“Home on the Phone”: How Black Students at a PWI Use Digital Space to Form Community

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“HOME ON THE PHONE”: HOW BLACK STUDENTS AT A PWI USE DIGITAL SPACE TO FORM COMMUNITY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication

by
Malaysia Barr
May 2024

Accepted by:
Dr. James Gilmore
Dr. Ashley McKenzie
Dr. Rhondda Thomas
ABSTRACT

College is a time when students are traditionally away from home in the hopes of not only securing a better future through higher education but have the ability to shape who they are as individuals. As Predominately White Institutions serve few minority students, this can prove to be challenging for them as they do not fit into the majority racial group. This thesis investigates how Black students at a PWI utilize the mobile app, GroupMe, as a method of connecting and networking within their racial community. Through focus groups and individual interviews, this study found that Black students use digital space to gatekeep their culture, express vivid emotions, find community, and form self-identities. This thesis project demonstrates how a marginalized group of students used a common, everyday app as their “home on the phone.”
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those who may make up less than 10% of their student populations at PWIs. Your heart, soul, and uniqueness are in everything you do. Your narratives matter, too.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my God, who has been to me everything and more. Thank you for being my friend, Abba-Father, and Lover of my Soul. You are good. You are my life. I am eternally grateful for every good gift you have given me and I want to steward so that I may hear, “Well done, thy good and faithful servant.”

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I would also like to acknowledge my House of Judah and Friendship church families. The love and support from you all has always taught me that church is community, and community is good.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

College is a time when students traditionally learn to self-navigate. Whether it be learning how to cook for themselves or to pay bills, college is about stepping into adulthood. College not only focuses on students outside of the classroom but in the classroom as well. Not only do they engage in navigating a new classroom space, but they also learn to navigate digitized social life. While many have social media apps long before they enter college, the use of digital media during higher education is more accessible without parental and/or school restrictions. For most students, their social life includes digitized spaces. A digitized space is an online place that is ostensibly limitless, as it has no physical bounds (Di Cesare, Harwood, and Rowsell, 2016). There are many forms of digital spaces, including social networking sites (Instagram, X, Facebook), discussion forums (Reddit, Quora), and bookmarking networks (Pinterest, Flipboard).

For many college students, digital spaces are a way of life. Whether posting a photo on Instagram or updating a collegiate organization's biography on X, digital spaces are essential. Because these spaces also serve functions of community-building, relationship maintenance, and social support, it is crucial to recognize that they serve as safe spaces for historically marginalized identities. Online spaces have been used to spearhead activism within LGBTQIA+ communities (Schmitz et al., 2022) and promote a support system for coming out (Gray, 2018). Likewise, digital spaces have been used to connect Black people on X for cultural conversations and to gather together to watch popular Black television shows (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Williams and Gonlin, 2017).
This thesis explores how Black students at Clemson University have used digital spaces to find and build community. Clemson University is located in the upstate of South Carolina and enrolls over 28,000 undergraduate and graduate students (“Admission Statistics,” 2023). The racial demographics of the university are majority White (over 70%), making it a Predominately White Institution (PWI). PWIs are colleges or universities whose racial makeup serves students who identify as White (Bourke, 2016). This does not mean that Clemson is intentionally overlooking students of color, as it promotes diversity and inclusion with a desire “to create a diverse community that welcomes people of different races, cultures, ages, genders, sexual orientation, religions, socioeconomic levels, political perspectives, abilities, opinions, values and experiences” (“Division of Equity and Inclusion,” 2023). However, it can be easy for minority students to feel underserved.

Historically, Black people's presence at Clemson has been rooted in systemic oppression. The Fort Hill Plantation at Clemson University was home to 75 enslaved Africans (“African Americans at Fort Hill,” 2023). After slavery was abolished, African Americans were sharecroppers, domestic workers, convict laborers, wage workers, and cooperative extension agents (Call My Name, 2023). In 1963, Harvey Gantt became the first African American to be enrolled at Clemson University after winning a class-action lawsuit (“About the Gantts,” 2023). Fifty years later, African-American students comprise less than 10% of the university’s population (Data USA, 2023). Because of this history and because of Clemson’s ongoing status as a PWI, many minority students—specifically Black students—have felt the need to create their own communities. One way these students have sought to do this is through digital communities online. One specific digitized space they use to form relationships with one another is through GroupMe.
Created by Microsoft in 2010, GroupMe serves as a messaging platform due to its features that allow users to send and receive messages. Users interact with those messages by replying directly, liking messages, and sending GIFs to others (Smith, 2023). While GroupMe is used by many people of all ages to communicate, African-American students at Clemson University use the platform as a social hub. That is, they not only use it to communicate with one another but to form connections, network business opportunities, get informed, and find humor. Their use of digital technologies and spaces reflects the technological advances that society has seen in the last two decades as more and more people rely on messaging platforms as a part of their social experience to communicate with one another.

This thesis analyzes the cultural significance of the Black student GroupMe on Clemon’s campus through the production of a limited podcast series that analyzes how GroupMe serves not only as a messaging platform but as a social gathering space for minority students at a PWI that creates community and a sense of belonging.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Counterpublics

Counterpublics emerged from Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere. In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas argues that the public sphere is a faction of social life where public opinion(s) are formed by members of society. According to Warner (2002), a public “organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church” (p. 414). That is, Habermas believes that the bourgeois public sphere is a mediator between the private concerns (home) and those concerns over which the state had control (government, law, etc.) (Graham and Smith, 2006, p. 434). Habermas envisioned a deliberative democracy: a place where people could come and debate opposing issues, reiterate everyday problems, and hear the voices of all citizens’ (Graham and Smith, 2016, p. 434). More specifically, Habermas’ theory of the public sphere “emphasizes the function of publics to create democratic methods and practice in a particular moment of conflict with public authority” (Leowing and Motter, 2009, p. 227).

However, Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques Habermas’ conception of the public sphere. Fraser believes Habermas’ definition is riddled with exclusions. Habermas emphasized people who could buy property and were considered among the affluent as the most active participants in the public sphere. This categorization ultimately excludes a variety of social groups, including racial and sexual minorities. To help understand these exclusions, Fraser coined the term “subaltern counterpublics.” These counterpublics are “parallel discursive arenas where members of the subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser,
They “emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Counterpublics serve as a sort of intervention, in that they “aim to correct an exclusivist vision that cannot account for all the variety of public discourse and the diversity of public identities” (Leowing and Motter, 2009, p. 226).

Counterpublics, as both Habermas (1962) and Fraser (1990) define them, are not passive entities. Instead, they are active and deliberate via communication, especially around attempts to disengage the dominant narrative. For example, Jackson and Welles (2015) discuss the #myNYPD digital campaign. On April 22, 2014, The New York City Police Department (NYPD) posted tweets inviting the public to share their memories of the NYPD. This resulted in many minorities (specifically women and people of color) emerging as a counterpublic on Twitter and hijacking the narrative the NYPD was attempting to push. This counterpublic began to retweet the original tweet with their own stories of horrific and sad experiences with the NYPD. The #myNYPD example that Jackson and Welles (2015) outline is a clear-cut example of a counterpublic in action.

A second example of a counterpublic is Jackson and Welles’s (2016) study of #Ferguson on Twitter after Michael Brown’s death. On August 9, 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. After his death, the hashtag Ferguson (#Ferguson) trended extensively on Twitter. A counterpublic emerged, led by crowd-sourced elites that became the voices for #Ferguson. These crowd-sourced elites “immediately challenged and reframed mainstream discourses about what was happening in Ferguson” (Jackson and Welles, 2016, p. 407). While there were the crowd-sourced elites of #Ferguson, there were also other influential citizens who “frequently outranked more traditional and elite sources, including @CNN” (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016, p. 408). As the events
of Ferguson gained national coverage, people who were in the #Ferguson counterpublic—
including Ferguson residents and journalists—were able to tell the facts as they saw them and
allowed their marginalized voices to be heard. Furthermore, counterpublics are oppositional to
publics. That is, because counterpublics form as a result of the dominant public not being
representative of all voices, counterpublics seek to be heard, but in their own unique ways. One
way of doing this is keeping their groups semi-public or partially hidden from view. In order to
participate, you have to first know the counterpublic exists (Warner, 2002, p. 424).

Moreover, Catherine Squires (2002) expands Fraser’s (1990) theory of counterpublics by
suggesting “three responses a marginalized public sphere might produce” (p. 448). Squires
(2002) categorizes these three responses as an enclave, a counterpublic, and a satellite. An
enclave is a private-public that hides itself, its ideas, and its strategies in order to survive and/or
avoid punishment. While the dominant public does not see enclaves outwardly, internally these
enclaves are producing and building. Enclaves form once “[m]arginalized groups are commonly
denied public voice or entrance into public spaces by dominant groups” (Squires, 2002, p.458).
An example of an enclave is Black Americans during enslavement. These Black Americans were
unwillingly seen as property and subjected to obeying ‘slave codes’ (laws that restricted the
behavior of enslaved Africans) (The Library of Congress, 2023). These oppressive laws led to
many enslaved individuals forming separate communities while leading to the emergence of
many stable institutions within Black American culture (the black church, for example).
Furthermore, an enclave space serves as a place to retreat and regroup. Enclaves have several
goals, including the desire to “preserve culture, foster resistance, and create strategies for the
future” (Squires, 2002, p.458).
The next subgroup Squires (2002) defines is a satellite. A satellite is a public that seeks separation from other publics, but not due to oppressive reasons like the enclave. Instead, satellites are formed “by collectives that do not desire regular discourse or interdependence with other publics” (Squires, 2002, p.463). An example of a satellite is the Nation of Islam, a branch of Islam that operates solely in the United States and is “founded on the basis of peace” (The Nation of Islam, 2023). The Nation of Islam typically does not engage with the dominant public unless it has to, which is usually at a point of crisis (Squires, 2002, p. 464). Even if the satellite public has to get involved, “the goal is not to eventually integrate itself amongst multiple publics, but to always offer its constituents separate spaces and worldviews.” (Squires, 2002, p. 463).

The goals of a satellite public are to retain group identity and strengthen its own institutions.

Combining Fraser’s (1990) and Squires’s (2002) definitions and conceptions of counterpublics, enclaves, and satellites, the Black student GroupMe at Clemson embodies characteristics of counterpublics, enclaves, and satellites. The Black student GroupMe is a counterpublic because, as Clemson is a PWI, it emerged as a way to disrupt the dominance of Whiteness at Clemson. It acts as an enclave because the GroupMe is invisible to the dominant eye. Much like the culture of enslaved Africans during the American enslavement, the GroupMe has its own language and often builds community by keeping members updated on-campus events. These events are varied as they cater to students of color, encouraging them with academics and remind them of adverse publics. Finally, the Black student GroupMe acts as a satellite because it does not want to engage with the dominant public. Instead, true to satellite nature, it often watches from its sector and only when events happen that directly impact the group will it respond. Thus, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ1:** How does the GroupMe function as an enclave, a counterpublic, and a satellite public?
Black Digital Publics and Spaces

As the examples above show, counterpublics, enclaves, and satellites have been historically in-person spaces. These spaces were important meeting places, and for Black Americans, these spaces hold cultural significance. Brock (2009) notes that these were critical during the time of segregation as “Black people have always had to make do with whatever geographic location they were allowed to occupy” (p. 33). These physical spaces included barbershops, beauty salons, and churches (Steele, 2016). As many public spaces were riddled with ‘Whites only’ signs, the barbershops, beauty salons, and churches for African Americans became “an enclave [...]. In these shops, Black working and middle-class male patrons received services for their hair while engaging in the rituals of Black hair care, [and] everyday talk [for] a place of retreat for African American clientele and barbers” (Steele, 2016, p. 3). Barbers and hair salons served much importance as they were “place[s] where no one is confused by African American hair, and no explanation needed for one’s hair care needs” (Steele, 2016, p.4). These spaces not only allowed for African Americans to express their grooming needs openly with one another but also served as a place to “openly discuss things personal to the community with no need to hide their opinions and ideas in fear of reprisal” (Steele, 2016, p. 4). Like the salon and Black barbershop, the Black church was a space that allowed Black Americans to speak freely. During the colonial and antebellum periods, enslaved Black preachers would often draw on Biblical texts such as Exodus to generate ideas of freedom for other enslaved individuals (American Experience, PBS. 2019). Because the dominant society of White plantation owners forbade such texts to be taught among enslaved individuals, the emergence of the Black church allowed many enslaved people to praise God publicly and yet plot freedom safely. In essence,
the barbershop, beauty salon, and the church in the Black American community were safe
harbors for them to safely and freely express themselves.

As expression is an integral part of the African-American community, the rise of digital
public spaces (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) allowed the community to express
themselves on a broader scale. While these digital platforms are designed for public use, Black
Americans have taken these spaces and made counterpublics from them. Brock (2020) reiterates
this shift and addresses how “Black folks have made the internet a ‘Black space’ whose contours
have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice” (p. 5). That is, Black
people have used the Internet to develop a subculture reflecting their lived experience.
Furthermore, Brock (2009) recognizes counterpublic Black spaces as essential. He views it from
a ‘third place lens,’ a concept first written by Oldenberg (1991), where these ‘third places’ “serve
as a regenerative function for the people who frequent their environs; where they can reconstitute
themselves as ‘people’ apart from their kinship and work networks” (Brock, 2009, p.17). This is
similar to Homi Bhaba’s (1994) theory of third space, which is an in-between space serving as a
border between the discourse of the colonizer (dominant public) and the colonized (subaltern
counterpublic). This space serves as a place of conversation and questioning the cultural norms
of that space. For many Black Americans, this idea of a third place has emerged in the form of
digital spaces.

As digital media rose in the early 2000s, Black digital counterpublics also emerged.
Brock (2020) notes that “[o]ver the last half decade [...] Black digital practice has become very
much a mainstream phenomenon” (p.1). Payton and Kvansy (2011) write about how black
bloggers in the ‘blogosphere’ and black radio, an already established counterpublic, used digital
spaces to speak out against the conviction of the ‘Jena Six,’ a nickname that was created for six
Black teenagers who were arrested for the assault of a White student. The incident occurred after months of racial tension that began when Black students sat under a tree that White students traditionally frequented. Taking offense, White students responded by placing nooses in the tree. On December 4, 2006, several Black students heard a White student bragging about a racial assault perpetrated by a friend. Six Black students then responded by assaulting the White student (NPR Staff, 2011). As black blogs had been a place of “support [...] and communication” (Payton and Kvansy, 2011, p.87), these blogs and radio shows immediately began discussing the conviction. Black blogs were an essential counterpublic at the time because many blogs focused on community interaction, political involvement, and journal-type writings, where “authors report their inner thoughts and feelings” (Payton and Kvasny, 2011, p.86).

Blogs became an important counterpublic within Black digital spaces as they replicated older traditions within the community. For example, Steele (2016) examines how Black bloggers create a new phase of Black oral traditions, such as folktales. For Steele (2018), Black blogs serve as a counterpublic to mainstream media and its conversations. Steele investigates this by purposefully selecting Black bloggers invested in various facets of life, including entertainment, sports, and fashion. Steele argues that even though each blog is catered to a particular subject, it is a counterpublic because they engage with the dominant publics to critique and shed light on their lesser-known narratives (Steele, 2018). Blogs have also been used in exceptionally niche communities. Tiffany Gill (2015) posits that many black women with natural hair find community on online blogs, message boards, and YouTube videos. Unlike blogs, message boards are online discussion sites where people can ask and reply to questions (Hasa, 2021). A YouTube video is a free place for creators to upload videos about a range of topics, and viewers have the option to like or dislike, share, and comment below the video. (Burgess and Green, 2010). These
Digital spaces have been essential for Black women since a new natural hair movement erupted in the early 2010s, with many using these online spaces for “advice, support, and community” (Gill, 2015, p. 74). Gill (2015) also notes that in addition to hair, these online spaces curated for Black women discuss lifestyle, advice, parenting, health, fashion, travel, home, etc. These digital spaces are essential as a subculture because they showcase an experience that is not necessarily seen in the mainstream public sphere.

As blogging became a thing of the digital past and social media became the popular and preferred way to communicate, Black counterpublics transitioned to social media spaces. Sites like Instagram, Facebook, and X became a place where “Black folk [...] extol the joys and pains of everyday life” (Brock, 2020, p. 6). For example, Lu and Steele (2019) studied the meaning of Black joy on online spaces like Vine and Twitter. They found that on these social media apps, joy was used as a way to counter the dominant public’s narrative about what Black joy looks like. Moreover, research has investigated Black Twitter, a term created to understand the large number of people of African descent using Twitter as a place to “draw attention to issues of concern to black communities” (Ried, 2018). Graham and Smith (2016) explore the idea of Black Twitter as a counterpublic. The authors found that Black Twitter can be considered a counterpublic because the hashtag BlackTwitter (#BlackTwitter) was highlighted more on the platform and had little overlap with other hashtags, such as the hashtag Black Conservative on Twitter (#BCOT). The authors found that #BlackTwitter is relevant to the platform, and while it is not gatekept, it does act as a form of resistance. Furthermore, Hill (2018) examines how Black Twitter, after the killing of Michael Brown, became a space for pedagogy, resistance, and survival. Hill argues that while Black Twitter has traditionally been a space for blackness to be highlighted and discussed
on the platform, it also acted as an enclave because it found ways to enhance, build, and reform the marginalized community it was created to serve.

To date, most of this research has only considered black digital spaces as counterpublics. One of the goals of this thesis, then, is to demonstrate the importance of treating them equally as satellites and enclaves and demonstrate how these add conceptual richness to research on black digital spaces. Furthermore, the Black student GroupMe allows for the students involved to form and create community. Media have always been part of group formation and senses of belonging. As medium theorist Armond Towns writes, “[p]honetic literacy, the Gutenberg press, mapping, newspapers, movies, and the Internet all continually transform the ways in which we come to understand conceptions of blackness” (Towns, 2015, p. 480). This holds true, as spaces like Black Twitter “manifests style-in-space; [...] [and] deploys Black discursive identity and intentionality to vivify the service as an emotional construct centered on catharsis and invention” (Brock, 2020, p.14). As digital counterpublics, like the Blogosphere and Black Twitter, constantly reinforce and reshape the concept of Blackness and convey those cultural emotions, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ2:** How do Black Clemson students use GroupMe to form community?

**RQ3:** What emotions do Black Clemson students have being a part of the GroupMe?

**Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that a person’s identity is based on their group memberships. Initially developed by Henri Tajfel in 1978 and later by Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, the theory first began in social psychology before moving into various other fields. The original purpose of SIT was to investigate how individuals categorize themselves and others. The
theory “proposes that individuals categorize themselves as belonging to various groups such as a professional group, a fanbase of a particular pop band or to a person with or without children” (Trepte and Loy, 2017, p.1). Tajfel (1978) argued that the categorization of people is a natural cognitive response. Categorization is an essential part of SIT because it allows people to “define the individual and others” (Scott, 2007, p. 125). This natural categorization that humans participate in is explained by what Tajfel and Turner (1979) note as “in-groups” and “out-groups.” These in-groups and out-groups help people navigate the social world in relation to attitudes of inclusion and exclusion, better known as the ‘them-versus-us’ mentality. As the in-group and out-group are constantly compared, the in-group is often favored (Schmalz et al., 2015). In-group and out-group behaviors create “group prototypes [that] describe individual cognitive representations of group norms” (Hogg and Reid, 2006, p.11). The prototypes and group norms give people a base for how people within their in-group should act, labeling these behaviors as acceptable and good. It also places negative connotations on how the outgroup will act, often labeling their behaviors as non-acceptable and contrasting to those of the in-group. The process of labeling behaviors emphasizes the salience of a group in relation to a person’s identity. According to Trepte and Loy (2017), “social categorization, group evaluation, and the value of group memberships for the self-concept constitute an individual’s social identity” (p.1). Therefore, within SIT, the in-groups and out-groups work together to produce a person’s perceived identity.

Trepte and Loy (2017) identified seven processes within SIT that help explain how people categorize themselves and others. The seven processes are categorization, salience, social comparison, positive distinctiveness, social identity, self-esteem, and grouped together are individual mobility, social creativity, social competition, and stereotyping. First, as discussed
earlier, social categorization is a natural phenomenon that people use. Social categorization not only defines people as unique individuals but also pushes them to belong within social categories (Trepte and Loy, 2017). These specific categories (e.g., age, occupation, race, etc.) help a person to position themselves socially in the world around them. Then, as people begin to categorize themselves, they move into the second process: salience of the social category. Salience defined is the level of importance a thing has. In regards to social identity theory, people use salience to see what social category of identity is more important in specific settings (e.g., for Gen Z, having social media to comment on their friend’s post is more salient to them than it would be with a Baby Boomer). The salience of the social identity then begins to have precedence in social interactions, with the individual “considered as a typical representative of the corresponding social groups” (Frame, 2017, p. 3). Once someone has identified how salient a social category is, then they move to process three: social comparison. Within this process, people begin forming the aforementioned in-groups and out-groups. People start to compare in-group characteristics to those of the outgroup. Social comparison then leads to people engaging in process four: positive distinctness. This is where people’s “perceptions [favor] the in-group over the outgroup” (Trepte and Loy, 2017, p. 4). Once people have identified specific in-group characteristics they want to adhere to and out-group characteristics they want to avoid, they then take part in process five: social identity. In this step, people combine their self with specific categories and evaluate how this makes them feel, leading straight into process six: self-esteem. This process is when a person has decided whether their identification with the in-group and its norms make them feel good or not. Once a person has identified how the in-group makes them feel, they can then move to step seven: individual mobility, social creativity, social competition, and stereotyping. This final process is important because it focuses on different aftereffects of what happens once a person
identifies/rejects an in-group. Trepte and Loy (2017) explain that “individual mobility, social creativity, social competition, and stereotyping […] strategies […] reinterpret or even change group memberships” (p. 2). People will either reinforce or reimagine what their in-group norms are or move away from or engage deeper with the group. Together, these seven processes demonstrate how SIT affects human communication.

These processes align with the Black student GroupMe at Clemson University. First, Black students undergo categorization upon coming to Clemson. As previously mentioned, Clemson University is a PWI, with African-American students making up less than 10% of the student body. Once Black students see and experience this, they categorize themselves into racial categories. After categorization, Black students engage in salience by evaluating how vital this racial identity is to them. They do this by talking with other Black students who are already a part of the GroupMe chat. After evaluating the salience of their racial identity, they then engage in social comparison, where students begin to form their in-group of Black students and the out-group of other racial groups. This is done with the help of the Black student GroupMe as students begin to talk about their experiences as Black students on Clemson’s campus. This allows students to undergo positive distinctness as they soon add characteristics to their in-groups and out-groups (ex: ‘The Black GroupMe’ is helpful and kind while other groups are rude and do not acknowledge my experience), which transitions into the students combining their self with the group identity, or social identity. This is where students will combine their in-person experiences with those similar experiences of students a part of the GroupMe. As Black students then choose to identify with being a part of the larger group of Black students at the University, this translates into the student’s self-esteem. In this part of the process, Black students evaluate how being a part of the Black student GroupMe makes them feel. Once self-esteem is evaluated,
students engage in the final process: individual mobility, stereotyping, social creativity, and social competition. The final step in this process is brought on by the individual experience. For example, Keisha may really love being a part of the Black student GroupMe and feels like it has helped her grow, increasing her individual mobility. However, Jalen may feel the opposite of being a part of the Black student GroupMe as he may feel that only some people’s voices are heard, increasing his social competition.

As the Black student GroupMe at Clemson helps Black students produce and then embrace their self-identity, it also helps them to understand their group identity. Group identity is rooted in social capital, defined as “resources accumulated through the relationships among people” (Coleman, 1988). Research has found that social media sites can increase one’s social capital or resources accumulated through relationships with people (Ellison et al., 2007). Research has also found that when a social group’s identity is devalued or marginalized, it results in the degree of association with that group becoming more salient (Schmalz et al., 2015). This association enables “access to an even greater sense of in-group that might not otherwise be available offline” (Schmalz et al., 2015). Researchers have also found that in times of crisis, social media sites have been used to retain group identity (Schmalz et al., 2015). As group memberships can “be seen as either identity enhancing or as jeopardizing” (Ellemers et al., 2002), p.165, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ4:** Does the Black student GroupMe help students develop self-identity and group identity?
CHAPTER THREE
METHOD

Podcasting As Method

The main method of this thesis was the production of a podcast. A podcast is defined as “the distribution of audio/video files in digital format” (McGarr, 2009, p. 309). The word originated from Apple’s “iPod” and “broadcasting,” combining to become ‘podcast’ (Bierma, 2005). In higher education, podcasts are rising in popularity as a teaching tool (Smith, 2022). Podcasts have proven effective in education due to their easy accessibility and their use as a mobile learning tool (McGarr, 2009). Additionally, podcasting has proven effective because “as a communication medium, podcasts offer a great deal of flexibility in terms of how audio materials are presented [...] consist[ing] of anything from a recorded lecture, speech, or interview to a highly produced and richly textured narrative documentary” (Day et al., 2017).

Previous research has used podcasting as a method. For example, Smith (2022) used podcasting as a method during her time as a Black female doctoral student to resist the popular narrative of speaking ‘properly’ to adhere to ‘correct’ English. She explains that “[p]odcasting became a way for [her] to resist falling into the social norms of voice in the academy” (Smith, 2022, p.1). Like Smith (2022), Day et al. (2017) used podcasting as a method to investigate and facilitate conversations between Indigenous cultures and Western scientists to join forces and further a project that seeks to improve water quality in Indigenous communities. I borrow cues from both of these existing studies. As I have researched a marginalized community, the formation and dissemination of a podcast will allow this minority community's voice to be heard.

Furthermore, Florini (2015) investigates Black podcasts that are collectively called ‘The Chitlin’ Circuit,’ a term used to describe the continuum of Black entertainment being siloed into
its own field. Florini (2015) also describes the emergence of Black podcasts as an enclave, as they are “resistant to easy intrusion from those outside the group. To listen to the podcasts in this network, one must first know they exist, which requires an inside contact with the larger network. Beyond that, one must seek out the content and commit time to listening” (p. 214). Because of this tight-knit community, Black podcasters often adopt an “informal, flexible approach that allows for free-form conversation and embraces a range of Black vernaculars and regional accents (Flourini, 2015, p. 210). In taking the form of a podcast as a part of its final output, this thesis aims to contribute to the diaspora of Black podcasters. Like Florini (2015), the final podcast project of this thesis was kept from the dominant eye and distributed to the students within the Black student GroupMe.

**Interviewing as a Method**

As I created a podcast project, I paired it with interviewing. Defined as a guided question-answer conversation (Tracy, 2013), interviewing is a traditional qualitative method, and it allows for a deeper analysis of the data (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 40). As I interviewed Black students and wanted their voices to be centered, I used a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews allow for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions based on the responses of the interviewee. They also allow for greater flexibility and freedom for both the host and interviewee, providing an opportunity for depth (Alshenqeeti, 2014). According to Tracy (2013), semi-structured interviews are useful to “stimulate discussion rather than dictate” (p. 158).

Furthermore, I paired semi-structured interviews with narrative interviews, which are open-ended in structure. This interview type encourages participants to “tell stories rather than
just answer questions” (Tracy, 2013, p. 158). As my interviewees were all a part of a marginalized group, allowing them to tell their stories was the most important aspect of the interview; it allowed them to share their narratives authentically.

Furthermore, each podcast episode consisted of 2-3 participants in focus group interviews. Focus groups are “group interview[s] of approximately six to twelve people who share similar characteristics or common interest” (CDC, 2018). While my participants per episode were only 2-3, I asked them the same questions. This was done so that I could get varying responses, as each person in the focus group had their own unique identity. I wanted to contribute as little voice as possible so that they could be centered (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 5).

Focus groups differ from one-on-one interviews because they allow the participants to draw from one another, enabling them to expand upon their answers, adding richness to the interviews. As I interviewed a group of people who are considered minorities, I adopted a ‘responsive interviewing’ stance, which chooses to “honor interviewees with unfailingly respect behavior, reflecting on their own biases and openly acknowledging their potential effect, and owning the emotional effect of interviews” (Tracey, 2013, p. 161). As I am a Black student who interviewed other Black students, I acknowledge my own position as someone who has been both an undergraduate and graduate student at a PWI, the institution that this project emphasizes. From my personal experience, I believe that this not only enhanced conversation between participants but also allowed them to feel as if they could truly express who they are.

Data Collection and Participants

As previously mentioned, the content for the podcasts was collected via semi-structured interviews. The podcast consisted of four episodes that each looked at a different topic
concerning the Black student GroupMe. These four topics were: the origins of the GroupMe, community relationships, resistance and humor, and self-identity. Participants were all current and former Black students at the same predominately white institution in the Southeastern United States. Participants were contacted in the GroupMe App using snowball and convenience sampling. Generic messages were created to be distributed to participants (ex: “Hi! So I hope that you are well. I’m reaching out to you because I’m currently recruiting participants for my thesis project. I am interested in researching how black students use digital space as a means to form community.”). From there, I would describe how I want to distribute the podcasts and let each potential participant know that there are procedures in place to conceal their identity. There were 16 potential participants who were contacted, and only 12 responded. Out of the participants who responded, only 9 met the criteria of being a Black student at a PWI and using GroupMe. The final participant pool consisted of three undergraduate students, three graduate students, and three alumni of the university.

**Recording the Podcast**

As noted above, there were four episodes for this limited podcast series. Participants were put into episode “groups” based on when they agreed to be interviewed. The only exception to this was the first episode (‘How Did We Get Here’), which was crafted specifically for the three alumni who participated in the study. The other episodes (Unity in the Community, Hot Tea, and These Jokes Gon’ Fly) each had 2 participants per episode. Of the 9 participants, three opted out of using their real names, so pseudonyms were used. Two participants asked for their voices to be changed. Episode 2 (Unity in the Community) was done in 2 parts and recorded as separate
interviews. Part one of episode two was recorded in person, and part two was recorded via Zoom.

**Coding**

Once each episode was recorded, I transcribed them using the TurboScribe website. After verifying that TurboScribe was accurate in its transcription, I manually went through the episode to write names and aliases where each person spoke. After transcription was complete, each episode was manually coded through open coding. I coded three times before I reached saturation. Using my research questions, I pointed out four potential themes to look for: community, identity, emotions and the relationships between counterpublics, enclaves, and satellites. During primary cycle coding, I looked for quotes that would fit into the themes (for example, if a participant noted how jokes were used in the GroupMe, I put that under ‘emotions,’ and if a participant noted how information stays in the GroupMe, I put that under ‘satellite’). Codes were kept in a Microsoft Word document that I kept locked. During secondary cycle coding, gatekeeping emerged as a theme. This theme replaced counterpublics, enclaves, and satellites. During level three coding, 3-4 subthemes emerged under each theme. It was during this cycle that I reached saturation. At the end of the coding cycle, four themes emerged: gatekeeping, community, emotions, and self-identity. Each code had a corresponding color. The final codes and their subthemes were placed in a separate locked Microsoft Word document.

**Podcast Production**

Once coded, the podcast was then edited for distribution to the members of the Black student GroupMe. Similar to Day et al. (2017), the production of the podcast was broken down
Day et al. (2017) produced and distributed their podcast with the following six steps: audio collection, review and analysis, structure and sequencing, sound editing, participant review, and public release for podcast dissemination. The current podcast production used four of these six steps: audio collection, review and analysis, sound editing, structure and sequencing, and public release. As I have already explained the audio collection and reviewing and analysis (coding), I will now describe the other steps of the podcast distribution process.

First, structure and sequencing explain how each episode is structured. Because this podcast is limited, each episode is a continuation of the one before it. Therefore, each episode has a short preview of the next episode. As there are four episodes, and they all range from 10 minutes to 1 hour in length, they all have the same structure: introduction music, the episode, and then outro music. The music fades in and out in order to provide a seamless transition for listeners.

Next, I performed sound editing. I used Audacity to edit the sound, making it louder or softer when needed and pitching voices lower or higher as requested by participants. As I wanted this podcast to be as natural as possible, I kept pauses and wordfillers just to show the authenticity of the episode. I did not use background music as some podcasts do because I wanted the voices and stories of the participants to stand out.

Finally, I released the podcasts using a secure Dropbox folder as my ‘host platform.’ The episodes were uploaded simultaneously, as I desired for students to be able to listen to each one as sparingly or as frequently as they desired. The link to the Dropbox will be shared with the Black student GroupMe as the academic semester draws to an end.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

The following will explore the four themes that were discovered during coding: gatekeeping, community, emotions, and self-identity.

Gatekeeping

The first theme that emerged was gatekeeping. In communication studies, gatekeeping theory is described as “the process of selecting, and then filtering, items of media that can be consumed within the time of space that an individual happens to have” (Davie, 2024). Gatekeeping theory, developed by PJ Shoemaker, has been traditionally used in relation to newspapers and journalists (Shoemaker, Vos, Reese, 2009). According to this theory, the gatekeeping process creates the role of gatekeepers who “decide what information should move past them’ to the group” (Davie, 2024). For the students in the Black student GroupMe, the process of gatekeeping differs from the definition of communication theory in that gatekeeping occurs not to share information with the larger campus community but to filter who and what can enter or remain in the space. Therefore, gatekeeping for the Black student GroupMe entails the process of selecting, inviting, and monitoring individuals who can enter the space. The gatekeeping process occurs twofold in the Black student GroupMe: first, by selecting who can enter and second, by monitoring those who have entered the space.

First, as the Black student GroupMe is a digital group that is only accessed by Black students, the group has been gatekept from the public eye. Because the GroupMe chat is not publicized to the entire campus, students are personally invited by others, usually in the form of
‘word-of-mouth.’ For example, Jorell, a junior at Clemson, explained that he joined the group chat with help from his residential assistants during his freshman year:

I believe it was some of the Black residential assistants, like RAs, they knocked on the door and they told us that Black Clemson is meeting at the amphitheater and that's a good way to meet the older Black kids here at Clemson because that's a right of passage here.

If you need anything, need any resources, the Black Clemson group chat is where it's at.

Another student, Vanessa, a junior, was introduced to the GroupMe chat by attending a fraternity event.

I went to this ice bucket event that one of the fraternities was having, and one of the boys there was like, ‘Oh, you didn’t know, are you in the GroupMe? And then I was like, ‘What GroupMe’? And then he sent me the link, I clicked it, [and] then I’m in”.

Similarly, Camryn, a current graduate student of the university was introduced to the GroupMe as an undergrad. “I was introduced through the CONNECTIONS Program [...] and then from there, the mentors of the CONNECTIONS Program introduced us to the Black Clemson GroupMe.” Like Camryn, Bake was introduced to the GroupMe chat through her peer mentor within the CONNECTIONS program. “My senior peer mentor added me to the GroupMe. [They] were like [let’s] try and get you connected, so I was in there.”

Once students have entered the digital space of the Black student GroupMe, they are introduced to its inner workings. Inside the Black student GroupMe, its members assume one of two roles: member or administrator/moderator. Members of the GroupMe chat get to enjoy the daily communication that occurs while administrators moderate who can stay or who can leave the chat. This is the second step of gatekeeping. As administrators of the group, their purpose is to watch over it so that the space is welcoming and cohesive to all students involved. During
times when there is discord in the GroupMe chat, the moderators can remove someone. Sherm, an alumnus of the university, explains that moderators and administrators are essential to the Black Student GroupMe to make sure that “you are skin folk and kinfolk.” Sherm also noted that this form of upkeep in the Black student GroupMe is essential:

You have to, when you create a legacy or like, an artifact, of heritage. Who you tasked with its upkeep over time is also part of that job. […] So when they created the group and use it as the central means of communicating what is going on with this community of people socially, academically, politically, [and] physically, […] just as it is a a community bulletin board.

Because the Black student GroupMe is used to support a traditionally marginalized community, this tight regulation of who is involved in the GroupMe chat serves as a way to allow freedom. Sherm notes that this form of control is necessary for the group chat to function as liberally as possible:

No outsiders. We can finally be free and say what we want to say. Sure, sure. Technically, somebody could screenshot it and go lalala. But that’s the point of gatekeeping. If you don’t want snitches in your culture, gatekeep your culture. It’s really very simple. It’s a controlled environment where you can establish and maintain a community.

This notion of gatekeeping is not only a ‘rule’ for the administrators and admins of the GroupMe, but for the constituents of the group chat as well. Camryn explains that taking information outside of the GroupMe is frowned upon:

But I think that’s also everyone in the GroupMe, not to take that out of the GroupMe. If you go to social media, let’s not. […] This is just my opinion, [but] let’s not tell all the business of what happened.”
The Black student GroupMe functions through a system of gatekeeping to ensure that it remains hidden from the public eye so members are able to speak freely about whatever they choose.

Community

The second theme to emerge was community. Because the students attend a PWI, the presence of a similar racial community is extremely important to them. For many students, the Black student GroupMe is a central means of communicating with people who identify with and understand them. The Black student GroupMe serves as a form of community in several ways: mentorship, sharing information, and rallying together.

Mentorship

First, the Black Student GroupMe creates community by supporting its members. For many members, this formation of community looked like mentorship. Kiyana, a 2022 graduate of the university, took on the role of mentor during her time as a student:

I made sure that, at least up until this last class [year], people still found their way into the GroupMe because, just even being a Black person at Clemson, you get to see [...] people around. I [would say], ‘I keep seeing you go to these events, are you in the GroupMe?’

Because there is no way you’re asking these questions every time I see you.

People like Kiyana felt it was their job to inform others about all the things that were happening campus-wide. Kiyana explained that this is so people are not feeling isolated. “[It was] kind of like an unassigned-assigned mentor, or unofficial-official [...] to try to get you in there so you don’t have to feel lost,” Kiyana said.
This unofficial-official form of mentorship is the responsibility of upperclassmen who showcase their mentorship status by not only adding people to the GroupMe chat but also by posting events that are happening. Martin, a second-year Master’s student, felt encouraged by people posting events: “The good thing is all the events are always posted in there, so you can always go to those places and meet up with those people.” Similarly, Jorell felt that posting events keeps everyone not only informed, but also involved. He explained that, “if there’s an event, it’s getting dropped in the Black Clemson group chat. Not only is it getting dropped in the Black Clemson group chat, but we’re going to get people talking about it.”

This ‘dropping’ of events by mentors allows the mentees to build community by coming together to support events. Not only does this form of mentorship share events for the community, but it allows people to put ‘faces-to-names.’ With over 1400 members of the Black student GroupMe in Clemson, it can be hard to figure out who is who when attending in-person events. Rebecca explained that the GroupMe chat allows her to show up to events and communicate with people. She explained how “we would all be in the same GroupMe, but when we show up to an event, it’s like, oh yeah- you’re so-and-so, what’s going on?” Like Rebecca, Camryn believes the GroupMe chat is essential for helping to learn who people are, saying that “sometimes it’s good to see a face with a name.”

Sharing Information

Secondly, the Black student GroupMe fosters community by sharing information. As noted earlier, the mentors of the group share information about events and resources. However, the GroupMe chat serves as a place to find information about “who did what” as well. Kiyana explained that Black student GroupMe serves as “the hotline, gossip line, the
I-need-to-know-what-to-do-in-case-of-this line.” An example of this is what Blake, a senior at the university, describes as ‘helpful but fussy’ information:

Like one student was saying that it was a [football] game [...] You know, [students] had to like move your cars and stuff out of the parking lot. And this person said, ‘Should I move my car? Cause, like, I left it [and] forgot about it.’ We was all like, ‘Baby just leave it there. It's gone. That person towed that car, it's gone. Don’t even worry about it. Just go back to sleep. Just rest your head’. [...] But we feel for you, we’re going to feel for you but we’re going to jump on you about that. Cause you should’ve moved that car.

This ‘helpful but fussy’ way of sharing information allows for community to be built by advocating for the person who needs help and lovingly correcting them at the same time, similar to how families joke with one another about events and situations that have happened.

The Black student GroupMe fosters community by sharing information not only about how-to-do, but also about classes and professors. Camryn explained that a lot of information is shared about the website “Rate My Professor [which details] what type of class you need to take and who’s the best at the classes.” She also explained that through the GroupMe chat, students are “also learning about other classes you may not have thought about outside of your major.”

Similarly, Jorell explained the GroupMe chat helped him when other campus-endorsed resources could not. “There have been times where I can type in the Black Clemson group chat about needing textbooks, or needing a tutor, or someone to help plan my schedule when advisors to no avail are able to do so,” he said.

Information is shared not only on a campus level but also at the local community level. For many Black students, getting access to certain shops and stores that cater to their specific needs is important to them. Vanessa noted that if she’s “trying to figure out a place to get [her]
nails done, [she] can receive clarity on that.” Likewise, Rebecca noted that when she first came to the university, she asked, “Who are the hairstylists around? What are the good shops and everything like that? And for the guys, they were like, ‘Oh, this is the barber I go to and this barbershop,’ stuff like that.” This information is especially useful to foster community because it allows students an opportunity to learn information they may not have access to otherwise.

**Rallying Together**

Not only is community fostered through sharing various types of information, but it is also fostered through rallying together. As the students in the GroupMe chat attend a PWI, there are times when the students feel their racial identity is being threatened. This happens when organizations on campus host events that attack the Black experience in America. When this happens, students rally together in order to support their community. Kiyana explained how this act of rallying together is often fused with political activism:

> When people were leading protests back in 2020, 2021, that’s when it, [the community], came back stronger [...] and [with] the last protest. [...]So it’s like it hit a point where political statements had to be the reason why the Black community is sticking together.

Similarly, Camryn recalled an incident when a Conservative political student organization brought activist and political commentator Tomi Lahren to campus:

> She’s a, you know, a very strong activist. And she just...she said a lot of things that did not resonate with a lot of people who are either people of color of who identify as Black or African-American.[...]. You know [we said we’re] going to the event and like [...] sit there and we're going to take up the tickets. Of course, it was a very serious, you know,
like a serious thing that was happening on campus. Cause it affected all of us. It was like, well, how could you bring somebody that has these beliefs to campus?

Like Camryn, Rebecca recalled a time when a racial incident occurred off-campus where a restaurant named their food after a racial slur. Upon learning this information, the students in the GroupMe chat created a space for students to rally together:

We’re definitely in the group chat. We’re like, ‘Oh, what should we do about this?’[or] ‘Is this something you guys are willing to support?’ Like, it’s really a space where we’re like, okay, something happened here that’s not okay [...] what are we gonna do as a community?

For many Black students involved in the Black student GroupMe, this act of rallying together didn’t just serve them when it came to engaging in political activism outside of their community but also when it came to nurturing one another inside of the community. Kiyana explained that when adverse things happen back to back, such as “someone getting impeached from [campus] office [...] and then right after, you know, the floor collapses [during a party]. So we have to stay together.”

This act of rallying together is important for the Black student GroupMe because it allows students to have a safe haven when they feel they can’t express their opinions on a larger scale. Jorell explained that “anytime I feel like a sense of loneliness, I [can] easily hit somebody up [and] find something to do.” For the Black student GroupMe members, this digital space allows students to participate in community on various scales, such as rallying together, sharing information, and engaging in mentorship. The various community-building strategies used by this GroupMe chat allows students to have a home away from home as they seek to adjust and embrace their lives as college students.
Emotions

The third theme that emerged was emotions. The three main emotions that are sustained on a consistent basis are shock, humor, and anger.

Shock

As many of the Black students in the GroupMe chat come from different backgrounds and experiences, many experience a culture shock upon entering their PWI. For many students, this shock is expressed in the GroupMe chat as a means to understand the environment they are experiencing in the present moment. Blake explained, “You see stuff on campus, being at a PWI.” For many black students, this included questions surrounding their non-black peers. These questions are mostly in regards to outfit choices their non-black peers choose, which cause questions like “Did you not feel the breeze[or] the wind?” or “Why are we barefoot?”

These questions extend into shock as students deal with not only other students but also older people, such as professors. Camryn explained how the difference in generation can result in feelings of confusion:

I think [it’s] sometimes what professors say, like in classes. And of course, they don’t mean no harm by it. But it’s just like, ‘Did they really say that?’ [...] I don’t know how they meant that [...] because they are a different generation than us so it’s like [...] what are you talking about? (emphasis original).

Like Camryn, other students endure the shock of what professors may say in class. As many of the faculty are older, students feel that what they may be trying to convey does not resonate with them. This occurs because as the students attend a PWI, many of their professors are not people
of color and lack the cultural knowledge and experience that their students of color have. The Black student GroupMe, then, serves as a place for students to feel connected to one another, including their experiences. The ability to share this with others in the Black student GroupMe makes the students feel more at ease with where they are.

This generational difference also extends to the Black alumni when they are on campus for events such as homecoming. Camryn explained that this shock comes from learning about their experiences:

I mean, that was a different generation. They grew up in a different time on Clemson’s campus. So it’s cool to talk to them and see their experiences but [...] [they] went through some different type of stuff than we did. It’s not funny that they went through that, but it’s like, darn. Y’all…yeah, ok.

For Camryn, learning about what Black alumni experienced made her look at her PWI college experience in a new light, as the shock she experiences on a daily basis seems minimal compared to the experiences of older Black alumni. An example of this is Harvey Gantt being the only Black student at the university during the spring semester of 1963. Alone, he navigated outward racist events while the students today have a community, such as the GroupMe chat, to lean on and rely on each other.

The second way shock is expressed in the Black student GroupMe is inside of the GroupMe chat when individuals say something that is deemed ‘abnormal.’ Vanessa explains that it’s “sometimes the things people say. You’d be like, ‘Wait, what?’” In a similar fashion, Blake, the Black student GroupMe’s ‘Meme Queen,’ explained that memes are used to convey shock about what people say. She explained how she’s “gonna send a meme regardless. Whether you say something crazy, I’m like, let’s rebound back to what you said right there.” Memes are useful
when students in the Black student GroupMe simply can not formulate words as to how a message made them feel. These memes often promote group cohesion as many students feel similarly about the message that was shared

**Humor**

The most prevalent category of emotion in the Black student GroupMe is humor. Within the GroupMe chat, the motto is “these jokes gon’ fly,” which is evident in how students engage with events that happen on campus. For many students, humor is a means of resistance. For example, Camryn noted how when Republican activist Tomi Lahren came to campus, students joked about what they would do if they attended the event:

> But even though we can’t necessarily do something about it, it still felt good to joke about it. And be like, we will go there and just ruin the event [...] I’m not saying, you know, that there was going to be harm or anything, but sometimes you got to lighten the mood in order to get through something.

Like Camryn, Martin noted that students “make fun of them [outsiders] all the time.” For students, this method of making jokes during adverse situations helps them relax when harmful things happen to threaten the community. Kiyana noted that during her time as a student, the Black student GroupMe “was a place of release and relief” where she could “hehe, haha, [without] being serious all the time.” Camryn expanded upon this notion about how jokes are necessary to survive as Black students at a PWI:

> It is a space where we do have a lot of community jokes, a lot of just laughter and
entertainment, because [...] Clemson is such a hard campus sometimes to be a part of.

And I think having that community of just being yourself and [the ability to] say what you wanna say. That kind of free space I think is a good thing for Black students.

This freedom to joke that the GroupMe chat also enables students to make jokes about each other. Joss noted that the act of joking about one another is normal and “if you can’t take the heat, then that’s [on] you.” While some people engage in using words to crack jokes, most people use memes. These memes are often saved and recycled by others. Camryn explained how she’s “saved plenty of memes in my collection from [...] the group, because [I’m] find one that hits right on the head of what somebody said or did.” Similarly, Blake (the Meme Queen) and Camryn explained that memes are consistently used in the GroupMe chat to convey humor about what someone said. Camryn further explained how extremely useful memes are:

*I think it’s a good way of how [we] use the jokes. Like the memes. Sometimes [it’s] just the things people say. You’d be like, ‘Wait, what?’ I mean, okay, and you just laugh about it. [...] But you know, memes, the memes go hard in the Black group chat.*

Humor in the Black student GroupMe is a way for students to engage with one another on a more emotional level. As these students attend a PWI and face adverse events, humor through jokes and memes allows them to relax in a space that can be hard to. Humor further allows students to embrace their racial community in a way that advocates for freedom and fun.

*Anger*

The last emotion that is prevalent in the Black student GroupMe is anger. Like the other emotions, anger is felt with people outside and inside of the chat. Anger serves many of the same functions as humor, and there are considerable overlaps between these two themes.
For many students in the GroupMe chat, anger is felt when adverse events happen on campus that are perceived as threatening and harmful to their community. Sherm explained that when this happens, the mutual feeling is one of “social justice energy.” When these events happen, many students feel angry, resulting in what Martin explains as “anger and protest.” This anger often results in deeper community engagement, as described above in theme two.

While anger is felt as a collective against people and institutions deemed as ‘others,’ anger is also seen among the students in the group chat. These feelings of anger occur when jokes have gone too far. Camryn explained, “You definitely have to make sure that these jokes don’t fly on you. That way you can’t get upset when someone says something to you.” At times, this has resulted in tension and disagreements within the chat. For example, Blake explained how during one specific incident where people were disagreeing, “some people took it the wrong way.” Blake explained that “some people got offended and went through social media [to say] that Black Clemson was bullying.” When this happens, the group cohesion in the GroupMe chat is strained, and the community chat can feel harmful, making students feel unsafe. Blake explains that:

I heard students [...] specifically saying [that] they felt ostracized from the GroupMe [and] that they couldn’t authentically be themselves because of this type of stereotype or pressure that we kind of create, whether we realize it or not, indirectly or directly.

This feeling of isolation can make the GroupMe chat feel like a place of harm. Martin explained that sometimes, “the group chat just provides a place to ridicule each other,” and that he only feels a sense of community “when it’s something racist happening.” The ridiculing creates anger as it makes people feel that they do not belong. Camryn noted that “that’s where a lot of people get caught up of, “oh, I’m not Black enough to be a part of Black Clemson.”
Martin expressed similar comments as he felt that individuality was frowned upon in the chat:

If you follow along certain characteristics and you don't mind following groupthink [then the chat is fine]. But if you're a little bit different or you're a little bit odd or you're a little bit weird, you'll be crucified and people will talk about you not only in the group chat but outside of the group chat.

While anger does try to unite the community, it often reveals how this digital space is strained. As the Black student GroupMe was formed to be a safe space, feelings of anger shed light on how the members of the GroupMe chat occasionally struggle with a coherent social identity that is inclusive for all its members. This anger students feel can be further isolating from a community that was created to honor them.

**Self Identity**

The final theme that emerged in this study was self-identity. The Black student GroupMe helps students form identity in four ways: creating group identity, increasing brand confidence, embracing uniqueness, and engaging self-agency.

**Group Identity**

Self-identity among the students in the Black student GroupMe is first formed as a part of the larger group. For many students, this GroupMe chat serves not only as a way to form a racial community but also increases the student's sense of belonging on and off campus. Sherm explained that his boasting in the university is not from the larger campus community but the one formed from the gatekept GroupMe chat:

The only reason I’m even proud to wear my Clemson ring is because I was in the Black
Clemson community [...] I’m not doing this to hold up at the Columbia Museum of Art [...] no. This [pride] is so when a person sees me in this melanin with a Clemson hoodie or my Clemson jacket or my Clemson blanket [they know we are there too].

Like Sherm, Joss’s group identity helped her to face the larger campus community:

Yes, I had to go put my big girl drawls on to go [speak] in front of these people. But at the same time, I know I take my big girl drawls off and chill with my people. You know, so it was easy. With the [GroupMe, it]made it easy.. easier to flip my switch on and off for when I need to step up and show up for the community, knowing that they are also going to show up behind me too.

The notion of group identity helped students relate more to their racial identity as they felt supported and seen by those around them. With the group support of members in the Black student GroupMe students feel that, as individuals, they can express themselves to the larger campus environment. This expression of group identity is important also as it makes students feel more comfortable with their racial identity as they see their peers expressing that part of themselves.

Business Confidence

Aside from group identity, self-identity is formulated within the Black student GroupMe as students experience confidence in their unique businesses. Like students being a part of the group helps them to embrace their racial identity on a larger scale, the same happens for students as they start to network their businesses. Several student businesses and brands have originated
and flourished in the Black student GroupMe. Kiyana explained that this helps them to support their community in return:

I remember when I first started [KB Photography]. Literally, at the time [at] which I started[...], me, Giana and Shelton [were] dropping stuff in the GroupMe. Then [the] graduation special started off in the GroupMe before they went to social media because we want our people to have access first.

Like Kiyana, Joss noted how her business, Renee’s Plates, was curated for students in the GroupMe chat:

I can say I did Renee’s plates strictly for our people. Like I didn’t…I didn’t even care about the community outside of our people. Like, I only did my biggest audience.

Everybody who wanted it was coming from the GroupMe.

This brand confidence allowed the students to embrace and explore their entrepreneurial side. Jorell explained that “basically people are networking,” and that even he’s able to “grow as an individual” by networking his brand. Like Jorell, Kiyana believes her brand confidence was only possible “straight from GroupMe.”

Students like Kiyana, Joss, and Jorell are able to grow their self-identity because the Black student GroupMe allowed them to pilot their brands and businesses, giving them, if they wanted, a push to reach the larger campus community. This reach within their in-group and their out-group then created the students' healthy perception of themselves and their intersectional identities.

*Embracing Uniqueness*
Not only are students able to grow their actual businesses and brands, but they are also able to explore and grow their personal brands. For many students in the Black student GroupMe chat, this digital community helped them to embrace their blackness. Jorell believes that the GroupMe chat helped him to embrace his personal identity:

I feel like once I realized that being Black is not a monolith and that there’s so many different ways to be Black, that helped me to grow as a person in terms of my intersectionality as a Black man and everything else that I identify with.

Like Jorell, Camyn explained how individual blackness is important to embrace the online community:

I think, [remembering] that there’s not one way to be black [...] because we’re all coming from different spaces [...] Everyone has different experiences coming from different parents [and] different grandparents. Whether you were raised, you know, in a different state or in another country even. I think that’s important when being a part of the Black, quote-unquote, Black GroupMe. If you identify as Black, that’s perfectly fine.

When students in the Black student GroupMe begin to embrace their own uniqueness, it allows them to have pride in who they are and what they bring to the table. This is reinforced when students may not feel that they are valuable to the larger campus community. Kiyana recalled a time when the GroupMe chat served as a place of reassurance:

I remember when me and [Nathan] were going out for orientation ambassador at the same time. And [Nathan] wanted to transfer [out of the university] when we were talking around that point. But after being around all these people for so long- we both graduated from Clemson.
Kiyana explained that this reassurance served as “re-information,” as it reinforced students that they deserved to be a part of the university.

Not only does the Black student GroupMe serve as a way to help students embrace their own uniqueness as Black people, but it also helps them with other aspects of their character. Jorell noted how it helps him to grow “as a student leader [and also] as a human being.” Similarly, Camryn thanks the GroupMe chat for helping her identify how she wanted to be known during her time as an undergraduate student before transitioning to a graduate student:

I needed to find out what I really thought and what I really wanted to talk about or be involved in. Like, some events, I was like, ‘I’m not really interested in that,’ but [I thought] ‘What can I do that’s [something] I’m still interested in?’ So I think it helped me figure out, moreso, how I could be a leader on campus and what I could be involved in. It did help me figure out who I wanted to be, like my leadership. And how I wanted to like treat people and for people to treat me.

Like Camryn, Blake also used the Black student GroupMe as a means to create her unique path by “creating her own legacy.” Blake explained that she “didn’t want to be voiceless and not do anything.”

Many students who engage with the Black student GroupMe use the chat as a means to embrace who they are. Once they embrace their unique experiences, backgrounds, and what Blackness means to them, they are able to express themselves in totality to the greater campus community.

*Agency*
Furthermore, students in the Black student GroupMe enhance their self-identity by exploring their agency. For many students, college is a time for discovering who they are without parental supervision. As many first year students use the Black student GroupMe to navigate the campus, they also grow in their adulthood. Jorell explains that for him, “it’s my sense of home and agency that I have in the beginning stages of my adult years.”

For the Black student GroupMe members, this adult agency often starts with events posted in the GroupMe. Rebecca said, "It’s interesting to see a lot of the potential things like events” she could attend. Similarly, Camryn explained that agency is important as she goes out for new experiences and positions, noting how if “you want to be a part of an organization, then go be a part of it.” Not only do students have agency to go to events and be a part of different campus organizations, but they also learn to have agency within the GroupMe space. Camryn explained this by noting how the GroupMe chat allows students to “stand on what you believe in and stand on what joke you’re saying.”

The agency students have to stand on what they believe and say within the chat further creates room for students to take a step back from the GroupMe. Blake recalled how she had to “take a step back from the [GroupMe] and put [her] phone down.” As students are able to have the agency to step away from the GroupMe chat, they also can choose to respond or not to respond to comments or jokes that are being made. Blake explained that this practice is healthy for members of the GroupMe chat, especially when discord happens. She explained that “[s]ometimes you gotta be able to listen instead of responding so quickly out of what you believe. Instead, [try] looking at the other person’s perspective and why they came to that conclusion.”
Not only does agency provide a place for students to engage or not engage in the Black student GroupMe, but it also allows them to take this agency to the larger campus community. Blake explained that agency is necessary to create your own college experience:

Do what makes you happy, what aligns with your beliefs and your purpose. [Think of] why you want to be here and what space you’re trying to create, honestly. So, like I said [earlier]: authentically be yourself. Authentically be YOU. Don’t allow anyone else to change you on this campus because you’ll be lost. So find out who you are, personally for yourself, and get that in order first, before trying to allow other people to place labels on you.

As students begin to accept and navigate their growing identity, they then make room for an authentic college experience. For Black students at a PWI, this can be challenging as students are not surrounded by a familiar ethnic culture. However, the Black student GroupMe allows students to navigate their college life in a unique and healthy way. Camryn explains this by expressing how important agency is for Black students at a PWI. She calls for Black students to “create your own Clemson experience” and to “create your own Clemson family.”

Agency for the students in the Black student GroupMe allows them to curate a college experience that is unique to them and their beliefs. By engaging in the Black student GroupMe, students are able to grow as young adults as they prepare for life after college.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This thesis investigated how Black students at a PWI utilize digital space to form and maintain community. As these students have a traditionally marginalized identity, using digital spaces, like GroupMe, allows them to gather a sense of belonging as they navigate through their college years.

RQ1 asked, “How does GroupMe function as an enclave, counterpublic, or satellite public?” The responses from students indicate that while the Black student GroupMe has qualities of all three forms of non-dominant publics, it overwhelmingly acts as a satellite. By definition, a satellite is a public that seeks separation from other publics because they are “collectives that do not desire regular discourse or interdependence with other publics” (Squires, 2002, p.463). As the Black student GroupMe exists with its own rules (these jokes gon’ fly) and community roles (unassigned-assigned mentors and moderators), it functions on its own without help from the larger campus community. The Black student GroupMe acts similarly to how Brock (2020) describes Black Twitter as a “mediation of Black cultural identity, expressed through digital practices and informed by cultural discourses about Black everyday life” (p. 92). The Black students in this study affectionately describe their GroupMe chat as their “home on the phone,” a space created for them to enjoy their unique culture without the disruptions and distractions of everyday campus life.

However, while these students have created a highly gatekept satellite public they still nevertheless exist within the larger campus community. When students do engage with the larger campus community, it is often rooted in retaliation for something that has happened to threaten their smaller community. While the larger campus community is able to bypass these events, the
members of the Black student GroupMe have to engage back. This is reflexive of Rawls (2000) notions of how “black [people] and [white] people occupy the same world geographically, they rarely occupy the same interactional space” (p. 247). Because of events that negatively affect Black students, this pushes their gatekept satellite to become visible from its hiddenness. This forces the Black students at the PWI to become visible in ways that the dominant public may deem their behaviors as immoral and deviant (Rawls, 2000, p. 247). However, the results of this thesis propose that marginalized students at PWIs are rarely concerned with what the dominant public thinks of them. Instead, they are more concerned with preserving their satellite community, suggesting that marginalized students' community is more salient to them than engaging with adversity.

Furthermore, RQ2 asks, “How do Black Clemson students use GroupMe to form community?” The students interviewed in this thesis use adverse events to rally together, bonding over events that attack one aspect of their identity. The responses from students indicate that yes, while they would rather not engage with the dominant public and stay within their “shack out back,” they feel a greater sense of community as they protest adverse campus events. This finding is in line with the fact that “racism is not the sole defining characteristic of Black identity” (Brock, 2020, p. 234), but members of the Black student GroupMe utilize racist campus occurrences to not only form but strengthen their already existing community. This finding suggests that digital spaces such as GroupMe enable students to resist and push back during adverse circumstances, which further creates spaces for marginalized identities to engage in meaningful community practices with one another.

Additionally, RQ3 asks, “What emotions do Black students have being a part of the GroupMe?” Responses from students interviewed suggest that while there are a plethora of
emotions that are felt, the stand-out emotion that is displayed most frequently is humor. This humor is enacted through the use of memes and jokes, with the number one rule among members being known as “These jokes gon’ fly.” This finding draws on a practice described by Brock (2020) as “ratchetry [...] [defined as] digital practice born of everyday banal, sensual, forward, and “deviant” [...] behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse” (p. 136, see further Cohen, 2004). This finding suggests that members of the Black student GroupMe perform ‘ratchet’ behavior on a consistent basis as it is deemed natural for their racial community. This ‘ratchet’ practice gives way to ‘Black joy,’ in which students use humor as “celebrations of self in defiance of norms that can be imposed by both external and internal forces” (Brock, 2020, p.142). However, while humor has been used as a way to give students freedom and joy, the most surprising response about humor is that it has isolated students. Interview responses indicate how the jokes in the Black student GroupMe can sometimes go too far. This finding provides a space of contention within the Black student GroupMe. This is consistent with Brock (2020), as he described how both Black and white internet users discuss what is and is not “appropriate [behaviors] for online spaces and devices” (p. 143). This is seen with humor, as it can be used by members of the Black student GroupMe to positively engage with the community and at other times puts a strain on the overall cohesion of the group. This tension of what is/is not humorous in the Black student GroupMe draws on the idea that blackness is not a monolith. As each student’s identity is intersectional, they come into the group with their unique lived experiences. These unique experiences shape not only how they view the larger campus community but also the Black student GroupMe, gives them the freedom and agency to agree or disagree with what has been said. Therefore, the findings of this thesis can assume that marginalized students' use of digital space as a means of communication allows for a range of
ideas and emotions that can not be recreated with the larger campus community. However, this free range of ideas creates a space for some students to feel further isolated from their community as the GroupMe chat jokes can be viewed negatively. This further proves that blackness is not a monolith as every student does not believe that “these jokes gon’ fly,” further creating a push for their unique self-identity.

Lastly, RQ4 asks, “Does the Black student GroupMe help develop self-identity and group identity?” The responses from the student interviews suggest that while group identity is formed from the GroupMe chat, self-identity is considered to be more salient. Students have indicated that the Black student GroupMe enables them to develop their unique identities, including what organizations to join as well as what businesses to start and broadcast. This finding assumes that the Black student GroupMe is used as a home base for Black students. Once students have gotten settled, they begin to formulate their unique ideals, including the things they stand for and support. This is in line with the seventh process of Social Identity Theory that Trepte and Loy (2017) define as “individual mobility, social creativity, social competition, and stereotyping” (p.2). The students within the GroupMe chat engage in this process as they reject or accept certain ideals that are presented in the GroupMe chat (jokes, for example). This notion is also in line with what Walcott (1972) describes as “inhabit[ing] [the space] so individually” (p.11). That is, these students use the GroupMe chat to create and mold their unique identities, which helps them to present this to the larger campus community. Therefore, the student responses in this thesis suggest that for marginalized students, their use of digital spaces to communicate with one another at a PWI does enhance their marginalized identity but acts as a place for students to enhance their personal intersectional identities in a greater way.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explored how a marginalized group of students at a PWI use digital space to formulate and sustain community. Through the practice of interviewing and podcasting as a method, four themes emerged: gatekeeping, community, emotions, and self-identity. The gatekeeping of this online community shows that these students deem their online space vital to their overall existence at their PWI. Emotions, like humor and shock, are the students' ways of checking in with one another, even when the group cohesion is strained. Community is formed not only through jokes but also by older students taking on the role of mentors to guide first-year students. Finally, as the students begin to settle into the community, they are then free to build up their individual identities, including personal brands and businesses. Each of these themes has shown that Black students' way of using the GroupMe app is rooted in finding, connecting, and networking with others who look like them in order to exist in a place that does not always cater to their cultural needs. This speaks to the ongoing technological revolution and how it is shaping how we build relationships. Digital and social media landscapes are revamping and exploring more virtual reality spaces (Meta Quest and Oculus headsets). While VR holds an uncertain future, there is no denying that virtual communities are prevalent, and the Black student GroupMe serves as a prototype of what a virtual-digital gatekept community could look and feel like.

While this thesis looked specifically at how Black students used the GroupMe app, further research could seek to look at how other identities (racial, sexual, gendered, etc.) students have used digital spaces in their own unique ways. Identity in itself is intersectional, so further studies could look at how students with multiple identities (i.e., gay-Hispanic male, international
Asian student, etc.) use digital space as a means to find community on a larger scale than what they may be privy to in a PWI college setting. This thesis also demonstrated that within a community, not all students who share the same racial identity agree with other aspects of identity. This could be explored further by looking at colleges and universities that cater to marginalized students specifically (ex: HBCUs) to see how the ingroup behaves with one another.

This type of research will be important in the current and coming years as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices in education are being discussed at length in politics. As many are considering whether to keep or dismantle DEI programs, studies such as this thesis can help reframe the narrative as to why DEI initiatives, programs, and funding are important. In examining these interview responses on one marginalized group’s experience of using digital spaces at a PWI, this thesis has found the lengths that students of the minority are willing to do to form and maintain community. As poignant as this is, this thesis shows that many marginalized students do not feel at home in the physical campus they have relocated to learn and grow as individuals, highlighting an issue in inclusion. As college students are traditionally of legal age in the United States to drive and vote, they should have the same agency on their college campuses to explore and present their unique intersectional identities. However, if this marginalization continues, students like the ones interviewed for this thesis will neglect to be larger constituents of the physical campus community and seek their “home on the phone.”
Appendix A

Questions for Episode One, “How Did We Get Here?”

1. What is your name, and when did you graduate from Clemson?
2. Can you remember when you were introduced to the Black Clemson GroupMe?
3. Do you know how long the Black Clemson GroupMe has been around?
4. How do you think people hear about the GroupMe and what do you think makes them want to join?
5. Why do you think this GroupMe remains favored by Black students?
6. Why do you think some people remain members of the GroupMe even after graduating?
7. During your time at Clemson, how did the Black Student GroupMe affect your experience at Clemson?
8. As an alumnus, do you think this GroupMe chat has been important for those who are and have a part of it?
9. Ten years from now, do you believe that this GroupMe will still be relevant to Black students who attend Clemson?
10. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with the Black Student GroupMe?
Appendix B

Questions for Episode Two, “Unity in the Community”

1. What is your name, and when did you graduate from Clemson?

2. Can you remember when you were introduced to the Black Clemson GroupMe?

3. Do you remember how you were introduced to the Black Student GroupMe?

4. What made you join the GroupMe?

5. After joining the GroupMe, did you feel a sense of community? Why or why not?

6. What are some particular things about this community that make it easy or difficult to form community?

7. Is this GroupMe easily accessible to people who want to join?

8. In what ways has this GroupMe impacted your college experience?

9. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with the Black Student GroupMe?
Appendix C

Questions for Episode Three, “Hot Tea”

1. What is your name and when will you be graduating from Clemson?

2. Can you remember how you were introduced to the GroupMe?

3. In your time at Clemson, how has this GroupMe acted as a source of information?

4. How is this GroupMe utilized during major campus events?

5. Why do you think Black students share information in the GroupMe?

6. Does information shared in the GroupMe give you clarity on things you may have questions about?

7. How has this GroupMe been beneficial to your experience at Clemson?

8. *Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with the Black Student GroupMe?*
Appendix D

Questions for Episode 4, “These Jokes Gone Fly”

1. What is your name, and the year you intend to graduate from Clemson?
2. How did you get introduced to the Black Clemson GroupMe?
3. If you could describe Black Clemson GroupMe in 3 words, what would they be and why?
4. The Black student’s GroupMe’s self-proclaimed rule and motto is “These Jokes Gone Fly.” Do you think this is true?
5. In what ways have you seen humor used in the GroupMe?
6. In what ways do people engage with jokes in the GroupMe.
7. When do people tend to joke most often in the GroupMe?
8. What triggers jokes in the GroupMe?
9. How has this GroupMe been relevant to your Clemson experience?
10. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with the Black Student GroupMe?
Appendix E

Names and Pseudonyms

1. Camryn, Blake, and Jorell used their preferred given names.

2. Martin, Rebecca, and Vanessa, Giana, Shelton, and Nathan are Pseudonyms.
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