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#SAYITLOUD: SECURING RACIAL & ACADEMIC IDENTITIES FOR AFRICAN
AMERICAN STUDENTS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

By

Joshua Chase Schuschke
B.S., University of Louisville, 2013

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Pan-African Studies

Department of Pan-African Studies
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

May 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

#SAYITLOUD: SECURING RACIAL & ACADEMIC IDENTITIES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Joshua C. Schuschke

April 22nd, 2015

The rise of Black Twitter as an online cultural phenomenon has garnered attention as a force in the African American community. The online social network is a space for cultural performance, discussion, and debate. Generally, social media has created spaces for online communities to congregate around shared experiences and interests. African American users of popular social media such as blogs, Facebook, and the aforementioned Twitter have used the affordances of these platforms as tools to convey and construct their racial identities. The performance of racial identity offline is often carried over to these online environments, and arguably *vice versa*. When African American users come into contact with other African Americans they are able to reaffirm or renegotiate their identity, which they may carry with them back to offline environments. One such offline environment where African American identity is challenged is within the educational system. The purpose of this thesis is to deconstruct the anti-intellectualism narrative toward African American students embodied by oppositional culture perspectives, and show how secure racial identities can potentially lead to positive educational outcomes through social media platform affordances. I propose a model of online racial identity construction using social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and Cross' (1991) model of

Nigrescence accompanied by a pedagogical guide that shows how social networking sites can have educational benefits for African American students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The explosion of social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Vine, Instagram, and personal blogs has created venues for individuals to more freely express themselves in public domains on a variety of topics. These public and global domains become a place for debate and discussion across cultural bounds and distance. Trending topics on Twitter as well as Facebook statuses become common areas where people across lines of race, gender, sexuality, and other identities communicate opinions and information to wider audiences. The evolution of smartphones and tablets enable users to express their opinion and access information from anywhere and at anytime (McGrath, 2011). The technological affordances of these social media platforms that allow users to communicate around shared interests and manage social bonds enable communities of shared social identities to develop online. Social media technology in the last decade has become a part of everyday life in America. Today, brief disconnections from technology and social media can leave people, corporations, and even schools out of the loop and a step behind in communicating information (Jaffray, 2013; Tsouvalas, 2012). Educators are slowly utilizing social media as a tool for supplementing and expanding the curriculum, and connecting to students in new ways. This expansion into education has the potential to aid in abating the issue of cultural exclusivity that plagues the U.S. public

school system (Miller, 2013; Peluso, 2012). As African American students are often among the most effected groups when it comes to educational inequalities (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Tyson, 2011), the increasing use of social media platforms in education may affect the academic performance of these students in the future.

The academic performance of African American students is a chronic point of contention across all levels of education. Scholars have theorized the causes that create and perpetuate the achievement gaps between African American and white students. Explanations for these academic disparities range from resource deprivation (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Lewis, Parsad, Carey, Farris, & Smerdon, 1999), curriculum exclusivity (Bowers, 2000; Ladson-Billings 1992, 2001), and cultural barriers (Foote, 2005). Experts in fields ranging from education, sociology, and psychology, among others, continue to examine this phenomenon, which has yielded mixed results relating to the causes of educational disparities between African American and white students. Perhaps one of the more contentious aspects of this research area examines racial identity and how it intersects with education. Oppositional culture theorists believe that African American students have a negative disposition towards education that is a marker of racial authenticity (Farkas, Llera, & Maczuga, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Ogbu, 1978). This theory is contested by other scholars that attest under achievement by African American students is caused by systemic issues in education (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Downey, 2008; Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011). As structural impediments in education can greatly influence the opportunities and academic outlook for students, African American student identity requires further examination as newer generations of

students continue to utilize social media and communicate via this medium at higher rates (Duggan & Smith, 2014). The current study examines the possibilities of using social media platforms, and more specifically their communicative affordances to craft African American youth's social identity in relation to race and education on popular social media platforms. In other words, how can African American students use social media to build and reaffirm their racial identities? Furthermore, how does such social media use subsequently affect their academic identities? Building secure identities through social media could potentially serve to counter the oppositional culture narrative and improve the academic performance among African American students, paving the way for innovative approaches using social media in and in relation to the classroom.

Improving academic achievement among African American students has been a long-running issue at all levels of education. Particularly since integration, the academic performance of African Americans academic performance is juxtaposed to that of their white counterparts, which is referred to as the Black-White achievement gap (Tyson, 2011). From the labeling of issues to the implementation of appropriate policies, improving outcomes for these students is a focal point among practitioners and academics. Part of these discussions is a persistent emphasis on the role of African American culture inside and outside of the classroom. Commonly labeled as deviant, anti-intellectual, and oppositional, African Americans are often posed at odds with the structures of society, with education being no exception (Farkas et al., 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Ultimately, this theoretical examination engages a central point of contention of the culture-identity link and its relationship with African American students' academic achievement. The formation of social identities plays an important

role in the psychological and educational welfare of a student (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Harris & Marsh, 2010). Thus, it becomes critical to analyze the role that educational structures play in molding student identity and how these students negotiate their identities both inside and outside of the classroom. Student identity is intersectional, meaning that their racial and academic identities are not separate, but rather they exist simultaneously, and both can be influenced by structures, such as education, as well as other factors. African Americans' use of social media across various platforms has shaped viral culture, and significantly boosted the online traffic of some of the biggest sites, such as the previously mentioned Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The cultural insurgence of "Black Twitter," (Brock, 2012; Esco, 2011; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013) and the use of blogs among African American public intellectuals to convey black thought through "think-pieces" has had a resounding impact on not only web culture, but society in general. Given African Americans' disproportionately high use of popular social media platforms (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010), it is worth investigating the transformative power of social media on education, specifically for African American students.

The purpose of this study is to theorize the use of social media affordances as tools for building positive, secure racial and academic identities among African American students. Major social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs function as hubs for interaction within online social networks. African Americans' disproportionate use of the platforms via mobile applications has established online social environments for cultural discussions across physical boundaries, increasing the interactions of African Americans from different backgrounds and with perspectives. Through an educational

lens, social media platforms have the potential to influence African Americans' formation and maintenance of their identities. More specifically, this study seeks to build a model of identity formation through popular online social networks that correlates to secure, positive racial identities, and improved academic achievement among African Americans. This model could assist educators to improve their understanding of how the networks and identities their students build online can impact their educational experiences.

Theoretical Perspective

This study utilizes social identity theory (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Tajfel, 1981; Thoits & Virshup, 1997) to couch the argument that groups create norms and identities in response to structures of normativity, and learning new norms to create group cultures involve a fluid exchange of information that is multidirectional as opposed to being hegemonic. To further flesh out and define identities, working definitions of “secure academic” (Tyson, 2011) and “racial” (Cross, 1991) identities are operationalized to connect multiple levels of identity development. The development of identities in response to discrimination, isolation, and prejudice leads to the development of prototype behaviors (discussed further below). The formation of identities among African Americans commonly occurs upon encounters with members of other groups, when their perceived differences designate a sociocultural distinction between them and the dominant, or other-group (Cross, 1991). According to Hogg and Reid (2006), social identity theory focuses on intergroup behavior that is affected by issues such as prejudice and discrimination, and how these groups negotiate norms in relations to others in competition for status and self-enhancement. This becomes a key guide in determining

how African American students develop their racial and academic identities in relation to white students. This thesis focuses on the identities of African American high school aged-students (ages 14-18), while looking ahead to how they may view continuing their academic careers into college.

A key aspect to social identity theory is the role of “central members” and “leaders” that can use their influence to alter group norms and behaviors, which are referred to as “prototypes” (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, Otten, 2005). Prototypes are a set of attributes that one group uses to define themselves as different from others. These attributes lead to group norms, which are values shared and agreed upon by its members. Leaders that match the group prototype carry more social capital and influence within the group, as they are seen as being sources of information on identity. Connecting students to African American public intellectuals and academics as examples of secure, racial identity could potentially be one of many benefits offered by the use of social media platforms by African American students, due to the fact that these individuals model desirable characteristics and behaviors that may encourage students to positively view race and academics.

Hypotheses

Based upon these theories (above), this thesis looks to construct a stage-model of identity that maximizes the affordances of social media platforms to build secure, racial and academic identities for African American students. One way that this model utilizes these affordances is by connecting these students with African American intellectuals (public or academic), professional organizations, and other positive role models. The building of networks online can have a bridging effect on student’s offline social capital

(boyd & Ellison, 2007), which may help them combat social stigmatization in school and improve academic outcomes (Tyson, 2011).

Social identity theory suggests that individuals are influenced by the societal structures that exist, and they form their social identities in relation to society's constructed categories and meanings (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1981); and that these individuals self-categorize in order to gain acceptance and build self-esteem (Thoits & Virship, 1997). Additionally, central members, or leaders within these social groups have a profound impact on those that identify with them (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). It is through this lens that this model seeks to conceptualize how social media can factor into the identity development of African American students, which includes academics and psychosocial welfare, and also determine how interactions with African American public and academic role models, as well as professional organizations play a role in influencing the development of secure, positive racial identities among African American students.

The use of social media as a racial identity-building tool could have academic significance, even if it is not used explicitly within educational settings, as students use it as a source of communication, identity performance, and information gathering. Additionally, students can build connections with intellectuals and role models that can have a positive influence on a student's racial and academic identities.

This model can help test hypotheses regarding African American student identity and achievement. Karolyn Tyson (2011) suggests that African American students who have secure identities are less likely to succumb to societal pressures from peers and educational structures. Social identities are constructed and affirmed through the processes of categorization and social comparison, which comes from the adoption of

norms and behaviors through group interactions (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke 2000). The following hypotheses should be tested to see how social identities formed online can impact student perceptions of race and academic achievement.

H₁: African American students who utilize social media more frequently are more likely to have positive views on race and academic achievement.

H₂: African American students who connect with African American academic/public intellectuals or professional organizations are more likely to have positive views on race and academic achievement.

H₃: African American students who connect with African American academic/public intellectuals or professional organizations will be high achieving in regards to their overall grade point averages and test scores.

The first hypothesis (H₁) predicts: African American students who utilize social media more frequently are more likely to have positive views on race and academic achievement. Brock (2012), Florini (2014), and Sharma (2013) discuss the various ways that African Americans utilize social media platform functions as a way to create online networks and communicate along racial lines to proclaim their identity with in the anonymous environment of the Internet. This hypothesis posits that the unique form of communication and social network building can serve as a way for students to categorize and compare themselves to other African Americans, which in turn can help them construct identities that reaffirm their racial and academic identities.

The next two hypotheses focus on the roles of “central members” and “leaders” as social identity influencing factors (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Abrams et al., 2005). The internet’s open-gate access has allowed for individuals who may not hold traditional

credentials, but are knowledgeable in particular fields a space to share their expertise, and who are frequently referred to as public intellectuals (Freese, 2009). Public intellectuals, along with traditional academics, and professional organizations utilize social media to share their work and opinions. If students can connect with these individuals, who qualify as leaders within their groups, they can have their identities influenced by the behaviors of these central members. The second (H₂) hypothesis states that African American students who connect with African American academic/public intellectuals or professional organizations are more likely to have positive views on race and academic achievement.

The third (H₃) hypothesis continues this line of reasoning by stating that African American students who connect with African American academic/public intellectuals or professional organizations will be high achieving in regards to their overall grade point averages and test scores. These central members act as prescriptive forces within social groups, and can dictate what is seen as prototypical behaviors (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Abrams et al., 2005). These hypotheses center on the model's theory that student will recognize the saliency of race to these central members, and will also recognize the high-academic and intellectual achievements of these individuals as reconcilable identities that they can potentially emulate. Utilizing the affordances of social media to help build and secure social identities for African American students serves as a potential tool for educators to combat structural deficiencies within education, and pushes back against notions of oppositional culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) by positing that African American identity and academic achievement can be mutually beneficial (Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011).

Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 discusses the historical and current predicaments facing African American students in education. Specifically, the achievement rates of African American students are described in relation to the gap between them and white students. This discussion summarizes many of the important aspects of an unequal education system many African American students face. Resource deprived schools that feature predominately African American students are often juxtaposed to well-resourced systems that their white peers often experience. This unequal access to resources helps frame understanding the gap between African American students and their white peers. Within this unequal system the “achievement gap” is constructed around issues of resource deprivation, teacher bias, and curricular track placement. Finally, this chapter discusses social and school cultures of African American students centering on how schools facilitate identity development among students in relation to both race and education.

In Chapter 3, social identity theory is posited as a framework for discussing social interactions. More specifically, this chapter examines what African American identity formation looks like in social settings. Social identities are related to structures and intergroup relations within these structures, specifically within education. At the crux of this thesis, understanding how social media can be used to construct identities using social media for educational endeavors. This chapter presents the foundational aspects for a model of how social media platforms can facilitate identity formation and maintenance in relation to both academic and racial identities, which can influence educational outcomes among African American students.

In Chapter 4, social media affordances are discussed as a social bonding form of communication, information dissemination, and network maintenance, particularly amongst students and young adults. The use of social media platforms has an effect on every aspect of the lives of students, including education. However, this infusion of these new technologies with education has faced stiff opposition considering their popularity and potential distraction. This fourth chapter explores the various affordances of social media, and how each works in relation to community and online identity building. Additionally, the cultural significance of social networks for African Americans will be discussed. The bridging of online to offline identities, and *vice versa* will serve as the basis to understanding how social media can impact the academic identities of African American students. More succinctly, the cultural benefits and social networks that can be fostered through the affordances of social media will lead to a discussion of racial identity, drawing from the previous chapter of identity building, and how these forms of back-channel, out-of-school communications can combat in-school segregation (track placement).

Chapter 5 will consist of a model of identity development that shows how the three social media affordances discussed can be utilized as pedagogical tools to help secure the identities of African American students. This model can be an out-of-school tool that has educational benefits, and possibly serve some functionality as an in-classroom technique. The model will utilize core tenants of social identity theory, beginning with factors and situations that create identities, then utilizing Cross' model of development, the proposed model will show how African American students can matriculate through these stages using social media and the networks that exist on each

platforms. This model will take into account structures that influence identity in education, along with social media to offer a nuanced and complete view of how formulating secure identities can affect educational outcomes. Additionally, a pedagogical outline will be presented to give an example of how social media can be used by educational practitioners in one of many ways to help African American students develop secure racial identities. Lastly, how these and other pedagogical practices that use social media platforms to assist with identity development among African American students is discussed to assist with understanding how to infuse these approaches within the classroom.

Finally, Chapter 6 will offer discussions and conclusion of this theoretical paper, which will explore the potential research avenues and the limitations of social media as an identity-building tool for educational improvement. It is to be made explicitly clear that this work may show positive results for educational identity construction, but it will not solve the expansive issues when it comes to educational inequalities, as this paper explores social media identities formation using a non-classroom tool with classroom implications.

CHAPTER II

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Many believe that education is “the great equalizer” in our society, and educational achievements are often the barometer used to measure success or predict future life chances. Parents, teachers, politicians, and many others preach about the prosperity that being successful academically can bring to one’s life. However, few challenge the notion that education itself is an unequal playing field, often incapable of rendering equitable life outcomes across lines of race, class, and gender. The historical inequities within education are continuously documented and discussed over the decades (Anderson, 1988), as access to resources, teacher training, and debates over curriculum have been points of contention when discussing the education of African American students (Allen, 1971; Buszin, 2013; Kozol, 1991). Several suggested fixes of these systemic issues in education range from urban teacher training and motivation (Gimbert, Desai, Kerka, 2010; Wachira & Keengwe, 2011) to the reallocation of financial resources (Buszin, 2013). Unfortunately, despite these and other suggestions to resolve the issues of an unequal education system, the fact remains that most African American students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic households in urban areas, are not granted the same opportunities as those from more privileged backgrounds. This chapter provides a brief overview of the educational landscape in regards to African American

student achievement by discussing test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment, and other measures of student academic performance. This layout of academic achievement is followed by a contextual discussion regarding the history of resource deprivation in African American communities and schools from Jim Crow segregation to the present. The chapter concludes with a discussion of current educational structures and practices, as well as classroom cultures that influence students' learning dispositions and outcomes.

The Achievement Gap

Educational achievement is viewed in America as a way to greatly improve life outcomes and financial possibility. Therefore, it becomes imperative that educational attainment and aspirations are measured in order to gauge the efficacy of students as they go through each level of education beginning in kindergarten. One of the long-standing issues facing academics and educators is the black-white achievement gap (Harris, 2011). The solutions to this problem of African American student achieving on various measures less or at a slower pace than their white counterparts have varied in scope and effectiveness. This gap is seen early in the educational career of students, and can drastically affect their life outcomes, including their employment, health, and possible criminal record (Jenks & Phillips, 1998).

Grade point averages (GPAs) are the most closely connected barometer of achievement for both students and their schools, while standardized test scores such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), ACT (American College Testing), and state-wide tests are often viewed by policy makers and colleges as most important in determining a student's achievement level and academic ability (Harris, 2011). African American students lag behind whites in both GPAs and standardized test scores. The average

African American student GPA is anywhere between 10-12% lower than the average white students GPA by the time students reach middle school (Harris & Robinson, 2007; Fryer & Torelli, 2010). Since the 1990s, there is growing evidence that the closing of the achievement gap in standardized test scores has slowed considerably, and progress has become stagnant (Harris, 2011). These test scores, which are typically composites of core areas such as reading, writing, math, and science, show that African American students lag in all areas.

As students enter their junior and senior years of high school, problems with standardized testing become exacerbated, as college entry tests such as the SAT and the ACT are utilized as markers for entrance into postsecondary institutions. Even with college diversity initiatives and affirmative action offering assistance to African Americans when it comes to college admissions, African American students still find themselves being shut out of institutions, particularly elite or state flagship schools (Harris & Tienda, 2010; Kane, 1998). The achievement gap has a lasting effect on African American students, following them from their earlier grades through college. African Americans are twice as likely as whites to drop out of high school and also less likely to hold a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census, 2009). Although standardized testing has come under frequent scrutiny in regards to its effectiveness of student ability, the disparities remain staggering when considering the gap in scores and attainment.

However, the achievement gap only gives a bare-bones look at how students are performing academically. The larger question at-hand when looking at these educational score disparities is, why are African American students not achieving on standardized tests or in class at the same rate as whites? A fuller picture begins to come into view

when school resources are considered, along with structural influences within education that may affect the learning experiences of these students. Attempting to close the achievement gap requires an inquiry to the infrastructure of schools.

Resource Distribution and Deprivation

A frequently cited issue facing education and an often-theorized cause of the achievement gap is the unequal distribution of financial and educational resources (Buszin, 2013; Foote, 2005; Lewis et al., 1999). When factoring in class, along with race, African American students commonly find themselves enrolled in under-funded and over-crowded schools that lack many of the basic necessary classroom tools that assist in learning. However, this is not a new issue facing African American students and the communities where these schools are located. The historical root of educational resource deprivation is found almost immediately after slavery (Anderson, 1988), and continues during the post-integration era, as white flight often removes white students from public, urban schools heavily populated by African American students (Johnson, 2008).

Historian James Anderson's (1988) work chronicles the beginning of the public education system in the South. Anderson makes clear African American families and students were the driving force for public education, not whites. This revelation shows that African Americans have always valued education as a way to improve their dire circumstances, and evidence today continues to support this theme, as African American students and parents hold the value of education in equal or higher regards than whites (Harris, 2011; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). However, this high value on education did not come without a cost to African Americans, particularly during Jim Crow, when their property was essentially doubled-taxed for

having a school on their land (Anderson, 1988). Given a majority of African Americans had scarce financial resources, the schools they built often lacked basic necessities such as chairs, book, chalk, quality buildings, and teachers. The double-taxing of their schools only exacerbated these issues, making education an uphill battle for the next generation seeking to remove themselves from poverty. Sadly, this reality still holds true, as African Americans have since migrated from the rural South, to metropolitan centers across the country since the era of Jim Crow. Taxes and resources still cripple educational opportunity for many disadvantaged African American youth through the funding of education by property taxes (Johnson, 2006; Kozol, 1991).

The unfortunate reality is that race and class are inextricably linked. Despite spatial changes over time, African Americans are the most segregated racial group, and are concentrated in mostly urban areas. This segregation by race and class shows how little has changed in the way of education (Johnson, 2006; Kozol, 1991). With race and socioeconomic status working at the intersection of educational funding, resources available to African American parents is vastly different in comparison to whites. Since public school funding is based on property taxes, whites living in the suburbs are able to provide more financial resources to their child's school, which also typically houses a smaller population of students (Johnson, 2006; Kozol, 1991). This extra funding is utilized for resources such as computers and tablets. Meanwhile, at the urban schools which draw less property tax funding for more students, essential school supplies must be accounted for first, before budgeting for the more non-essential commodities such as smart boards and tablets. This point should not be easily dismissed as we continue to move through the digital age where schools are beginning to rely more heavily on

technology. Jenkins (2009) warns of the potential problem with the proliferation of technology in the classroom, as the assumption that all students have access or are technologically savvy may not accurately portray every student's circumstance. This lack of educational resources extends beyond the walls of the classroom, as Darling-Hammond (2004) notes that African American students lack basic educational resources and supplies at home. This lack of resources negatively affects learning outcomes, particularly for those coming from families with low socio-economic status. Resource deprivation is a harsh reality faced by inner-city schools with majority-minority student populations, as many of these students are coming from homes without the ability to supplement the underfunded education they receive while in school.

As previously mentioned, many of these urban schools, which are populated by mostly African American students, are grossly underfunded. Jonathon Kozol (1991, 2005) describes the conditions of these schools as structures with dilapidated roofs, lacking equipment, outdated textbooks, and overcrowded classrooms. This gross inequality in education perpetuates a paradigm in American education, where minority students, who are the most likely in need for social and economic liberation through education, find themselves held back by the very system they hold hope in, while mostly white and wealthy students continue to reap the benefits. Both Johnson (2006) and Kozol (2005) discuss the effects of wealth and resources as the continued means of perpetuating societal segregation in the post-integration era.

Two-Sides of Educational Tracks

The University of California-Los Angeles' Civil Rights Project (Orfield, Kucsera, Siegal-Hawley, 2012) note that segregation is recurring in America's public schools

along the lines of race and poverty. This evidence of persistent segregation flies in the face of those attempting to claim a post-racial, equally opportunistic America for the next generation of students looking to improve their social standing through education. There is a strong need for equitable education, particularly for marginalized groups of students, such as African Americans, as they are the most segregated group in America (Johnson, 2006; Massey & Denton, 1993). The Civil Rights Project report shows that wealth and having access to resources are still playing major roles in dividing education by class and race. However, even with the supposed end of segregation (Orfield et al., 2012) and the rise of standardized testing, schools place students based on perceived ability into different educational tracks. This labeling of students with different academic capabilities has a distinct impact on racial disparities in educational opportunities, as teacher and administrative perceptions of students can have a major influence on the classroom placement, causing some to call this phenomenon “in-school segregation” (Tyson, 2011). As previously discussed in this chapter, having the access to these advanced placement classes varies greatly across schools, as some may have a plethora of courses, and others may be drastically limited in their offerings (Johnson, 2006; Kozol, 2005, 1991). The demographics of these classrooms do not go unnoticed by students. This form of institutionalized segregation and labeling has dire consequences for all African American students, whether they are considered gifted or not.

When analyzing the effect of “tracking,” which is the intentional placement of “gifted” students into advanced courses and others into remedial classes, a clear division by race is observed (Tyson, 2011). Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) argue that teacher perceptions and their influence on track placement is a micro-political process

that can greatly influence the educational career of students. Tracking is based on a student's past and present academic performance in the classroom, and is greatly influenced by teacher expectations and assumptions about the student (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). However, race has been shown to serve as a proxy to estimate the likelihood that a student will be placed in an advanced course (Tyson, 2011).

Teacher bias can have a profound impact on how these educators view certain students, particularly ones from cultural backgrounds that are different their own, which can lead to an implicit bias in how they view student behavior. For instance, white teachers from middle class backgrounds often experience great difficulty and culture shock when they begin teaching in urban schools with high minority populations. This conflict of cultures can sometimes lead to the reinforcement of racist stereotypes that impede teachers' ability to objectively judge a student's work in the classroom (Foote, 2005). Part of this racialized scripting and bias of African American students is found in the suspension rates of students, where African American students are far more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts, with African American females having the largest disparity in comparison to their white female counterparts (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Teacher expectations can have a profound effect on a student's self-confidence and academic identity formation (Hayes, Cunningham, & Courseault, 2006). Students see themselves based on the environment around them. When they see others being awarded for their academic achievement when they perform as well as their peers, these students are left to question whether their efforts were good enough or possibly even worth it in the end. This becomes especially difficult to negotiate when students perceive that teacher bias is having an impact on their educational mobility.

The theory that schools reinforce society's class based system in order to perpetuate cycles of social stagnation is not new (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977). The effects of tracking hold societal implications, as schools enforce a hierarchy of achievement and places value on student's performance. This can be best observed by viewing classroom demographics, where whites are enrolled in AP courses, and African Americans are placed in remedial courses. The ability of students to recognize the educational based value system within schools can lead to resentment among students who do not feel they are valued as much by teachers and school administrators. Additionally, school demographics play a large role in the attitudes towards tracking into advanced placement courses. Whereas, African American students at predominantly white schools may face heckling for their high achievement status, those that attend predominantly African American or minority schools do not face the same level of ostracism (Tyson, 2011). With educational tracking maintaining a social order, or hierarchy, the message is clearly sent to students that whites are typically among the intelligent and African Americans are not, with the few exceptions that are typically marginalized in their classrooms.

As African American students find themselves underrepresented in advanced placement courses at schools, regardless of population demographics, the question that continually rises is "why?" Also, how do African American students feel towards education when they take into account their socio-economic placement and displacement from advanced educational avenues? In other words, how do African American students adapt socially to educational structures that prohibit their academic and social mobility?

Black On Both Sides

In their attempt to solve the achievement gap scholars and practitioners have often looked at the culture of students and parents to explain the persistent lag in African American attainment and aspiration. A popular, yet contested view is the “oppositional culture” theory, which was advanced by John Ogbu (1978), and has since sprung related theories based on the “acting white” phenomenon (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer & Torelli, 2010). These scholars posit that, because of the educational system’s flaws and lack of racial awareness, many of these students reject learning and dismiss learning and intelligence as a “white” personality trait. Existing scholarship refutes this theory, showing that African American students show persistence in values towards education, despite its inequities (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Downey, 2008; Harris, 2011; Kozol, 2005; Tyson, 2011).

According to the oppositional culture perspective, students are influenced by the perceptions of education through their parents who had negative experiences dealing with discrimination in schools, which led to their poor life outcomes as adults (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978). It is then theorized that African American students negatively view education and disengage from educational pursuits, which accounts for their low GPAs and standardized test scores (Farkas et al., 2002). However, this theory does not hold up against empirical data suggesting that despite overwhelming beliefs that discrimination is a factor in their lives and the lives of their children, African American parents hold education in equal or higher regard than white parents (Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011). The theory of oppositional culture does not solely hinge on educational

achievement however; it also encompasses school and community culture by stating that African Americans do not believe learning is a trait for authentic racial verification.

This racialized view of learning and identification has led to what many call the “acting white” phenomenon. The term “acting white” is purported as a commonly used insult among African American and minority students to degrade other students of the same race for not performing what they view to be the prototypical behavior of their race, as loosely defined by social group norms (Tyson, 2011). Oppositional culture theorists believe there is an educational component to this insult, as students who are routinely subjected to this ridicule are among the brightest in their class. However, as Karolyn Tyson (2011) states, the “acting white” term relates more closely to social circles that these students inhabit, and has more to do with insecure academic identities among students. Furthermore, Harris (2011) points out that students across racial lines view “acting white” as a negative educational trait, meaning that African American students are no more likely to engage in this counter-educational ideology anymore than any other group.

When looking at the effects of tracking on course placement of African American students, it is not hard to imagine how the structure of classrooms can trigger a social response by students. With teachers and school administrators having unchecked bias in their assessment of students (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1998), and the social environments created in schools influenced by track placement (Tyson, 2011), the effect on African American academic culture warrants a deeper discussion on student identity. Specifically, how do racial and academic identities intersect, and how do students negotiate these identities as they go through school?

When discussing academic identities among African American students, it is vital to understand that education is not a wholly equal or equitable institution in American society. The effect of tracking in schools plays a large role in how academic identities are formed in education, as it is the schools and teachers themselves who are labeling students as “gifted” or the inverse. Schools play a large role in the creation of their academic culture; the response and attitudes of students is simply a by-product of that cultivated environment, which places subjective standards of perceived intelligence by teachers and administrators.

Educational opportunities that influence students’ outcomes vary greatly for students living in urban settings than they are for those living in suburban areas. Factor in race into each of those settings, and the discussion is further complicated. Although urban schools can often cite the political distribution of funding as a hindrance in their effectiveness, their own school policies often impede the success of their African American student population (Foote, 2005). Racialized tracking has a profound effect on African American students, as they are often tracked into remedial courses. The ones that are tracked into advanced classes often find themselves marginalized in a sea of white students, even in schools which are predominately African American (Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011).

As suggested by Hayes et al. (2006), African American students should build strong social networks consisting of family, teachers, and mentors in order to build high self-esteem or, in other words, secure academic identities. The formation of secure academic identities through social networking is possible in the 21st century, as social media has become an integral part of our society. Drawing from Hayes and colleagues’

(2006) suggestion, how might building online social networks with positive African American role models such as public intellectuals, professionals, and academics be beneficial to the securing of these academic identities among African American students? Perhaps another question to ask is how do discussions on popular platforms help inform identity and promote positive cultural education that may assist students in learning about themselves and their history? Understanding how social media platforms work, and who utilizes them becomes key in determining the answers to these questions.

CHAPTER III

RACIAL (AND ACADEMIC) IDENTITY

Having the ability to identify one's self as belonging to a social group(s) is a complex and ever-changing phenomenon. Not to be understated is the acceptance, rejection, and potentially oppressive nature of being identified by others as either belonging or not belonging to a social group(s). Schools and their classrooms are primary social spaces where identities are formed and (re)negotiated for children all the way through adulthood. While this chapter focuses specifically on racial and academic identities, understanding the multiplicity of identity and intersectionality is a key facet in understanding how these identities are formed and activated. Patricia Hill Collins (1993) discusses how all identities (race, class, gender, etc.) play a role in determining an individual's social positioning. Beginning with a review of social identity theory, and how school structures influence identity formation, this chapter discusses what it means to identify and be identified as Black or African American in schools and society, both socially and academically. Finally, this chapter provides an argument on how securing a racialized identity can have a positive impact on the academic of a student.

Social Identity Theory

The discussion of social identities is contingent on the understanding that social identities are socially constructed and hold meaning based on categories that are accepted by those identifying with the group (Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Social identity theory was

introduced by psychologist Henri Tajfel (1981), who believed that humans have a cognitive need to categorize, based on similarities and dissimilarities to one's self. Within this framework, it was further theorized that humans have a need for positive interactions with others, which typically comes from those who are most similar and greatly influences self-esteem. As Stets and Burke (2000) point out, the processes of self-categorizing and social comparison are key components to social identity theory, which grants individuals the agency to accentuate similarities with in-group members that in turn enhances self-esteem, while viewing the in-group positively and out-group negatively.

When considering the socially constructed categories, such as race, Hogg and Abrams (1988) state that structured societies rely heavily on power dynamics, where one group holds more status over another. Race, for African Americans, and in the framework of social identity theory, is contingent on the need to create a new group identity in order to define social differences between themselves and whites, and while the labeling of race is a result of hegemonic enforcement, many African Americans have accepted the label of being socially different than whites. The role of racism and discrimination is highly important in how out-group individuals formulate new social groups and norms in response to their rejection (Bandura, 2001). This development of identity in response to discrimination, isolation, and prejudice leads to the development of prototype behaviors. It is also imperative to understand that individuals can identify with a number of different social groups in relation to gender, sexuality, class, and other groups simultaneously (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). This intersection of identities provides variance in what is viewed as prototypical behavior of an individual

belonging to multiple groups. Prototypes, as Hogg and Reid (2006) note, are a set of attributes that one group uses to define themselves as different from others. These attributes lead to group norms, which are values shared and agreed upon by its members. The desire to be accepted as part of the group becomes a prescriptive force that encourages conformity to group standards. Members who hold high status in the group are considered “central members.” Their behaviors, which are typically in line with prototypical performance, can also influence other members when and if they redefine what is considered to be group norms (Abrams et al., 2005; Hogg & Reid, 2006).

Distinct characteristics are utilized to show group membership. When this membership is accepted by the social group as a whole, particularly when it comes to race, self-esteem is shown to vastly improve. This is especially true of African Americans (Stets & Harrod, 2004). Social identity formation goes beyond the ability to separate in-group and out-of-group behaviors and norms, as identification with multiple groups creates a multiplicity of identities that individuals can orient themselves to in their lives. Stets and Burke (2000) discuss three levels of inclusiveness within social identity: superordinate, intermediate, and subordinate. These levels are contextual and rely heavily on the saliency of each identity for the individual. Within the context of education, African American students may see themselves at the superordinate level as African American (as opposed to whites and other students), as a student (as opposed to a drop-out/non attendee) at the intermediate level, and as a high-achiever (as opposed to low-achieving student) at the subordinate level. As previously mentioned, the saliency for each level is interchangeable based on an individual students’ perception of themselves within their current environment. The key to this theory is that African

American students can embody all identifications as not only being black, but also being a student and being high achieving. This core tenant of social identity (Ashmore et al., 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000) enables a more inclusive view of African American identity, which has been traditionally ignored by identity theorists and academics (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007).

African American Identity Formation

With race in America being a fluid social category that has been in constant flux since its colonial beginnings (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2014), understanding the socio-political history behind racial distinctions is important in understanding how African Americans view themselves, and are viewed by others. Furthermore, there has been a call for a more in-depth understanding of identities, along intersections for African Americans, as a monolithic understanding of identity is problematic and insufficient in understanding the complexities of race (O'Connor et al., 2007). The complexities dealing with African American identity require a more nuanced understanding of how racial identities are cognitively developed in relation to societal structures. The experiences African Americans have when it comes to their self-categorization with race can produce a number of outcomes in various situations. When it comes to modeling African American identity, Cross' (1991) five stages of development will be highlighted to broadly define different levels of racial identity formation, and will serve as a guide for the proposed theoretical model. The use of Cross' Nigrescence model allows for practical standardization of identity development in combination with the cognitive processes of social identity theory to development the proposed model.

The formation of racial categories materialized during western colonization; in America specifically, the racial hierarchy created a social class power structure that situated whites on top and Blacks on the bottom (Omi & Winant, 2014). Over the course of the next two and a half centuries, into the present, a number of different theories regarding African American inferiority have attempted to legitimize this colonial-based power structure. These racist ideologies have ranged from religious explanations (Wilder, 2013), biological determinism (Graves, 2008; Wailoo, Nelson, & Lee 2012), and educational ability (Graves, 2008; Steinberg, 2001). For instance, the eugenics movement that swept through scientific fields during the turn of the 20th century saw faulty attempts at explaining African American intellectual inferiority at the biological level (Graves, 2008). Graves (2008) also discusses how this attack on African American intelligence helped give birth to standardized testing via the IQ test, which has since become the leading qualifier for rationalizing African American academic achievement and outcomes (Steinberg, 2001).

As Carla Goar (2008) highlights, most Americans believe that the post-civil rights era is one of “color-blind” faith in individuality. However, in this current ideological state, race is used as a proxy, although not specifically mentioned, for re-positing African American intellectual inferiority, due to lower academic achievement via educational testing (Steinberg, 2001) and disparate life outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). This, again, shifts the focus back to African American culture and identity to being a causal source for lower levels of achievement (Harris, 2011), as opposed to looking at the social structures that create a system of race-based inequalities.

Within the context of identity development, African Americans have historically dealt with the questioning of intelligence, both biologically (Wailoo et al., 2012; Wilder, 2013) and academically (Steinberg, 2001). With school systems utilizing track placement to separate students based on perceived ability (and color), it is not at all surprising that some students may internalize this separation of intelligence and race and view their academic and racial identities as mutually exclusive (Tyson, 2011). In other words, educational structures are continuing the historical narrative of separating African Americans and intelligence, which completely ignores the tenants of social identity theory, where individuals can hold multiple identities at the same time (i.e. being an African American, and being a high achieving student) (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Intersecting Race and Academics

With self-categorization and the restructuring of norms and behaviors being prime processes of social identity development (Ashmore et al., 2005; Stets & Burke, 2000, Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Thoits & Virshup, 1997), performing race becomes a treacherous topic as people try to determine what it means to “act white” or “act black” to African Americans, essentializing group experiences. Specifically, for African American students, what does it mean to “act black” within schools and classrooms? While “acting white” theorists posit that performing well academically is negatively associated with African American identity (Farkas et al., 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978), students actively resist this notion (Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011; Wright, 2011).

What is “acting black?” According to Majors and Billson (1992), African American male identity is linked closely to “cool pose,” which is a form of impression management through physical posturing, behaviors, and scripting in order to show

strength and control over any particular situation. This show of control is in response and in part formulated by racial discrimination by whites (hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson 1992), which is in-line with social identity theory's processes of social comparison and self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). Additionally, Henry Louis Gates (1988) describes the art of "signifying" as a form of playful, yet meaning-constructed communication utilized by African Americans to form and strengthen social bonds. Although these definitions of African American cultural performance are broad, they are necessary to more accurately represent and include the various expressions of identity within the African American community. It has been the "cool pose," as an expressed form of resistance that has led some to believe that African American students oppose education in order to maintain their "cool" in the face of discrimination (Farkas et al., 2002; Ogbu, 1978).

The bifurcation of "cool" and educational achievement is encompassed within the framework of the aforementioned division between racial and academic identities for African American students. However, under the development of social identity, racial and high-achieving academic identities are not mutually exclusive (Ashmore et al., 2005; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000). African American students are not opposed to conflating the ideas of being cool and achieving academically (Wright, 2011). According to Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), African American students that are considered "good students" are also among the most popular among their peer group. This survey data is also consistent in qualitative interviews where African American students, who attend urban high schools, state that part of being cool is doing well in

school (Wright, 2011). These students show that having a strong African American identity is typically reinforced when achieving in school.

While this level of social identity security is typically found among high achieving African American students in diverse or predominantly African American schools, Karolyn Tyson (2011) finds that students who are enrolled at majority white schools or are in a high number of AP courses have a slightly different experience. These students face ridicule from their African American peers. However this was not due to their educational abilities, but rather they were teased for not socializing with other African Americans (Tyson, 2011). Additionally, Arroyo and Zigler's (1995) study found that African American students who exhibited "raceless" behavior and were enrolled in AP courses were more likely to suffer from symptoms of depression. In other words, students who lack a strong racial or social identity find themselves marginalized, as they are unable to connect with peers and do not experience the gratification of group acceptance (Tajfel, 1981). Livingston, Pipes-McAdoo, and Mills (2010) point to high self-esteem and strong black identities as typically translating into higher levels of academic achievement among African American students. Furthermore, Adams (2014, 2005) shows how being in the same classes and having a connection to the African American student body increases racial saliency and improves persistence in schools. In direct conflict with oppositional culture theory, evidence shows that having a strong connection to African American peers correlates to improved educational outcomes (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Livingston et al. 2010; Tyson, 2011, Wright, 2011).

Unfortunately, not every African American student has developed a strong or secure identity, and may find themselves at schools or in classes where they are marginalized due to structured social environments (track placement) without having racially reaffirming resources to combat the social stigmatization they may face. The process of identity development, specifically for African Americans, remains a complex task of renegotiation based on situation (Cross, 1991). Fully developing and securing these identities is key to educational achievement and persistence for these students, as African American student achievement relies heavily on social attachment (Tyson, 2011).

Developing and Securing Identity

As stated in social identity theory, group identification is developed by accentuating similarities and differences between groups, in order to self categorize and subsequently gain acceptance, subsequently improving self esteem (Ashmore et al., 2005; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). While this theoretical framework is utilized to describe the psychosocial processes of group identification, Cross (1991) further develops the formation of African American identity in his model of “Nigrescence” by noting that there are five stages in black identity development: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion, emersion, and internalization. It is important to note that his model does not suggest that every person passes through each stage, but rather that there is a ladder of development that can lead to a positive African American identity. These stages are not static, and individuals can find themselves between stages in an attempt to negotiate identities. Additionally, these stages are non-linear, meaning that it is possible for individuals to fall back into a less progressive stage of racial identity development depending on the circumstance or environment. For

example, a well-adjusted African American college student that meets emersion criteria may slip back into the encounter stage when they are surprised that campus police racially profiles them. Despite the fact this student typically exhibits emersion qualities, the new situation of being profiled, and their unpreparedness for the event, is a performance of pre-encounter/encounter qualities.

In the pre-encounter stage, Cross (1991) states that most students of color tend to absorb the norms of the dominant culture and have little self-conceptualization of race. This sense of being “raceless” or “colorblindness” can be detrimental to the psychological development of African American students who internalize discrimination (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Harris & Marsh, 2010). An individual that internalizes racism or stereotypes may develop similar feelings towards their own group (Tatum, 2003). In the next stage, which Cross (1991) calls the “encounter” stage, students can have either a positive or negative encounter with the dominate culture when it comes to realization of race. In either case, this results in a distancing from the dominant culture, as group difference are perceived, which activates the processes of social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). In a worst case scenario, a negative encounter with the dominant group can cause African Americans to withdraw socially. The third stage (immersion/emersion) results in a search for a new, positive identification with race, where African Americans re-imagine their racial identity as a positive and all out-group behavior as a negative (Cross, 1991). Internalization becomes the fourth stage, where African Americans with a new positive outlook on race are willing to build social bonds across racial lines (Cross, 1991). Finally, the fifth stage, which Cross (1991) labels as

“commitment,” African Americans view their achievements as being reflective of the group as a whole.

Reflecting on education in particular, students who may be in the encounter phase will typically disengage from interacting with other groups. With race becoming more salient, African American students find themselves isolated due to educational structures, such as track placement (Tyson, 2011). It becomes important that during the process of immersion/emersion African Americans form positive identities, and move into the internalization phase, where they are able to interact with non-group members without fear of slipping back through stages or renegotiating their positive outlook on race. Students described in Wright’s (2012) study fit within the commitment phase, as they viewed their academic achievements as being “cool” and representative of other African American students’ outlook on education. When navigating a school environment, it becomes imperative that African American students that have reached the internalization or commitment stages (Cross, 1991) have a “secure” identity. While positively viewing race is a key component of this study, it becomes important to outline what is a “positive” African American identity in relation to the development of the current model.

Students should view race along with other social identities as being mutually beneficial to the development of themselves and their peers. Particular conceptions of Black Nationalism, which is a race-positive ideology have been roundly critiqued as being sexist and homophobic (Dyson, 1993). Although Black Nationalism is a manifestation of positive racial identification, it is equally problematic in its repression of other identities. Students with secure, positive identities should value other social aspects along with race and education, and should not be easily influenced by what others may

view as authentically “black.” Additionally, there is not a singular “positive black identity” for students to work toward, and is dependent upon the individual to develop their identity that is affirming to who they see themselves as in relation to race, academic pursuits, and other identities (i.e., gender, sexuality, class, regional, etc.). What this positive form of racial identity develops into is not only individual, but situational as one person may have a secure and positive racial identity in a school setting, yet another person may not hold the same form as is found in Tyson’s (2011) and Harris’ (2011).

Tyson (2011) explains that students with secure identities are not as easily influenced by educational structures or the perceptions others may have of them. This makes the student more resilient against ridicule they may encounter from other students who might challenge the authenticity of their racial identity due to their socialization with whites in AP courses, for instance. When applied to students who find themselves isolated from the rest of the African American student population, which typically occurs during track placement in AP courses (Tyson, 2011), students may underperform in order to not feel as secluded or “better than” other African American students. This is what Bandura (2001) identifies as *disregard for the consequence of an action*. African American students in predominantly white schools or AP courses may rationalize lowered academic achievement in order to remain with other African American classmates. Building a secure identity for these students is paramount when they find themselves marginalized in a classroom full of white students or ridiculed by other African American students for having white friends in those classes. Additionally, securing an identity can help students stigmatized by track placement and teacher bias, by making them resistant to the internalization of racial stereotypes about African American

intellectual inferiority. This applies heavily to stereotype threat, where marginalized students perform worse academically by simply acknowledging that their group is expected to fair poorly on a test (Steele, 1997). By securing and re-positing that academic achievement is the norm, for students who may be placed in remedial or non-AP courses, stereotype threat can be resisted. The processes attached to social identity theory (Hoggs & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel 1981; Thoits & Virshup, 1997; Stets & Burke, 2000) are operationalized by the Cross' (1991) model of black identity in order to give general categories of identity development for African American students. By securing these identities, African American students can become resistant to social and structural influences that may hinder their conceptions and performance of academics in relation to their own identities, both individual- and group-based forms (Tyson, 2011).

Online social networks in relation to educational settings are arguably vital to the development of individual and group identities. However, as the current student generation grows up in a new technological age, the emergence of social media has created new platforms where individuals can build social networks and online communities that foster new connections to people that would have been previously out of touch. Building online connections to other African American students, African American academics and public intellectuals, or professional organizations could potentially help develop and secure these racial (and academic) identities in a non-educational setting to influence African American students' educational performance in the future.

CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL MEDIA

The ability to connect with other people across physical boundaries is a hallmark of social media. According to Hogan and Quan-Haee (2010), social media is defined as bi- or multi-directional online communication. In other words, social media allows for a less-restricted flow of information. Starting in the 1990's, weblogs (blogs) became the first form of social media, where users could post comments and share links to other bloggers' pages (Miller & Shepard, 2004). Since then, the use of social media, and more specifically, social network sites (SNS), has enabled people to maintain pre-existing social bonds and communicate with anonymous users within online communities (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Additionally, the integration of social media into society is further aided by the ability to access these platforms through mobile applications on cellphones and portable tablets, allowing users to connect and communicate almost any time and anywhere (Lenhart et al., 2010; McGrath, 2011). These social media platforms have become an incubator for online communities and social networks for a wide range of demographics, whether they are for schools, sporting events and teams, or even social groups. African Americans specifically, have been able to carve out spaces on social networking sites where socio-political and cultural debate and discussion occur in mass (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Lindsey, 2013; Lee, 2012). These discussions and access to

conversation are even more important than even the access to information that social media provides in the context of political protest and social change (Shirky, 2011).

Access to discussion, information, and network maintenance are the three main affordances that will be cited as identity building tools within online communities. Online communities are composed of users who interact and discuss shared interests in a particular topic on the Internet (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Online communities are hosted on various social media platforms, which are web-based applications with distinct affordances for connecting users (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Platforms ranging from blogs, dating sites, Facebook, and Twitter have had a profound impact on society, thanks to their ability to connect individuals in a number of different ways. The affordances enable optimal performance on platforms, while the limitations make others better equipped for certain functions (Klang & Nolin, 2011). It is through a lens of affordances that this thesis seeks to posit how social media functions as a tool for identity building, specifically for African American students, as they are able to build social capital, adjust to group norms, and bridge these online identities to their offline environments, such as school. Lastly, this chapter theorizes how these affordances may have educational value for students who utilize social media platforms outside of school.

Identifying Affordances

Generally speaking, most social networking sites and platforms serve the same purpose of connecting individuals with shared interests (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

However, different platforms carry out this function in different ways, making some better in certain aspects than others. These optimal functions, such as the different ways users can communicate (i.e. instant messaging, wall post, comment, etc.), are called

affordances (Klang & Nolin, 2011). Understanding the design of particular platforms, which demographic (race, age gender, etc.) uses them, and how they are used are key aspects in determining the vitality of these social media tools to the development of African American students. There is certainly some overlap in the affordances of platforms so that users typically have access to multiple platforms in order to capitalize on the unique functionality of each (Duggan & Smith, 2014). Focusing on the affordances rather than the platforms themselves allows for theoretical flexibility, as platform functions can evolve and popularity can fluctuate over time (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Three main affordances explored in this chapter are network building, communication (meanings and backchannel), and information dissemination.

Personal networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn function as social network maintenance sites. As Ellison et al. (2007) notes, most users on Facebook, and similar platforms use the site for maintaining and intensifying weak social ties with individuals they share a common bond with offline. The maintenance of social bonds online, builds what Ellison et al. (2007) call bridging social capital, whereby people are able to take the social capital they have acquired through their large network of weak ties online, and translate it to their offline identities. This process works as an individual's networks expands online; they gain access to more resources, even if the interpersonal bond is weak (Donath & boyd, 2004). Social media enables the maintenance of bonds and resources that are cheap, easy, and mutually beneficial to both users (Ellison et al., 2007). Platforms that allow for this expansion of networks can be beneficial resources for African American students looking to build educational social capital with positive role models or maintain connections with friends and family, if they find themselves

marginalized within the school system. This use of network maintenance is best illustrated in Lee's (2012) study that showed African American college students used Facebook to maintain relationships with their friends (mostly African Americans) and family back home as a way to build online communities away from home. Facebook as a standalone platform is not sufficient as a racial identity building tool (Lee, 2012), rather its affordance of network management grants African American students the ability to maintain and manage social bonds with people beyond their physical environment (Ellison et al., 2007; Lee 2012). The ability to maintain close social bonds with other African Americans on social networking sites can create a community resource for students who may have trouble fitting into environments they are not comfortable in. The power of the particular affordance is the accentuation of maintaining connections with acquaintances, which can expand the network and diversify resources available to the users (Ellison et al., 2007).

However, not all online connections are mutual, platforms such as a Twitter, Instagram, and blogs can be unidirectional in nature. Following an individual's Twitter account or subscribing to a blog does not force the individual to reciprocate the action. Although this mode of network building is not mutually beneficial, it still holds value as an interest graph, where the user can still gain a limited access to the resource that they are following through their shared interest. This also enables a larger network for users, whereas typically a pre-existing relationship needs to be established on a social graph, such as personal networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. Social networks function more on anonymity where social identities become more salient than personal individuation (Spears, Lea, & Postmes, 2007). There are benefits to both network

affordances, whereas a network consisting of weak interpersonal ties can assist in providing users with access to resources, such as information; social networks that do not require a mutual connection can grow much larger and accentuate social identities. For African Americans, this manifests itself most prominently on Twitter, where individuals have created a community based around the social identity of race called “Black Twitter.”

However, the affordance most commonly associated with Twitter, and one that is uniquely utilized by African Americans on “Black Twitter” is text-based, fast communication that occurs through 140 character replies, messages, and comment (Brock, 2012; Sharma, 2013). Access to conversation is arguably the most important function of social media, when it comes to political protest and social change (Shirky, 2011). The use of Twitter’s communicative affordances has enabled African Americans to push conversations about race and social justice online into the national spotlight (Brock, 2012; Sharma, 2013; Young, 2010). Conversation online can occur in front-stage environments, such as a Facebook “wall” comment, or in backchannel modes, such as Facebook messenger. Each form of communication can be beneficial in the process of building racial identities for African American students. Understanding how social media is a tool for communication, and more specifically, how this tool is utilized, is imperative in identifying which platforms are most effectively used by African Americans. Student’s ability to utilize private communications on platforms, such as Facebook’s messenger or Twitter’s direct messaging feature, enables them to freely communicate in an interpersonal space that is not directly influenced by social structures and expectations (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008). Discussing race and racism with other African Americans has been shown to correlate with higher GPAs and better social

adjustment among students (Powell & Jacob-Arriola, 2003). Allowing students to utilize these functions to create a privatized space for communication is a way for them to maintain bonds with each other beyond the classroom, and build bonding capital with students they may have loose connections to (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Public discussion around topics is also a communicative affordance of many platforms that can be beneficial to African American students, particularly when these topics center on race. Teenagers utilize hashtags, most commonly associated with Twitter, to dialogue about issues that are relevant to them (Sharma, 2013; Florini 2014). Hashtags are topic titles that proceed with the keyboard “#” symbol, which makes the topic easily searchable and directly connects the user to the larger conversation beyond their own newsfeed (Sharma, 2013). Platforms that utilize this function, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, are able to link individuals with shared interests in topics, making them more likely to participate in conversations without having a pre-existing offline bond (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Cultural hashtag discussions have a profound relationship with identity, as issues regarding race encompass a number of shared interests for African American users on various platforms. Citing African Americans’ disproportionate use of Twitter, Brock (2012) discusses how twitter conversation helps inform African American identity amongst its users.

Within this process, users have the agency to communicate in ways that grant access to membership to the larger group, and signify racial self-categorization (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013; Spears et al., 2007). Even on platforms like Facebook, which is predicated on pre-existing social ties, the emphasis on social identity grows as networks extends and interpersonal bonds weaken between users (Ellison et al., 2007).

Additionally, Spears, Lea, and Postmes (2007) posit that the lack of interpersonal relationships online leads to an emphasis on roles. These roles within social identity theory correlate closely to the functions of central members and leadership within groups. These leaders carry social capital that allows them to set norms and behaviors within the community. Utilizing communicative affordances as a way to build bonds and have conversations that tie directly to the interests of individuals who share common interests can influence social identities of users. These lines of communication offer a space not only for subversive dialogue and cultural performance, but also for the encouragement of information sharing.

Access to information is commonly referred to as the Internet's greatest affordance. Since the invention of Web 2.0, the Internet has allowed for open access to information that flows in a multidirectional pattern, free of regulation by gatekeepers (Shirky, 2011). The ability to share information quickly is one of the main affordances of many social networking sites. However, there is also a downside to this open access to information, as the pool of credible sources can be diluted by individuals who may not have the expertise they claim to have in order to adequately speak on certain topics (Freese, 2009). Regardless, this open access to information can be helpful for students looking to learn more about themselves, their culture, and their academic aspirations.

Information can be shared quickly on social media, people are able to quickly post stories through links on their various platform accounts, and some even offer their own expertise on topics through their personal blogs. Blogs were the first form of social media; they enable in-depth analysis where users can express their ideas in full, and link or comment on other user's posts (Freese, 2009; Miller & Shepherd, 2004). The

affordance of blogs is that they allow for in-depth analysis on topics, and they build on ideas by linking to other blogs and articles (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). Additionally, comment sections, which exist on most blog pages, enable somewhat quicker responses to the user's post and can encourage dialogue (Ellison et al., 2007; Miller & Shepherd, 2004). The ability to link to information and sources has since become a hallmark of social media platforms (Ellison et al., 2007). Through affordances such as Facebook's "sharing" feature, or Twitter's "Retweet" function, linking embedded information enables users to quickly share stories and opinions that they feel are relevant to them. However, linking doesn't just connect information, it can also connect users to credible sources of information, such as academics and public intellectuals (Freese, 2009).

Through various platforms, academics and public intellectuals are able to share work and spread information quickly (Freese, 2009). These individuals can be viewed as leaders and experts in their particular field. However, it should be noted that Freese (2009) does warn that confirmation bias and the dilution of quality work can occur online due to open access to public intellectuals. Despite this, open access to intellectuals and the information they bring to the table allows students to connect with leaders and role models. Within the African American community, these leaders can play a major role in securing identities and setting norms of group behavior. Access to information and credible sources is a powerful affordance of social media that can be utilized to help inform identities of students in online spaces.

While certain platforms have gained popularity, particularly among African Americans, focusing on the affordances enables the developmental power of social media to extend beyond the contemporary and ever-changing online landscape. Even as

platform popularities fluctuate and their levels of importance wane, the affordances can be emulated by other platforms that may soon take their place. The three main affordances of social media that should be focused on for identity development are: network maintenance, communication around shared interests, and information sharing. These affordances allow for the construction of identity online to continue to take place, long after certain platforms lose their popularity or change their structure. Bridging online identities and social capital to offline environments for educational purposes will be discussed below as it pertains to social media affordances.

Online Communities & Identity

Online communities that exist on social networking sites, such as “Black Twitter” are comprised of individual users that have similar interests, values, or social standings (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). In the case of “Black Twitter,” for example, shared interests in social justice movements would be a topic of discussion, with communicative expression as a form of racial expression. Even if users are not African American, the performance and signification of racial competency is adequate for inclusion into the community (Florini, 2014). The affirmation of cultural norms constructs the community participant’s desired behaviors, which can be group-decided and renegotiated at various points in time. As with offline social identities, central members and leaders hold more social capital and are able to set agendas and norms more easily online (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Sharma (2013) reinforces this point when referencing “Black Twitter” hashtags, which in order to gain popularity, must be engaged by popular “Black Twitter” users. Online communities function in a somewhat similar fashion to offline communities, in that they are predicated on the sharing of similar interests or attributes, and have social structures that enable

acquisition of social capital to improve rank and influence. However, they also differ from offline communities, as they are not bounded by time or location, and communities (social groups) are able to renegotiate their social positioning in online spaces more easily as identities can be anonymous or straightforward. The anonymity of individual identity online places more emphasis on social identities, which have allowed for greater inclusion, even if the interpersonal bond is much weaker (Ellison et al., 2007; Spears, Lea, & Postmes, 2007).

Spears, Lea, and Postmes (2007) discuss the effects and values of social identities on computer-mediated communication (CMC). They posit that social identities can become more salient in online spaces where individuality can become anonymous; therefore social groupings become the main mode of identification. Within online communities, shared interests take precedent as a means for building social connections around common identities. The social cues exhibited through the communication online validate the inclusion within the group or community. When it comes to race online, the anonymity of the Internet forces users to look for signifiers in text-based communication, and rely on social groupings to place individuals in categories.

The importance of social identities online rests heavily on communicative cues and membership roles, which are function as the structural affordances of social media platforms. For African Americans students, the ability to signify race through communication (Florini, 2014) relies heavily on the development of their racial identities in how they discuss topics of interests. Various social media platforms have inherent structural affordances that allow this performance of social identity in online spaces. With African American students utilizing particular platforms in specific and

disproportionate ways, the social identities they construct online are vital to their performance and understanding of race. The emphasis of social identities online places value on belonging and acceptance of social categories as a way to adhere to set standards and behaviors. As with certain platforms, such as Facebook, the pre-existing relationships and identities can be carried over online, but can be renegotiated in order to fit into the larger group network.

However, it is the bridging of the online social capital into offline resources that is the key to the educational value of social media. As social identities become more salient and individuals learn norms and behaviors from their online environment (Spears et al., 2007; Hogg & Reid, 2006), how these identities translate back into offline identities and environment becomes key. The affordance of bridging social capital online is one way that has previously been discussed as a way individuals carry their online identity into offline spaces (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007).

The “Proteous effect” focuses on the behaviors and self-representations of individuals online, as they relate to subsequent behavioral modifications offline (Yee, 2007). According to Yee (2007), individuals construct their ideal selves online, which can be done through avatars, which are digital representations of human faces or bodies. These avatars give users in a community an idea of how individuals view themselves. Often times, these users perform online in ways that could be considered stereotypical to the avatar. It is then noted by Yee (2007) that these behaviors are subsequently carried into offline environments. For African American students looking to bridge newly modified racial identities into offline settings, the Proteous effect bares consideration. The picture they select for their profile, or the avatar they create will most closely align

with their ideal identity, giving those in the community an idea of how they view themselves belonging to the larger group as a whole. Imagery, online performance, and discussions revolving around intersectionality are pervasive on social media platforms and contribute to the larger conversation about race, identity, and education (Lindsey, 2013). With the prominence of race becoming a salient social identity online, students learn group norms and behaviors through communications online, which they can then carry over to their offline identity.

Online identities that center on race highlight the importance of social identities and the acceptance of group membership. Similar to offline contexts, students utilizing social media confirm to social structures and norms, and construct their identities in accordance to expectations. Given the aforementioned issues within education (Chapter 2), students face structural impediments that they may perceive as conflicting with their identities as an African American and as a student. The structural affordances of social media platforms could potentially serve as an out-of-classroom form of resistance where students can reaffirm the bonds of their racial and academic identities to create positive educational outcomes.

Selecting The Right Platforms

In understanding how online identities are constructed through social media affordances, it becomes important for users to pick which platforms are best for utilizing each affordance. African Americans have already begun to use particular platforms in preference for particular affordances (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Lee, 2012; Sharma, 2013). This is highlighted when analyzing platform usage, where African Americans are

almost twice as likely to use Twitter than whites, and use Facebook at a disproportionately high rate as well (Duggan & Smith, 2014).

Race is not the only proxy for determining platform use; age can determine which platform is best utilized as well. Piper and Jaffray's (2013) market research project shows that Twitter has become the "most important" platform, for teenagers making spending decisions. This positive trend towards Twitter usage and age continues into adulthood where young adults (age 19-30) are the most likely to use the text-based networking site (Duggan & Smith, 2014). While most platforms have the ability to share information, communicate, and build large networks, some are better than others at those particular functions, and can serve to inform identity in different ways. These various platforms and their functions could enable practitioners to select the optimal affordance they wish to utilize in their classroom to engage students.

For instance, when it comes to the sharing of information, blogs may be the best platform, particularly when it comes to education. Miller & Shepherd (2004) note that content is the most vital component to a successful blog. Meaning that unlike network building sites and sites built on quick communication, users have the ability to find quality information from reputable sources. The information can come from individuals who people from particular social groups may view as central members and leaders (Hogg & Reid, 2006). When constructing identities for African American students the information gleaned from blogs can be helpful in giving them direct information, and a source to emulate. However, with the popularity of blogging among teenagers showing a steady decline (Lenhart et al., 2010), selecting a platform that is content driven is key to supplying information among students. With content driving the success of blogs (Miller

& Shepherd (2004), finding a platform that has rich information linked or embedded into the structural design for students utilize is key in taking advantage of social media's open gateway to information.

When looking for a platform that focuses on shared interests, the type of communication and the ways text is shared should be considered. An example of this is the rise of "Black Twitter" as a space for African Americans to dialogue around shared interests, which in some cases has led to online-activism that has caught nationwide attention (Florini, 2014; Young, 2010). Through the utilization of cultural norms and practices, Black Twitter has become a space for African American communication and social movement incubation through shared interests (Brock, 2012; Esco, 2011; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). This becomes important as African American identity and issues become salient amongst Twitter users, and can provide a beneficial experience for African American students. The phenomenon of "Black Twitter" speaks volumes to the communicative cultural competencies of social network platforms. African American ideologies and identities online run the gamut, from the intellectuals, to the comedians, to the celebrities. However, they are all unofficially unified through a shared Black cultural competency (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014). This is most easily seen through the use of cultural "hashtags" on Twitter, which sets the topic of discussion; these particular hashtags revolve around issues of race (Sharma, 2013). Additionally, Sharma (2013) notes that Black Twitter's cultural hashtags rely heavily on social contagion in order to quickly spread across the social network. Those with the cultural competency to add to or engage in the discussion create an online environment that is rooted heavily in the shared African American experience and the expression of racial identity (Florini, 2014).

This online community that exists on Twitter highlights the fact that people are more likely to carry out tasks, such as participating in online conversations, if they are working or communicating with people who are similar to them with shared interests (Kraut & Resnick, 2011). Black Twitter's existence is due in large part because of the structural affordance of Twitter, with hashtags setting the topic, users are able to communicate along lines of shared interests, which have typically revolved around issues of race or have some racial dynamic to them for African American users. Florini (2014) points to the communicative art of "signifying" online as the main mode in which African American Twitter users communicate over these hashtags. Within online and offline communities, signifying is a cultural form of communication that African Americans can use to build bonds.

Although Twitter, specifically "Black Twitter," is poignant example of how communication through shared interests can form identity, it is not the only platform capable of these functions. Any platform that can allow for focused discussion on the shared interests of students should be considered viable for the use of projecting identity online. User interest lets the community know that they belong to a particular group from which they share a social bond. For African Americans, platforms where users can dialogue about race in culturally unique ways can have outcomes for identities.

The ability to build networks of social bonds to produce social capital that can be bridged into offline settings is another important affordance that needs to be considered. Most connections on social networking sites tend to be weak bonds shared by acquaintances, and as the network grows the access to resources grows (Ellison et al., 2007). Managing these large networks can have benefits for African American students,

as they may tie their different identities to the social information they gather from their connections. Facebook as an example allows for this type of network management, where students may have friends, family, classmates, and social acquaintances as a part of their network. Even if these bonds are weak, they are still maintained, and students can tap into their resources as they can get information from their acquaintances or communicate with their classmates about school. Having the ability to utilize this affordance can help them bridge the social capital online to their offline identities, where they can use these connections in a positive way (Ellison et al. 2007).

As previously discussed, not all platforms require mutual connections. However, in order to build the social capital necessary for bridging to offline environments, mutual connections need to be made. Platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn strongly enable this feature, as users are able to construct networks for shared and potentially beneficial purposes. Selecting platforms that highlight the mutual benefits of bonding and bridging social capital is key to highlighting the potential education benefits of social media.

The Value of Social Media To Education

Technological advances, such as computers, have aided education greatly over the time, particularly over the last two and a half decades (Gu, Zhu, Guo, 2013; Hew & Bush, 2006). Social media platform usage, through mobile devices have been particularly beneficial to bridging the digital divide across lines of race and socio-economic status (Lenhart et al., 2010; McGrath, 2011). The “digital divide,” is the unequal access to the Internet and technological resources for underserved and marginalized communities (McGrath, 2011).

According to Lenhart et al. (2010) and McGrath (2011), despite “the digital divide,” African American’s use of mobile phones to access the Internet has encouraged disproportionate use of particular social media platforms among African Americans, particularly those 30 and younger. With popular platform sites becoming readily accessible through mobile phones and tablets (Lenhart et al., 2010), the impact on African American community has allowed for the shaping of web cultures based around racial lines, the popularity of “Black Twitter” is a prime example of an online community utilizing a platform affordance for reaffirming racial identity.

Research has shown that the usage of social media amongst African Americans can have a positive effect on African American identity (Brock, 2012; Lee, 2012; Lindsey, 2013), which according to Tyson (2011) and Tatum (2003) may in turn lead to higher academic achievement, as evidence by other studies (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003; Livingston et al., 2008; Wright, 2011). The formation of racial identity also plays a huge factor in the psychological and educational welfare of a student (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). The use of social media, specifically the efficient use of affordances can be particularly useful in assisting African American students build secure racial identities, which can lead to better self-esteem and positive educational outcomes.

This unique use of social media by African Americans is becoming a hot field of study by many scholars. The functionality of these popular social media platforms does not stop at serving as a point of connecting individuals. The use of the platform affordances to introduce discussion and topics could serve as a way to implement culturally relevant material in a way that is engaging to students. As Agrifoglio et al

(2010) point out; platforms can encourage people to participate with others to discuss topics and shared interests. Just by simply allowing access to topics and discussions in a space that is familiar and interesting to African American students, there is a greater chance at improving their disposition to learning across subjects. By providing students an outlet to communicate with each other or positive role models, the effects of in-school segregation, social isolation (Tyson, 2011), and teacher bias (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999) can be combated through the building of social bonds and the sharing of information outside of the classroom.

From an educational perspective, platform affordance can assist in the formalization of racialized identities in online spaces, and can promote higher levels of saliency and self-esteem, which may subsequently improve educational outlooks and achievement outcomes for African American students (Chavous et al., 2003). By utilizing social identity as a theoretical framework along with Cross' (1991) Nigrescence model of identity development for operational purposes, we can determine the societal value of race and its relationship to the academic profiles of the students who are involved in these culturally based platforms. The formation of racial identity for African American students plays a major role in their educational outcomes (Chavous et al., 2003; Livingston et al., 2008; Tatum, 2003; Tyson, 2011; Wright, 2011), as well as their psychological well-being (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995). The educational value of popular social media platforms in the classrooms remains a highly debatable topic among educational practitioners and academics (Wilson, 2013). However, functionality of social media platforms in the African American community may serve as an unexplored tool in creating an online tool for African American students to reaffirm their identities, and

counter hegemonic educational narratives. The next chapter looks to construct a model of social media identity building and operationalize the practice in a pedagogical description that can be utilized by students, practitioners and academics.

CHAPTER V

MODELING ACADEMIC IDENTITY

The following model is based on the affordances of social media platforms; network maintenance, communication, and information access. This model utilizes social identity theory and Cross' (1991) model of Nigrescence as a framework to show how these affordances online can help foster identity development in a similar fashion to offline interactions. This model shows a descriptive outline for each stage of African American identity development (Cross, 1991), one for face-to-face (offline), and one for online interactions in order to show how these environments can be bridged. The remainder of the chapter will thoroughly discuss the model as it relates to each stage's threshold, examples, explanations, and best practices for educators looking to utilize this model as a building tool. Below is the Affordance Identity Model (AIM).

Table 1. Affordance Identity Model

Cross Model Stage	Form of Interaction	
	Face-to-Face	Online
<i>Pre-encounter</i> (No conception of racial identity)	Small social circle, racial identity not salient for the individual within particular setting.	Minimal online presence, network consisting of mostly close friends and family; racial identity not salient.
<i>Encounter</i> (Accentuates differences between ingroup and outgroup)	Made aware of their outgroup differences, and social categories, along with their assigned power structures.	Made aware of group differences through network expansion beyond immediate relationships and communication; social identities supersedes individuation as network expands.
<i>Immersion/Emersion</i> (Racial performance)	Withdraws from dominant culture and aligns ideologically with their racial identity. Self-categorizes as belonging (or not belonging) to a particular racial group.	Joins online communities that discuss on race/racial topics, and begins to adopt group behavior and identity. Communicates using cultural hashtags and textual signifiers.
<i>Internalization*</i> (Self-gratification)	Defines self racially, and positively internalizes group membership. Interacts with other groups without influence from outside factors.	Displays race online, and communicates across groups. Links personal network to include information from African American intellectuals and professional organizations.
<i>Commitment*</i> (Becomes central group member)	Views success as reflective of group as a whole, and becomes a visible leader within the group.	Online identity is specifically race-positive. Utilizes large network and communication tools to disperse race-positive information.

* Indicates stages of security

Cross (1991) describes the “pre-encounter” stage as a level of unawareness in relation to racial identity and group differences. Although African American students are typically aware of race by the time they reach their high school years (Cross, 1991), in a given situation, students may consider other identities to be salient, such as their family, student, religious identities, etc. This may be particularly true for African American students at predominantly white schools, or those listed in gifted courses where their academic identities are the dominant social proxy for their environment. As previously discussed, the effects of “racelessness” among high achieving students can lead to symptoms of depression and social anxiety (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Harris & Marsh, 2010). Getting students to pass through this stage quickly is vital not only for their psychological welfare, but for their adjustment into a racialized society as well (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). African American students should be fully aware of how their race, along with their other identities, play a role in their societal positioning, even when they believe that one identity is more salient in a given situation (Collins, 1993). Within social identity theory, a pre-encountered identity would be described as an uncategorized identity, where an individual has yet to recognize their place as either an in-group or out-of-group member (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). Students utilizing social media in the pre-encounter stage have small social networks consisting of mostly family and close friends. Their bonds are based off pre-existing relationships where race is a salient factor. For example, students with a Facebook account where most of their connections are with family members will not view race as the dominant identity within this social circle, rather their familial identities (i.e. son, daughter, cousin, nephew, etc.) will take precedent. In order for students to begin to recognize race online

they must expand their network beyond those they already share an interpersonal bond with offline.

The recognition of in-group and out-of-group differences is considered an encounter (Cross, 1991). During this process, students recognize the role of race and the societal values placed on each group. For African American students, they begin to recognize social or cultural differences between themselves and others. The significance of this stage comes from the socially meaningful categorizations of race, where hegemonic values grants social capital to one group over another. When it comes to race, whites remain the dominant group, while African Americans are considered a subordinate group in American society (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). The awareness of group differences comes with the recognition of different group norms and behaviors (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within an online environment, students utilizing social media at this stage begin expanding their network and start recognizing differences between races. This expansion of networks can be beneficial as they begin to build online social capital that can be bridged as resources to offline environments (Ellison et al., 2007). Through building superficial social connections through networking sites or participating in conversations where “signifying” dialogue is used to denote race, students begin to see the differences in racial performance in online settings. The psychosocial processes involved with the online “encounter” phase is very much similar to the offline, with the exception that the encounter relies more heavily on the textual and conversational nature of the event. Students “encountering” a situation where race becomes evident is the crux of the academic identity debate.

As students become aware of their social positioning, does this have an effect on their educational aspirations? At this stage, students can either withdraw socially, or self categorize as belonging to a social group (race) in order to build self-esteem and avoid social isolation. The affordance of network expansion through social media allows for students to identify with and form different groups based on shared interests and experiences. For example, the same student who originally had a small network may join a Facebook group specifically for African American journalists; expanding their network to a community of writers whose racial identification is salient. The base level of the encounter phase is the recognition of race online, extending beyond personal connections and recognizing social similarities with the in-group and differences with the out-group. While the choice to categorize and claim group membership is key to moving forward to the next stage, it must be stated that the possible social isolation and internalization of racism that students who withdraw socially may face is not conducive to learning, and is typically what oppositional culture theorist point to as the root cause for African American students withdrawing from education (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978).

The next stage (immersion/emersion) points to the ability of African American students to draw positive value from their identification with a racial group as they begin to draw social comparisons with other African Americans as a reference point for examples of normative behavior (Cross, 1991; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Students at the immersion stage have self-categorized as being African American, as they have moved beyond simply recognizing race, and have willingly accepted that they are members of the racial group. At this point, students begin looking to adopt group centric views on race that counter mainstream society's view of African Americans, as they start to adapt a

more race-positive mind state. During the immersion/emersion process, students withdraw from the dominant group, and align themselves more closely with the group they identify with (Cross, 1991). The immersion process coincides with social identity theory's tenant of accepting group norms and prototypical behaviors (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1981). Students can merge their identities with the group and further accentuate similarities. In an offline setting, an example of this would be African American students sitting with each other at a cafeteria (Tatum, 2003). Students recognize the differences between races (encounter), then begin to socialize and adopt the norms of the group that they categorize themselves as belonging too (immersion).

In an online environment, where identity can be anonymous (Spears et al. 2007), students can join communities where racial identity is salient amongst users in discussions. An example of this would be Twitter hashtags, where cultural discussions are funneled through topics that require an understanding of shared meaning for those within the group (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). "Black Twitter" itself is a prime example of the immersion/emersion process online, where a community of users makes race a salient social identity through which norms and group culture are discussed (Brock, 2012). At this stage, the key rests in social identity theory's tenant of social comparison when African American students can see, imitate, or renegotiate norms attributed to African American culture and identity. These conversations on social media can assist in further developing a diverse perspective on racial identities for students, as they are able to interact with a multitude of African American identities, showing that racial categories are not monolithic in their portrayal or performance of behaviors. Within an educational framework, connecting with other African American students or group

leaders through communicating a shared cultural competency can allow for them to interact in online communities with other students centered on shared social identities (racial and/or academic).

The fourth stage of “internalization” denotes a level of security whereby students have actively embraced their racial identity and begin to build self-esteem through their identification as African American. The building of self-esteem is the driving force behind this social self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). At this level, students have positively internalized their group membership and rendered their racial categorization as salient identity. Additionally, students who have internalized their racial identity in a positive way are likely to have more secure identities that will not be influenced by negative outside pressures (Tyson, 2011), as students at this stage are more likely to interact with other groups, rather than socializing exclusively with their own (Cross, 1991). Having this level of security for racial identity is the target goal of this model, and aligns with the processes of social identity theory whereby a secure identity is supported by strong self-conceptions and self-esteem (Stets & Harrod, 2004; Tajfel, 1981). Students may counteract negative messages about their group identity within schools by reaffirming their identities online, and can carry these identities offline.

This stage is also the first where the bridging of the online and offline identities manifests itself. An example of this would be a student proudly displaying their race online, through various functions, either textually or digitally (avatars) and actively seeking out information from African American intellectuals, professional organizations, or other positive role models to add to their online network. The groups or individuals that these students look to for information can be viewed by the student as being central

members to their race, who hold significant social capital academically or professionally. Subscribing to an African American public intellectual's blog in order to gain social insight into a professional field of interest is one way students can exhibit internalized racial behavior for academic purposes. The internalization of positive views of race for students at this stage puts them at a distinct advantage psychologically over students that do not strongly identify racially, as this level of social identification is closely related to improved levels of self-esteem (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Harris & Marsh, 2010; Tyson, 2011). Through the process of internalization, students can resist narratives of African American intellectual inferiority by exhibiting high achievement academically and performing racial pride socially without secluding themselves from other social groups.

The "internalization" stage is where we can begin to measure the hypotheses presented in Chapter 1 in comparison to students who exhibit traits from the pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion/emersion stages. Specifically, H₁ focuses on social media use as correlating to higher regard for race and academics as being mutually beneficial. It stands to reason that students who have identified themselves as African American, and view their racial categorization as a positive will be more likely to make race a salient identity and view education as one area achievement is valued (Chavous et al., 2003). Additionally, students at this stage are more likely to include African American intellectuals and professional groups into their networks, which is where the hypotheses of H₂ and H₃ can be tested. These hypotheses also center on the student perceptions of race and academics becoming a factor in how they construct their networks and online identities, as they begin to connect with central members and leaders

of their group (Abrams et al., 2005; Hogg & Reid, 2006). As students head into the last stage of the model, they can become central members and group leaders.

In the final stage, “commitment,” students go from being active participants that have gained a level of self-gratification, to becoming leaders who can renegotiate norms and behaviors of the group, and are viewed as central members (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). At this level, students could become role models for their peers and encourage group achievement that is reflective of their own work. Students at this stage have cognitively reversed societal expectations of African Americans by positing success and achievement as a prototypical norm of the group. In the commitment stage, African American students take an active role in ensuring that group identification is synonymous high achievement and aspirations. In face-to-face interactions, students may actively encourage other African American students to take college prep-exams or form study groups for a test. In an online setting, students proudly synthesize race and achievement, and go a step beyond participating within online communities, but become content creators and discussion leaders with large networks of resources.

An example of students at this stage utilizing social media affordances would be creating or disseminating information themselves. This can be achieved in a number of ways, such as creating their own blogs, group pages, or threads where they share their experiences and drive discussions, and they can bring their social influence to the forefront in sharing their racial (academic) identities. The social capital acquired by becoming a central member or leader of a social group has implications for online and offline identities, which at this level of development should become synthesized as bonding social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Students exhibiting commitment level

qualities typically are able to carry their identities and leadership across environments, as race is a fundamentally salient identity for them. The use of social media for students with leadership qualities increases with age, as Batts (2013) found that students in leadership positions in college frequently utilized popular social media platforms in order to communicate with other students and organizations to build networks. African American student leaders exhibit “commitment” level qualities through their association of racial identity and academic achievement by not only viewing success as reflective of themselves, but as the group as a whole. Those utilizing social media identify themselves through their interests in racial and academic topics, and are willing to drive information sharing in a way that mutually benefits both identities.

It is important to note that this model and the examples given account for an ideal situation, and that it is possible for students to slide backwards from stages, or be caught between them, as the model is not static or non-linear. The temporal nature of this model is one of the limitations that will be discussed (Chapter 4). However, the presented model should serve as an effective representation of how online interactions that use the affordances of social media can influence identities for African American students. Ultimately, the synthesis of online and offline identities that fall within the internalization or commitment stages should have positive academic outcomes, as students see themselves as leaders and become secure in their identities as they view their accomplishments as being reflective of the group as a whole. The validity of this theoretical model should be tested with the aforementioned hypotheses in order to gauge how the saliency of race online and the use of platform affordances have educational and psychological impacts on students. Additionally, the ability to include intellectual role

models into a social network through non-interpersonal bonds online should be tested for measuring saliency and academic outcomes. Bridging online interactions and identity formation to create offline results is the express purpose of this model, and should be tested as such.

Best Pedagogical Practices

For educators looking to utilize the affordances of social media as an identity-building tool, the proposed model (above) should serve as a viable guide for securing African American identities online for offline, educational outcomes. However, the ceiling for effective use of social media in the classroom is debatable (Elvasky, 2013; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011; Wilson, 2013), and its use as an in-class tool should be left to the discretion of the educator. Regardless of teacher opinions of social media in the classroom, the open access nature of the internet and mobile applications allows for this model to be utilized as a pedagogical tool outside of the classroom. This section will discuss ways that teachers and school administrators can utilize social media's affordances as an educational identity-building tool for African American students, whether it is used inside and/or outside of the classroom. It is important to consider that students can start out at different stages due to various social factors that extend beyond the school and social media, and that progression through these stages is not necessarily linear, as students will have to internally form and renegotiate their identities throughout their academic careers.

As previously discussed, African American students may find themselves among marginalized populations in schools or in their classrooms (Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011), and develop feelings of “racelessness” or face social isolation (Harris & Marsh, 2010).

These students would be categorized as having “pre-encounter” mentalities towards race and education. These students will typically have small online social networks, where bonds are pre-existing and familial. To get this student moving forward, and aware of race within an educational context, they need to have an encounter, where they recognize group differences. Within the educational system, this encounter is all too often negative, as African American students either find themselves tracked into remedial courses, or they find themselves socially marginalized as one of the few African American students in their advanced courses (Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011). Utilizing the affordance of network expansion on social media is one way that these students can have a positive encounter with race, where their perceived differences can highlight educational attainment along with an affirmation of African American identity. Having students expand their network by following African American intellectuals and professional or student organizations on various platforms can make these students aware of race, while promoting a positive academic identity that they may not get to see in an offline setting in schools. For instance, having students with aspirations of becoming a lawyer, but have never met an African American lawyer can Google search: “Black Lawyers” and they could find in the results a number national and local organizations for African American lawyers, a majority of which have links to their social media accounts. Making students simultaneously aware of race and academic/professional achievement is vital to producing a positive “encounter” with race online.

However, even at the encounter stage, students that recognize group differences may be influenced by societal expectations and racism, as norms of associating with an African American identity (Bandura, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Preventing these

students from not internalizing racism or negative stereotypes about the group, which they have categorized themselves as belonging to, is key to avoiding adverse educational outcomes (Steele, 1997). Having students go through the process of immersion/emersion is vital for them to adjust to positive group norms and behaviors that can reaffirm their racial identity and lay a solid educational framework. Using communicative affordances of certain platforms can be beneficial to students in learning how to communicate culturally (signify) as a way to build networks with other African American students or role models that focus on educational discussions around race. “Black Twitter” hashtags are prime examples of communicative affordances where students can quickly engage on discussions that are filtered through a racialized lens (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013). Students in the immersion/emersion stage have begun to adopt norms and behaviors of the group, while withdrawing from the dominant culture (Cross, 1991). While positive group identification is a major step in the right direction, withdrawing from interactions with other social groups is problematic, and is a trait of insecurity as students at this stage rely heavily on their social comparison to others within the group (Cross, 1991; Stets & Burke 2000). Utilizing communication functions can be beneficial in not only helping the student immerse themselves into their own social group, but it can also serve as a function to get them to progress to a stage where they are able to communicate across racial lines and exhibit positive, internalized identities.

The goal of this model is to have students at the “internalization” or “commitment” stages of identity, as these two stages exhibit secure traits that will reduce the chance of a student slipping back into a more vulnerable stage. Producing positive encounters with race online is vital in students developing secure racial identities, as

negative encounters can cause student to slip back into more vulnerable stages. In both stages, students have internalized positive views of their race, and are able to comfortably interact across social groups without being influenced by peer or societal expectations. For educators, it is important that students remain at these stages. One way that this can be done is by encouraging students to build their own social media profiles where they can act as create and curate information on education and race, and interact with other public intellectuals and fellow students in large networks that can reaffirm their identities as academically successful African American students. These students may see themselves as leaders in their school, and can act as central members to their classmates to help encourage a “cool” (Majors & Billson, 1992) academic identity for other African American students.

Perhaps the pedagogical practice that can be utilized by educators to encourage stage matriculation at any level is to encourage students to expand their network on all platforms that they frequently utilize. Giving students a take-home assignment that puts their time spent on social media to effective use outside of the classroom may be the most practical way to utilize the theoretical model, until more definitive research emerges on the validity of social media in the classroom. Specifically, encouraging students to connect with African American public intellectuals, professional organizations, academics, as well as each other, in order to create online communities where information can be shared, social capital can be bridged, and lines of communication around race can be opened for positive identity building. For African American students that find themselves in under-resourced classrooms or in tracked-courses that are not conducive to preparation for higher education, social media can be utilized as a tool to

counter systemic displacement. Educators could exercise the use of the Internet and social media as a way to engage these students with high-achieving African American role models. Students can begin following these accounts, interact with these individuals and/or organization, and gather valuable information about race and education. Within this resource is the intrinsic value of these students having the opportunity to see and interact with academically and professionally successful African American leaders that can combat structural inequality and norms within schools.

Additionally, encouraging students to create online groups across classrooms could be a way for students to build connections and communicate, minimizing social stigmatization and envy. The ability for students to communicate with each other at various levels of intersecting identities could benefit all students, regardless of track placement. This could easily be done on platforms such as Facebook and Google+, or even a schools website, if they have communicative functions available. Another out-of class possibility would be to utilize the quick communication power of Twitter and cultural hashtags as a way to foster discussion between students and central members of “Black Twitter” as a way to uniquely signify an educational cultural performance. For example, a hashtag like “#BlackNerds” has been routinely used by high-achieving African Americans to discuss various academic topics in a culturally relevant manner. Quick communication is not only limited to Twitter, as most platforms have direct messaging functions that allow for fast backchannel communications that students can use outside of the classroom to share information.

Due to the sensitive nature of certain topics revolving around race, such as slavery or police brutality, teachers and administration may not feel comfortable devoting time in

class to the subject. The conservative nature of certain school systems, along with tight curriculum schedules may prohibit use of social media or discussion of race in the classroom. Restrictions on social media access on school servers may also hinder utilizing AIM as a pedagogical tool within traditional school settings. However, alternative educational spaces and programs may help in utilizing AIM as a way to develop student's racial and academic identities. After school programs can offer assistance in giving students a time and space to utilize social media affordances to further develop their academic pursuits through a racialized lens. Guidance counselors in these programs can create their own syllabus that focus on race and academics or possible sensitive, race-related topics for students to complete beyond what may be restricted in the classroom. Taking advantage of the multitude of spaces where educational resources can be found beyond the traditional classroom setting, along with open access to the Internet enables AIM to be operationalized in a number of ways, even if one avenue of education is cut off by administrative limitations.

These pedagogical practices merely serve as examples of ways educators can use social media as a way to build identity for African Americans, and are certainly not the only ways that social media can be utilized to do so. It is strongly recommended that practitioners looking to utilize social media take each platform's affordances and limitations into consideration when constructing assignments, as well as the relevance of these platforms to the students. Utilizing each platform's communicative affordance to the best of its ability will maximize its effectiveness in allowing students to socialize within the network and construct their identities in a productive manner.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

For those looking to utilize this model, gauging its effectiveness is important in not only determining its validity, but also assessing its educational value. Variables relating to social media use, perceptions of race, and educational achievement should be considering when utilizing this model. Student self-report survey data on social media is the most practical way of measuring social media use as far as time spent, what social media is used for, how it is used, and the breadth of networks students have constructed. Given that this model was designed for use among high school aged students, samples should come from students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years old. As this thesis deals with the effects of track placement and social marginalization of African American students, a specific focus on students enrolled in urban schools and districts should be considered when drawing a target sample.

As hypotheses H_1 and H_2 deal with frequent social media use as it relates to views of race and academic achievement, self-report surveys, along with traditional outcome measures, such as GPAs are the best form of data collection. Due to the fluidity and temporal nature of the model the results of these surveys should be gauged in comparison to the thresholds and descriptions of the stages given within the model explanation. For example, a question regarding student perceptions of race in the classroom may be included in a survey, such as, “Do you feel isolated in your classroom because of your race?” A student recognizing racial differences in the classroom or online is at least at the “encounter” stage, and may be as advanced as the “commitment” stage if they exhibit internalized leadership skills. Additional responses to surveys may help tease out exact

stage descriptions. However, the best way to evaluate these stages is through qualitative measures through interviews and focus groups.

Traditional measurements of test scores and GPAs can be utilized to measure educational outcomes for students following this model. However, when gauging academic identities, it is also important to measure the aspirations of these students beyond simply achievement, as well as student influences. In other words, evaluating academic identity should include instruments that measure how students view themselves and what other factors influence their perceptions of education, along with their academic achievements.

Collecting social media data requires a mining of platforms that enables access to enormous amount of information (Russell, 2013). For the specifics of this thesis, analysis of hashtags, social connections, and content will be useful in gauging the frequency and utilization of social media. By analyzing hashtags, conversation revolving around a specific topic that has to do with race and/or academics can be monitored to see how students perceive these subjects. Responses to these hashtags can be subsequently coded for the specific study's purpose, and offer a large sample of responses around a given topic. Analysis of social connections is a key for this model, as gaining insight on how people are connecting on various social media platforms is key to this study. Mutual or non-reciprocal connections can be studied to see how these connections are made and utilized by students. Who these students are connecting to or with online is vital in measuring the impact of social media and identification. The content found within these online interactions is substantive data that can be collected for analysis regarding student perceptions of race and academics. Data found within these conversations, connections,

and content will be beneficial in measuring the effectiveness of this model's affordances on identity.

The model proposed in this chapter highlights the potential the benefits of utilizing social media affordances as a way to encourage positive identity development for African American students. African American student identity has been historically scrutinized (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978), and students themselves may even succumb to societal pressures of structural inequalities. This model positions the use of social media as a tool for African American students to construct positive social identities online, where they may not face the same systemic issues that the encounter offline. This model was constructed with the ideal environment in mind. In the following chapter, limitations to this model will be further fleshed out, along with future research and implications for this thesis.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The use of social media platforms' affordances among African American students allows for communication across physical boundaries that can lead to affirmation of racial identity, which could have positive academic outcomes. Social networking sites allow African American students to counter hegemonic narratives and discriminatory social structures that can reinforce negative stereotypes about African American intellectual inferiority by allowing them access to and an avenue of communication with communities of shared interests. Additionally, connecting these students to the work distributed by African American public and academic intellectuals or professional organizations gives them resources to valuable information, and may give them role models, who can act as central members to emulate. Building networks with other high-achieving academic students on popular platforms create communities and networks that enable African American students to re-posit their racial identity as secure, and academically successful.

Utilizing these platform affordances as tools, primarily outside of the classroom, can still hold educational value, even as the debate as to whether or not the popular platforms can be used productively in the classroom continues (Elvasky, 2013; Junco et al., 2011; Wilson, 2013). The pedagogical framework proposed above grants academics and educational practitioners a model through which they can assist African American

students in building connections, creating dialogue, and gathering information that is pertinent to their formation of identity and academic endeavors. Having the opportunity to counter structural segregation within schools, through building networks of communication via social media, can work to subvert the racialized messages brought upon by teacher bias and school tracking. Additionally, African American student resiliency within these platforms' online communities works against these dominant narratives of African American's opposition to learn, and asserts that "acting white" is not an academic phenomenon. The bridging of online social identities into the offline environment of the classroom can serve as a way for these students to articulate "cool" (Majors & Billson, 1992), "signify" racially (Florini, 2014) and perform well academically.

AIM further extends the discussion of intersectionality in online spaces. The ability for students to construct academic social identities that intersect with race adds another dimension to identity formation and categorization. While popular discourse features dominant discussion of intersectional identities being focused on race, class and gender (Collins, 1993), academic identity deserves further inquiry into the social development of students. The ability for students to identify as high achieving along with race and gender, for instance, points to the saliency and multiplicity of identities that African American students can embody throughout their lives. Referring to the more contemporary work of Treva Lindsey (2014), popular media literacy can have an effect on the psyche, performance, and identification of African American students, particularly young girls who must navigate not only racial discrimination, but gender bias as well. The extension of this model into intersectional approaches at interpreting online identities

could hold value as students continue using more social media platforms in their daily lives (Jiffray, 2013; Lenhart et al., 2010). Academics and educational practitioners should view these platform affordances as a potential tool to better understand and develop the social identities of African American students that may find their identities challenged, or in conflict within educational environments.

Limitations

While the securing of identity and the proposed pedagogical framework for social media practices are potential devices in combating internalization racism within school systems, there are still a number of issues left unresolved within education that social media and identity building will not solve. Issues facing urban public schools, such as overcrowding and underfunding (Darling-Hammond 2004; Kozol 1991, 2005) cannot be solved by securing student's racial identities online. In fact, utilizing social media as a pedagogical tool is contingent on schools and students having consistent access to the internet or mobile technology. Additionally, as the practice of using social media as a learning tool is proposed as an out of school technique, structural deficits within the educational system remain intact. Track placement and teacher bias, which building connections online may counteract at the psychosocial level, remain in policy and practice (Foote, 2005; Orfield et al., 2012; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Tyson, 2011).

This model's focus on affordances allows for greater application over time as platform functions and popularity can shift quickly (Ellison et al., 2007). However, it is also important to note that Facebook and Twitter carry special cultural significance to African American students, which leaves to question whether or not the next popular

platforms include affordances that are conducive to creating communication based on the shared cultural interests among African American users. The model attempts to negate this possibility by focusing on the affordances and leaving open the use of backchannel communication for users open, across platforms where African American students could still utilize the functions in similar manner. The popularity of Black Twitter as a social media platform geared towards the shared interests of African American and the subsequent online activism that is what makes Twitter a unique platform itself (Young, 2010). While its affordances can be replicated on other platforms in the future, the socio-political value of the platform may not be as strong, which could have implications on the effectiveness of future platforms on the development of racial identities. In other words, future platforms with the same affordances as Twitter may not be as significant or popular among African Americans, negating some of the beneficial social identity aspects.

A second limitation of this model is that it does not account for multiple racial identities. Much has been said about the “biracial baby boom” in America, regarding the growing population of multiracial youths (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). With the number of children identifying or attempting to identify with multiple races, the effect of these identities on educational outcomes in relation to social media goes unexplored. Students from multiracial backgrounds may be influenced to identity differently depending on their social context (Harris & Sim, 2002). For instance, these students may identify with one race at home, while identifying with another in school. These students face the unique challenge of having to self-categorize intrinsically, while being aware of how they are perceived by groups they may identify with or reject (Blay,

2013). The anonymous nature of online communities and social media allows for these students to identify with social groups they share interests with (Kraut & Resnick, 2011; Spears et al., 2007). This model of academic identity building does not account for the possibility that these students may identify with multiple races, or even the possibility that they may reject the conception of race altogether, given the so-called post-racial era of “color-blindness” of this generation (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2014). The fluidity of racial identification both as an expression of agency or a pre-encounter (Cross, 1991) marker of unawareness in online communities deserves further exploration among students looking to self-categorize with particular social identities.

While AIM deals with intersectional identities of race and academics, other social identities such as gender remain unexplored by this model. With much academic focusing on the educational disparities faced by African American boys (Hayes et al., 2006; Garibaldi, 1992; Majors & Billson, 1992), girls are also victims of educational disparities. Losen & Martinez’s (2013) study reveals that African American girls have the highest rate of out of school suspensions, which may indicate structural teacher bias. This model is not sufficient for building identities beyond race and academics, which leaves numerous holes to fill as far as developing holistic and multiple social identities that students embody.

Where, which, and how many identities become salient in particular environments is a structural limitation of this model. Using Cross’ (1991) popular stage model as a guide for social identity development allowed for operational use; however, it is unable to handle any identity development beyond race. The Nigrescence model lacks the ability to attach itself to identities relating to gender, sexuality, religion, etc. that may also

influence educational identities. Further, all of these identities can inform how someone understands and performs their own racial identity in line with work on intersectionality (see Collins 1993; Crenshaw 1989). Therefore, the AIM model suffers from the same limitations. Additionally, Rockquemore and colleagues (2009) suggest that future racial identification models should not be as static, and should consider the fluidity of race as a construct, how the student is categorized by others, as well as the individual's agency to self-categorize themselves at multiple points in their lives. As previously mentioned, the temporal nature of the model does not allow for sustainability beyond the online setting, making the formation of identity a process of loops, progressions, and slip-backs. In relation to the issue of time and space, this model is only valid for students during their high school and college years, as social media usage by adolescents younger than 13 is typically restricted, and use by adults above the age of 30 significantly decreases (Duggan & Smith, 2014). This means this model cannot be used as a tool for adolescents before they reach high school, and it may not be applicable for non-traditional college students.

Although this thesis focuses on the benefits of social media as a positive identity-building tool, there can be negative encounters on platforms that could be of detriment to student identities. Cyber-bullying has been shown to have adverse effects on psychological well-being of students, as they may encounter other users that stigmatize and harass them for their social identifications or interests (Campbell, 2005; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Cyber-bullying could potentially cause these students to internalize feelings of low self-esteem or racial discrimination, which can adversely affect their performance in educational environments (Schneider et al. 2012).

While this model is predicated on securing identities, where cyber-bullying would have less of an effect on identity formation, the prevalence of online bullying and instability of stages based on situations can still have damaging psychological and academic effects on identity. In addition to cyber-bullying as a negative aspect of social media, overuse of platforms can be detrimental to academic performance of students. Stollack, Vandenberg, Burkland, & Weiss' (2011) study shows that students who spend excessive amounts of time on particular platforms and social networking sites tend to have lower grades. The constructed model is designed for students to use social media platforms in moderation, as excessive use may negate the educational impact of formulating secure identities.

The larger issue of the achievement gap will persist as long as school policies and bias practices continue in the classroom. However, utilizing African American's unique propensity to connect with others on social networking sites can be a powerful tool in helping secure their racial identities, and reaffirm their commitment to academic achievements and aspirations. By highlighting how social identities can improve self-esteem and group efficacy, African American students are able to re-posit their racial identities as being congruent with academic success, and can work to counter the narrative of oppositional learning and racialized perceptions of achievement that school structures construct.

Future Research

Future research should test this model of online academic identity building for African American students, beginning with, but not limited to the proposed hypotheses. Utilizing various racial identity scales and academic tests in relation to frequency and use

of platforms would allow for proper testing of the model. These tests could be conducted in comparison with students who use social media less frequently, or in longitudinal studies to analyze how these identities develop over time. Understanding the psychological gratification and potential pitfalls of utilizing social media to build identity should be further explored as well. As the model presents a best-case scenario, factors such as cyber-bullying, negative encounters, and social stigmatization online should be addressed in order to give a more holistic view of online interactions. Additionally, this research should also look at the connections and interests of students to analyze the networks they've constructed and how they view themselves in comparison to other members of the online communities.

As discussed in the limitations, future research should also focus on multiracial identities, where students may not feel compelled or deem it necessary to identify as strictly African American (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Points of contention regarding where this model could still hold application and where it can be modified or expanded upon for multiracial students online will be key regarding the fluidity of race as a construct (Omi & Winant, 2014) and the individual ability to self-identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). This is not to suggest that multiracial students wish to remain ambiguous, or deny race as a social identity, rather the model should be reconfigured and tested in future research to be more applicable for these students in relations to their social interactions with groups they see themselves as being a part of.

Lastly, the intersections of online identity need to be further explored through research as to how identities such race, class, and gender also interact with academic, political, religion, etc. The concept of intersectionality has been explored extensively

through literature, particularly by Black Feminist scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins (1993), and more contemporarily by Treva Lindsey (2013) and Bettina Love (2012). Future research should build on this model's theory of bridging identity and social capital from online environments to offline settings, with an intersectional approach. Reconfiguring the model to account for multiple social identities and the online communities where they become salient can make the model more applicable to various students in the future. Though this thesis focuses on the social identity of race, the ability of individuals to self-identify with multiple social groups should be further explored online, particularly in relation to educational outcomes and aspirations. Intersectionality online is a relatively unexplored topic, which this model may serve as a starting point to help investigate how identities are formed on social media.

While oppositional culture theorists posit that building a strong African American identity is a detriment to academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978), the proposed model shows how racial and academic identity co-exist at an intersection that may prove beneficial to African American students. As students spend a considerable amount of time on different social media platforms, the structural affordances of these platforms and the networks they contain offer African American students the ability to construct social identities around social bonds and shared interests (Florini, 2014; Kraut & Resnick, 2011; Lee, 2012; Spears et al., 2007), which can then be bridged into offline environments (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007; Yee, 2007). These identities can hold educational value inside of the classroom, and can be put to use within a pedagogical framework that would best maximize the affordances of the

platforms for these students that often times find themselves on the margins of the educational system.

Broader Impacts

This thesis returns focus to the theory of oppositional culture, as an explanation for the academic underperformance of African American students (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Ogbu, 1978), by adding to the literature that disputes its validity (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Downey, 2008; Harris, 2011; Tyson, 2011), and adding online environments as a possible source for racial and academic affirmation for African American students. According to the proposed model, students are able to recognize race online and associate positive academic norms and behaviors with their racial category. This not only offers a counter to the theory that African Americans who have salient identities oppose education, but also provides educators with a relatively new tool to engage students who may feel marginalized by educational structures.

Despite the mounting academic literature that disproves the validity of oppositional culture theory, it is still commonly cited as an issue among many in society (Harris, 2011). The visibility of social media (boyd & Ellison, 2007) can be potentially used to highlight academic engagement by African American students to the general public. African American students engaging various platform affordances online can offer parents, teachers, administrators, etc. an opportunity to see how these students view education outside of school. From sharing grades with their networks through Tweets and Facebook statuses, to linking educational articles to their favorite public intellectual blogs, African American students can offer very public displays of strong racial and academic identities for everyone to see.

Offering a corrective on theory and public perceptions is secondary to this theoretical model's main purpose, which is to improve educational outcomes. Utilizing social media to construct online identities that can be carried over into schools has the potential to be a powerful tool within education. For African American students, it can serve as an outlet to rearticulate what it means to be Black and academically successful in spite of gross educational inequalities.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

2015 (expected)	M.A., Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville <i>Thesis: “#SayItLoud: Securing Racial and Academic Identities Through Social Media.”</i>
2013	B.S., Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville Minor, Justice Administration
2011	Dipl., Audio Technology, Study Audio Engineering, Institute of Technology

Research and Teaching Interests

Educational Inequality; Educational Technology; Curriculum Reform; Social Justice; Race and Ethnicity; Social Media; Music and Pop Culture

Positions

2013–Present Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville

Awards

2013 Nancy Pollack Memorial Award, Department of Pan-African Studies, University of Louisville.

2012–2013 Dean’s List, University of Louisville.

2007–2008 Woodford R. Porter Scholar, University of Louisville.

Panels and Presentations

- 2015 “#SayItLoud: Securing African American Student Identities Through Social Media.” A.C.E.S. Black & Latino Student Symposium. University of Louisville, February, Louisville, KY.
- 2015 “Selma.” National Association of Black Journalists, University of Louisville chapter, February 4, 2014
- 2014 “Genocide In America: The Criminalization of African American Males in the Media.” National Association of Black Journalists, University of Louisville chapter, September, Louisville, KY.
- 2014 “Modern Day Accommodation.” Annual meeting of the National Council of Black Studies, March, Miami, FL.
- 2014 Panelist, “What Do You Know About Black History Month?” National Association of Black Journalists, University of Louisville chapter, February, Louisville, KY.
- 2013 Moderator, “Are You Criminal? Crime Reporting at the University of Louisville,” Cheikh Anta Diop Society, University of Louisville, March, Louisville, KY.
- 2013 Panelist, “Let’s Talk: Hip-Hop & The N-Word,” University of Louisville Cultural Center, March, Louisville, KY.
- 2013 Participant, Black Alliance for Educational Options Symposium, March, Orlando, FL.

Teaching Experience

Guest Lectures

University of Louisville, 2013–Present

Introduction to Pan-African Studies (PAS 200)

African American Music History (PAS/MUH 214)

African American Education (PAS 335)

Women In American Culture (WGST 201)

Departmental and University Service

2014--2015 President, Pan-African Graduate Student Association, University of Louisville.

2013--2014 Vice President, Pan-African Graduate Student Association, University of Louisville.

2012--2013 President, Cheikh Anta Diop Society, University of Louisville.

Media Appearances

2014 Interview “Light Up Middletown Protest Sparks Dialogue.” WAVE 3, December 8th, Louisville, KY

2014 Interview, “Kentucky Alliance Against Political and Racial Oppression Talk Show.” WLOU 1350, November 22nd, Louisville, KY.

- 2014 Interview, “Louisville Group Plans To Rally If Ferguson Police Officer Is Not Indicted.” WLKY 32, November 17th, Louisville, KY.
- 2013 Interview, “Trayvon Martin and the ‘N’ Word.” WHAS 11, July 12th, Louisville, KY.
- 2013 Interview, “University of Louisville Crime Reports.” WHAS 11, March 27th, Louisville, KY.

Commentaries

Schuschke, Joshua. 2014. “The Riot To Protest.” *BlackHawk*. December, 2014.

Schuschke, Joshua. 2014. “Bring The Action: A Story of Protest and A Call To Students.” *BlackHawk*. November 25th, 2014.

Schuschke, Joshua. 2014. “Colonization, It’s Happening Here: The University of Louisville’s Relationship With The Community.” *BlackHawk*. September 30th, 2014.

Other Experience

2013 – 2014 Pro-Audio Instructor, Guitar Center Studios, Louisville, KY

Affiliations

National Council of Black Studies
 Pan-African Graduate Student Association
 National Association of Black Journalists
 Theta Beta