

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

African American College Students Navigating Digital Spaces to Affect Social Change

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Demographic studies (Nakamura, 2002) on internet usage often emphasize the position African Americans have as consumers of internet content. Studies (Eastin, 2015; Katz & Rice, 2003; Nakamura, 2002) addressing topics such as internet access, race, and the “digital divide” fail to measure digital production and suggest that underrepresented groups, such as African Americans, are only consumers of commodities, rather than active audiences. The current study utilizes a qualitative approach to analyze the intersection of consumerism and content creation in the African American community. This project explores the ways in which a group of 42 African American college students, attending a public, 4-year university in Southern California, use the internet and mobile technology to follow and frame current political events, and advocate for social justice. The students reported using social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram as sites of resistance, empowerment, and activism. Thus, the findings of this study reject the previous hypothesis where African Americans are portrayed as primarily consumers of internet content, rather than producers on the internet.

Keywords: African American, digital resources, internet access, social media

INTRODUCTION

According to Nakamura (2002), in the early years of the internet’s massification, cyberculture scholars spent time discussing and analyzing mostly White users and audiences.

Marginal references were made to online media produced by African Americans, Asians, or Latinos (Nakamura, 2002). Between 2000 and 2005, there was a radical increase in the number of women and minority populations online, with websites emerging

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such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, which enabled consumers to have interactive conversations. Many demographic studies on internet use solely emphasize African Americans as consumers of digital platforms (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Correa et al., 2010; Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2019b), while other researchers highlight African Americans as the demographic groups who are more likely than the general population to access the internet for social, political and environmental activism (Anderson et al., 2018; Harris, 2017; Hatch, 2018), thus challenging initial negative connotations around social media activism.

A phenomenon where individuals engage in token activities (i.e., wearing a pin that symbolizes a movement, liking posts on social media platforms) without engaging in more meaningful, supportive acts, such as donating money, joining an organization, or serving as a volunteer, has been recently coined using the word “slacktivism” (Essig, 2014). Slacktivism carries a negative connotation, implying that people who use social media in this way are lazy and lack initiative (Glenn, 2015). In a 2011 study, McCafferty (p. 18) indicated that “highly effective movements evolve from parties built upon ‘strong tie’ personal connections, such as those among classmates and church members.” He goes on to compare these strong ties to Gladwell’s (2010) finding that social media movements create weak connections and are less effective in keeping a movement going (as cited in McCafferty, 2011, p. 18). Both perspectives fail to acknowledge the ways that online platforms bring people together. With the dominance of digital technology, activism on online platforms “allows groups to expand their reach across geographic locations in ways that are more cost-effective and environmentally friendly” (Glenn, 2015, p. 82). As a result, this more positive practice of slacktivism has helped increase the number of African Americans that continue to produce content, fueling social activist movements by spreading awareness primarily through social media channels.

In 2008, Hargittai and Hinnant found that educational background did not affect ability and skill to use the internet. It did, however, influence the types of sites that were visited. Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) argued that participants in higher education were more likely to visit sites that would increase social and cultural capital. This propensity, along with the widespread use of the internet, has expanded the number of media outlets targeting African Americans and other minorities, paving new pathways of expression (Alleyne, 2008). These new mediums, which were previously unavailable due to limited internet access, are now widely accessible due to mobile technology such as cell phones and tablets.

Moreover, advancements in technology have allowed African American college students to engage in current events in ways that were not available to their counterparts during the 1960s and 1970s. As such, an important aspect of social media is the user’s ability to organize, network and share what they are passionate about. Research studies (Correa et al., 2010; Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Harp et al., 2010; Wireless News, 2012) suggest that underrepresented groups are more or less consumers of commodities and entertainment rather than producers or actively engaged audiences. However, by studying internet usage, race, and the perceived “digital divide,” these studies fail to measure digital production and user interaction, and instead focus on measuring access and consumption. Therefore, this study employed focus group discussions and surveys in order to understand the level of internet/social media usage, the propensity and style of internet user-created content, as well as its effect on cultural and social capital among African American college students at a large public university in Southern California. The purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the literature by analyzing the ways in which African American college students use the internet, social media, and mobile technology as sites of resistance and platforms to instigate and participate in social movements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phrase digital divide was initially termed to describe the division between White Americans who could afford internet technology and people of color who could not. Harp et al. (2010) illustrated that White youth were more likely to use a computer on a daily basis, compared to African American or Latino youth. Yet, with the growth of African American median household income over the years, the gap that previously prevented African Americans access to the internet, has been greatly reduced. Results from a 2014 study indicated that 80% of the African American population has access to internet broadband connections while 56% own smartphones (A. Smith, 2014). Additionally, a 2019 Pew Research analysis on social media demographics revealed that Black Americans dominate social media usage on sites such as Facebook and Instagram, with a majority of users within the 18- to 29-year-old range. Over 37% of African American college students use Twitter, which greatly exceeds White American Twitter usage by 21% (A. Smith, 2014).

Today, with a growing number of American adults identifying as “smartphone only” users (Pew Research Center, 2019a), it only makes sense that smartphones would be used as instruments to spread awareness. Smartphones are not only closing the digital gap, in terms of low-income access to internet applications, but have also made it easier for individuals to use technology to their advantage with respect to social, cultural and political causes. For instance, Hatch (2017) describes the idea of “countersurveillance,” the ability of marginalized groups to use smartphones to create a new form of “citizen journalism.” Through the use of smartphones, these groups are able to give an alternative view of events, record injustice and altogether, “document racist institutional practices and personal behaviors” (Hatch, 2017). Marginalized groups are taking new technology and using it to voice their concerns and share injustices that have long been ignored. Hill (2018, p. 290) writes that “smart-

phone and other technologies enable Black citizens to surveil state agents and institutions, thereby holding the state and its apparatuses accountable for practices of anti-Black violence and other forms of social injustice.”

Just as video footage of Rodney King put police brutality on display in 1992, smartphone footage is being used to shine a light on the disenfranchisement of minorities, particularly at the hands of the police. In 2015, Sandra Bland, a Black woman, was stopped by a state trooper in Texas. What was supposed to be a routine traffic stop ended in tragedy when she was found dead in her cell three days later. Initially, law enforcement released the dash cam footage with inconsistent visuals. It was not until May of 2019 when Bland’s own cell phone footage was released, that the arresting officer, Brian Encinia can clearly be heard violating her rights by threatening to tase her if she did not get out of her car (Montgomery, 2019).

Bonilla and Rosa (2015) argue that footage taken from individuals’ smartphones played a key role in bringing attention and awareness to the murder case of Eric Garner in 2014. Moreover, in the 2016 case of Philando Castille, his girlfriend Diamond Reynolds chose to live-stream the moments immediately following Castille’s tragic encounter with law enforcement (M. Smith, 2017). When Michael Brown was shot eleven times by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, pictures and videos of his body laying out in the street circulated for hours (Lane, 2017). Hill (2018) reveals that though the uprising started with the circulation of these images, post-Ferguson activism has been sustained through other digital videos of police violence posted online. Not only did these cases bring national attention to the Black Lives Matter movement, but they also show the extent and impact of African Americans as producers of content, citizen journalists and social activists.

Currently, mobile devices such as smartphones allow users to post content to their social media platforms from anywhere in the world at any time. For example, on Twitter,

information can be shared with anyone, regardless of whether or not users are following each other. This feature means messages can be spread around social media in a matter of seconds. Hashtags also allow for instant sharing. Sharma (2012) explains that hashtags help users identify certain messages and quickly obtain information on topics that are important to them. In addition to ordinary hashtags, “Blacktags” are distinctive hashtags associated with what is now known as Black Twitter. Black Twitter is mostly used by African Americans and its Blacktags consist of content associated with African American culture (Sharma, 2012). Since Twitter allows for instant news sharing, Blacktags have played a crucial role in past incidents. In their article, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) present examples of hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #HandsUpDontShoot, #WeAreTrayvonMartin and #Ferguson, that have been used to help users retrieve information on a trending topic. This also helped shine a national spotlight on underreported acts of police violence by sharing local news reports on a global platform (Hill, 2018). These videos, hashtags, and local news shared across Twitter allow for “real-time discourse” about events that impact the Black community as a whole.

Aside from acting as a site for political discourse, Twitter also serves as a digital space for community gathering, networking opportunities and enhancing social capital, which is defined as access to social networks and connections (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Previously, African Americans engaged in cultural, social, and political conversations in physical locations such as churches, schools, barber-shops and beauty salons. Presently, Twitter gives African Americans, as well as global members of the Black Diaspora, a place to develop social capital with those in their community. Hill (2018) coins these digital spaces, “digital counterpublics,” in which African Americans can now express political and social thoughts outside of the mainstream media. These social groups can lead to the creation of communities beyond the digital space.

In their discussion of a 25-year-old protester, Johnetta Elzie, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) explain that individuals who are highly present on social media websites can form “tight-knit communities” at organized protests and then continue to support each other outside of the online space.

African American college students are expanding the conversation on social issues by addressing ideas intended to bring social change and empowerment related to health and healing, environmental justice, and responsible activism. They are actively using the internet and social media for research, “calls to action”, collaboration, and for honing their creative imagination. Through these conversations, African American college students are becoming agents of social change and ethical and socially conscious citizens.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses critical race theory (CRT), cultural capital theory and visual sociology frameworks in order to analyze the use of social media platforms by African American college students. Through a multifaceted approach, we examined ways that online platforms can be used to promote a counternarrative and produce content directed toward social justice. CRT’s focus on counterstorytelling allows for alternative narratives to come to light, and by using visual sociology alongside CRT as an analytical framework, the researchers were able to understand the impact digital tools have on creating these narratives. Cultural Capital Theory ties in with these two frameworks by providing a lens to analyze the forms of cultural capital acquired by African Americans college students through the use of social media platforms.

Critical Race Theory

CRT began in the mid-1970s as an attempt by lawyers to create a legal progress against racism, by utilizing legal and social theories as

part of their strategy for change. Founders of CRT include Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This study uses critical race theory as an analytical framework, specifically focusing on counterstorytelling as a tool to analyze the personal narratives provided by a group of African American college students at a large public university in Southern California.

As outlined in Delgado and Stefancic (2001), the foundational tenets of CRT include (1) racism is ordinary, (2) the social construction of race, (3) differential racialization, and (4) counterstorytelling. This study uses these four frameworks to analyze the responses of the participants of this study.

Racism Is Ordinary

This aspect of CRT contends that racism is experienced daily and there is no quick fix. This is meant to contradict the use of color-blind policies that promote “equality” in treatment as a way to mend institutional and systemic inequities that cannot merely be fixed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This relates to many African American college students who experience racism on a daily basis. The data analyzed through this lens will expand on the ways in which a select group of college students use social media to display and share these experiences.

Social Construction of Race

Race is merely a construct and has no biological basis. The concept of race is used to group people and form hierarchies of power based on physical characteristics, and are essentially just “categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Using racial categories to organize and differentiate data will allow researchers to understand differences in experiences, narratives, and the kinds of information produced by African American college students on digital platforms. This study aims to shift perspectives

that are often developed solely on racial categories.

Differential Racialization

This tenant describes the ways that society racializes minority groups, depending on the current shift in needs. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) look to popular culture to show how it affects the way certain groups of color are viewed based on media images and descriptions. This phenomenon continues to be observed today, particularly as it relates to selected media coverage of police shootings of Black people and the way the victims are portrayed in the media. As producers of their own content, African American college students are able to use social media to depict alternative images of Black men and women killed at the hands of the police.

Counterstorytelling

A critical component to this research, and that of CRT, is the idea of counterstorytelling. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) provide insight into the ways that people of color need to express themselves by “recounting their experiences with racism” (p. 9). Counterstorytelling allows people of color to combat preconceptions, images, and stereotypes seen in popular culture and by the media. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), “critical writers use counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs” (p. 43). Counterstorytelling brings to light the forms of activism, as well as the production of social and cultural capital that is produced by African American college students use of social media platforms for daily activities, academics, and social justice advocacy.

While each of the tenants expressed by this theory are significant in allowing underrepresented groups to form their own narratives, counter story telling embraces an alternative perspective that intersects with many of the other tenants as well. African Americans use

of social media platforms to display their view of social and political issues surrounding their everyday lives provides the basis for how counterstorytelling can provide a counter narrative to the Eurocentric viewpoint. By using CRT as a framework, the researchers intend to address the alternative view of African American college students as content producers and the ways in which social platforms can serve as an opportunity to express a unique point of view.

Cultural Capital Theory

In 1986, the concept of cultural capital was first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, which is defined as the different resources available to groups of people based off group membership. Cultural capital comes in the form of knowledge, skills, and education, and can influence various factors including social mobility (Mawere & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2015). According to McEwan and Sobre-Denton (2011), cultural capital can also be gained through social connections made through internet-based social networking sites. While it has been argued that cultural capital is the property of the elite (Kingston, 2001), internet platforms have now made it possible for new ways of access to cultural capital. Using cultural capital theory, this research highlights the ways in which social media platforms serve as new sites of cultural capital for African American college students.

Visual Sociology

Visual sociology was first introduced in the 1960s and includes the use of fine arts, portraiture photography, film, and video (Harper, 1988). Visual Sociology can be used not only as a tool to study social reality through images and film but can also be used as a method to critically analyze nonvisual data such as interviews. Zuev and Krase (2017, p. 1) wrote that visual sociology can be

used to analyze how participants “create, interpret and circulate images.” With the emergence of technology as a tool to document individual’s daily lives, visual sociology can be applied as an effective way to understand, and analyze, Black culture and political activism. Within social movement studies, the use of visual sociology has become critical as online platforms have become the dominate space for the production and sustainment of these social movements.

Social and political barriers are increasingly addressed through visual methods (Zuev & Krase, 2017) in social media, and these images can have a significant impact, regardless of proximity of the source. Visual sociology enables researchers to use data produced by African Americans, that would not typically be seen as a tool for research analysis.

The use of cultural capital theory combined with the counterstorytelling aspects of CRT provide a multilayered view through which researchers attempt to investigate and describe where cultural capital emerges on social media platforms. Applying visual sociology as a third framework supplements the other two by directly analyzing the visual tools African American students use in building personal narratives.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study took place on a large public, minority serving institution in Southern California. Participants were recruited from classes in the Africana Studies Department, the Black Student Union, campus dormitories, and student groups. A total of 42 students completed a demographic survey and were subsequently asked to participate in videotaped focus groups and, in some cases, one-on-one interviews. Twenty-nine of the participants identified as female, while 13 identified as male, with ages ranging between 19 and 29 years old.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission from instructors was obtained prior to visiting the classes. Thus, the sampling method began as a purposive, convenience sample, and eventually developed into snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). A script that explained the purpose of the study and the format of the proposed focus group was developed and shared with prospective participants. The participants were invited to attend one of three focus groups, to be held on three different occasions at a location on campus. Once participants selected a day to attend, the focus groups were structured as a combination of males and females represented within each group. Upon arrival, participants were given a survey instrument and a consent form to complete. The participants were also assigned an alias name that was used throughout the study. The focus group was moderated by the principal investigator of this study. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes and was audiotaped and videotaped. Focus group participants were asked a series of questions to encourage a descriptive response including:

1. Do you think that social media platforms can be used for social justice purposes? And if so, can you name a few examples of sites you use?
2. In which ways have you used social media as a form of activism, empowerment, or as a call to action for social change?

Data Analysis

The principal investigator, with the help of trained research assistants, transcribed the discussion from the video and audiotaped sessions from each focus group. Using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory approach, data analysis was an ongoing process in the study. Content analysis of the protocols were conducted by two coders. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) method of categorizing data to establish emergent and organizing constructs was incor-

porated. An important strategy of categorizing the data involved sorting into broader themes and issues. Specifically, each coder was asked to evaluate pertinent data individually by reading and rereading the protocols several times in order to identify the most endorsed themes. In line with Maxwell (1996), the coding categories were developed during the analysis. Coding was thus a way of fracturing the data in order to allow for comparison between, and within, various categories.

RESULTS

Responses from focus groups and one-on-one interviews provided insight on the frequent use of digital devices and social media outlets by a select group of African American college students. Participants highlighted their increased connectivity online through their smartphones and other devices. From the data collected, researchers found three themes that encompassed student's perspectives of their connections to the world through the use of social media. The main themes that emerged were (1) the use of social media to become informed about social issues, (2) the use of social media to reach out to others and engage in social justice causes, and (3) the use of social media to voice one's opinion. The following sections highlight these themes with responses from participants and provide a counternarrative on the use of social media as a means of activism by African Americans college students.

Social Media and Device Usage

When asked regarding the devices they use, a majority of participants reported owning both a smartphone, a laptop, and a tablet device. Participants reported using their phones mostly for texting, calling, and social media while they use their computers primarily for school-related assignments work. Tablets were used to browse the web and access applications that are not ideal for use on a mobile phone or computer. All participants

confirmed that they use their phones “24/7” and expressed that they go on the internet and social media sites several times a day. Marlea, specifically indicated that she uses the internet “about four to five times a day” while Zakiyah stated that she “use[s] the internet quite a bit. I can’t really count how many times I use it.” A majority of participants also agreed that they find themselves using social media once they are on their smartphone. De’Ja described her mobile phone as “a little bit more of a distraction ... I get notifications on my social media so it makes me want to go look at what people are liking.” Nick also expanded on the topic by saying that, “my phone is just the biggest distraction. I get like, tons of alerts and then ... I somehow drift off to, like, social media.”

Social Media as Informative

One of the major themes that arose from the one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions was the important role that social media plays in keeping participants updated with the news. Nick elaborated on this by saying, “[Social media] is kind of equivalent to how the baby boomer generation watches the news. Social media is our [the millennials’] news nowadays. So if we go two weeks without the news we’re not going to know what’s going on in the world.” While Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram were identified by participants as the primary social media platforms they use almost every day, Twitter and YouTube appear to be common sources of news and information. One participant, Beverly, detailed how she specifically uses different social media platforms by saying, “Twitter is more of my educational, intellectual side of me, and Instagram is more of my chill, let’s see what’s going on side of me, and Facebook that’s for my family.” Marlea, another participant, expressed how she uses YouTube to access news that is typically not available in mainstream media. She stated that YouTube allows her to “look up a lot of news footage that I don’t get, maybe like on CNN where they might have taken it down or something.”

This thought was further expanded by De’Ja, where she explained, “the news only shows you so much, social media will show you way more than what the news will show you.”

Furthermore, the participants described that social media platforms allowed for the most expeditious transfer of information. Hashtags were identified by participants as a useful tool when searching for trending topics. One participant echoed, “[on] Twitter, I just like to see the hashtags on what’s the story, what’s trending.” Zakiyah further elaborated saying that “you click on the hashtags and it sends you to other pictures that have those specific hashtags.” She also mentioned the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and elaborated “if you put #BlackLivesMatter you’re gonna’ see a while lot of activism from that specific hashtag.” She also shared that her organization “tell[s] people to put these hashtags, or click on these hashtags so you can see all the forms of activism that we’ve done, or that is going on.” Participants indicated that hashtags and search engines embedded within social media platforms served as a crucial tool for allowing them to quickly access recent news and to inform themselves of news and trending topics impacting the Black community.

Outreach and Engagement in Social Justice

The second theme identified was the use of social media to reach out to others and engage in social justice activities. One student, Zakiyah, recalled a silent protest on campus to address a social issue. Zakiyah was a board member for an organization, and after receiving emails from several individuals “saying how angry they were about the [Michael Brown] verdict,” the participant’s organization was “forced” to take action. They were able to organize a silent protest utilizing the organization’s online platforms to reach out to the public. The organization used its social media accounts to post details about informational meetings and logistical information about the protest. While individual motivation may have

propelled this group to take action, the organization's use of several social media platforms inspired a plethora of additional users to get involved, thus generating greater engagement within the university and the surrounding community.

In addition to serving as a tool for outreach, participants also describe social media as an instrument for actively engaging in online activism. Marlea described that she has "posted pictures of the Black Panthers and hashtagged #BlackPower." She goes on to describe her involvement, stating that she "[tries] to keep posting things for people who follow me because when I look at my timeline, there's not a lot of people posting about what's going on in the world. So, I feel like I have to show them and let them know what's going on." Another participant, Marlea, added to this, saying

I think for example when the Trayvon Martin thing happened, I posted a picture of Trayvon Martin ... just to let my followers know that this is what's happening, in case they don't know what's happening. Also, with Twitter too, I just retweet and look at the hashtags just to know what other people are posting and if they are aware.

Zakiyah also mentioned that she uses hashtags to inform people, for example #insight, #bep-roactive, #blackmatadors, to make people aware of her organization's activity on campus. De'Ja takes her involvement a step further by saying, "I repost pictures on Instagram for people who I know ... and I ask my followers to share their opinions because I like to know other people's opinions, and what other people think about the situation." She goes on to elaborate, "I hear a lot of different things on different topics, and it makes me feel more informed I guess because I can see how this person thinks, and it gives me two different ways of thinking."

When participants were asked about involvement in social activism now and in the future, the students described unification and spreading the word as two important actions

that they hope to continue engaging in. One participant communicated that she planned on "keep[ing] the cycle going" in the future (Beverly). She also expressed plans to go out of state and reach out to more individuals in an effort to impact other communities. Marlea, also agreed and mentioned that people need to "just keep talking about it more, maybe going to the inner city schools and talking to the classrooms about it." Another participant mentioned that unity is what will help the Black community have a stronger impact. One participant in particular echoed the importance of unity while reflecting that, "the whole light skin versus dark skin [issue]. We [the Black community] don't need that, we need to just be together. We're all Black; at the end of the day, that's how society sees us." These responses indicate that students are aware of the social impact and potential they have as producers of activist content, as well as utilizing online spaces to build communities with a common purpose.

Finally, participants gave examples of the impact of social justice activism. Several participants communicated that they have been recognized by other community members, who have thanked them for bringing awareness to other racial groups. While some students' experiences have been positive, others have faced some criticism, and have been questioned about their actions. For example, one participant stated that after certain social advocacy posts, people asked the participant why she was "being a Black panther on social media?" The participant specified that after giving some thought to the situation, she decided to "just keep going" and reiterated that "if they [hiring managers] don't want me, I'll become my own CEO."

Social Media as a Tool for Expressing Opinion

The participants also emphasized how they use social media to express their personal opinions on social and political events. One participant mentioned that, "When things are

going on, I post the picture of whatever it is and my opinion and my thoughts on it.” She expressed that this allows her to somewhat affect change among her followers. Another participant, Beverly, mentioned that tweeting her opinion on social and political events led her to have a discussion with her friends where “we put our own opinion, it was kind of like a back and forth [exchange of thoughts], but it was like a consensus in a way also.” On the other hand, Shelby describes her experience, “I have a blog, I have a Tumblr, Instagram and even Facebook. I just try to say as much as I can, as often as I can, because there’s ... not a lot of voices inside the community,” while another participant added, “Instagram is my way to voice my opinions on things, ‘cause I used to perform, but I’m more in my shell now. So social media is the way I share myself.” These responses reinforce the importance of social media as an avenue to share personal information and as a digital space for knowledge production and self-expression.

DISCUSSION

The combination of mobile technology with internet access has provided college students the opportunity to engage in various virtual activities. This access allows for easy communication within social and professional circles, and encourages students to effectively obtain information, engage, and participate in social justice movements and forms of activism. African American college students interviewed in this study reported that they use the internet on their mobile device multiple times throughout the day as they perform daily activities, from class participation and schoolwork, to engaging with current events. The role of social media in keeping the participants up to date with the news was also emphasized. Having access to social media using their smartphones has allowed them to be constantly connected to information and current news. These findings reflect a 2017 Pew Research Center report, which indicated that 78% of

Americans ages 18–49 get their news from social media sites (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017).

African American student participants also expressed the importance of Twitter, where they reported using the popular platform more than twice a day. This is shared by a majority of American social media users, as 74% indicated Twitter as their news source (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Twitter can also be particularly useful and relevant to students given its inherent design that allows for expeditious transfer of information, or what Sharma (2012) describes as “the ‘real time’ of the digital media landscape because of the precipitous speed of its propagation of messages, information and ‘news’” (p. 49). Students described that hashtags allowed them to easily search for trending topics such as #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackPower. Through hashtags on Twitter, information is not only easily obtainable, but also allows for a “virtual, online, or otherwise digitally networked community” (Hill, 2018, p. 287) where members can cross geographic spaces and engage with one another. Students utilizing Twitter with a focus on Black issues and Black hashtags create and participate in what Hill (2018) refers to as a “digital counter-public.” This allows college students to engage in political behaviors, by consuming and producing content that is relevant to their cause. For example, participants mentioned retweeting and reposting material through social media platforms that are politically and socially relevant to pass along the information to their followers. This is not surprising, because African American social media users see themselves as most likely to participate in political activities on social media, as well as believe that these activities are effective, compared with other ethnic groups (Auxier, 2020).

African American college students have also expressed barriers in their use of online platforms to speak on social justice issues. Hill (2018) describes this barrier as the “politics of respectability,” writing that Black people often “aim to defy negative stereotypes and better position themselves to struggle for equity and inclusion within dominant society” (p. 293).

As portrayed in the responses from student participants, some African American college students reject this model and choose to resist by using their social media platforms to advocate for social change. Within the literature, it was shown that this rejection of respectability politics is displayed by support of “imperfect victims” on platforms such as Twitter. Digital spaces emphasize this aspect of resistance and by “using the hashtag to assert that every Black life “matters,” despite ostensible bad choices or an imperfect life history, the Black Twitter counterpublic actively contests dominant anti-Black narratives about whose life is worth protecting” (Hill, 2018, p. 294). The responses from students give insight into the hostility received by African American college students when advocating for social change, however it also shows their perseverance in promoting awareness towards these causes. It also reaffirms that while social and cultural capital can be enhanced through the use of online platforms, students face barriers when using social media for activism.

Social media platforms can also be useful in sharing African American college students’ personal narratives, opinions, stories, and experiences; bringing to light issues that might otherwise be left undiscussed outside of their social circles. The participants revealed their willingness to share their perspectives and personal lives online, indicating the visible effect of their efforts in breaking down stereotypes. These sentiments stress the importance of African American college students’ presence on social media and a need for counternarratives that rebuff existing conventions.

Overall, this study provided a select group of African American college students with a platform to narrate their own story, and an opportunity to become agents of social change, by advocating for themselves and their community. Contrary to the preexisting notion that African Americans are mere consumers in the online sphere, the data collected from this study show that participants are heavy users and content producers in various social media

platforms. The findings revealed the enthusiasm and willingness of a small group of African American college students to utilize online platforms to participate in social justice and advocacy causes. Not only have college-aged students shown they are producers of activist content, but they have also taken action and have advocated for themselves. The participants actively reached out to other individuals within their social spheres, building online communities and engaging in both conversation and action. In one example, the participants’ online efforts led to an on-campus silent protest. It was also revealed that participants viewed the current study as opportunities for discourse, beginning a cycle of social justice and advocacy among African American college students. With their dominance among users of social media platforms, combined with the proliferation of smartphone only users (Pew Research Center, 2019b), and the continued rise of trending topics and hashtags (Bonila & Rosa, 2015), African American college students will remain as key players in advocacy and social justice efforts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The counternarratives obtained from the participants in the study shows the need for these voices to continue to be heard, emphasizing the crucial role of African American college students on social justice advocacy. This qualitative research study illustrates the importance of a counterstorytelling approach when narrating experiences of African American college students combined with their proficiency in navigating digital spaces. Additionally, as college students continue to evolve in the ways in which they utilize mobile technology and online platforms, understanding content production and its impact will become even more important. This paves the way for future research in this topic.

Limitations

This study solely focused on African American college students. Randomization was not used for the selection process and the findings might not transpose to other ethnic groups. Furthermore, the study was conducted at a public university in Southern California with a small sample size of 42 students. Moreover, the findings presented in this study may not represent the activities of college students who reside in states other than California. Institution demographics can also largely affect the kind of exposure students receive and how informed they are on certain topics. As of 2020, the Office of Institutional Research at this university reported over 60% of total students (undergraduate and graduate) identified as underrepresented traditionally underserved students. The racial breakdown consists of about 4% African American, 54% Latinos/as, 9% Asians, and 22% Whites (CSUN Office of Institutional Research, 2020). Being at a minority serving institution may influence discussions amongst students, as well as the cultural and social capital of students. Last but not least, the self-reporting methodology used for the data collection of this study might result in selective memory from the participants. It is possible that individuals did not remember, or misremembered, their involvement in social justice activities. The accessibility to social media makes it difficult to recall every interaction. Ergo, the full advocacy story of the participants of this study may not have been heard.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the data collected in this study enabled the researchers to critically analyze the ways in which a group of African American college students use social media in their everyday lives, acting as both consumers and producers. The findings from this study present preliminary information that can be further explored in an attempt to reevaluate the former digital divide hypothesis and the perception of

African Americans as purely consumers of content. The CRT, visual sociology, and cultural theory provided this study the necessary structure to explore and dissect the narratives obtained from the participants.

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