online community that uses a shared conceptual map and shared language to "communicate and collaborate to create a phenomenon that values positive Black self-identity" (p.65). Her research also demonstrated that Black Twitter users were able to engage in substantive social movements and change as represented by the takedown of Juror B37⁵ and the hashtag Solidarity is for White Women⁶. While this research is not specific to Black women's use of Twitter but instead focuses on Black users collectively, Clark's research, along with the other cited research on social media and activism,

⁵ Juror B37 was the juror from the Trayvon Martin trial who was offered a book deal about her experience on the jury. A petition to the publisher was circulated on Twitter and after calls, emails and messages flooded the publisher, plans for the book were dropped.

⁶ Solidarity is for White Women was a popular hashtag started by Mikki Kendall on Twitter to call out White feminists who supported/were complicit in feminist Hugo Schwyzer's attempts to silence feminists of color online.

provides insight into how strongly connective, engaging and powerful the networks that Black women create online when they are communicating directly with one another to share their lives and experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This research study is grounded in established theoretical frameworks which provide a foundation for understanding Black women's use of social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives and Black women's experiences with oppression and marginalization in daily life. The theories demonstrate consistency with the justification for the study and its goals, and support the data analysis and the outcomes of the research. The theories discussed in this section include Black feminist theory, structural violence and critical race theory.

Black Feminist Theory

The introduction chapter of this dissertation briefly highlighted the importance of Black feminist theory and its contribution to this study. As previously articulated, Black feminist thought is characterized by the knowledge that Black women have about the intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender that frame their lives. Stemming from the understanding that Black women have often been placed in positions that often require them to choose between or prioritize different facets of their identities it recognizes, as Crenshaw (1991) cites, that the problem with identity-based politics is they often ignore or play down the importance of intra-group differences, which leads to tension among those groups. Thus, for example, the violence that women experience is often shaped by race and class and yet civil rights movements focused on race often silence the gendered oppression experienced by women of color.

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling (p. 1242).

Intersectionality notes that there is a particular oppression distinct to the lives of women of color as a result of their status as both racial and gendered minorities. It posits that because they are “both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (p. 1244). Collins (2009) asserts that for Black women, the knowledge gained at the intersection of these identities provides the catalyst for both the development and furthering of knowledge that comprises Black women’s critical theory. Black feminist thought is action oriented; it combines knowledge with actions that aim to “find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic justice” (p. 11). Therefore, Black feminist thought is not static but combines a state of knowing and doing in which Black women understand their subjugation and find ways to actively liberate themselves from it.

Structural Violence

Structural violence refers to the disadvantages experienced by people due to inequities in political, social or economic structures. It does not represent direct physical harm but instead the types of harm incurred through practices that are upheld which serve to marginalize certain groups for extended periods of time. Structural violence is “almost

always invisible, embedded in ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experience” (Christie, Wagner, & Winter, 2001, p. 1).

Johan Galtung developed the term structural violence in 1969 to acknowledge that indirect violence impacts the lives of the most vulnerable groups in societies as much as direct violence does. It was his theory that structural violence can have an even greater impact than direct violence because it is not as observable and is upheld by cultural practices that maintain marginalization for extended periods of time. Examples of structural violence in Galtung’s definition include racism, sexism, classism, ageism and heterosexism. Galtung (1990) notes that cultural and structural violence legitimate their use by making those forms of violence look and/or feel right, or at least not wrong. Thus, they become normalized within our social systems and perpetuated over generations.

In comparing the living conditions of men and women, for example, women are disproportionately affected by structural violence at levels much higher than men resulting in dismal life indicators and lack of opportunities that could transform their realities (Brock-Utne, 1990). Women suffer from discrimination and negative attitudes directed toward them, lack of job and educational opportunities as well as lack of ability to participate in political life. “All women are part of the same struggle, a struggle against all types of violence, for an equal distribution of resources, for the right to express oneself freely” (p. 146). Though women continue to suffer physical and indirect violence at the hands of men, it is noteworthy that, much like misogyny, they can be complicit in maintaining systems of patriarchy, which continue to allow men to exert power and influence in society. Black feminist thought often refers to Black women being oppressed by both men (White and Black) and women (specifically White and non-

Black women of color). The reinforcement of this social hierarchy is a legacy of “inherited behavior” passed down through what is called gender specific socialization (Takala, 1991).

At particular risk for structural violence are women of color, who are often burdened by poverty, childcare responsibilities and a lack of job skills (Crenshaw, 1991). As a result of these factors, which stem from the intersection of race, gender and class oppression, Black women especially can often experience barriers to accessing social and political agendas that seek to solve their problems. Since the immediate focus for many of these women lies in the day-to-day struggles of work, inadequate schooling for their children, violence in their neighborhoods and from police, they are often likely to mistrust or be disinterested in political and legal systems. Thus, we see the interconnectedness of the two above theories. Structural violence results in attitudes and policies that persist in subjugating Black women while Black feminist theory suggests that Black women should actively resist that subjugation.

Critical Race Theory

Race has long been dismissed by social scientists as not a biological reality but instead as a socially constructed category. In popular language, when people talk about race, it is usually synonymous with color (Malik, 1996). Understanding differences in race or color also mean acknowledging that racism is an outgrowth of that categorization; resulting in a system that offers preference to one group of people over another. Lorde (1992) defined racism as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (p. 496). Due to the presence of Eurocentric narratives, which are overly represented in Western society, this preference is afforded to

Whites and results in a system of exploitation and power used to oppress people of color. Different definitions exist about what is or is not racism. However, one important position offers that racism is about institutional power which allows the group that is deemed superior the ability to carry out behaviors which benefit them while negatively affecting other racial/ethnic groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It can be argued that in both the United States and Britain, people of color have never possessed forms of power that allow them to systematically oppress Whites. The relationship between race, racism and power are at the heart of critical race theory.

Critical race theory is a framework that draws from a variety of academic disciplines including law, sociology, history, ethnic, gender and women's studies and is concerned with understanding the role that race and racism have in society; specifically as they relate to legal and discriminatory structures which serve to marginalize people of color. Similar to Black feminist theory, it also has an active social justice component, which concerns itself with working toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination (Matsuda, 1991). While critical race theory is concerned with liberation from oppressive structures based on racial hierarchies, critical race scholars acknowledge that it is intertwined with other theoretical assumptions which seek to eliminate other forms of discrimination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, national origin, etc.

Expanding on the work of critical race theorists, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) identified the need for methods that assist in research based on theories that address issues of race and racism. To that end, they developed what they called critical race methodology, which is defined as a theoretically grounded approach to research that

foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process (p. 24). While their research specifically looks at critical race methodology as a framework for educational research, this framework is relevant and can also be applied to research in conflict resolution and peace studies. It is particularly appropriate for this study since critical race theory acknowledges the intersection of race, class, gender and other forms of subjugation, a central tenant of Black feminist thought. Moreover, its very nature challenges the ideologies that maintain the power and privilege of dominant racial groups and is committed to the empowering of minority groups by recognizing their experiences as legitimate and central to understanding racial subordination (p. 26).

Solórzano & Yosso's (2002) research is also relevant to this research study because they also examine the interconnection of racism, white privilege and storytelling. Citing the work of Carmen Montecinos (1995) they explain that the ideology of racism results in "majoritarian" stories; stories that generate from a legacy of racial privilege and make that privilege appear to be natural. Those stories also include gender, class, and other forms of privilege. As a result, majoritarian stories are those that privilege "Whites, men, the middle/upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (p. 28). While majoritarian stories often silence those in the minority, minorities are not above buying into them or even telling them. This fact is underscored by the literature as stated above, which suggests that a number of negative, misogynoiristic narratives about Black women are told by Black men, White women and other non-Black people of color. While this study did not approach critical race theory from a legal construct, it most certainly focuses on majoritarian stories in terms of the ways Black women experience societal subordination through existing

stories; and counter storytelling in terms of how Black women use social media to create their own counter stories to actively resist that subordination.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how Black women in the United States and Britain use social media to document their stories of misogynoir and the meaning they make from that storytelling and testimony. Building on the existing literature and the outlined theoretical framework, this research is guided by a central research question:

How do Black women in the United States and Great Britain use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives as Black women?

The sub-questions include:

What is the lived experience of using social media for this purpose?

How does the experience affect them?

What meaning do they find in using social media for this purpose?

Each question serves to examine how social media has empowered this particular population to articulate their reality and the injustice they have experienced. While the writing of Black feminists is well documented, little known academic research exists on the juncture between social media and Black feminist discourse, particularly in the field of conflict resolution.

Chapter Summary

There is a wide variety of literature to support the study of Black women's uses of social media for purposes of storytelling and testimony about their lives. While gaps in the literature do not fully address all aspects of Black women in the United States and Britain's lived experiences, it does identify four specific themes relevant for this

research: community activism and resistance through literature, conceptualizing blackness, womanism and social media and activism. In addition to the existing literature that establishes the basis for this topic, three theoretical frameworks that include Black Feminist Thought, Structural Violence and Critical Race Theory support the rationalization for this study. Building on the foundational elements of current research and theory, Chapter 3 of this dissertation focuses on the methodology utilized for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Methodology

Creswell (2007) notes that an appropriate use of qualitative research is when an issue or topic needs to be explored because of a need to study or know more about a group or population or to hear silenced voices. To that end, a qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach was implemented to address this particular research topic. This approach was selected because the topic combined social media and Black women's use-- two subjects that necessitate further study since little is known about them; particularly the intersection between how users from marginalized populations understand and make meaning from their social media use. Similarly, I decided that this approach was relevant because silencing and marginalization are central themes in the literature surrounding the experiences of Black women in both the United States and Britain.

Qualitative research that centers participants in the telling of their experiences, learns from participants and does not silence members of oppressed and marginalized groups can be empowering and democratizing (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Likewise, critical race theory and feminist theory all "assume that knowledge is subjective but view society as essentially conflictual and oppressive" (p. 21). This was a critical element to this particular study as the storytelling and testimony presented by Black women about their lives included discussion of existing social structures and processes that marginalize them or reinforce their marginalization. Further, a qualitative approach seemed to reinforce the fact that this study was underscored by the literature, which supported the

idea that Black women's perspectives include a belief that society is inherently oppressive toward them.

Research Design

Phenomenology is an approach that studies the lived experience of individuals as they perceive or understand it (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore it was an appropriate methodological approach for this study because the study aimed to understand how individuals (Black women in the United States and Britain) experience a particular phenomenon (using social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives). It [phenomenology] is concerned with "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 21). This approach aligned not only with the research questions but also the critical race and feminist theoretical approaches that I, as the researcher, utilized in order to empower research participants and interrogate the issues they experience with domination and power (p.24).

More specifically, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was selected because its analytic process consists of elements that were vital in creating a deep understanding of the meaning participants make from their experiences. The data analysis framework used within IPA requires that the researcher engage in a "close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 79). This detailed examination of the data provided for a more comprehensive narrative to be developed which assisted me in cultivating a full understanding of the phenomenon to be described. Enhanced information about the data analysis process is detailed further in this chapter.

Sample

The selection of research participants for this study required careful consideration because the topic necessitated obtaining a cross section of perspectives from Black women residing in both the United States and Britain. As referenced in both the ethnographic context section as well as the literature review section regarding conceptualizing blackness, some of the issues facing Black women in Britain are markedly different than those of Black women in the U.S.; including the definition of who is Black. To that end, one of the qualifications for participation in the study was that a participant needed to be an individual who self identifies as a Black female, rather than being identified as Black by me, the researcher.

Potential participants were identified representing users from across a variety of social media platforms that included Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Vimeo (a video sharing platform much like You Tube). In the initial design of the study, I anticipated interviewing approximately 5-6 women from each country (10-12) since 3-6 is a suggested range for a project using IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The final study included 12 participants; 8 who reside in the United States and 4 who reside in Britain. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study was as follows:

- 18 years of age or older;
- Live in the United States or Britain;
- Self-identify as a Black female;
- Use at least one social media platform;
- Be able to read and speak English;
- Be willing to participate in a written/oral interview about her social media use;

- The exclusion criteria for participants were the inverse of the ones listed above.

Recruitment

Following approval from Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Research Board (IRB) on February 5, 2015, potential participants were invited to participate in the study through several channels. On February 6th, I posted the IRB approved flier on Facebook asking potential participants to contact me directly. I also asked Facebook friends⁷ to circulate the information to help me find potential participants. Following that post, I sent a direct message⁸ to six women of color on Facebook with the study information. While the purpose of sending this message solely to women of color was not intended to intentionally exclude White women, I made an assumption that most of the women of color I communicate with Facebook have Black female friends who are easily accessible and might be interested in participating in the study. The response from those women was almost immediate and by the end of the day, three of those women had expressed interest their own interest in participating in the study. One, a South African woman living in the US, wrote to ask me if she met the criteria for eligibility.

The next step in recruitment took place on February 7th, which was sending emails directly to four women I had been in contact with through social media. They were Black women with whom I had engaged on various topics related to Black women's experiences and we had previously exchanged contact information to continue communicating offline. Two of them were based in Britain and two were in the US. One of the British women runs a Black feminists group in the UK and I had been in touch

⁷ "Friends" on the social media platform Facebook refers to those people who follow me and whom I follow, and whom we are able to mutually access one another's profiles/pictures/posts, etc.

⁸ Direct Messages are the equivalent of sending an email using Facebook.

back in 2013 to learn more information and had participated virtually in one of their meetings in 2014. In my emails, I invited them to participate as well as to pass along my information to other Black women who might be interested in participating. I also sent invitation emails to three high profile women⁹ who had been introduced to me via email by Meredith Clark, the same researcher who published her dissertation on Black Twitter in the summer of 2014.

On February 8th, I sent direct messages using Twitter to several women I had been in contact with on that platform. In order to do this, these have to be people that I am following that also follow me. Twitter allows you to “follow” other users, which then permits you to see their posts and have their posts be visible in your timeline so that when you log in, you can see what they are posting. Twitter, unlike Facebook, does not require mutual following. However, in order to send a direct message on Twitter to another user, you both must mutually follow each other. The messages were brief. Since Twitter is limited to 140 characters, I simply described the study and asked them to follow up with me for details if they were interested. That same day, I also posted a message on Twitter that could be seen by all of my followers. That message stated “Hey fam- I’m recruiting BW¹⁰ in US & UK for my dissertation on how BW use social media for storytelling/testimony. Interested?” That generated a few responses within minutes (3 to be exact). Women responded with expressions of interest such as “I’m in!” “Pick me!” And “Yassss¹¹!” To those and the subsequent responses, I followed up with direct

⁹ High profile denotes Black women with very large Twitter follower counts (15,000 plus) who also are prominent activists and online feminists with their own blogs and who publish in various publications.

¹⁰ BW on Twitter is the abbreviation for Black women.

¹¹ “Yassss” is an enthusiastic version of yes, often used by Black Twitter users.

messages asking for the users' email address so that I could send the information about the study.

By February 9th, I had approximately 64 retweets¹² of that post and 4 new followers. It is unknown how many expressions of interest I received from my post directly versus the retweets. However, any woman who expressed interest was asked to follow me (in the case that they weren't already) so that I could send her a direct message or she was messaged directly (in the case of those who were following me) by me so that I could request her email address to send the pertinent information. By February 10th, I had about nine serious expressions of interest from potential participants, four of whom subsequently became participants in the study.

The expressions of interest were overwhelmingly positive. I noted that, as far as the recruitment on Twitter, the interest was primarily expressed by women who were not high profile users but instead seemed to be ordinary women who enjoyed using the platform and wanted to talk about their experiences. One of the high profile women I contacted declined my invitation citing that while she appreciated being asked, she was too busy. I did not receive responses to my emails from the other two high profile users nor from the women I had previously been in contact with offline from the UK. One potential participant that I engage with regularly on Twitter expressed great interest but could not commit due to timing and personal circumstances. While I eventually received a few expressions of interest from Facebook, the majority of the expressions of interest came from Twitter¹³. On February 10th I posted another tweet announcing the study and

¹² A "retweet" is when someone on Twitter reposts your original post on their timeline.

¹³ Using the analytics feature on Twitter, I was able to see that my three tweets advertising the study were viewed a total of 3,910 times.

the last tweet about the study went out on February 19th. By then, I had already started interviewing and had garnered significant interest. In the design phase of the study, I anticipated circulating the study flier among different blogs and Black women's organizations that I followed online or was familiar with, but it turned out that I did not need to. Between the social platforms I used to recruit plus word of mouth from participants, I was able to recruit all 12 fairly quickly; though I found recruiting British participants was a bit slower than recruiting US participants. In fact, one of the British recruits was actually introduced to me via email by a work colleague.

Once potential participants were identified, read the study description and gave their initial consent, they were sent consent forms electronically. At this same time, an interview was scheduled. All participants were asked to return the forms prior to participation in the interview. Throughout all steps of the process, I remained available for questions. All participants met the process with enthusiasm and only one woman asked a question concerning the security of conducting an interview via Skype, which was answered to her satisfaction. I began the first interview on February 10th and completed the last interview on March 16th. 10 of the interviews were conducted via Skype, one by telephone and the other was conducted in person in the Washington DC area.

Participants

The 12 participants willing to be interviewed self-identified as Black females living in either the United States or Britain as per the selection criteria of the study. They ranged in age from 19-48, with an average age of approximately 30. There were 8 participants from the United States and 4 from Britain. While the interview questions did not ask the participants specifically what they did for a living, it came up quite naturally

in the conversations prior to the start of the interview or during the interview while participants were providing context about their lives and experiences. Two participants are full-time students; one is a part-time student who also works full time and the rest are at various stages in their professional careers. They represent various disciplines and occupations including creative arts, communications, business, academia, health and social services. The participants were given a choice of using a pseudonym or their real names for purposes of the study. They will be mentioned by name from this point on. The table below (Table 1) is ease of reference. A brief overview of participants is presented in Table 1 with more detail in the findings section (Chapter 4) of this dissertation.

Participant Number	Participant Name	Age Range	Location	Nationality	Method of Recruitment
1	LaFionda	30-40	USA	American	Facebook/Personal Connection
2	Marcelle	40-50	USA	South African	Facebook
3	Charlene	19-29	USA	American	Twitter
4	Takiyah	30-40	USA	American	Facebook/Personal Connection
5	Quinntarah	19-29	USA	American	Twitter
6	Hana	19-29	Britain	British	Referred by Colleague
7	Yossie	19-29	Britain	Nigerian	Twitter
8	Alex	19-29	USA	American	Referred by Quinntarah (Participant #5)
9	Rose	30-40	USA	American	Twitter
10	Shelby	19-29	USA	American	Twitter
11	Adesola	40-50	Britain	British	Referred by Takiyah (Participant #4)
12	Rianna	19-29	Britain	British	Referred by Hana (Participant # 6)

Table 1. Participant List

Data Collection

Once the study design was complete and participants were recruited and given consent, the data collection was ready to begin. In keeping with a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing an IPA approach, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews as the means of data collection. This is because, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) note, IPA is best suited for data collection which invites participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences. While other IPA studies have used other methods, including email dialogues, focus groups or observational methods, they did not seem appropriate for this study. However, upon reflection, I do note that given the purview of this study, it may have been interesting to employ a different method to interview participants for data collection; specifically using a social media platform like Twitter or Periscope¹⁴. While I believe these technologies are extremely limited in their ability to facilitate in-depth interviews and subsequently need clarification surrounding the issues of ethics and privacy that are usually associated with studying human subjects, I do feel that they warrant further examination; particularly in studies that seek to investigate how individuals use technology for various purposes.

Participant Interviews

Each participant took part in an interview which was conducted either using Skype, by telephone or in person. The Skype interviews were recorded using Quick Time Player, a feature available through Apple, which allows for audio and video recording from a laptop. The phone and in person interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. Interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes and were guided by the study's semi-structured

¹⁴ Periscope is a new social media application that allows the user to broadcast live from anywhere using their phone to users who choose to follow them.

interview protocol (See Appendix A). The following are examples of the interview questions that were used to generate data:

- Would you please describe how you use social media platforms for sharing your life experiences as a Black woman?
- Why do you use social media for sharing your experiences? What led you to use social media to describe your life and experiences?
- How does using social media to share your experiences as a Black woman impact you?
- What meaning does connecting with other Black women about their lives via social media have for you?
- What would be different for you if you were not able to use social media to share your life experiences as a Black woman?

In addition, I did decide to ask each participant her age. Though it was not a part of my intention originally when developing the interview protocol, once I began interviewing, I thought there might be some distinguishing features about the experiences of the women and their use of social media based on their age. Indeed, it did make a difference--younger women reported a different relationship to technology in terms of its appropriateness for telling their stories compared to older women. Younger women also talked about their sense of safety online differently than older women did. The findings reported in Chapter 4 will discuss these aspects in greater detail.

Each individual interview was a unique experience. In almost all cases, participants seemed enthusiastic about talking about their social media use and what it meant to them. Most interviews began with some rapport building, including asking

participants to offer a bit of information about themselves and their occupation since I was talking with many of them for the very first time. I also began with some background information about the origin of the research topic for additional context. One participant shared that the topic was “exciting” (Hana) and another shared “the importance of your study is that for some people they need to find a way to identify themselves” (Yossie). Two of the participants referred others to participate after they conducted their own interviews. As the interviews were being conducted, I also took notes in a journal. This journal proved very useful as I consulted it later during the data analysis process. Additionally, after each interview, I made notes recording my impressions, observations and questions.

The data collection process included audio recordings of the interviews. The interviews were transcribed through two methods. Some were transcribed directly by me using headphones and others were transcribed with the assistance of a transcription service as indicated in the Nova Southeastern University IRB approved proposal. However, I found it necessary to review all transcriptions myself using headphones. When I received the individual transcription from the service, I would listen to the recording again and simultaneously review the transcript. I found that the service mislabeled many words as inaudible (like misogynoir) that were important for the context of the study and for obtaining the essence of what the participant was trying to say. I also found that hearing the interview again while reviewing the transcript was useful for becoming deeply immersed in the data. The majority of the transcripts were transcribed directly by me. The transcripts are stored in a password-protected file on my laptop as well as in a password-protected file on an external hard drive. The recordings are also

stored in a password-protected file on my laptop as well as in a password-protected file on an external hard drive. The external hard drive and consent forms are locked in safe where they will remain for three years after the completion of the study, at which time they will be destroyed.

As a part of the study design, I had originally included the possibility of reviewing relevant materials from social media in the data collection process. It was anticipated that I might want to review resources on social media such as blogs, tweets, videos etc. and review the social media pages of the participants to get a feel for how they talk about their experiences using their own words. This, however, turned out to be unnecessary. The data obtained from the interviews was quite in-depth and there was an interview question that asked participants to specify a time that they had used social media for describing their experiences as Black women. While I reviewed some blogs and videos, I believe the data that most accurately responds to the research questions comes from the interviews themselves.

Data Analysis

The analysis of a research study using IPA as a methodology begins with several readings of the transcripts and then moving on to coding the data. In the initial noting step of IPA, the researcher begins engaging with the interview transcript and there are three types of comments that allow the researcher to explore content and language usage. The first type is descriptive comments, which focus on key words, phrases, or explanations that illuminate the participant's thoughts and experiences. The second type is linguistic comments, which focus on "exploring the specific use of language by the participant" (Smith, et al. p. 84). Linguistic comments were essential to the analysis in

this study because the central research question is concerned with how Black women's life stories and experiences are told in their own voices. Lastly, the IPA noting process consists of conceptual noting, which is a more interpretative step designed to engage with the interview data at a conceptual level. All three of these steps allow the researcher to fully engage with the data and develop a deeper understanding, which becomes a precursor to developing themes and writing up findings.

Initial Impressions

Since the transcription process required reviewing the interview recordings, once a transcript was completed, I began the analysis phase by listening to the interview in its entirety while simultaneously reviewing the transcript. This allowed for the correction of any errors but also for noting any information that was of interest and stood out to me. For this, I used the highlight function in Microsoft word and highlighted any relevant text in yellow. This was an open, free approach and I was very liberal with what I highlighted, whether it seemed directly applicable to the study or not. Sometimes this was a comment about someone's identity or an experience that may or may not have been related to social media or not. An example of this is "*Being a Haitian American at Howard is interesting because we have things like the Caribbean Student Association, so I feel like people identify with the Caribbean stuff but I sometimes feel like I'm being lumped in with other things...*" (Charlene). I chose to highlight this comment because it gave greater insight into how the participant feels about her identity and because it gives greater depth to her experience as a Black woman. In addition to highlighting the text, I also made notes using the comment function for any questions, comments or observations I had about what was being said.

Descriptive Comments

The next level of analysis was the identification of descriptive comments within the transcripts. To do this, I selected any key words, phrases, or explanations about particular topics offered by the participant. The descriptive elements were highlighted in green and bolded and italicized for easy identification. Then I used the comment function to write a corresponding comment. An example of this is “*when you aren’t being what people expect you to be, I think you start to disappear a little bit because people notice what they recognize*” (Adesola). In this sentence, I placed special emphasis on the phrases “*you start to disappear a little bit*” and “*people notice what they recognize.*” They were highlighted in green, bolded and italicized and the corresponding comment I wrote was “*People only recognize the stereotype, it is what is familiar.*” I selected these phrases as descriptive of her experience navigating perceptions and stereotypes of what it means to be a Black woman. This comment proved useful later on in the developing of thematic elements since one of the themes relates to how Black women use social media as a way to transcend discrimination and the oppressive stereotypes assigned to them within society.

Linguistic Comments

Another step in the IPA process is the development of linguistic comments. As I was developing these, I realized that they were not always completely separate from the descriptive comments. There were times that the linguistic elements I identified overlapped with a key word, phrase or explanation that was offered that I had previously highlighted and made my own observations about when I was noting descriptive comments. I found this to be acceptable since this was my third in-depth review of the

transcript. In this phase, I also paid close attention to the non-verbal elements of the transcript. When the transcript denoted pauses, laughing, or stuttering that I thought were significant, I made comments about this with a question or observation about what the non-verbal utterance might mean. In order to develop linguistic comments, I used the comment function of Microsoft Word. I had originally considered using the highlight tool but because I had used it for the first two levels of noting, the transcripts had become pretty marked up at that point. Additionally, while I had originally anticipated using italics to denote the linguistic aspects of the text, I had used them earlier when identifying the descriptive comments. The comment function actually served me well for this phase; I simply began each comment with an “L” so I would be able to distinguish the linguistic comments from other commentary I had previously made about the text. One example of a linguistic comment I identified is the following:

“And I can sit with women who are my age, and who are younger than me, and who are older than me and find a little solace and find a little wisdom while we’re watching something on different parts of the world and find that communion there” (Marcelle).

I specifically commented on the choice of the word “*communion*” and my note read “*L: Almost implies a religious experience.*” This participant had previously used the words gathering and community quite a bit in the interview to describe her experiences connecting with Black women via social media, so I was particularly interested in her reference of the experience as communion which seemed to imply a religious, perhaps holy or sacred, aspect of the experience. While this element did not

translate into a theme reflected in the linguistic elements identified in other transcripts, it was still an interesting and powerful linguistic device.

Conceptual Comments

The last step in the initial noting process in an IPA study includes the annotation of conceptual comments. This is meant to be an interpretative process that helps the research engage with the data at a more conceptual level. In this phase, I approached the transcripts with an eye toward interrogation, seeking to ask questions that moved away from the direct, explicit words of the participants and instead toward possible interpretations of their experiences. Some of the questions did not yield anything, as they were unrelated to common thematic elements that could be identified within the transcript and across the other transcripts. However, it was not only a necessary step in the process but also a useful exercise that allowed for the identification emergent themes that led me right into the next step of the process.

To identify the conceptual comments, I reviewed each transcript. I also used the underline feature of Microsoft word to underline the text I wanted to comment on. I then used the comment feature, to add my conceptual comment. An example of text that I made a conceptual comment is “*And I think once you talk to other black women of the diaspora, there are little nuances in what they go through. They experience the same things sometimes, that erasure, that isolation, the micro-aggressions...*” (Rose). My conceptual comment was “*Is there a Black female diasporic identity? If so, what makes up this identity- is it the shared experiences she outlines?*” This turned out to be one of the conceptual comments that did lead to follow up on since it was a theme repeated throughout this transcript and the transcripts of other interviews as well.

Emergent Themes and Findings

I developed the emergent themes in several ways. The first way was by tracking connections and patterns that were similar among transcripts. As I listened to the interviews in order to transcribe them, I wrote down, on post it notes, any ideas/concepts that I recalled being repeated from interview to interview. For example, one post it read: *“Mainstream media- alienation, getting alternative news.”* This was an indication that several participants had mentioned that they felt that the experiences and perspectives of Black women were not portrayed or found in mainstream media. This subsequently led to the development of a theme about creating safe spaces for Black women. This step was not necessarily a part of the IPA methodology, especially because at this stage I was still working on each individual transcript and not yet comparing themes across transcripts. But it did provide me an initial way of seeing larger patterns across the overall data, even if those themes didn't go anywhere. Many of them did not yield substantive results and many of them were just repeats as I sometimes had a different way to phrase what I'd already identified.

The next way that I went about developing themes was at the level of identifying them for each individual transcript. This step required me to review all of my noting on the transcript. At that point, I had read each transcript four times so I felt confident that I was working with the parts of the interview which best reflected all of what I was attempting to capture during the initial noting stages. My task at this point was to take the notes and turn them into brief statements that captured the salient points participants articulated throughout the transcript. In this stage, I was considering not just the participant's words, but my own interpretation as well. To do this, I actually created a

small chart on the last page of each transcript. The chart contained the emergent theme, line numbers and some examples of words, phrases or sentences that supported the essence of the theme. I also left a section for notes in case I wanted to add any additional notations about why I thought this captured a particular understanding. This part of the process went relatively easily and quickly, again, because of the detailed noting process I had engaged in during the prior step. An example is a chart with emerging themes is found below.

Emergent Theme	Line Numbers	Examples	Notes
Developing a diasporic identity	87-92; 618-622	“We connect in that we both experience certain things as black women in diaspora and Africans in diaspora.”	She mentions connection numerous times, always specifying connection to other Black women, other women from African heritage
Creating an affirming space/community	422-425, 428, 452-454, 621-623	“Something that Twitter offers is, I mean, if you choose your followers carefully, something you get is, you get a sense of community. There are people who know you who know what you’ve been through, they know your story, they know your dreams and your passions and everything and they care about you, even though they’ve never seen you, even though we live in two	Creation of a global support network; almost feels “seen” without having met them

		different continents or you know, whatever.”	
Impacted by oppressive expectations/stereotypes	241-243, 261-265, 287-290	“The way black women are viewed today... We’re not allowed the complexity, we’re not allowed contradiction” “there’s an image of black women that people have, they want us to sort of fit into that box” “people act surprised when you’re a black woman who looks a certain way and you’re very intelligent...”	Black women are seen as one-dimensional, flat. She feels constrained by this; her blog writing is a way of showing Black women in their diversity.

Table 2. Example of Emergent Themes

The final way that I went about developing emergent themes was to compare the charts for each transcript to identify overarching themes for all the data. This is the development of what is known as a super-ordinate theme, which is essentially a broader theme that incorporates similar themes or sub-themes. In order to do this, I printed out each chart so that I could see them side-by-side. There were themes that immediately jumped out as consistent across transcripts. However, in order to make sure that they were, in fact, consistent, I wrote down the themes for each transcript on post-it notes. I chose post-its instead of cutting them out because the adhesive nature of post-its allowed for me to move them around easier. This was useful because some themes were super-ordinate themes that encapsulated smaller, support ideas. I originally placed the post-it notes on a white board but they quickly filled up the white board I had, so I then bought a large piece of poster board, and moved the post its there. This gave me a visual idea of

how the themes fit together and I still had the printed out charts that contained the specific lines and notes about each theme.

Once I had an idea of what I believed to be super-ordinate themes, I consulted the research questions to test whether or not the themes responded to the questions. There were a few instances that a theme was developed and consistent across cases but did not relate to the research questions. There were also themes that were not directly related to the research questions but presented opportunities for further study or consideration. Those themes were noted and will be discussed in the recommendations section of this study. I also did some reflecting on whether or not the themes were giving an authentic representation of the participants' voices; an issue of concern for remaining consistent with both the methodological approach and the ethical approach I sought to adopt.

When I finally felt confident in the themes I developed, I created one last chart to help me visually identify whether or not this theme was present in a majority of the sample. A recommended IPA sample size of six is recommended for most first student projects (Smith et al., 2009). My study contained double that amount at 12. Even with such a large sample size for this particular methodology, I found it important (and it is recommended) to measure the recurrence of themes across cases to lend validity to the findings. Due to the size of the chart, it has not been included here. However, it was useful in helping me to identify whether the identified themes were present in half of the cases if not more. As stated previously, the sample size was not completely even—with 8 of the participants being located in the US and four in Britain. However, for the themes pertaining to British women's experiences, if the theme was present in two or more of the cases, I considered this half of the sample and it was considered to be a super-ordinate

theme. The end result of this process yielded six themes, which are split into three categories. The themes are described in detail in the findings chapter (Chapter 4) of this dissertation.

Chapter Summary

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology that employs an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach. The process of recruiting participants, collecting interview data, transcription of interviews, initial noting and the development of recurrent themes are all outlined in detail to provide context for the data analysis. The themes were confirmed after a rigorous process to make sure they were validated by the data and after a consultation of the research questions. In keeping with the goals of IPA as well as the researcher's own ethical stance, the voices of the participants were central to the process. The following chapter, Chapter 4, describes the participants and presents the themes that comprise the study's findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

This section of the dissertation outlines the findings resulting from the study's data collection and analysis. It includes brief descriptions of each participant so that the reader may understand each woman's individual context and so that each of their voices and perspectives are acknowledged and valued as contributions to the research. Following the participant descriptions are detailed explanations of each of the recurrent themes. Demonstrative statements from the participant interviews are included to reinforce or support the justification for each theme.

Participant Summaries

As this study was rooted in a phenomenological approach that sought to understand the experiences of Black women using social media and the meaning they create from it, the participants were critical to the process. The following summaries are designed to provide background information about each participant, her geographic location, age range, social media use and occupation. The summaries are grouped by geographic location as well as the order in which they participated in the interview process. Smith et al (2009) note that an IPA researcher needs to possess the qualities of patience, empathy and a willingness to enter into the participant's world. The participant summaries are intended as way to invite readers of this dissertation into their respective worlds.

Participants from Britain

Hana (Participant #6)- Hana lives in London and is between 19 and 29 years old. She is of South Asian (Pakistani) descent and identifies politically as Black. She is the creative director and founder of an online platform and non-profit organization created for the

purpose of curating, documenting and archiving the narratives of women of color (particularly in the UK) with specific emphasis on how they navigate and exist in their bodies as well as how they understand and deconstruct their identities. She refers to the organization as providing a space for women of color to heal and understand themselves holistically. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter, Tumblr¹⁵ and Facebook. A colleague of mine who thought Hana might have an interest in participating in the study introduced Hana to me through email.

Yossie (Participant #7)- Yossie lives in London and is between 19 and 29 years old. She is Nigerian, having been born and raised in Nigeria until the age of 13, at which time she immigrated to Britain. She is a university student completing a degree in Business Management with intentions to pursue a graduate degree in Media, Communications and Development. She enjoys writing and believes writing characters that look like her and do everyday, normal things is a way that she can change people's negative perceptions and assumptions about Black women. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter and Tumblr and reading various blogs. Yossie was recruited for participation in the study through Twitter.

Adesola (Participant #11) - Adesola lives in London, with frequent travel back and forth to the US, and is between 40 and 50 years old. She is a dancer and choreographer who, upon completing her initial training in dance, was told that she should find a new career path, as she could never be a Black ballet dancer in the UK. She subsequently found acceptance and encouragement in the US, training with a dance company internationally

¹⁵ Tumblr is a microblogging and social networking platform that allows users to have their own blogs and post other content (videos, pictures, etc). Users can choose to make their blogs private or public and other users can subscribe to/follow another users blog.

known as the first Black classical ballet company. She has a doctorate in dance and has taught, performed and choreographed work that has been presented in the US, UK and other parts of Europe. While she has a website and uses blogs for her work, she reports a general disinterest in social media stemming from her dyslexia. She acknowledges a persistent feeling of invisibility as a Black woman in the dance world and says that social media's visibility does not allow her to navigate invisibility in ways that work to her advantage. She does use Facebook to remain in contact with family overseas. Adesola was referred for participation in the study by Takiyah (Participant #4).

Rianna (Participant #12)- Rianna lives in London and is between 19 and 29 years old. She is first generation British, with both of her parents having been born in Jamaica. She strongly identifies as Caribbean and aligns herself with other Afro-West Indian persons. She grew up spending summers in a large city on the East Coast of the US and it was during these trips that she theorized that Black Americans do not recognize global Blackness and that many did not have a larger diasporic connection. She is a writer, artist and creative director and is actively involved in the Black feminist movement in London. She is also involved in the organization run by Hana, which is who referred her for participation the study. She describes social media has fundamental to her political identity and education. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook. Rianna was referred for participation in the study by Hana (Participant #6).

Participants from the United States

LaFionda (Participant #1)- LaFionda lives in Arizona and is between 30 and 40 years old. She is a nurse educator and health administrator and the founder and CEO of a

university designed to offer degree programs to marginalized minority students from non-traditional backgrounds. She is originally from the East Coast of the US and was raised by her grandmother who was a Pentecostal pastor from North Carolina; as a result she subsequently identifies with Black women who hail from the Southern US. Stemming from the isolation of the rural area in which she lives, she enjoys social media's ability to connect her with other Black women worldwide and is currently learning Amharic through Facebook's messenger feature from a woman in Ethiopia whom she met through social media. She mainly uses Facebook though she actively reads various blogs related to health and Black women's issues. LaFionda was recruited for participation in the study through Facebook.

Marcelle (Participant #2)- Marcelle lives in New York and is between 40 and 50 years old. She is South African and works as an educational consultant while also pursuing her doctoral degree. She identifies as a Coloured South African woman with a Black consciousness, which means she has a heritage of mixed raced background and can trace her ancestors to both to native South African but also to both the European slave owners and those escaped persecution in their native European countries and settled in South Africa. She identifies politically as Black and says that when she situates herself in the US, she sees herself as Black and that the coloured aspect of her identity is cultural, leading to a blend of her culture, race and consciousness. She credits social media for saving her sanity and being a place of gathering where she can develop community and engage in healing with other Black women. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and Instagram. Marcelle was recruited for participation in the study through Facebook.

Charlene (Participant #3)- Charlene lives in Washington, DC and is between 19 and 29 years old. She is an undergraduate student studying communications at a historically Black university and identifies as second generation American with ancestry descended from Haiti. She was born in a predominately Black, urban area on the East Coast but moved at the age of 10 and attended high school in a predominately white city in another state (also on the East Coast) where she says most of her friends were White males. She describes having a growing Black identity and says that social media helped her to overcome the inferiority complex that came with being the only Black girl in an all-white environment. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter and Facebook as well as reading various blogs. Charlene was recruited for participation in the study through Twitter.

Takiyah (Participant #4)- Takiyah lives in North Carolina and is between 30 and 40 years old. She identifies as African American and considers herself Black, hinting at a connection to a larger kind of Pan-African idea. Further, she cites the intersectionality of her identity, stating that she concurrently exists as a woman and a Black person. She is originally from the East Coast of the US but has Southern roots. She is an academic and scholar and is employed as a professor of dance at a state university. She credits social media for being a loving, affirming, positive space where she can connect with other Black women while at the same time being helpful for knowledge sharing about information related to her profession. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter and Facebook. Takiyah was recruited for participation in the study through Facebook.

Quinntarah (Participant #5)- Quinntarah lives in New York and is between 19 and 29 years old. She is originally from the East Coast of the US, attended an undergraduate institution in the Southern US and is currently studying for her graduate degree in Mental Health Counseling. She identifies as Black and queer, strategically pointing out that, for her, Blackness means a connection to a larger Black diaspora and is more encompassing than the term “African-American.” She credits social media for opening her up to a wider world of marginalized identities and realities while also broadening her perceptions of what the Black female experience is. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Quinntarah was recruited for participation in the study through Twitter.

Alex (Participant #8)- Alex lives in California and is between 19 and 29 years old. She works at a preschool. She identifies herself as a Black, queer woman whose family has been less than receptive or understanding of all the different things she has been through. She says that part of the reason she is so attracted to social media platforms (specifically Twitter) is that she grew up not talking about things and Twitter is just words and people talking free from the worry of being judged by people who know you. She credits Twitter for connecting her to others during a very isolated and depressed phase of her life and for helping her to create meaningful relationships which she has carried offline. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Alex was recruited for participation in the study through a referral by Quinntarah (Participant #5) who also happens to be one of the close friends that she has met online.

Rose (Participant # 9)- Rose lives in Wisconsin and is between 30 and 40 years old. She is an education specialist at a trauma one hospital and teaches phlebotomy which she has

been doing for about 12 years. She enjoys writing about arts and culture and hopes to someday publish her work thereby creating a platform connecting Black Americans to other the culture and arts of other Black people in countries around the world. She identifies as Black and notes that she has particular compassion for Black women who “seem to get the worst of everything.” She acknowledges that social media has helped her to be more compassionate to other Black women and that it makes her feel supported and listened to. She is not a multi-platform social media user, citing that Twitter is the only platform she uses. Rose was recruited for participation in the study through Twitter.

Shelby (Participant #10)- Shelby lives in Maryland and is between the ages of 19 and 29. She is originally from the East Coast of the US and holds an undergraduate degree in International Business, which she obtained in 2011. She is a writer and filmmaker with her own web series that is available solely through social media. Her target audience is young Black female filmmakers, mainly college age, who are interested in filmmaking but whose content isn't considered mainstream because their characters are Black. She sites that young Black women in the TV/film industry are often pigeonholed because of their age and race, even though they are not making content exclusive to Black audiences. She credits social media for helping her to find communities of people (young filmmakers) who are just like her, which has proven helpful for networking, learning and support. She is a multi-platform social media user, citing use of Twitter, Facebook and Vimeo¹⁶.

¹⁶ Vimeo is a social networking site which allows users to upload, share and view videos. It has been dubbed the “You Tube for hipsters.” There are many aspiring artists/filmmakers who create and produce short films and shows that are hosted on Vimeo. It is a free service and accessible around the world.

Themes

The analysis and its subsequent theme development yielded six themes that related to the areas of focus of this research and its three research questions. The six themes are divided into three categories, which are:

1. Social media's impact on the self
2. Social media as a designated safe space for one's marginalized identity
3. The formation of community through social media

The subsequent section presents the thematic findings within their respective categories and is accompanied by a detailed description of each theme. The descriptions are also complemented by direct quotes from the participants, which are representative of their experiences within the given theme. Each participant statement will be in quotation marks with the participant's name following directly behind it in parenthesis (See Participant Summary section for descriptions of individual participants). More regarding the findings and their relationship to the research questions can be found in Chapter 5.

LIST OF THEMATIC FINDINGS

1. Social Media's Impact on the Self

Theme 1. The experience of using social media is accompanied by the negotiation of a private and public self.

Theme 2. Social media use leads to knowledge and personal transformation.

Theme 3. Relationships with other Black women through social media serve as positive affirmation of one's self, humanity and dignity.

2. Social Media as a Safe Space for One's Marginalized Identity

Theme 4. Social media provides an empowering platform for "talking back" to societal oppression and the development of counter stories.

Theme 5. Users navigate a duality within the space; feeling safety while simultaneously feeling unprotected.

3. The Formation of Community through Social Media

Theme 6. Using social media assists Black women in feeling connected to a larger, African diasporic identity.

Table 3. Thematic Findings

Social Media's Impact on the Self

The bulk of the study's interview questions (see Appendix A) pertained to the participants' individual experiences using social media and how it impacts them. Thus, it is no surprise that the majority of the study's findings could be incorporated into this theme. Among other questions, participants were asked specifically how they use social media, how it impacts them and how their identity impacts their choice to use social media for speaking about their experiences as a Black woman. They discussed a variety

of topics and experiences pertaining to these questions. After a review of the data, three themes emerged related to this category. They are discussed below.

Theme 1. The experience of using social media is accompanied by the negotiation of a public/private self

Citing a variety of ways that this manifests itself, a number of participants discussed the distinction between the creation of a public and private self and how the differences between the two can be negotiated within the different social media platforms that they use. Some participants shared that they are a part of private Facebook groups where only invited members can join to discuss certain topics (specifically groups created to discuss topics related to race and gender), some users have private Facebook pages and Twitter accounts which can only be accessed by those who are granted permission, while simultaneously maintaining public profiles that can be accessed by their colleagues, students and for business purposes. One of the reasons they cited for this was so that they can have greater control and regulate whom they communicate with in the space; particularly because the space is such a liberating and safe location for them to share personal experiences about being a Black woman compared to the outside world. One participant discussed having two Twitter accounts—one, which her family can see, and another other, which is anonymous and is her way of communicating with others about topics related to womanism, race and sexuality. She shared that in this way she can be free from the gender expectations placed upon her by her family, which she finds to be very restrictive and old-fashioned.

“I have an anonymous sort of account where I talk about all the things I love, my passions, my, the boss side, my...everything that I can't really say to my parents” (Yossie).

“I will not friend students on my private profile because that space feels intimate for me. I know that might sound crazy because it's Facebook, but I'm really careful about curating my friend list. That profile feels intimate, kind of like I'm talking to people in my living room, and I'm not cultivating that kind of intimacy with my students” (Takiyah).

“My blog is really personal and so I only let the folk who I choose to have access to the link, only they have access to the link... I have things on that blog and pictures and whatever struggles I'm going through that I don't really want to share with the greater public but that I know a couple of close folk have access to seeing it and then that's how I share out really maybe intimate things even” (Marcelle).

“I think that's the interesting thing about social media, is how people compartmentalize their lives, or they can have these split selves. I think for me for a while, probably up until about 2 years ago, that was the case. For about 3 years, I just didn't ... I still don't like people I know reading it” (Hana).

While the above examples demonstrate that participants find that the development of a private self is helpful for maintaining the intimacy and safety of the space as well as a distinct personality and “voice” that they may not be willing to share publicly, other participants talked about negotiating a private self online that allows them to discuss

matters openly and honestly that they would not be able to articulate in front of specific audiences.

“I use it openly and secretly to talk to other Black women about things happening in the Black community... there are some posts that you just want to keep among the people because you know white people are gonna see it and they’re going to feel alienated or make some crazy reply...” (LaFionda)

“I think a lot of us, myself included, are trying to negotiate the space of public and private on these platforms” (Takiyah).

While this suggests that Black women compartmentalize their communication into public and private and use social media to talk with one another privately without the addition of unwanted perspectives from outside groups, another aspect of the private/public dynamic is the feelings of alienation or frustration that can arise as this space is being negotiated. One participant shared that, for her, this happens when an event occurs that has specific impact on the Black community is being discussed on social media and members of other demographic groups do not share the outrage. This could suggest a preference for an exclusively private platform, in which one can always choose a “preferred” community with which to engage, one that is more aligned with one’s own perspectives and reality.

“It's also very frustrating when the Trayvon Martin verdict comes out and everybody I know on social media is posting and tweeting and talking and sharing their grief, and I see a white person show up in my news feed and they're just posting pictures of their dog” (Takiyah).

Another participant offered that the creation of a public self through social media doesn't allow her to navigate the invisibility she experiences due to her status as a Black woman in society and the perceptions that accompany it. While feelings of invisibility and silencing emerged among participants in some of the later themes, her perspective offers the suggestion that having a public social media profile doesn't allow for maneuvering "unseen" within society in ways that may be to one's advantage.

"I also find that I disappear a lot; I think you become invisible a lot and, I sort of, I guess I try to use that to my advantage so I can be sort of present somewhere because people aren't really noticing me... So I don't like to have a really close sort of trail of what I'm doing and when I'm doing it because of all... I think it might be because of that- the projection of who you are and I'm happy to be like what people want me to be at the time for me to get the stuff done that I want to get done" (Adesola).

The findings also demonstrated that the notion of a public and private self might not isn't always negotiated by Black women in relationship to other users on social media but can also be negotiated at the individual level. This can determine how a Black woman uses a given social media platform in the first place. While all of the platforms are considered "public" in that they are free and not bound to certain privacy standards (even though some have the option to allow the user to make their profile and content private), some participants in the study reported that they use or have used it in the past for self-reflection and inquiry, a journal of sorts, and not so much as a way to communicate publicly to others.

“But, you know, I just, I only have like how many, I really don’t check my follower account so I think I’m under three hundred. And yeah, at this point, I just tweet for me” (Rose).

“Sometimes I feel like I’m talking to myself. It really feels like that. It really is I have to be honest and say that sometimes I use my timeline like a journal of sorts because I’ll just get on and start going. When I’m aware, when I’m more aware of what I’m talking about like sometimes something will trigger a thought and I’ll just start talking. Other times it’s more deliberate and I’ll say, ‘Hey, you guys, I want to talk about this,’ and I know that certain people will gravitate to that conversation” (Alex).

The distinction between a public and private self was also seen across age differences within the sample of participants. One of the interview questions asked participants to identify when social media might not be appropriate for telling one’s story. This garnered a variety of responses, mainly on the part of participants who were within the age ranges of 30-40 and 40-50 who said that there are hard limits to the appropriateness of social media for sharing stories, specifically because something may be too private (personal), or may need professional attention and is therefore not appropriate for sharing publicly. Similarly, it was noted that social media becomes difficult when one cannot control how the tone of one’s message is perceived by others.

“I think, sometimes, it’s not appropriate when we tell too much of our private tales on there. And I think sometimes it’s not helpful

when we think of what, if it's out of context or if we think how words are being so badly misconstrued and we can't control it" (Marcelle).

"There are times when, like I said, Twitter feels therapeutic. I know for myself and other women who are maybe not connected to resources that we need, we do use Twitter when we do need to be in actual therapy with a licensed medical professional" (Alex).

"It might not be helpful if say something happened and I wasn't completely healed from it. You may be inviting people in who trigger you more, from your trauma, and thus harming you more. So, yeah, and like I said everybody's a little bit different but for me if I experience something traumatic like that, I would definitely one, need to be completely healed before I share" (Rose).

One of the more interesting aspects to the distinction of the negotiation of a public and private self was that women from the younger range of the sample (ages 19-29) overwhelmingly stated that social media was almost always appropriate for sharing their story. Perhaps this is because many of them have grown up with technology (many of them stated that they began using social media in high school) and have been negotiating an online identity since adolescence in comparison to older participants for whom social media is a relatively more recent phenomenon.

"I think honestly you can share whatever you want to as long as you have the right audience for it. I mean, as long as you're not like saying like treason stuff and as long as you're doing it to hurt people or

yourself, I think, you know, basically anything is within your jurisdiction”
(Charlene).

“I don’t know, personally, I don’t feel embarrassment or guilt in that way. I have no problem sharing very intimate parts of myself”
(Rianna).

“I’ll share anything on Twitter. Some people will be like ... I’m sure that some of my followers feel like I over share sometimes but I don’t feel that way. I’ve talked about my family. I’ve talked about relationships, sex, gross health things. There’s really nothing that I really wouldn’t talk about on Twitter...” (Quinntarah)

The development of a public and private self through social media and how it is negotiated for individual users based on their age, location and experience is an interesting and powerful theme which adds greater insight into how Black women use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives.

Theme 2. Social media leads to knowledge and personal transformation

Overwhelmingly, participants across ages and geographic location articulated that social media has been an incredibly important tool for the development of their knowledge, both for knowledge about themselves and about other Black women. Moreover, there has been an aspect of this online knowledge sharing and production that has been deeply transformative. Several of the interview questions targeted this aspect indirectly by asking how using social media impacts participants individually and how it impacts how they relate to other Black women. Their responses indicate that they view social media as critical to their self-esteem, social, emotional and political growth as well

as for general learning and education. Some participants talked about facts or information that they learn or share through social media which are useful for professional purposes. Others talked about learning information about other marginalized social groups (persons with mental health challenges, LGBT communities, sexual assault victims), which helps them to develop expanded perspectives. A few participants also mentioned that because they are actively involved with social justice causes, social media assists them to become more politically and socially aware.

“I have been able to get ideas about my career and tips and I wouldn’t be able to find this without the Internet. It’s inspiring and helps you stay confirmed in what your path in life is. It’s great networking and learning...just good community support. You know, for the young filmmaking community” (Shelby).

“So, a lot of my education, political and otherwise, and my creative expression has been linked heavily with social media... the correlation between me coming onto social media and opening my horizons into particular areas, they worked very well together. I can’t imagine my political education and re-education without social media” (Rianna).

“There are a lot of subjects sometimes that come up that I was not aware of or someone will tweet the title of a book that I haven’t read...Or basically it’s just discovering new things, new things that I haven’t even thought to think of to study or whatever... you can get good info, good info to improve yourself or just expand your perspective” (Rose).

Many of the participants shared that by using social media they are able to learn more specifically about Black women-- the issues and challenges as well as the wide diversity of experiences and perspectives that Black women have around the world. They cited this as important for challenging their own stereotypes about Black women as well as for their own personal identity development. They understand it as a critical tool for developing solidarity with other Black women. While almost all of the participants talked about their social media use in ways that help them to become more educated and to develop personally, it was a particularly prevalent theme among the sample of women representing ages 19-29. Those women talked about social media in terms of it being useful for learning about the various contexts that frame the lives of Black women and for facilitating the experience of learning to embrace being a Black woman positively in spite of negative reinforcement about themselves from society. This reflected the potential of social media's ability to help young Black women feel empowered, to be understood as diverse beings and to develop healthy self-esteem.

“I think it allows me to understand them more because even though I myself am a black woman, I am only one kind of black woman. Like we've been saying, there's so much diversity...Some black women like to think they're the experts on all black women. Again, we're not a monolith. It's just opening me up and broadening my ideas on what the black woman experience is” (Quinntarah).

“Teaching me about like Afro Latinas...Afro Latinas and Black Diasporas, things like that so I feel like I learned a lot about myself and how I fit in to the different oppressions... Like we didn't just like sit

around on our computers and our phones, like we learned about ourselves. I think that's cool" (Charlene).

"I would actually say that it has broadened my view of other Black women... I had a certain view of how women were based on my East Coast experience... So it challenges any stereotypes that I had about our own ethnic group. And that's when you realize the widespread diverse culture of the Black identity across the world" (LaFionda).

"And I started getting a sense of who I was as a woman because I love my mom and she's wonderful but I don't think I learned anything about womanhood from my mom...my introduction to those sort of things were from Feminista Jones on Twitter and other women like Trudy (the Trudz)...So from those women I found more things to read and I sort of started developing my own sense of identity" (Yossie).

As a supplemental interview question, participants were asked what they hoped to get out of the research. In addition to citing that they had a desire for a larger audience to understand how Black women use social media and for what purposes, a number of them shared a desire to learn more about other Black women around the world; with a particular interest in their experiences using social media and their life experiences more broadly. For British participants, there was also an interest and excitement about acknowledging the Black British female experience as distinct from the Black American one. More details about the Black British female experience will be presented in the sixth thematic finding of this study. However, the thematic finding discussed in the above section which highlights social media use for facilitating knowledge, specifically about

the self and other Black women, directly relates to the third and thematic finding of this study.

Theme 3. Relationships with other Black women through social media serve as positive affirmation of one's self, humanity and dignity

The vast majority of participants described social media as important and impactful for their connections with other Black women and one that is vital to their own feelings of self-worth and affirmation. They described this as taking place through sharing experiences, receiving direct and indirect validation from other Black women and just general support. This results in feelings of being “seen” and “heard” in comparison to offline experiences in their lives where they feel marginalized and invisible. Several participants used the word “affirming” to describe social media as a space, the impact it has on them and the impact it has in terms of how they relate to other Black women. Other perspectives offered were that there is a sense of “healing” and a “therapeutic” catharsis that occurs when they are able to share lived experiences with other Black women online. In this way, they also spoke of social media as a platform for establishing community and for helping individuals to make meaningful connections, even in a digital space.

“It's a happy space. It's a joy space... It's a place that I can affirm them. It's not weird, for example, for one of my sisters to change their profile picture and to see a bunch of black women posting hearts or "you look so good girl" or "you so pretty." It's an affirmation space. We will give each other compliments. We will give each other love. We give each other high fives” (Takiyah).

“I felt that there was something affirming about hearing other people going through similar, or different things, but are trying to do the same work” (Hana).

“I think a lot of us have a lot of hurt, a lot of baggage we carry around just living in this society. Just to know that there’s another black woman that says ‘Sis, I hear you, I see you, I recognize you, I’m going to listen to you and I’m going to support you and I’m going to be honest with you.’ That, to have that is amazing. It’s amazing, it makes you feel like you can fly” (Rose).

“Social media gave me like mad black girl loves... when I had social media affirming who I was, saying like, you know, black girls can be anything, black girls are nice, black girls are the most loving people in the world... And I feel like that it’s definitely impacted me positively. You know, I feel like instead of like shying away from having black girlfriends, like that’s basically all I really want to have now. Because I feel like no one understands me as much as black girls do” (Charlene).

“You can use it as a space to access your humanity. The human things. Which is nice” (Hana).

In addition to engendering feelings of self-worth, affirmation and healing, participants also talked about how empty their lives would be without social media, specifically because of its connective ability. This was in direct response to an interview question that asked them to reflect on what would be different for them if they were unable to use social media to tell their “story.” The resulting responses that emerged from

this question indicate that Black women consider social media vital to helping them create meaningful relationships with others, particularly other Black women. Some participants described having a supportive “circle” which would be hard to establish without social media. Moreover, some offered that social media is helpful for combating feelings of loneliness and isolation (which will be addressed in some detail in the sixth thematic finding). A few participants also talked about the importance of social media for having made them the individuals that they are today and its role in modern society as a tool for communication, connection and learning.

“If I weren’t able to share my experiences with the black woman or learn about those experiences through social media, I would have no idea that like the Black Lives Matter was founded by a black woman. I would never know about the black women that are being killed by police. I would never know about, you know, body positivity. I wouldn’t know about sex positivity and how that’s different for black girls and how you just have to not give a shit about it. I haven’t, I wouldn’t know anything about my hair” (Charlene).

“I would miss so many people in my life who are valued. Whose perspectives and opinions I value... I don't have time to do five Skype dates on a Sunday with my sister friends... Trying to carve up that kind of time is increasingly difficult because of the lives that we have. So if I couldn't have that social media space to share what's going on with me, to find out what's going on with other people, at this point I would feel so disconnected. There are relationships that I'm sure I wouldn't have been

able to maintain. There are other relationships that I never would have had. There are people I've met in social media” (Takiyah).

“I don't think I would have had the emotional outlet that I needed, particularly after certain things had happened...I think a lot of the things, and how I approach things now, about well-being and mental health and self-care and trauma and the power of storytelling through that, I think would have been very different, very different. I think that's something that social media has really helped with” (Hana).

“I would feel really sad if I couldn't access my very personal circle. Considering that my personal circle has changed in the past five years, a lot of them include people I've met on the Internet... I don't know I would have organized myself personally and publically to do things like I do actively... I don't know what kind of person I would have been. Or what I'd stand for....” (Rianna)

Participants also shared that they were aware that of some of the perceptions within society that meaningful relationships could not be created or sustained online. However, they actively challenged this idea, stating (as the quotes above confirm) that a number of them have not only made friendships online that have been carried offline but that social media is also critical to maintaining relationships that do not begin online. The importance of maintaining connectivity to other Black women is explored more in-depth as the sixth thematic theme of this study's findings.

Social Media as a Safe Space for One's Marginalized Identity

The second category of thematic findings involves social media as a specific site or location for the various ways Black women use it. While the interview questions did not directly address this point, through the data analysis it became evident that there were particular characteristics that were associated with social media as a platform for Black women's storytelling and testimony about their lives as Black women. Participants spoke of these characteristics in terms of social media as a vehicle that provides the opportunity to create counter narratives to the oppression framing their lives as well as a safe space for their storytelling. At the same time, there was a contradictory element to this safety since social media's public nature often left participants vulnerable to harassment and different forms of violence.

Theme 4. Social media provides and empowering platform for "talking back" to societal oppression and the development of counter stories.

The ability to tell one's story, to create an alternative reality and/or develop a more complex image of Black women for the public was cited by participants as one of the benefits of using social media. Several participants acknowledged a feeling of invisibility or erasure in society, which prompted their use of social media as a way to "define yourself for yourself" (Yossie). In this way, they find social media empowering for announcing their presence to the world and demonstrating that they live normal lives just like everyone else. Others shared that they feel impacted by the pervasive stereotypes that dominate how Black women are viewed within society and that social media provides a platform for resisting those categories and assumptions.

“With the notion of a Black woman...its still such a bit of a stereotype surrounds what that means. You know there are limited identities that you can have with that...when you aren't being what people expect you to be, I think you start to disappear a little bit because people notice what they recognize” (Adesola).

“It's people who are trying to understand themselves, and want to use and listen to other people's stories as a way to do that to reclaim their own stories and their own experiences” (Hana).

Additionally, participants talked about the ways in which the “mainstream” (a reference to both mainstream media and popular culture) does not recognize them or allow them to be individuals who are seen as autonomous beings with agency in the same ways that White men and women are. To that end, their use of social media is about claiming a space for themselves that allows them, not just the ability to talk to one another and to learn, but also provides freedom to be who they are in all of their diversity and complexity.

“I turn on the TV, I don't see myself or if I do see myself, it's embarrassing. Or it's just like really one-dimensional. So when I and I do kind of feel boxed in...”(Charlene)

“We're not allowed the complexity, we're not allowed contradiction...So you know, they either want us to be one thing or another... there's an image of black women that people have, they want us to sort of fit into that box” (Yossie).

“You know society teaches women these certain things and how women should act and what sex should look like. When you're growing up and you're feeling urges and fantasizing about things that are not necessarily what people are teaching you it's kind of like, "Well, damn is something wrong with me? Am I weird?" Twitter, especially with sex and black women and identity and there's so many things...It's nice to see the real deal and here's so many real deal things from women and all kinds of things” (Quinntarah).

“There’s a sort of rise of social media amongst black women or women of color generally because no one’s putting us on news channels. No one’s putting us in films. No one’s putting us in music videos or anything that communicates something to people. So we’ve had to carve a space for ourselves” (Yossie).

Several of the participants described using social media as a way to be who they really are and for sharing their overall lived experiences in an open and honest way, which they acknowledged were multi-faceted. This resulted in the use of social media for writing (both fiction and non-fiction stories) but also for talking about pop culture (music, fashion, television) and for issues related to social justice. Intentionally creating a balance of using it for both serious issues and entertainment seemed to be a pattern across all of the ages in the sample, although women in the 30-40 and 40-50 demographics also talked about having certain professional pressures that require them to be serious at work thus they get special enjoyment from using the space for fun- which included things like talking with other women about mindless things and silliness. A few women in the 30-40

age range talked about watching the TV show “Scandal” (and its importance to them for its lead Black female character) at the same time as their friends and commenting on it “live¹⁷” on social media. They compared this to a conversation, almost as if they were watching the show while on the phone with their girlfriends.

“When I write I don’t specify a race but in my mind, my characters are black, they look like me. So, I try to write about people doing basic things, people falling in love or even experiencing loss or death or you know, heartbreak or even, I don’t know, love or anything like that, so I try to do that in my writing because I was inspired by Bonnie Greer and what she said about black women not being allowed contradiction” (Yossie).

“I guess for me, social media was that, was about being able to speak in a way that I didn't feel was policed, or wouldn't be policed. It was different to say things out loud and for a long time I wasn't able to say things out loud, for various reasons...as a way of encountering other people, and connecting, and also being able to write my experience out in a way that I wasn't able to articulate elsewhere” (Hana).

“I was tweeting about how it’s hard for black women to affirm their space, to like set boundaries because we’re constantly kind of pigeonholed into being like the angry black woman if we even stand up for ourselves ever... I feel like I tweet about my personal space a lot, just my personal space being invaded” (Charlene).

¹⁷ During the show’s live broadcast.

“It's not life and it's not death but performance [music, TV] becomes this third space where we can engage a range of ideas and perspectives. That's fun. And I think it's empowering to think about what might be possible and processing that with other sisters on social media is really important to me” (Takiyah).

A few of the participants suggested that there is a freedom of choice on social media and while they can choose to talk about fun things, their passions really lie in using the platforms to deconstruct important issues related to their lives more than anything else. One way these issues were referred to was “heavy.”

“When you're talking about things like domestic violence or racial profiling or police murder or rape culture, you get to know a lot about the way people think about really intimate and important things. I think that connection is why, because I'm able to talk about things that are so important to me that I'm so passionate about, it's why I feel seen” (Alex).

“They run the gamut from sexual assault, domestic violence, marriage, gay rights, sexuality, gender, fashion, music, but I am more passionate about the social aspect of injustice, so I try to post things that really make you take another look where you're like ‘Oh, I didn't know anything about this’ because popular white media did not tell us anything about this” (LaFionda).

One interesting aspect of this theme is that a few participants acknowledged that social media was not originally conceived for the purposes for which Black women currently use it. In that way, there was a sense that Black women were responsible for

transforming the platform- taking it way beyond its original use and innovating it; turning it into something way more meaningful and impactful. The comments on this point reflected a sense of ownership and the phenomenon of “Black Twitter” was mentioned a number of times. One participant said “black women run these platforms... we're using them perhaps in a way that they weren't intended to be used but this wouldn't be the first time that we've revolutionized a technology that was meant for something else” (Takiyah).

Theme 5. Users navigate a duality within the space; feeling safety while simultaneously feeling unprotected.

A number of participants articulated that social media is a safe place for them to have meaningful, important conversations and connect with other people (and especially with Black women) in ways that they may not be able to do offline. The reasons for this disconnect were varied; some participants articulated that they simply did not have a network of Black women physically available to them for discussing their lived experiences, particularly ones that relate to marginalization and oppression. Others offered that while they did have Black women available in their offline lives, those women were not interested in discussing some of the issues of importance that framed their lives. Some implied that this disinterest was due to a lack of consciousness on the part of their colleagues and so social media, for them, was the space where they could unpack those issues and engage in problem solving. Regardless of the differences in experience of how they came to use social media as a safe place, it was a prominent theme among the experiences that using social media is a protected space for

conversations and connections that ultimately generates connection and a place of shelter, where Black women can find validation and community.

“I would say its all related to notions of safety... there’s so much, ignorance that surrounds our ways of life, our cultures, our practices, so many misconceptions and myths... So I use social media to say certain things, in certain ways...I use it to communicate, fully, freely, openly and in a safe place with other sisters or even people of other cultures that are culturally humble or culturally aware” (LaFionda).

“For me that’s why I use it, I can reach out and somebody will reach back and we live such isolated lives and so I think so much of the disconnect between people is really hard for me but I find it with these platforms, I find my connection again” (Marcelle).

“For me, that’s really important to have those safe spaces, because those safe spaces are where that action can happen. You don’t have to justify it. It’s not people saying, ‘This doesn’t exist,’ or, ‘This experience isn’t real,’ which can often happen even within communities of color” (Hana).

“We’ve had to sort of push ourselves into that space to say ‘Hey, we exist’ and then we talk. So just having that space to tweet about what’s going on in my life every day and you know, something that Twitter offers is, I mean, if you choose your followers carefully, something you get is, you get a sense of community” (Yossie).

At the same time that social media is provides safety for expression and assembly, participants also noted that it could also be a place where Black women are often exposed to abuse and indirect violence from others. This takes place in several forms including harassment, trolling¹⁸ and even stalking. However, as they talked about these experiences, it appears that the abuse does not generally occur during times when they are using social media in general but is instead the result of being vocal about social justice issues and/or issues which frame the lives of Black women. For example, they cited that if they are tweeting Black feminist perspectives on a particular subject (LGBTQ issues, racism, rape culture, etc.) they often receive negative responses, specifically from Black and White men. The abuse varies and ranges from messages in which they are being cursed at or called racial slurs, to being threatened with rape and other forms of violence as well as receiving unwanted profane pictures of the male anatomy.

“This guy became so obsessed with me and he used to stalk my tweets and I just felt uncomfortable and I had to close down that account and start again” (Yossie).

“I know so many black women who have experienced so much vitriol and negativity on social media, I've had my fair share of people saying really horrible things to me...Engaging the social media highway almost feels as dangerous as walking down the street. There's street

¹⁸ Trolling is when a person intentionally posts offensive or provocative statements online with the intention of upsetting others or eliciting an angry response from them (Webster, 2014).

harassment, but there's also harassment in that social media space that I don't think we escape” (Takiyah).

“I’m kind of low exposure...I don’t have as many followers as some other tweeters do. So I don’t really get that, some of the hate and the, just some of the tweets that some black women get that have a high follower count that tweet about those things, is ridiculous” (Rose).

“It's almost like a policing of black women's pleasure, when these men show up to try and regulate in social media, and I hate that. I hate that... I have less patience for people trying to regulate my pleasure in that space, because how fucking dare you” (Takiyah).

Participants talked about the different ways in which they handle this abuse. The most common response was taking a hiatus from social media for a short time, although this was met with feelings of resentment and isolation. Others talked about taking initiative to protect themselves from harassers, either by directly confronting them or blocking¹⁹ them. Participants expressed a sense of empowerment and choice in the ability to block people. Blocking also extended to people who were not necessarily harassers but who did not engage in social media “etiquette” with the participant to her satisfaction. In other words, participants said that they felt that those who engaged on their pages were obligated to follow certain unspoken norms related to commenting and conversing. They were very clear about not having an interest in arguing with Facebook friends or Twitter followers within their individual social media spaces and that if individuals

¹⁹ When a user decides to block another user on Facebook and Twitter, they can no longer see that user’s profile, nor can they receive messages or posts from that person. Likewise, the blocked user is no longer allowed to access the profile or post messages on the page of the person who blocked them.

disrespectfully expressed opposing views or views which were intolerant, they were clear about blocking them so they no longer had to be in contact with those persons.

“I feel like this is a choice... a free choice. We have so much limited freedom, I think the things that we post and the things that we say should be the things that make us happy and that bring us joy and things that give us an outlet for the way we're feeling and if people don't agree, or if they vehemently disagree, and I am happy to have an open dialogue about anything but if people are disrespectful of that then I just won't have you participating on my site” (Marcelle).

“The whole purpose of social media is to be engaged with, not just when you're trying to fight. My favorite thing on Facebook and on Twitter really is the block feature...I'm all about sending somebody a one-way ticket to the block party. All the time” (Takiyah).

“Really the only time I get trolled is when I see people are coming for like my sisters and I'll be like ‘Listen, you're not going to talk to her like that, she's actually just trying to have an opinion. If you don't like it, you can go somewhere else, for real’” (Charlene).

Some participants also discussed the idea of permanently not participating in social media due to the negativity and abusive comments that are associated with being a Black female user. They cited that outside parties often suggest that if they are unhappy with social media, they can just choose not to participate in it. This idea was also met with resistance and frustration. Because of the multiple benefits participants have received from using social media, they shared that they were unlikely to stop using it,

even with the potential for harm that comes with it, because it is so vital to how they function in daily life.

“Social media can be a place for retreat, for safety and community.

It can also be a site for abuse and a lot of violence and negativity that folks don't think about. So when people say, you just can just choose not to do social media... Social media is fundamental to the way we live”

(Takiyah).

“It's a necessary thing now – the way that books used to be a necessary thing, the way that writing letters used to be a very necessary thing. It's a shame that everything's so digitized now but we have had...always have to communicate in some way. And... there's just so many of us out there... if I didn't have that, I wouldn't have this second family” (Rianna).

An outcome which can be understood from the this theme is that while social media can simultaneously be a refuge and a space where conflict occurs, Black women are unlikely to change their social media behaviors given that it is seemingly fundamental to their sense of self, identity and for empowering them to tell their stories. The last theme, which involves Black women's experiences with social media assisting them to connect to a larger community, is described in detail below.

The Formation of Community through Social Media

This last theme involves how social media helps Black women connect to others, specifically other Black women. While bearing some overlap with the third theme (“Relationships with other Black women through social media serve as positive

affirmation of one's own self, humanity and dignity"), this theme purposely focuses on how Black women use social media to create a meaningful connection to and engagement with the African diaspora. There were no concrete interview questions that targeted this point, however, responses to the questions about the meaning of connecting with other Black women through social media and how using social media impacts participants relationships with other Black women yielded interesting responses which lent themselves to the development of this theme.

Theme 6. Using social media assists Black women in feeling connected to a larger, African diasporic identity

In the interviews, participants expressed an enthusiasm for social media's ability to help them access a wide range of perspectives that reflect the female experience within the African diaspora. Essentially, this means that they were excited about technology's capability to allow them to interact with other Black women from around the world. They cited the importance of this for educational purposes- i.e. to learn what life is like for other Black women in countries in which they do not reside or know little about. It was also said that this is important for establishing solidarity and for building a network of Black women around the world who are working in support and care of one another. This was coupled with the understanding that there were, in fact, different contexts which impacted the experiences of Black women in different parts of the world and at the same time that the nuances did not prevent Black women from establishing mutual understanding and relationships, no matter where in the world they happen to be.

However, the importance of this experience went beyond simply learning about what its like to be a Black woman in another part of the world. Participants suggested that

by knowing more about other Black women and connecting with them around their oppressions and lived experiences that they were able to establish a kinship of sorts that transcends boundaries. Their sentiments implied that this sense of belonging leads to a shared, larger African descended female identity.

“I think once you talk to other black women of the diaspora, there are little nuances in what they go through. They experience the same things sometimes, that erasure, that isolation, the micro-aggressions, and I think it’s really super-duper important to be able to let them know, ‘Hey, we feel you over here in America’, we understand what is regarding them. Maybe it’s a little bit teeny tiny different but we experience that too as well” (Rose).

“We connect in that we both experience certain things as black women in diaspora and Africans in diaspora. So what social media does for me and other black women, we kind of establish relationships that transcend, you know, the physical boundaries” (Yossie).

“When you hear other Black women across the world articulate their fears and their misgivings and their jaded views of government or policy, you sort of realize that there’s so much more we can do together and that we’re so much more similar than we give ourselves credit for” (LaFionda).

This theme was the sole category in which there seemed to be marked differences within the sample between the experiences of women in the United States and women in Britain. While there were clear differences in the ways that British women

conceptualized and spoke about their Black identity (which as Chapter 2, the literature review, points out), there were not notable differences in the sample in terms of how the women from each country made meaning of the experience of using social media.

However, with regard to this theme, women in the United States expressed an earnest desire to learn more about Black women in other parts of the world. In the supplemental interview question that asked what they hoped to get out of the research, many of the participants living in the US said that they wished to know more about the global experiences of Black women using social media and, in particular, wanted to reach out, establish solidarity with other women and let them know that they are not alone. There was also a desire to have the scholarship on this issue accurately reflect the importance of Black women's experiences using social media and the ways in which they are using the platforms to deconstruct and problem solve pressing social issues.

“I don't even think a lot of us realize how brilliant we are in the way that we perceive the world and society and the way that we're able to articulate and share. Something like this, I would like to see it do what it's already doing, giving us a name and a description and an acknowledgement of what we do already” (Alex).

“For me Twitter is akin to religion. This is a place where I go when I'm feeling sad or I need to laugh or I need a supportive nudge on the shoulder or even a ‘I'm here for you sis’. I can get all those things from Twitter. I would hope that women who are not on Twitter and who are maybe feeling alone or whatever in the world, will see your research and enjoy” (Quinntarah).

“I’m really excited to see what we are thinking... what other Black women are thinking. How cool would it be if there was an online group that we could meet up in and have chats and thoughts around both this and then just as our general lives expand? I think I’d like to see more support groups for black women online...” (Marcelle)

“I am intrigued to know the global experience of Black women and social media...I think we would actually be surprised about how we use it. Because I think we all make different assumptions about why we use social media so I think it’s going to be fascinating to see what our sisters in the UK say about it” (LaFionda).

In contrast to their American counterparts, Black British women expressed a desire to have their experiences added to the conversation on global Blackness. In each interview with participants from the UK, they inevitably brought up the fact that, from their perspective, Blackness in the Western world is generally conceived of from the point of view of the United States. This meant that while Blacks in Britain know much about Black people and Black culture within the United States, Blacks in the United States know little to nothing about their British counterparts. Moreover, they described a historical erasure from British society that leaves them isolated and feeling generally disconnected. There was a sense of resignation and regret about this, but ultimately it manifested itself in a desire to elevate the voices and experiences of women from Britain in the African diaspora.

“You guys really just don’t recognize us outside of your 50 something states. You just don’t recognize Blackness if its not directly

from the continent and even then it's a very limited scope I can imagine, um, in comparison to people outside. But then I look at Black people outside who obviously know a hell of a lot about Black Americans..."

(Rianna)

"Everything that's UK produced ends up staying in the UK. It's been interesting to see how Americans have responded in terms of the connections, and the disconnect, but also that broader understanding of the black diaspora...The interesting thing I noticed when I was in America...It's very different. People hyphenate their identities. They've all become American. We don't do that here. Part of that work is also about reclaiming what it means to be British that we are here, that we have a right to be here" (Hana).

"The thing with blackness in Britain is that white people can't fathom being black and British so when we have black history month we're learning about Martin Luther King, we're learning about things that happened in America and just the basic generic stuff. We're not really learning about black Britishness and you know, what black people did for Britain and it's because they can't understand how you can be black and British..." (Yossie)

"It's only just recently that people consider like Black British being a thing...it used to be like on forms and things you'd have British was one thing you could tick and Black was another thing you could tick so there's like this assumption that you wouldn't be both. And its just

recently in the few, last few, maybe ten years or so, that you would get this notion of Black British” (Adesola).

In spite of the observation that Black Americans (this included both women and men) know little about their British equivalents, the collective sense from participants in both countries was that it is of the utmost importance for Black women to talk to one another and share their lives, experiences and form alliances across the diaspora. While the differences in context among the populations was made clear during the interviews, more than anything feelings of hope, possibility and self-determination were expressed when participants were asked about what it means to connect with other Black women online.

“I think for me specifically the social media, this place of gathering, has become where I find that outlet. And I can sit with women who are my age, and who are younger than me, and who are older than me and find a little solace and find a little wisdom while we’re watching something on different parts of the world and find that communion there” (Marcelle).

“This is for anyone who has been othered... it’s an exciting time because you can find those people and reach them. It doesn’t matter if they are in South Africa, Iceland or England... The scope of what we can do on here is really broad” (Shelby).

“I’m in the middle of feeling more connected to black women on Twitter... It’s more of a stronger connection that I feel towards black men. There are black women from so many different backgrounds. I love, I

want to say too that I love that I follow black women on Twitter who are not just from the US, black women from the islands and black women who live in Europe” (Alex).

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the study’s thematic findings resulting from the data analysis process outlined in Chapter 3. The responses from the participant interviews, which sought to answer the study’s three research questions, resulted in six thematic findings which give insight into three specific categories: social media’s impact on the self, social media as a safe space for one’s marginalized identity and the formation of community through social media. The findings were supplemented by illustrative quotes from the participants to maintain their individual voices in the process as they spoke directly to the essence of their experiences. Similarly, the chapter began with a comprehensive description of participant summaries so that the reader could become familiar with those who participated in the study. The following chapter is a discussion of the findings in relationship to the research questions and the literature related to this study, as well as implications for the field and future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

The first four chapters of this dissertation included an introduction to the research study, a review of the current literature related to the topic, a detailed description of the research methodology and a presentation of the findings. This chapter is a continued discussion of the study's findings including how they relate to the study's research questions and the literature. Moreover, it includes the commentary on the findings in relationship to the theoretical frameworks utilized in this study. Lastly, this chapter includes reflections on how this study can contribute to the field of conflict analysis and resolution, recommendations and implications for future studies.

Findings

This section will discuss the research findings in greater detail. The previous chapter focused on a descriptive presentation of the findings, however, this section will present brief analysis of the three categories of thematic findings. This serves to provide greater insight into the findings in order to present a more complete narrative that addresses the research's purpose and goals. The section begins with a brief overview of the findings in relationship to the research questions and then ties the findings back to the three overarching categories to provide greater insight and analysis.

Research Question 1: How do Black women in the United States and Britain use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives as Black women?

The answer to this research question can be found in the thematic findings related to the categories of social media's impact on the self and the formation of community through social media. Per the findings of this study, Black women in the United States and Britain appear to use social media platforms for two purposes-- for resisting

oppression and the development of counter stories related to that oppression as well as for connecting to a larger, African diaspora. The Black women who participated in the study possessed a clear understanding of the different stereotypes and assumptions which frame the lives of Black women and used social media, in part, to share their experiences but also to publicly challenge perceptions and views about what it means to be a Black woman. They also use social media platforms as a way to connect to the experiences of other Black women toward developing a Black female identity, which is international in scope. This identity serves as affirmation of their experiences and contributes to a sense of belonging that helps combat feelings of isolation and loneliness and transcends physical boundaries.

Research Question 2: What is the lived experience of using social media for this purpose (of storytelling and testimony about their lives)?

The answer to this research question can be found in the thematic findings related to the categories of social media's impact on the self and social media as a safe space for one's marginalized identity. The findings demonstrate that Black women who use social media for storytelling and testimony experience the negotiation of a public and private self in which they actively control who has access to their social media profile and who they choose to engage with across platforms. This is to shield them from communicating their innermost thoughts and feelings with unwanted or unreceptive audiences as well as to avoid unnecessary abuse or harassment. Sometimes the negotiation of the private also consists of using social media for journaling and personal reflection purposes instead of interpersonal communication with other users. Black women who use social media for purposes of storytelling and testimony also experience a duality within the space of social

media; both finding it a place of refuge but also experiencing it as a site of violence and abuse from other users. While the experiences with harassment and mistreatment by other users varied across the sample, most women articulated that they had developed coping mechanisms to avoid certain forms of negativity directed at them online. Moreover, because they deemed social media as fundamental to their self-esteem and identity, in spite of the abuse, Black women who participated in this study expressed that they were not likely to give up participating in or using social media.

Research Question 3: How does the experience affect them and what meaning do they find in using social media for this purpose?

The answer to this research question can be found in the thematic findings related to all three of the categories of findings-- social media's impact on the self, social media as a safe space for one's marginalized identity and the formation of community through social media. One of the more prominent findings which answers this research question speaks to the role that social media plays for Black women in terms of knowledge and personal transformation. According to the participants in the study, using social media has provided them access to vast amounts of information- both about themselves and about others. This has played an important role in their identity development, for becoming more compassionate toward others and for learning about the wide range of diversity and experiences of Black women in their respective countries and abroad.

Another way that Black women find meaning through the experience of using social media for storytelling and testimony is that they are able to have themselves affirmed and develop increased feelings of self-esteem through meaningful relationships and connections with other Black women. By removing some of the silence and fear that

surrounds talking about their lives, they find that sharing their experiences allows them to reclaim their stories in important and significant ways. These interactions serve a therapeutic purpose through which Black women feel accepted for who they are and ultimately possess a healing-type quality. Lastly, all of these shared experiences with other Black women allowed participants to feel connected to a larger family of Black women around the globe who are bounded together by similar history and experience and whose connection can create global support for one another's experience and identity.

Findings on Social Media's Impact on the Self

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black women in the United States and Britain who use social media to share their realities in the face of marginalization as racial and gendered minorities. The conflicts that these women experience due to their social location are both intrapersonal and interpersonal as they navigate resisting oppressive perceptions and stereotypes about them as well as the internal dilemmas that accompany being a part of a marginalized group within society. The themes that emerged from this category indicate the ways in which Black women are able to use social media to address and overcome their inner struggles.

Based on the findings of the study, feeling valued, affirmed and connected to other Black women is an important outcome of Black women's use of social media. It is essential for their self-esteem and their identity development. While social media is largely regarded within society as a tool for communication and collaboration, it also seems to have quite a transformative impact on how Black female users see and understand themselves and how they create public and private identities. Much of the critique of social media surrounds whether or not individuals can establish and maintain

healthy relationships online. Another fundamental question about social media is if its consistent and prolonged use leads to anti-social behavior. The thematic findings from this category indicate that not only do Black women develop meaningful relationships with each other online but that those relationships lead to a more stable, authentic self, a healthy sense of self and an increased understanding of what information should be shared publicly and what should remain private. While there was a difference in the sample in terms how participants in the younger age range viewed private and public boundaries, their responses indicated that they understood these boundaries clearly and were intentionally choosing to present a more public identity online.

Education and knowledge were also significant components of this category. Black women's experiences with social media indicate that they use it as a tool for information gathering, knowledge sharing and for learning about themselves. Participants in the study who represented the age ranges of 30-40 and 40-50 discussed using social media for both personal and professional development while women from ages 19-29 articulated that social media has played a foundational role in helping them come to a concrete understanding of how they fit into the world as Black women and has provided them with the vocabulary to name the different oppressions they face. The connection between Black women on social media who are deconstructing their own lived experiences very much mirrors the ways Black women produced knowledge in the past (i.e. through churches, quilting circles and other places of gathering). As the introductory chapter to this dissertation points out, Black women have a rich history of intellectual thought and scholarship about the issues that frame their lives even though those traditions have largely been positioned away from the eyes of the mainstream. The

findings from this study demonstrate that not only is social media the platform by which Black women are gathering knowledge, it is also the place where they share and create it. Therefore, it functions as both a digital library of sorts and a site of gathering.

One of the noteworthy outcomes of the findings in this category is the fact that Black women assigned incredible significance and importance to their relationships with other Black women on social media not just for the sense of connection and community, but also for its impact on their feelings about themselves. Many of the prevailing beliefs about social media suggest that it does not have any real contribution to individual's lives and is just a bunch of "noise"--people talking at one another but with no real meaningful dialogue. Yet overwhelmingly, the women who participated in the study articulated that social media was a powerful agent, one which allowed them to engage in important dialogue with other Black women and by seeing different representations of Black women, it allowed them to see Black women as diverse, worthy of dignity and attractive. At the same time, these women also believed that it was the connection with other Black women that served to affirm them- through compliments, through supportive words and through the reassurance that they were not alone. This has further implications for the significance on the positive aspects of social media and how human connection, whether digital or virtual, can have a beneficial effect on an individual's understanding of self and sense of self worth.

Findings on Social Media as a Safe Space for One's Marginalized Identity

During the course of the interviews, every woman articulated various feelings about being impacted by stereotypical perceptions of Black women, which did not allow for individual complexity or nuance but rather served to box them in. The findings in this

category suggest that Black women view social media as an appropriate and protective location for sharing those experiences related to societal oppression and marginalization. Moreover, it allows them to resist pervasive negative perceptions about them by allowing them to “talk back” (i.e. stand up) to stereotypes by providing space to create alternative perspectives and realities of Black women. This seemed to have an empowering effect; one in which they were able to feel free of the racialized and gendered constraints imposed upon them within society and present themselves and their lives in diverse and meaningful ways.

One striking aspect of this finding is that the Black women who participated in this study did not necessarily view or refer to the creation of counter narratives to reframe their lives and experiences as “activism”. While a handful of the women spoke specifically about activism and social justice, more than anything they appeared to be most excited about the ability to use social media to tell their stories and to construct different possibilities of what Black women are like for themselves and for presentation to the larger public. This is significant because it speaks to the fact that not all Black women who use social media to contest dominant narratives see these acts as political or as intentional forms of protest but instead as merely an extension of their own diverse contexts and realities.

Another aspect of the relevant findings in this category is that social media can be both a place of refuge but also a place of victimization and violence. Almost all of the participants in the study referred to social media as “safe” and stated that it provided them the ability to discuss issues related to their lives with other people (particularly Black women) in substantive ways that they may not be able to do offline. The ways in

which they experienced this safety varied- some felt that by simply having a dedicated space to talk about important issues with others was a form of safety. Others were more intentional about creating a safe space within the social media platforms that they use through the formation of private chat groups, carefully crafted friend/follower lists and separate profiles for different audiences thereby restricting full access to some parties. It was suggested that by carefully choosing whom one engages with online, a sense of community and connection is created.

However, not all the interactions Black women have online have been positive. Participants also shared that along with the safe place that is created for Black women through social media, there is a fair amount of negativity, abuse and indirect violence that they have experienced at the hands of others (mainly men). These instances seemed to be most frequent when the women were discussing feminism and/or advocating for equality in relation to social justice topics. While they shared a number of coping strategies that they employ to combat this abusive behavior, the most common seemed to be blocking other users who engage in abuse and operating under an unspoken code of conduct for participation on their account pages. If a fellow user were to say or do things considered offensive or disrespectful, participants felt great freedom in the ability to no longer allow that user to participate on her site. However, this issue brings up a more pressing concern related to these platforms. What are the responsibilities of these platforms to protect their users from abusive behavior on the part of other users? During one interview, a participant shared that she was disappointed that certain social media platforms do not do enough to protect Black women, specifically because she felt that Black women make up such a high percentage of their users and subsequently also receive disproportionately

high amounts of trolling, threats and abuse. This is a powerful and compelling question to be addressed later in this chapter in the section related to recommendations and implications.

The Formation of Community through Social Media

One of the most intriguing findings of the study is the notion that, to a very significant degree, the use of social media helps Black women to connect to a larger, African diasporic identity. This appears to manifest itself in a number of ways but almost every participant talked about social media's role in facilitating an increased self-awareness as a Black woman and the connection between their own Black female identity, the experiences related to that identity and the similarities between themselves and other Black women. This was the only finding in which there was a significant difference across the sample in terms of the women's geographic location. Women in the United States expressed a belief that their experiences were likely similar to other Black women in the world and they demonstrated a passion and curiosity for making connections, understanding the experiences of their British sisters and also learning about the nuances which framed their realities as African descendant women. They overwhelmingly articulated a sense of possibility in the idea that a larger global network of Black women could be created to share experiences, offer support, affirmation and community to each other. They were also very interested in knowing how Black women in Britain experience their use of social media and if it has been a positive and meaningful experience in the same way it has been for the women in the US.

In contrast, Black women in Britain expressed more feelings of isolation and loneliness based on the historical relationship that Black people have had with the British

state. Specifically, they talked about British citizenship being largely constructed and conflated with Whiteness and that to possess both Blackness and a British identity was to be erased or invisible within society. As a result of this and due to their own, more recent migrant histories, much of their own identities were tied to ethnic or regional groups and that largely this was constructed simultaneously with a “home” country somewhere else. All of the British women interviewed in the study identified with a culture or ethnic group outside of Britain (Jamaican, Pakistani, Nigerian, Native American) whether they were native British citizens or not. This led to an interesting conundrum in which they were establishing a connection and sense of belonging in spite of marginalization within British culture, while at the same time trying to claim a legitimate space for themselves within British society. In the same vein, British women also discussed a failure on the part of the larger Black diaspora to recognize them. A few participants mentioned that Blackness is often conceptualized as solely either American or African and this narrow perception does not allow for multiple experiences and realities. In that way, they expressed desire to be seen and heard within a global Black context. While it could not be said that the British women were skeptical, they were markedly much more reserved and practical in their desires to connect to a larger diasporic identity. They, too, expressed the desire to learn from and share experiences with other Black women around the world and they were also interested in how other Black women experienced using social media and what it has meant to them.

Unexpected Findings

Many of the findings of the study reinforced the existing literature used to support the purpose and goals of the research. However, since social media is a relatively new

phenomenon and there is little existing research about its users in terms of ethnic identity and social location in the Western world, there were some less prominent findings that were unexpected but noteworthy. For example, within the delineation of the private/public self, a few participants talked about using certain social media platforms for reflection and journaling purposes that may or may not lead to conversations with others about their experiences. In these instances, there appeared to be little difference on the impact that using social media had whether or not they were using it to communicate with others or for themselves. In other words, when they used it for journaling and reflection, it seemed to be just as meaningful for them and just as safe a place as it was when they were using it for the purpose of intending to connect with other Black women. Since many social media studies focus on the interaction and connections among users, this has implications for how social media can impact the self apart from other users, depending on how a given platform is being used.

Another unexpected finding is that many of the women (this was particularly concentrated among the younger women within the sample) articulated an awareness of not only the multiple oppressions that they face as Black women in society but the privileges that they have as well. This indicated that they recognized their own experiences as distinct and did not see themselves necessarily as victims. As they responded to the interview questions, a number of them mentioned having certain privileges²⁰ (able-bodied, pretty, middle class, etc.), which informed how they are positioned within society and their relationship to others. Along with this awareness, they

²⁰ In this case, privilege was used in reference to social inequality. By talking about their privilege, the participants were denoting that they possessed certain societal advantages that others did not have or could not access for various reasons.

credited social media for helping them to become more aware of these privileges and for facilitating conversations about them. They stated that by learning more about these privileges and talking about them with others, it ultimately served as a tool for introspection and for developing compassion and empathy for those who do not possess them.

Another unexpected finding considers what happens when Black women dedicate significant time and energy to using social media for the purpose of storytelling and testimony about their lives and connecting with other Black women. The participants in the study seemed to indicate that there was a tremendous time commitment involved with using social media. Outsiders may perceive their high levels of social media use as “wasted” time in comparison to those who do similar types of work (in terms of transforming stereotypes and activism) offline. This harkens back to the literature review section that addresses the perceptions of whether or not advocacy and activism using social media as a vehicle is considered “real” activism. This reinforces the question “Is time online sharing stories and creating new realities for Black women as meaningful as other types of activism- such as writing legislators to change policy or protesting unfair laws?” Likewise, Black women who use social media in this way run this risk of having their words taken out of context by strangers and their message being diluted, or worse, co-opted by others who seek to steal their “intellectual labor” online. A number of Black women on different platforms have noted that their essay writing, hashtags they develop, and movements they organize are not attributed to them when they are shared among the public in different forums.

The last unexpected finding is how passionate Black women are about creating a dedicated space for themselves online and how they see the creation of that space as an act of self-love and self-determination. Referring back to the existing perceptions of social media and some of the research, they suggest that social media is a location for individual vanity and inconsequential activism. Yet, the Black female users who participated in the study were very clear on the necessity to carve out a space of gathering for themselves, particularly because they are so actively discouraged in so many ways within society. There were no limitations on or assumptions about what the space needs to be, solely that it was important to have one and that the act taking up space was self-affirming and a demonstration of agency. One participant said, “Even within our community, black women are supposed to be in the background and be the bricks and mortar of everything, but quiet. It's revolutionary and radical for us to take up space the way that we do so deliberately” (Alex).

Discussion

The findings presented in Chapter 4 and in the previous section of this chapter are supported by the literature about this topic, which comes from a variety of academic disciplines including gender and ethnic studies, communication studies and computer science. That literature is reviewed in detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. This section of the chapter examines the study's findings in relationship to the literature.

Literature Review Connections to Social Media's Impact on the Self

The findings within this category are concerned with how the experience of using social media impacts Black women through education and knowledge, affirmation of the self through interactions with other Black women and the negotiation of a public and

private self. To begin, the work of Byrd and Shavers (2013) is useful for understanding the different sources of Black women's self-esteem and in relationship to their personal experiences and variables such as their racial identity, womanist identity, feminist identity, religion, work and family. While a handful of the participants in this study identified themselves as womanists and a few more as feminists, Byrd and Shaver's work sheds light on how the consciousness of an individual Black woman's racial and gender identity can impact her experience using social media.

Marsh's study (2013) connects how young Black women negotiate their racial identity and womanhood in various academic settings and demonstrates that Black women are able to manage racially heterogeneous settings, in part, because they actively seek out Black social groups that help sustain their Blackness. This study builds on Marsh's work by offering another perspective on how Black women make connections with other Black women online which helps to affirm their Black female identity.

Neville and Hamer (2006) studied Black female activists to document how they work to end oppression. They realized that while many women didn't consider themselves activists, they were engaged in work that was designed to improve the Black community. Many of the women in this study, also, did not consider themselves activists. Yet, they were concerned with many of the conditions related to the sites of struggle around which Black females organized in Neville and Hamer's work. Moreover, they used social media as a tool to educate themselves and share knowledge about issues of importance.

The negotiation of a public and private self is not just a theme in this study but also a prominent feature of Black women's community organizing. Stall and Stoecker

(1998) note that Black women have had to extend the private into the public sphere often, in order to get resources or engage the state in the work of transforming institutions. The women in this study also negotiate private and public identities online, and it impacts how they organize themselves to discuss issues related to their lives. For the most part, as they speak about their lives through social media, they extend the private into the public sphere when they talk about issues such as stereotypes pertaining to Black women, domestic violence, abuse, sexual identity etc. Fisher (2012) connects how Black women in Britain first began organizing around issues of racial and gender inequality that led them ultimately to organize for issues related to the Black community more broadly. Moreover, as per Stall & Stoecker, some of Black women's online work is very much within the realm of community organizing. Though they were not within the purview referenced in this study, recent social movements (such as Black Lives Matter and the National Moment of Silence (NMOS) '14) that resulted in galvanizing thousands around the country to demonstrate for equality were begun by Black women online through social media.

Literature Review Connections to Social Media as a Safe Space for One's

Marginalized Identity

Griffin (2012) advocates Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as a theory and method for Black female academics to detail their experiences with the pride and pain associated with Black womanhood. She suggests that BFA provides Black women the opportunity to “talk back”—to express themselves, self-define and develop voices that are free from the oppression of racism, sexism and marginalization. Similarly, Boylorn (2013) and Arya (2012) use autoethnography for examining their lived experiences Black

women in the academy to make sense of racism, patriarchy and classism. Arya (2012) also investigates the obstacles that restrict Black feminist thought and writing within the academy in Britain. While only two of the women in this study formally hold positions as scholars within higher education (unlike Griffin, Boylorn and Arya), one conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that almost all of the women utilize social media as a form of digital Black feminist autoethnography in which they interrogate the social, political and cultural factors that inform their lives. Moreover, social media provides the space not just to talk about their experiences but also a platform, in the spirit of talking back as suggested by bell hooks, for pushing back and resisting negative stereotypes while creating new perceptions about Black women.

Some of the research literature pertaining to this study relates to the examination of who uses social media and for what purposes. Caplan (2003) investigated preferences for online social interaction among psychosocially distressed individuals. He suggests that lonely and depressed individuals prefer online social interaction to face-to-face interaction and that this interaction can lead to the development of negative behaviors and problematic Internet usage. While it is unknown whether or not the participants in this study are clinically diagnosed as psychosocially distressed, it can be said that all of them articulated feelings of distress from experiencing life as a Black woman in their respective societies. To that end, a number of the women in this study appeared to prefer online social interactions for the safety it offers them as they discussed their marginalized identities. This served to supplement, and in some cases, replace the face-to-face networks that were may/may not be present in their lives. However, this safety also put them at risk for harassment and abuse at the hands of other users. Fenton and Barassi

(2011) argue that social media as a communication tool can mostly encourage users to become more self-centered rather than embrace the collective efforts prominent in social movements. Their study demonstrates that individual perspectives, experiences and the need for attention can often override the collective purpose of group advocacy. While this particular study focused on individual Black women's experiences, the findings are contrary to Fenton and Barassi's work. The responses from participants indicate that, in addition to sharing their own personal lived experiences, Black women often use social media platforms for the purpose of encouraging and supporting each other and for bringing awareness and attention to issues which impact Black women and the Black community as a whole.

Literature Review Connections to the Formation of Community through Social Media

Since the thematic finding in this category is concerned with how social media assists Black women in feeling connected to a larger identity, Lam and Smith's (2009) work can be referenced to understand how young Black British women rank their ethnicity as more important than age, gender or nationality and report having a strong ethnic identity tied to another country or region. All of the Black women residing in Britain who participated in this study identified a connection with a "home" country of origin outside of Britain. Similarly, a number of the Black women residing in the United States identified with cultures and traditions that were outside of what is perceived as "American" by mainstream society. Tamboukou and Ball (2010) researched the ways in which young, Black British women navigate their locations as Black women and attempt to move beyond rigid limitations of categories like gender, family, class and race. Their

research suggested that these women utilize a form of “nomadism,” allowing them to remain in transition while simultaneously maintaining identities that are not fixed or permanent. Likewise, the British women in this study seemed to be adept at situating themselves (politically, socially and through establishing meaningful connections with others) while at the same time never fully taking on the limitations posed by adopting a fixed national identity. The participants in this study who represented Black women residing in America also practiced “nomadism” by shifting their identities in ways that could not be easily defined through a single lens of gender, race, sexual orientation or class.

One of the recurrent questions posed in the research literature is what is the value and meaning of relationships that are established online. Grabowicz et al (2012) studied the exchanges among Twitter followers to determine whether high quality interactions take place. Their findings demonstrate that the most consistent, quality communication among users were those who are close friends, relatives and closely connected individuals in communities. However, the findings of this dissertation contradict Grabowicz’s findings to a certain degree. While many of the participants in the study discussed having an online network that includes family and friends, almost all of them also indicated that their close, network of people offline had grown to include people that they met via social media. Further, a number of participants also talked about the ability to share deep, meaningful conversations about their lived experiences with individuals they didn’t know online because they felt safe to do so in a way that they couldn’t with family members, friends and colleagues.

Clark's (2014) study on Black Twitter establishes the legitimacy of online communities, specifically for Black users. Her findings demonstrate that Black Twitter is, in fact, a community-- a space marked by shared language that users access for collaboration, communication and the development of a positive Black identity. The findings of this study are reinforced by Clark's findings which suggest that Black women in the US and Britain establish community online as they engage with one another and use similar language to deconstruct their experiences. Moreover, their connections to one another result in the creation of a shared Pan-African female identity that transcends physical and geographic boundaries.

Theoretical Framework Connections to Research Findings

As the previous section indicates, there is a substantial amount of research literature that supports the findings of this study. However, there are also significant connections between the findings and three theoretical frameworks that were used to support the study, Black Feminist Theory, Structural Violence and Critical Race Theory.

One of the defining hallmarks of Black Feminist Theory is that Black women gain knowledge when they understand their lived experiences navigating intersecting oppressions (race, class and gender) and when they engage in active resistance to those oppressions. This study emphasizes the idea that Black women use social media intentionally to make meaning of their lived experiences with sexism, racism and classism and they subsequently use it as a tool to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social stereotypes about them. This is evident in themes 2 and 4 where the participant's experiences with social media, its impact on the self and its position as a safe space for their marginalized identities are presented. Additionally, Black Feminist

Theory notes that the public and private boundaries are often blurred for Black women as they have always simultaneously participated in both spaces as in/voluntary workers outside the home while also being mothers and wives. This is reinforced in the first thematic finding of the study, which discusses Black women's experience of using social media as accompanied by the negotiation of a private and public self and the creation of online identities which are accessible to some and hidden from others.

The study also connects to Black Feminist Theory through the recognition that understanding of context and critical self-reflection accompanies coalition building among Black women within a transnational context. In short, the theory posits that it is not enough for Black women around the world to have shared history and experiences of victimization, but instead that they must recognize that coalitions are built on the acknowledgment of shared experience and also differing contexts. For example, Black American women must recognize their social location in relationship to Nigerian women and so on. Moreover, the practice of empathy for different experiences builds perspective and relationships. This idea was very much present in the sixth thematic finding which discusses the development of a larger, diasporic identity that Black women experience using social media. It was also articulated by Black British women who were keenly aware of the different historical factors such as migration and colonization which play a role in their experience as Black women in Britain.

Structural Violence Theory is the concept that there are forms of social injustice built into the fabric of society that serve to keep certain individuals marginalized. According to the theory, as individuals living in an inherently violent society, we have been socialized to see these injustices as normal and, for members of the dominant

culture, it is unlikely that they will understand and/or acknowledge the ways that others become subjugated within society. Meanwhile, those members of the second-class citizenry often come together, unified by their alienation, although not necessarily in the public but instead in the private space. This is an idea that emerged throughout the findings but was particularly prevalent in themes 1, 4 and 5, which pertained to the negotiation of a private and public self and social media as a safe space for one's marginalized identity. Participants were very clear on how they experienced marginalization as both people of color and women in their respective societies. Many of them spoke about the low self-esteem, feelings of isolation and struggle with identity development that accompany being erased from or stereotypically portrayed in mainstream media and society. Likewise, almost all participants discussed various experiences with violence (direct, structural and cultural) that have occurred when they have used social media to talk about their lives as Black women. Based on the findings, it could be said that structural violence remains a very real phenomenon in the lives of Black women. As one participant (Alex) suggested, societal expectations demand silence of Black women in which they are seen and not heard. Therefore, it is still a very radical act for Black women to so deliberately take up space in social media and intentionally tell their stories in the public sphere.

Critical Race Theory is a framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in American law and seeks to eliminate racism and other forms of subordination based on categories such as gender, class, and sexual orientation. As critical race theory is the work of a range of interdisciplinary scholars, it has been applied to disciplines such as education, women's studies, history, ethnic studies and sociology. An expanded

framework, critical race methodology, was developed by scholars in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), in part, to challenge dominant ideology, recognize the experiential knowledge of people of color and embody a commitment to social justice. Within these themes, it is acknowledged that racism creates and maintains a “master narrative (p.27)” that provides a very narrow depiction of what it means to be a part of a cultural group (both those in the majority and minority). Active resistance to the master narrative is represented through the telling of counter-narratives or stories, which highlight the experiences of those people whose stories are not often told. Additionally, “counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance (p. 32).” The development of counter stories as a way to resist the daily impact of subordination on their lives was present in the findings of this study, specifically theme 4, which is concerned with how social media enables Black women to “talk back” and develop counter stories. These counter stories are not just comprised of Black women’s reflections on their lives, but often include a critique of the social, cultural and political realities that impact their lives, which allows for a fuller analysis of their experiences.

Recommendations

The participants in this study presented a wide range of experiences and reflections about their social media use and its meaning. The findings present significant opportunities for understanding how social media users engage with platforms and how they understand their use. The demographic data presented in the Introduction (Chapter 1) of this dissertation demonstrates that a large number of users of social media in both the United States and Britain are women, people of color and/or both. Given that many of

the women who participated in the study reported experiencing some degree of abuse online at the hands of other users and as a result have concerns about their safety, one question that emerges from the findings is whether or not social media platforms have a responsibility (ethical or legal) to protect their users. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that social media platforms continue to consider how they can prevent hate speech, threats and other vitriol directed at users; particularly for those who experience harassment based on their status as members of minority groups. While free speech is a constitutionally protected right in the United States, it does not come without consequence. In certain cases, when a user's free speech descends into threats and indicates the possibility of direct, physical violence certain platforms have shut down the accounts of users. Likewise, when the speech is contrary to the sites terms of use, causes undue mental stress on unsuspecting users or is deemed profane/obscene, those platforms have restricted the user's ability to engage with others on the site. While there is genuine conundrum present for social media platforms in terms of maintaining a balance between free speech and user protection, it is an issue that is worth exploring--particularly if they wish to continue having high levels of use among Black women.

Another recommendation emerging from the findings of this study is for the discourse used to discuss what constitutes activism and how social media is used for activist purposes to be expanded. This expanded understanding of activism and the intersection of activism and social media should include the types of advocacy that marginalized groups engage in for purposes of supporting one another online. For example, it is a widely held belief among the mainstream that social media activism is not "real" activism, mainly because it occurs online and is viewed as passive and low-risk

(see Chapter 2, Literature Review for more detail). However, the findings of this study indicate that through their uses of social media, Black women engage in activism and advocacy for themselves and each other and that this activism is not low-risk. While not all of the women specifically considered their online presence as “activism” per se—almost all them used social media, in part, to dialogue and raise awareness about political, social and cultural issues impacting their lives. More importantly, they saw great value in talking to, sharing with and supporting other Black women online and championing their humanity and dignity. And while those who do not understand it easily dismiss this type of activism, it is very much aligned with the intellectual traditions of Black feminist scholarship and the long and distinguished history of Black women’s activism.

A third recommendation which emerges from the findings is for the exploration of how the communicative acts of Black women using social media for storytelling and testimony produce knowledge and critique of society. Habermas’ (1981) theory of communicative action suggests that communication can be an emancipatory act that serves to enlighten and free individuals from domination. If the ways in which Black women talk about their experiences is an important societal act that serves to liberate them from restrictive stereotypes and indicates how they experience the world day-to-day, further study could provide greater meaning into how this form of communication among Black women serves the purpose of action and transformation. Moreover, as *misogynoir* is the name for anti-Black misogyny and its related discursive acts, a study that more deeply sheds light into the ways in which Black women communicate and engage in counter discursive acts to combat *misogynoir* would be important. As Houston

and Davis (2002) note, the unfortunate fact is that communication scholars have yet to develop a substantial body of scholarship that explores the lived communicative experiences of African-American women.

Contributions to the Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field

Due to its interdisciplinary nature, this study and its findings contribute to the literature within a wide range of academic disciplines including conflict resolution, communication, ethnic and gender studies. While Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies have only emerged as academic fields of study in the last forty years or so, many areas of peace and justice remain unexplored. Evolving frameworks in the field examine the roles that actors play in the transformation of repressive social behaviors and structures into more peaceful ones as well as how individuals and groups actively resist those structures.

Black women in both the United States and Britain have been engaged in discourse about their experiences with marginalization as members of both racial and gender minorities, dating back centuries. Moreover, they have a rich intellectual tradition that combines an awareness of the intersection of multiple oppressions with action designed to help them survive in and escape injustice. Yet, there is very little literature present about Black women in the United States and Britain and their experiences in the discipline of Conflict Analysis and Resolution. In the case of this study, the findings show that Black women use social media to help them both create an understanding of their racialized and gendered experiences while at the same time providing a way for them to contest how they are conceptualized within a society that erases and simultaneously subjugates them. Similarly, as social media is a relatively new phenomenon, there are few academic studies within the field of Conflict Analysis and

Resolution that examine how users engage it for self-actualization, community building and social change. Thus, the role Black women play in transforming social media into a just world for themselves through learning, sharing and pushing back remains virtually unresearched. This research serves to advance the field of conflict resolution and provides an innovative approach, given that it is a comparative examination of Black women's experience across countries and contexts within the Western world.

When marginalized groups are offered the opportunity to give voice to their realities, it provides them much needed opportunities for healing functions as a form of resistance. One of the most impactful contributions this research is that it examines and understands the experiences of Black women in a relevant and modern context, promotes further dialogue and understanding among those women and beyond, and centers testimony and storytelling as a form of wellness. hooks (2005) writes that it is not easy for a Black female to be dedicated to truth. Yet, she notes, that honesty is necessary for Black women's well-being, physical and mental health since so many Black women are brokenhearted. "They walk around in daily life carrying so much hurt, feeling wasted, yet pretending in every area of their life that everything is under control. It hurts to pretend. It hurts to live with lies (p.19)." Although this research does not yield results that can be applied to Black women everywhere in the world, it does allow scholars, practitioners, and Black women themselves to recognize Black women's use of social media for storytelling and testimony in the United States and Britain as central to their humanity, dignity and empowerment.

Limitations

This study offers many positive contributions to the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution and the various other aforementioned disciplines. However, as a part of due diligence, it is also important to highlight the limitations of the study as well as the its benefits. A primary limitation revolved around the social media platforms from which participants were recruited. Since a large number of participants were recruited from Twitter and Facebook, it is possible that the sample was skewed, which resulted in bias both in terms of who participated and with respect to the preferred social media platforms on the part of participants. The study might have benefited from a sample that comprised a larger representation of users from across platforms. While users of Facebook, Twitter, blogs Instagram and Vimeo were represented in the sample; the primary platforms used to recruit were Facebook and Twitter. Since many participants were recruited from those two platforms, it is not surprising that the majority of them indicated that they preferred Twitter and Facebook as means of communication. Since the study was less concerned with which platforms were used in comparison to how they were used and the meaning behind it, this is not necessarily a major concern affecting the findings but remains a limitation nonetheless.

Additionally, the demographic span of the participants was fairly narrow. Almost all of the participants were college-educated, only three participants self-identified as queer, none were asked about their socio-economic status and none were directly recruited from an organization doing social justice or community based work. While the research design was fairly inclusive, it did not specifically seek out participants with these characteristics or backgrounds. Moreover, once the maximum number of

participants was recruited and the criteria met, it was not within the purview of the study to seek representation from these groups. However, the study might have been strengthened with the perspectives of these stakeholder groups and could have potentially benefited from even more inclusive criteria for participation in the study to enhance the diversity of experiences and backgrounds represented.

Directions for Future Research

There are several ways to extend this study for future research. As an extension of the first recommendation that discusses social media platforms and their responsibility to protect users, one area for further study could be dedicated to understanding violence in digital spaces. Qualitative studies that explore harassment and abuse on social media from both the perspective of the abuser and victim would enhance this study's findings and may lead to the development of new policies and procedures that protect social media users. Similarly, a research study that investigates how users understand digital citizenship (appropriate and responsible online behavior) and how it is reflected in their social media use would serve to deepen understanding related to users feelings of safety and the creation of public and private identities online. Along the same lines, another potential avenue for study is the concept of digital sisterhood. Digital sisterhood is the feminine currency that women use to create relationship wealth through the connections they make, conversations they have, communities they build, causes they support, collaborative partnerships they establish, and commerce they engage in with women they meet online and offline (Leeke, 2013). Digital sisterhood would be an appropriate topic for a phenomenological study that would seek to understand what the experience is like for women who participate in creating relationships online and the meaning they make

from it. Lastly, further exploration of Black women's use of social media is necessary. A continuation of this study, perhaps utilizing Black female participants in other Western countries (such as Canada, France etc.) or other geographic regions like Latin America or Africa would serve to validate the findings of this research and/or offer new insights into Black women's experiences using social media platforms based on their various context and histories. Finally, it would enhance this study and future studies if there were scholarship produced which utilizes a quantitative approach to add some methodological diversity to the research literature on this topic.

Conclusion

This study provided an in-depth examination of how Black women in the United States and Britain use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives, specifically as they share their lived experiences navigating racism and sexism in their respective countries of residence. Although each woman's narrative was unique based on her age, geographic location, socio-cultural and political identity, preferred social media platform of use and life circumstances, there was great similarity across the narratives in terms of the meaning that social media had for articulating their stories and for connecting with other Black women. Since Black women are routinely denied visibility and humanity within society in general and in racial and gender equality movements more specifically; they have had to intentionally create ways to affirm their identities, support one another and free themselves from oppression.

What will be the future of Black women's use of social media and how will they continue to utilize it to form community and tackle the pressing issues that impact their lives? Since it is impossible to predict the future, the answer is unclear. However, in a

world increasingly dependent on technology, it can only be assumed that Black women will continue to use social media platforms for speaking their truth and for the production of knowledge and transformation. And while so much of the existing historical, cultural and social violence is directed at them, it is clear that Black women will continue to claim spaces like social media to define themselves, for themselves—just as they always have.

As Toni Cade Bambara (1970) wrote,

“What we truly are as women or as Black women or as human beings or groups is an unknown quantity insofar as we have not determined our own destiny. We have an obligation as Black women to project ourselves into the revolution to destroy these institutions which not only oppress Blacks but women as well, for if those institutions continue to flourish, they will be used against us in the continuing battle of mind over body” (p. 108).

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Would you please describe how you use social media platforms for sharing your life experiences as a Black woman?
2. Which social media platforms do you use for this purpose? Which ones do you prefer?
3. Why do you use social media for sharing your experiences? What led you to use social media to describe your life and experiences?
4. What kinds of topics do you discuss/share on social media that relate to your experiences as a Black woman?
5. Could you describe a specific time in which you used social media to discuss your experiences as a Black woman?
6. How does using social media to share your experiences as a Black woman impact you?
7. How does using social media impact how you relate to other Black women?
8. What meaning does connecting with other Black women about their lives via social media have for you?
9. When do you feel that social media is not appropriate or helpful for telling your story?
10. What would be different for you if you were not able to use social media to share your life experiences as a Black woman?

Appendix B

Consent Forms

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled
 Tweeting Away Our Blues: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to Exploring Black
 Women's Use of Social Media to Combat Misogynoir

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #:

Principal investigator(s)
 Kelly Macías, M.A.
 360 H Street, NE #503
 Washington, DC 20002
 1-443-415-1109

Co-investigator(s)
 Robin Cooper, Ph.D.
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 3301 College Avenue
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For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:
 Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
 Nova Southeastern University
 (954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black women in the United States and Britain who use social media for storytelling and testimony about their lives.

Why are you asking me?

You are being asked to participate because you self-identify as a Black woman who uses social media. There will be between 10 and 12 participants in the study.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?

You will be interviewed by the researcher, Ms. Kelly Macías. Ms. Macías will ask you questions related to your use of social media. The interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes.

Is there any audio or video recording?

This research project will include audio recording of the interview. This audio recording will be available to be heard by the researcher, Ms. Kelly Macías, personnel from the Nova Southeastern University IRB, and the researcher's dissertation chair, Dr. Robin Cooper. The recording will be transcribed by either the researcher or a transcription agency (Malloy Transcription Services in Washington, DC). The recording will be kept securely in Ms. Macías' home office in a locked safe and on an encrypted external hard drive. The recording will be kept for 36 months and destroyed after that time by deleting the files from the encrypted external hard drive. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your

confidentiality for things you say the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described in this paragraph.

What are the dangers to me?

The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal. This means that they are no greater than the risks you take everyday. Because the study involves having your interview recorded, it means that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, though the researcher has established the procedures outlined above to keep your recording as private as possible. The procedures or activities in this study may have unknown or unforeseeable risks.

If you have any questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact Ms. Kelly Macias at 1-443-415-1109. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions as to your research rights.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits for taking part in this research study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information private?

Your name will not be used in this research study unless you give me permission to use it. If you do not consent to having your name used in the study then no identifying information linking you to this study will be used and your identity will be kept anonymous by the use of pseudonyms (made up names). All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The IRB, regulatory agencies, and Dr. Cooper may review research records.

If you choose to do the interviews over Skype, Skype may collect information about you including (but not limited to) your name, address, phone number, email address, age, gender, IP address, etc. You can visit the Skype privacy policy website (<http://www.skype.com/intl/en/legal/privacy/general/>) if you would like further information. While Skype may not know that you are participating in this study, they may be collecting identifiable information.

Use of Student/Academic Information:

If information will be collected from educational records, this section must discuss what information will be extracted and how it will be used.

If no student/academic information will be used in the study, this section may be eliminated.

What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate in, or withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw your participation or decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or adverse effect. If you choose to withdraw, any information

collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be used in the study but you may request that it not be used. Such information will also be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study.

Other Considerations:

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by Ms. Macías.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing below, you indicate that:

- This study has been explained to you
 - You have read this document or it has been read to you
 - Your questions about this research study have been answered
 - You have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
 - You have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
 - You are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- You voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled *Tweeting Away Our Blues: An Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to Exploring Black Women's Use of Social Media to Combat Misogynoir*

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____